From 12-13 July, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi made the first official visit by an Iranian leader to Africa since 2013. Mr Raisi’s visit began in Kenya on Wednesday 12 July, followed by a stop in Uganda on the same day before ending his visit in Zimbabwe on Thursday 13 July. The trip was meant to start a day earlier; however, it was delayed, finalising memorandums of understanding Mr Raisi and Kenyan President William Ruto were to review. While it was a short trip to what Mr Raisi calls the “continent of opportunities,” a total of 21 agreements were signed relating to economics, investment, technology, and agriculture. Mr Raisi’s administration is focusing on diversifying its involvement in Africa to help combat the sanctions placed on his country – as well as those he visited – by the United States and Europe. After the visit, the Iranian foreign ministry released a statement saying it expected trade between Iran and Africa to increase to over $2 billion by the end of 2023.

Five memorandums of understanding were signed in Kenya. Thereafter, Mr Raisi travelled to Uganda where he was welcomed by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. During his visit, Mr Raisi pledged his support to Mr Museveni in the face of possible new US sanctions for the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act by the Ugandan government. The new law would allow the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality.” Much of the international community has criticised Uganda for passing the law, which is stricter than its previous anti-homosexuality legislation (2014). In a statement following a private meeting with Mr Museveni, Mr Raisi supported his counterpart’s efforts in conserving traditional family values. “I believe that this issue [homosexuality], and these strong attacks by the West against the establishment of families and against the culture of the nations, is another area of cooperation for Iran and Uganda,” Mr Raisi said.

With Uganda having an 83% Christian population and Iran being the Shia leader of the Muslim world, Mr Raisi publicly speaking on an area of agreement between the two cultures offers a somewhat unprecedented connection point. As Muslims typically grow up learning that Christians are their enemies, understanding that there are aspects of agreement, such as the importance of marriage and family values, can bring about fruitful conversations between those of different religions. Mr Raisi created an opportunity for believers to bridge the gap between them and their Muslim neighbours by utilising this opportunity as the Church is told to do in Ephesians: “So be careful how you live. Don’t live like ignorant people, but like wise people. Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days. Don’t be fools, then, but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do.” (Ephesians 5:15-17 GNT).

Mr Raisi finished his African tour in Zimbabwe where he was warmly welcomed by crowds of people in Harare. Zimbabwe also shares the sentiment of traditional family values; therefore, the same opportunity is afforded to
Christians there as well. Iran has a history of supporting Zimbabwe and played a role in the country’s liberation from white minority rule following the civil war in the 1970s. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa thanked Mr Raisi for Iran’s support and they signed 12 new memorandums of understanding during the visit concerning various sectors including pharmaceuticals, agriculture, telecommunications, energy, and education.

The West has raised concern over Iran’s increasing involvement in areas like Africa and Latin America, however, increased economic cooperation has the potential to stimulate stagnant economies in countries like Zimbabwe who have faced consistent economic decline since the installation of US sanctions 20 years ago. With increased involvement comes increased migration of people, allowing Iranians, who have little to no access to the Christian Church, to travel to, and possibly live in Christian-majority countries in Africa. The global Church can pray that the Lord will use these newly presented avenues to advance his Kingdom in both Africa and Iran. The heart of Christian missionary-sending has been progressively moving towards the Global South, and the wider body of believers needs to be ready to assess and take advantage of the new opportunities that this trend brings for gospel advancement.

Please join us in prayer for the following:

- For the recently signed memorandums of understanding to bring economic relief and developmental benefits to the countries involved
- For the Church to make use of the opportunity presented to connect with their Muslim neighbours
- For the Lord’s will to be done through the relationships established by these new initiatives between Iran and Africa

Image: REUTERS/ Abubaker Lubowa