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INTEGRATING MUSLIM CONVERTS INTO THE CHURCH

by Luke Yeghnazar



The ethnic makeup of Christians in the West has been undergoing a transformation over the past few decades. We are grateful to God that part of that transformation includes many people from Muslim backgrounds. Because of this, the question has arisen, "How do we integrate this new wave of believers into the Church in the West?"

Sometimes totally new churches have been started for people from various ethnic communities. These churches have functioned closer to the cultural patterns that are familiar to the ethnic group and have been more successful in reaching out to their own people.

However, in some cases this is not the best solution and it would be better to integrate this new wave of believers into existing churches. To do this necessitates a willingness on the part of the Church in the West to make changes and create a Church with greater diversity. Although our fundamental beliefs never change, our approaches can and must if we want to bring the gospel to

the people God is bringing to our shores.

Every Christian needs to consider himself a missionary. Our mission is to make Christ known to those who do not know Him, regardless of whether we go thousands of miles away or to our neighbor next door. The large migration of Muslim-background people to the West has resulted in a growing mission field right here. This mission field has come to our educational institutes, our workplaces and our neighborhoods where we have the opportunity to reach many Muslims for Christ.

Muslims can be reached. They are responding to the gospel by the hundreds in Western countries. As individuals and as churches, we need to begin to more thoughtfully respond to their needs so that they will come to Christ by the thousands.

With this frame of reference, let us consider this important issue of *integrating Muslim converts into our churches*.

We must realize that Muslim culture is *community-*

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Speaking on Behalf of Muslims

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?
(Romans 10:14)

Ron Peck, Director
Center for
Ministry to Muslims



In the lead article, Pastor Yeghnazar addresses the critical issues concerning how to integrate a Muslim convert into the life and fellowship of the local church. I deeply appreciate the ideas he has shared from his heart because of the depth of his practical experience in these matters.

I feel that it is necessary to speak openly and sincerely with Western Christians who may be called upon to receive a new convert from a Muslim background into the fellowship of the church. Several things need to be carefully considered.

Our first goal should be to build a strong, loving, personal friendship with the new believer. Most Muslim converts will have come from a foreign country. They are likely to feel strange and vulnerable in the spiritual environment of an American church. The new convert needs friends who will care enough to help him feel accepted and welcome. This will take time and requires sensitivity. Most American Christians are not accustomed to investing significant amounts of time in new friendships and may lack sensitivity to cultures different than their own because of their limited exposure.

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Muslims are not all the same. They come to the United States from countries around the world. A Bangladeshi will exhibit cultural distinctives that are different than those of an Egyptian. This makes it necessary for the Westerner to become a student of his new friend's background. A few minutes of research from an encyclopedia can provide enough information to allow a person to hold an intelligent conversation with his new friend about the friend's country of origin. When we show interest and respect for his country and culture, we develop the basis for understanding and trust.

No matter where a Muslim comes from, hospitality will be a very important element of his culture. He will appreciate an invitation to visit in your home, and most likely he will also want you to visit in his home.

What are some guidelines for entertaining a foreign

guest of Muslim background? Remember that he may have strong feelings about dietary restrictions. Don't ever serve pork or alcohol. Sometimes it is helpful to ask a Muslim friend what he likes to eat so that you feel confident the food you are preparing is appropriate.

It is also good to remember that most Muslim cultures regard modesty in a woman's attire as essential. The wearing of shorts or sleeveless blouses is considered in poor taste.

When a new convert from Islam makes his faith known to his family, he may be totally cut off from his family members. This can create a serious financial hardship. Help in finding employment can be a great blessing. Government agencies in the West may provide some temporary assistance, but the church may also need to reach out and meet some of these practical needs. When assistance is given, care must be taken to preserve the dignity of the individual. Assistance should never be rendered in a way that could be misunderstood as an inducement to conversion.

Some Western churches provide no in-depth discipleship training for their new converts, even though every new believer from any background needs such training. This is especially essential for the establishment of any new believer from an Islamic background. Almost anything relating to biblical knowledge is new to the Muslim convert. He will have many questions that need to be answered before he will be able to fully understand the gospel. Repetition and review may be needed for full comprehension.

The Church, through honest and sincere friendship, can make these new believers an integral part of the Christian family.

God is bringing many Muslims to the West. By His grace, some are coming to Christ. The challenge to the Church is to love them and understand their needs. Then the Church, through honest and sincere friendship, can make these new believers an integral part of the Christian family.





SUDAN

The militant Islamic government of northern Sudan bombed a hospital on March 7 for the second time in a week. No fatalities were reported in the attack on the Samaritan's Purse hospital in the southern city of Lui, but a raid on March 1 killed two people and injured many others. The national Islamic Front (NIF) government bombers killed 13 children in February in a bombing raid that destroyed a school in the Nuba Mountain region. Large concentrations of Christians reside in the Nuba region. A British Broadcasting Company correspondent reports no military targets exist nearby. Nearly 2 million people have died since 1983 in the war against Christians and animists in the country's south.

—WEF Defender

WORLD

Religious liberty advocates working on behalf of persecuted Christians will face five important battles during the next 20 years, battles that will impact the church worldwide. Johan Companjen, president of Open Doors International, told church and mission agency leaders meeting in Cyprus on February 22 that the battles "are essential to win that the persecuted church might be sustained and strengthened."

Ironically, the battles—in the realms of ideas, communication, the Spirit, politics and the church—will not necessarily take place in restricted-access areas. "The idea that Westerners, whether states or individuals, have the right to interfere, criticize and hold other states and cultures to account for religious liberty abus-

es is under great attack," Companjen said.

—Compass Direct

INDONESIA

The Muslim-Christian war in the Moluccas is a serious flashpoint in the world. Although it may be considered a civil war, it has profound ramifications for Muslim-Christian relations worldwide.

According to the New York Times, "The fear is that the violence in places like Ambon will spread. Already there are copycat clashes in the resort island of Lombok, attacks on churches in Jogjakarta and rallies in the capital of Jakarta."

Once freed from the 32-year regime of its former dictator, President Suharto—whose sheer force was used to repress differences in a nation of 13,000 islands—society lost its ability to resolve differences in a peaceful way.

—WEF Defender

NIGERIA

A total of five lawsuits have now been filed challenging the legality of Islamic penal law in northern Nigeria. These come on the heels of the controversy and ensuing violence which erupted in Kaduna State and spread during the attempted introduction of *Sharia* law in eight northern Nigerian states.

Nigeria's federal constitution forbids the establishment of a state religion, declaring the country to be a secular democracy. However, the option of *Sharia* has been permitted as it relates to family matters such as inheritance, marriage and adoption, but not in the area of penal law which permits flogging, stoning, amputation and beheading for certain crimes.

The administration of Obasanjo, Nigeria's first democratically elected president after nearly two decades of military rule, has sought a political solution to the controversy instead of attempting to resolve the constitutional issue. This has prompted the lawsuits as well as calls from several Christian groups to eliminate *Sharia*

provisions from the constitution and for a national conference to determine whether Nigerians want to continue living together as one country.

—Newsroom

ETHIOPIA

The Christian church continues to grow in Ethiopia, an east African country that has suffered drought, famine and war in the past 20 years.

About 100,000 people attended evangelistic services in Nekempte, western Ethiopia, March 9-12. Preacher Sammy Tippit of God's Love in Action addressed the crowd as 6,500 people professed faith in Christ. Missionaries and lay leaders are being trained to reach Muslims. Approximately 1,500 Muslims responded to the gospel and 205 were baptized into the Christian faith in three months in 1998. Ethiopian missionaries are at work in several other African nations.

—Religion Today

MALDIVES

In the summer of 1998 all foreign Christians were expelled from the Maldives, and all local believers were kept in prison and tortured.

Today the Muslim government claims, according to the World Evangelical Defender, that all of the Christians have returned to Islam, "but those who live near them can see that they continue in their faith." Yet they have no Scripture and are not allowed to meet together.

—World Pulse

LEBANON

Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community is said to be getting more militant. Gunfire at the Russian Embassy, a grenade attack on a military checkpoint, and a three-day shootout between the Lebanese army and militants are possible evidence of the trend. Sunnis, the majority brand of Islam, are fewer in Lebanon than either the Shiite Muslims or the Christians.

—World Pulse



INTEGRATING MUSLIM CONVERTS INTO THE CHURCH

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based, whereas the emphasis of western culture is on the *individual*. A Muslim makes his decisions in relation to his family and community much more than a westerner. Therefore, it defies his culture for a Muslim to make an individual decision for Christ. A Muslim who comes to the Lord loses his former community. Often he loses his place in his family as well.

When Muslims come to our churches, we want them to attend meetings, listen to sermons and grow in the Lord. But when the meeting is over in a short time, the congregation leaves. Where does the Muslim meet his need for a sense of belonging? One or two hours in the church does not give him a sense of being a part of a new community. In many cases he cannot talk to the pastor, because the pastor is too busy.

Generally, one of three things will happen to this new convert:

- He will fall away from the Christian faith and return to his former community,
- He will resent the fact that he

feels like a spiritual orphan, or

He will become like a Christian in the West and develop an individualistic lifestyle.

Of these three, the third would be the best scenario. However, a Muslim convert who has lost his concept of community cannot effectively reach his fellow countrymen. He might speak their language, but he has forgotten their *heart* language.

Here are some suggestions to help

western Christians successfully integrate Muslim converts into the church and see them greatly used by God to reach their own people, both here and in the Muslim world.

People with an Islamic background are culturally closer to the biblical culture in matters such as hospitality, friendship and visitation. They need to feel they are joining a new community. They need church families to call them; to fellowship with them; and to address their questions, fears, rejections, as well as their aspirations. They need to have families visit them at home and, in turn, feel comfortable in visiting these families in their homes.

Muslim converts need to be involved in a smaller community within the church, such as a cell or prayer group, where they are asked questions about their family and needs. It is important for converts to know that the church cares about their family members who also need the Lord. Because of erroneous preconceptions about Christianity, a lot of time must be invested in teaching Muslim converts in a way that will help them grasp key doctrines, such as the deity of Christ and the Trinity.

Muslim converts have probably seen a lot of hypocrisy. They come from a community where white lies, jealousy, anger, hatred and backbiting are common. They need to see transformed believers who can teach them

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integrity. They should be guided into receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit and how to live a Spirit-filled life every day. When the fruit of the Spirit is seen in the lives of other Christians, Muslim converts will more readily be able to assimilate this behavior in their own lives. They need to see in a practical way how to resolve difficulties and tensions with a Christian attitude, firmly yet lovingly. And as the new convert sees models of Christian love in action, he will learn the kind of relationship he should have with his spouse and his children, as well as

are former Muslims who are filled with Christ's love. If the Western Church creates a loving community for Muslim converts, it will be much easier for other family members and friends to join.

Here are some things the Western Church should avoid doing as it endeavors to create a thriving community for these converts: Do not baptize them immediately. They need to grasp the gospel. It is not enough for them to say they love Jesus, as they may love others too! They need to accept Jesus as their *only* Savior and Lord. Be careful



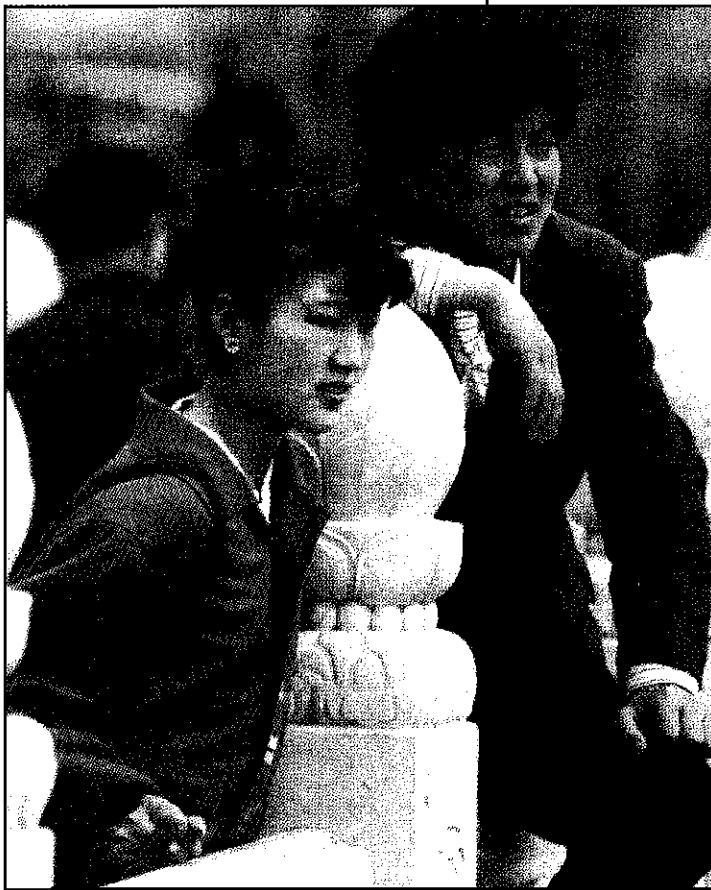
in Lebanon where I come from. I was shocked and humiliated. I just sat there speechless. An hour later, I knocked on his door again and asked him the same simple question. He answered with a yes or no and off I went."

A few days later I was sharing about God's work in Muslim nations with some 40 Spirit-filled pastors in Sydney. I asked them if they would like Muslims to come to their churches and find salvation. Everyone eagerly raised his hand. "Then you need to forget your tea-time!" I said and shared with them the story of the pastor from Lebanon.

God may have sent the future Billy Graham of Iran, Egypt or Malaysia to your local university, or he may have even come to the door of your church. However, you will never realize it unless you are willing to open your heart and help create an environment inside your church where Muslims can grow and feel a sense of community.

The Lord has a grand plan for the Islamic world. We can be part of His plan for reaching Muslims in Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, Toronto, Sydney or in your hometown U.S.A.

All He needs is your committed response to this great move of God today!



that they do not become proud. They should be dealt with in a normal way, but they need more attention. However, don't allow them to become totally dependent; they must learn to stand on their own feet.

Three years ago in Sydney, Australia, I met a pastor from the Middle East who serves the Lord there. He shared how he had come to the Australian pastor of the church where he was holding

a meeting to ask a simple yes-or-no question. But the pastor told him, "This is my tea time. Come back in an hour!"

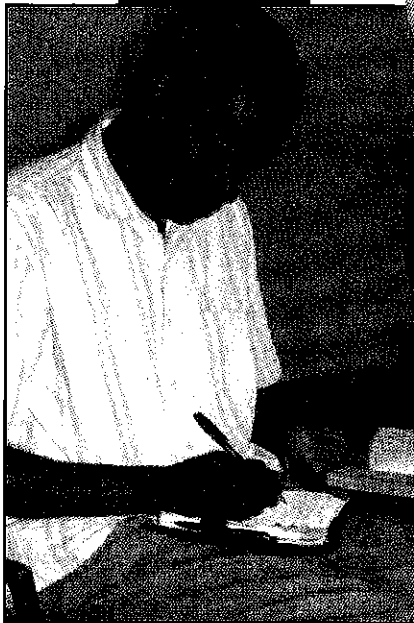
This pastor continued, "I went to the park and sat on a bench for an hour. This would never happen

how he should invest in God's work.

The ultimate goal is to help Muslim converts grow in Christ to the extent that they catch the vision to reach their people for Christ. For the best people to reach Muslims

WHAT KIND OF A MISSIONARY?

Recently an American missionary living in a limited-access Muslim country wrote concerning his involvement in a 7-hour meeting. Though most of us would have had difficulty enduring a meeting that long, he was sorry to see it end. But as the missionary described the meeting, we knew that this was not a typical service. He writes:



One of our little Pentecostal churches was commissioning their pastor to start a church in an area 500 miles to the east. This area is totally Islamic with no churches between here and there. As the pastor said his farewells, he broke down in tears, as did some of the congregation as they held tightly on to one another. It was a moving—no pun intended—moment. Wallace* is our first missionary to go to a totally unreached area and people group. I believe it was a watershed moment for our believers.

Two years ago a “Missions to Muslims” message was preached. An altar call was given and those who would dedicate their lives to reaching Muslims came forward. Wallace was in that service, but refused to respond. His hatred for Muslims was too strong for him to overcome. That night the Lord did not let him sleep, and in tears he finally surrendered. The Lord then told him audibly the name of the area where he should labor. Now here Wallace was, on the eve of his departure for the mission field of God’s choosing, once again presenting himself to God, and now with the support of his congregation.

Though Wallace is a ground breaker, he is not the only missionary in this Muslim country and cer-

tainly not the youngest. Immanuel is the seven-year-old son of Malawi missionaries who are ministering in this country. His family is a part of the cross-cultural team in the capital. During a recent prayer meeting, Immanuel piped up with a praise report.

“My friend Ahmad has not been listening to me,” he said. “I keep telling him about Jesus, but he refuses to listen.” Then, speaking calmly, with a serious look on his face, Immanuel said, “But I want to praise God that I kept telling him about Jesus, and now he wants to be a Christian.”

We could hardly speak for the joy that little testimony gave us.

Whether a seasoned minister—the best the Church has to offer—or a little snotty-nosed kid on the playground, God is in need of missionaries. Men and boys, women and girls, young and aged, strong and weak...all of us have a mandate to impact the unreached of our world.

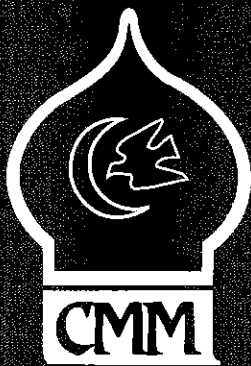
Today, I plead with you. Apprehend the qualities of both of these mighty missionaries, in some way. Will you, like Wallace, allow the Lord to overcome your objections, fears, biases and excuses? Will you, like little Immanuel, be persistent and true? May we all “move” in this direction together.

**pseudonym*



Jumaat Prayer Fellowship...

Praying for Muslims
Around the World!



Friday, July 7, 2000. Please pray

...that missionaries who are attending School of Missions during the next two weeks will find it a time of refreshing and that many will be challenged to share the gospel with Muslims in the countries where they minister.

...for the protection of foreign relief workers living in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They are seen in an unfavorable light by the Taliban, a fundamentalist group that makes life difficult for many, especially Muslim women.

...for the political situation in Chechnya which has continued to deteriorate. Pray for the large number of refugees in neighboring countries that are being cared for by Christians.

...for the nation of Sudan and its leadership during this time of increased civil tension. Pray for Sudanese believers, who often live in severe circumstances.

Friday, July 14, 2000. Please pray

...for a young couple that is reaching out to Muslims in India. Pray God will guide them in every endeavor, including the medical center they feel led to establish as an outreach to Muslim women and children. Pray the new converts will become well-established in the faith and that many more will put their faith in Christ.

...for Christians in El-Kosheh, an Egyptian village that has been the scene of much violence. Pray for the Coptic priest who has been accused of provoking the violence.

...that the Church in Ghana, which is strong in the south, will reach out to the increasingly well-organized Muslims who live mainly in the north.

...for an end to the persecution of Somali Christians and for the families of martyrs from that land. Pray that they will have peace of mind, health and financial provision.

Friday, July 21, 2000. Please pray

...for missionary candidates who are preparing for ministry in Muslim settings as they take Islamic courses sponsored jointly by the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary and CMM for the next two weeks. Pray they will be mentally refreshed and profit from this training.

...for Christians in the Molucca Islands in eastern Indonesia as the violence between Muslims and Christians continues to escalate and spread. The situation has become serious and the government is being forced to intervene. Pray for an end to the conflict.

...for Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa, as the people prepare for elections in October. National Christians ask us to pray that God will maintain peace and harmony between Christians and Muslims.

Friday, July 28, 2000. Please pray

...for the Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. As the northern states continue to implement their plans to institute sharia law, Christians are protesting and tensions are mounting. Pray for God's intervention.

...for Christians who continue to be falsely accused of blasphemy and are thus imprisoned in Pakistan. Though a guilty verdict demands a death sentence, no one has been put to death. A lesser sentence is usually imposed with extensive jail time.

...for Regina Janda, the widow of Ruel Janda, a Filipino Christian who was beheaded in a Saudi Arabian prison in May 1997. She has immigrated to the United States to make a new life. Pray that God will meet her needs and give her a place of ministry.

...for the situation in southern Philippines. Violence against Christians and missionaries continues to escalate as rebel Muslim groups try to Islamicize the entire area.

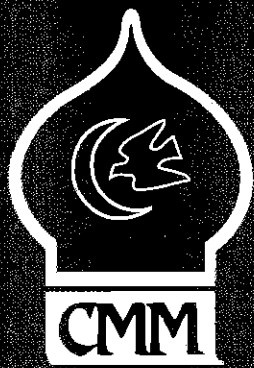


*I urge, then, first of all
that requests, prayers,
intercession and
thanksgiving be
made for everyone.*

—(1 Timothy 2:1, NIV)

Jumaat Prayer Fellowship...

Praying for Muslims
Around the World!



Friday, August 4, 2000. Please pray

...that the Lord will comfort the families of those who died in the earthquakes that struck Turkey last year. Pray for the protection of Christians who are intimidated by the claim of some Muslims that the disaster occurred because God is punishing Turkey for its lack of Islamic practice.

...for the follow-up of Muslims in the West Bank and Gaza who would like to have more information about the gospel. Pray for the formation of fellowships of new believers in the many villages.

...for Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam. Because of recent cancer treatment, his life has been affected. Pray that during this time of increased openness his heart may be turned to the Lord.

...for FEBA broadcasts reaching into Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique. Pray that more Muslims will hear the gospel proclaimed and come to Christ.

Friday, August 11, 2000. Please pray

...that a bill that would prevent evangelism in Israel will be defeated. There is also an attempt to modify the Law of Return that allows Jews and their spouses an almost unlimited right to live in Israel. Some would like to make it more difficult for Messianic Jews to return.

...for the negotiations taking place regarding the shipment of Bibles to a closed country. Pray they can be received, and that they will be freely imported and distributed.

...for the approximately 300 believers in the Comoros Islands. They cannot worship together legally and suffer much duress.

...that the current government leaders in Pakistan will respect the rights of all religious minorities. The military takeover last October was welcomed by many as it removed the unpopular government of Nawaz Sharif.

Friday, August 18, 2000. Please pray

...for 50 Muslims who turned to Christ in one Middle Eastern country last October. Pray they will not be intimidated by the opposition they face, but grow in faith and commitment.

...for the protection of Christians who face persecution and retaliation because the authorities in Uzbekistan have taken a hard stand against Muslims, closing mosques and imposing a quota on flights to Mecca.

...that God will raise up short-term workers who are willing to go and build relationships with Malays with a view toward long-term commitment to live and work among these needy people.

...for protection for the growing number of converts from Islam to Christianity in Iraq. Iraq imposes the death penalty for apostasy.

Friday, August 25, 2000. Please pray

...for a lasting peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the Church is encouraging the implementation of last summer's peace deal. The civil war has threatened to develop into a regional conflict between Muslim and Christian nations.

...that Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the prime minister of Malaysia, will seek God to receive a divine revelation that will change his heart.

...for Christians and Muslims around the world who are **really** suffering. The Islamic Human Rights Commission claims that 80 percent of those suffering human rights abuses worldwide are Muslims. Since Muslims believe it is their "right" to be under *sharia* law, they consider denial of this right an abuse. Hence they believe they are being "abused" in the United States, even though they live in this country of great freedom.

I urge, then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.

—(1 Timothy 2:1, NIV)