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The global religious freedom “forecast” looks grim for the 2.2 billion people around the world who suffer discrimination or persecution because of their faith, according to the results of a recent study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The study, released earlier this month, analyzed masses of reports and data from 2006 to 2009 and identified recent trends in the level of religious repression and protection in different countries. It found, in part, that there's no immediate relief in sight for those suffering for their faith. In fact, the situation seems to be worsening in many countries that already have high levels of religious restrictions.

John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, said the results of the study are troubling but not particularly surprising. “There's an old saying that 'The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.' Well, this study suggests that, globally, the 'free' are enjoying even stronger legal protections, while those who already suffer religious persecution are facing ever-more stringent restrictions on their freedom.”

China, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Egypt topped the list of countries with the highest levels of government restrictions on religious freedom. The study also looked at "social harassment" of religious minorities. It cited China, Nigeria, United Kingdom, Russia and Sweden as among those countries with the largest recent upswing in the number of malicious acts or violence motivated by religious hatred.

Graz said these trends are borne out in the day-to-day work of the department he heads up, which is charged with tracking and responding to religious liberty concerns around the world on behalf of the world church.

"Just in the past few months we've seen the de-registration of many religious organizations in Hungary, including the Adventist Church, the destruction of Christian churches in Ethiopia, the assassination of religious freedom advocates in Pakistan, and continuing legal persecution and social violence against Christian minorities in some countries of the Middle East," Graz said.

Dwayne Leslie, the church’s representative to the United States' Congress and Washington’s diplomatic community, says it's hard for those in the West, who can freely practice their faith, to understand just how vulnerable church members are in countries without strong traditions of religious freedom.

"Protection of religion becomes politicized," Leslie said. "Rights become dependent on political whims or changes in governments rather than established legal principles."

This reality often generates work for the PARL department that falls into the "under-the-radar" category. "Often we're dealing with situations that are too sensitive to publicize," Leslie said.

He cites a recent example, where a church leader from an African country appealed to PARL for assistance following notice that some church property was about to be seized by the