

Behind the Black Veil

In the midst of tragedy and persecution, a vibrant underground church is growing in Iran.

Overwhelmed by the pressures of life, Afrooz, a young Muslim student in Iran, cried out to her god—Allah—to help her, to give her a sign that he was with her. That night, while Afrooz knelt on her prayer mat waiting for Allah to respond, a bright light flooded the room.

“I lifted my head and [saw] Jesus ... wearing white,” she recalls. “I recognized that this could only be the Messiah.”

In the midst of this startling vision, Afrooz—who had never seen a Bible—wrote in her native Farsi language: “‘Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’” (Matt. 11:28). It was the beginning of a spiritual journey that would bring her inner peace yet also test her resolve in the fires of persecution.

As her newfound faith in Jesus came to light, Afrooz was refused employment and treated with contempt. On her wedding night, the secret police burst into the newlyweds’ hotel and interrogated them.

Afrooz’s experience (as told by The Voice of the Martyrs) is not uncommon in this fiercely Islamic theocracy, where Christians—especially converts from Islam—face harassment, blacklisting and physical threats. Her remarkable testimony, however, reflects the growing number of Iranians being drawn to Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

New Faith, Ancient People

On December 26, 2003, the eyes of the world turned toward the Iranian city of Bam, where a catastrophic earthquake buried thousands of people under the rubble of their homes. While Western churches sent relief to Bam, international attention focused on the suffering of Iranian Christians and the growth and energy of Iran's underground church. With the situation in Bam opening doors previously slammed shut, missions leaders believe the compassionate response of the worldwide church to this horrific disaster could be a catalyst for explosive church growth in Iran.

Jesus is building His church in this biblical region of ancient Persia—the home of such Bible heroes as Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel. Acts 2 lists Elamites, Parthians and Medes (all Iranians) among those present at the feast of Pentecost celebration in the first century when the Holy Spirit came in power. Today, the church in Iran is growing—spurred by a fresh, sweeping move of the Holy Spirit and strengthened through the fellowship of suffering believers.

Missions experts estimate 20,000-30,000 indigenous evangelical and Pentecostal believers are in Iran today, most of them from Muslim backgrounds. Some experts—citing an unknown number of “secret” believers—claim the true figure could be much higher.

Missiologist Patrick Johnstone, co-author of Operation World, estimates Iran has 17,000 evangelicals, 7,000 charismatics and 4,000 Pentecostals. With annual church growth of 7.5 percent, Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing religious movement in Iran.

Everywhere, the charismatic influence is strong. Many

indigenous churches practice prophecy and healing. Services, which are marked by vibrant worship and fervent prayer, can last for hours.

Yet church leaders often lack training and basic resources, including Bibles. As one missionary put it: “A Persian-language Bible is a hot item in Iran.”

Spiritual Hunger

For most Americans, the mention of Iran conjures up images of Islamic extremists, women in stifling black chadors and bearded zealots declaring America “The Great Satan.” Islam certainly has a grip on this nation of 67 million people—of whom 99 percent call themselves Muslims—but extremists represent a very small minority.

Many Iranians are nominal Muslims simply because they are immersed in an Islamic society that marries the Muslim faith with the Iranian identity. For millions of Iranians, there has been no alternative—until now.

Mounting social problems such as drug abuse, alcoholism, prostitution and suicide belie the public face of “unshakable” Islam while unveiling a culture riddled with despondency. In reality, many Iranians—especially the young—are soul-searching, disillusioned with the Islamic Revolution of 25 years ago.

Increasingly influenced by Western culture, Iranian youth are rebelling against the strict Islamic code. They are eager to express their individuality—and they are open to the gospel.

Today ministries with a heart for the Middle East are grasping unprecedented opportunities for evangelism in Iran. In February, San Antonio-based evangelist Sammy Tippit launched gospel broadcasts (with Farsi interpretation) into Iran via satellite.

Since May 2003, Oklahoma-based Harvesters World Outreach has beamed its Farsi-language Day of Salvation program into Iran three times a week. The response has been incredible, according to Harvesters' founder, pastor Reza Safa, an Iranian convert from Islam.

"We've had hundreds of callers from Iran desperate to know more about the Jesus who saves, heals and delivers," Safa says. "Most callers use phone cards to avoid surveillance; many stay on [the line] for 45 minutes from Iran."

Ongoing testimonies of conversions and miraculous healings provide irrefutable evidence that many Iranians crave a personal relationship with God and thirst for a soul-satisfying experience with the Holy Spirit. It's also natural for Iranian Muslims to be intrigued by and attracted to the "Christian Jesus." That's because almost all Iranians are aware of Jesus through their own poets and the teachings of Islam (which revere Jesus as a prophet but deny His deity).

"They are hungry to learn, eager to discuss the Bible and, in particular, Jesus. They're searching for the truth," explains Tom White, director of The Voice of the Martyrs, an Oklahoma-based ministry to persecuted Christians worldwide.

He notes that the courage and spiritual passion of Iranian believers is a key factor in the "spontaneous growth" of

Iran's house-church movement. Driven underground by persecution, thousands of Iranian Christians—as many as 30,000, according to White—meet in homes. They switch locations to avoid detection.

“In the past eight years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of converts from Islam,” White told Charisma. “Much of the evangelism goes on inside people’s homes.”

Most Iranian believers shun the few official, state-sanctioned churches because the secret police scrutinize church membership rolls to root out what they call Muslim “apostates.” Although violent persecution has subsided, conversion to Christianity during the last decade has resulted in beating, imprisonment, torture and even execution. Despite the risks, some congregations continue to worship publicly—even placing crosses on the front of their buildings.

Persecution: An ‘Honor’

Although Iran's constitution claims to guarantee religious rights, Christians face widespread discrimination. Those who openly acknowledge their faith in Christ are ridiculed and denied meaningful employment. Consequently, many impoverished believers face urgent housing and medical needs, and churches struggle to support their pastors.

Yet believers in Iran count it a privilege to suffer. “It’s an honor to experience persecution for the gospel,” Iranian pastor and church leader Mehdi (not his real name) told Charisma. “[Persecution] has been helpful in strengthening our faith and spiritual growth.”

Iran's autocratic rulers expect church leaders to "knuckle under" their demands, just like the prophet Daniel was expected to conform to King Nebuchadnezzar's decrees centuries ago.

During the 1990s—a period of intense persecution—Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, leader of a Pentecostal church in Iran, was given orders by the Iranian government that no services were to be conducted in Persian (the native language); all church members were to be issued identification cards; member-only services were to be held on Sundays only; and no new members were to be admitted without the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance being notified.

According to human-rights group Jubilee Campaign, Hovsepian-Mehr responded that "never would he or his ministers bow down and comply with such inhumane and unjust demands."

He added: "Our churches are open to all who want to come. If we die or go to jail for our faith, we want the whole world to know. ... I am ready for anything." Soon after affirming his faith with such boldness, Hovsepian-Mehr was murdered.

Other Iranian church leaders have, like Hovsepian-Mehr, paid the ultimate price. Pastor Mohammad Bagher Yusefi—a 35-year-old Pentecostal evangelist and convert from Islam—left his house early one morning to pray. Later that day, his wife and two children were told, his body was found hanging from a tree.

Hearing such stories, many Christians in America might excuse their Iranian brothers and sisters from publicly proclaiming their faith. But Iranian Christians use the book of Acts as

their guide to evangelism.

They are prepared, if necessary, to follow in the footsteps of Stephen, who was martyred; Paul, who endured severe civil punishments; and other first-century believers who were persecuted for Christ. They take to heart the rallying cry of Tertullian, the early church writer: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Call All Prayer Partners

Christianity in America might seem far removed from such suffering and sacrifice. However, pastor Mehdi insists that U.S. Christians are intertwined with the persecuted church: "Do not think that being ... in America [should] give you total security, peace and rest. Instead, you should be thinking of your brothers and sisters in the faith undergoing persecutions and trials. The gospel—born in the East—has reached you. Now the burden of intercession ... is being placed on you. In these latter days, it is your responsibility ... to help and support [suffering believers]."

Many churches in America are catching pastor Mehdi's vision. "Right now, we in America have the incredible opportunity to partner with Iranian churches to see tremendous church growth," says the leader of a missions organization that works closely with churches in Iran.

During a recent visit to Iran, the leader (who for security reasons is not identified) spoke to an evangelical, charismatic congregation, encouraging them and prophesying over them.

“They locked the windows and bolted the doors,” he recalls. “It was a powerful experience that reaffirmed to me that we—the church in America—have a God-given mandate to support our brothers and sisters amid their tribulations.”

Pointing to Iran’s political and cultural influence in the Middle East and Eurasia, missions strategists believe the church in Iran could hold the key to dramatic gospel breakthroughs in neighboring Muslim nations, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Turkey. Pastor Mehdi said he believes Iran has “a pivotal role in the establishment of God’s kingdom in the Middle East.”

It is not surprising then that the church today encounters such intense opposition amid this critical “battleground,” which spiritual forces have wrestled over since Old Testament times. Daniel 10 records that the archangel Michael battled against “the prince of the Persian kingdom”—whom some believe was a demon exercising influence over the Persian realm.

As this centuries-old struggle approaches its climax, Iran’s unflinching believers say they are looking toward the new era described in Jeremiah 49:39 when their daring faith amid tribulation will be rewarded: “‘Yet I will restore the fortunes of Elam [Iran] in days to come,’ declares the Lord” (NIV).

“The Iranian church faces shining days ahead—days of blessing and God’s favor,” pastor Mehdi says. “God has taken Iran into His own hands and has given us a chance to share in His reign.”

It’s God’s Hour for Iran

More Iranians have come to Christ in the last 20 years than in the last 14 centuries

In what some scholars believe is the homeland of the “wise men” mentioned in the biblical account of Jesus’ birth, modern Iranians find themselves on a journey similar to the ancient Magi’s. They too are searching.

A lone trucker drove his vehicle into a remote forest near the Turkmenistan border in northern Iran. He wasn’t making a delivery or stopping to take a nap. He was planning to commit suicide.

By accident he knocked a dashboard switch and the truck’s radio crackled to life. A Christian broadcaster was talking about the gospel in the indigenous Farsi language. Tears flowing down his cheeks, the truck driver surrendered to Christ.

More than 100 people were taking part in a chat room on the Internet. One person asked, “Is anyone interested to know why Jesus is God?” The comment was met with some derision—until someone asked why the question had been posed.

“Because Jesus has changed my life,” came the answer.

The two Web surfers kept in touch. Two weeks later they met at a park in Tehran, the Iranian capital. The inquirer turned out to be an Islamic scholar, seeking to know Christ.

“You can take all sorts of people from all walks of life—from prostitutes to truck drivers to university lecturers—and you

find that God is touching them,” says Lazarus Yeghnazar, an Iranian-born evangelist now based in Great Britain.

From his home in the leafy back roads of a small English town, Yeghnazar, 55, is part of a massive gospel movement that reportedly is seeing “thousands upon thousands” of such conversions.

He directs a church-planting agency called 222 Ministries, a media organization known as Iranian Christian Broadcasting, and a Christian charitable foundation, the Ark Trust. It was through the Ark Trust that help was sent to support relief work after an earthquake on December 26, 2003, devastated the ancient Iranian city of Bam. Christians were among the first on the scene to assist survivors.

“Even the government, press and TV were appreciative of how quickly the local church responded,” Yeghnazar says. “Despite their shortage of finances, the church responded by collecting money.”

An American ministry set up a kitchen, and Iranian Christians supplied the manpower. Together they fed 3,000 people after the earthquake—and, according to Yeghnazar, met with an astonishing response among the locals.

The Muslims often would respond with tears and hugs when they discovered their rescuers were Christians. They would then ask for prayer “in the name of Issa [Jesus].”

Such breakthroughs are occurring after centuries of prayer, Yeghnazar believes. “In the last 20 years, more Iranians have come to Christ compared to the last 14 centuries,” he says.

“We’ve never seen such a phenomenal thirst.”

He had his own divine visitation in Iran—when at age 6 he experienced, with the rest of his family, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Others joined the household in their spiritual journey, until all together they formed the first Farsi-speaking Pentecostal church in the country since the 15th century.

When he was in his early 20s, Yeghnazar was ordained as an elder at the Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran. He has served two brief prison sentences because of his “extreme efforts in evangelism”—both during a so-called era of freedom when the Shah of Iran, rather than Muslim clerics, ruled the country.

Yeghnazar and his wife, Maggie, left Iran in 1988 and settled in the United Kingdom. He has not visited his homeland since a close friend of his, a key Pentecostal leader in the country, was martyred 10 years ago—becoming one of several pastors who have paid the ultimate price for their allegiance to Christ.

Constitutionally, the rights of other religions are guaranteed but closely monitored. Christian proselytism is forbidden. The 1990s saw severe persecution—ironically, in the historical homeland of the wise men who visited the infant Jesus. Yet churches, both real and virtual, are being planted.

Through mass media such as the Internet, radio, television and even films, Yeghnazar and his teams are sharing the Christian message to Farsi-speaking people across the globe. They are propelled by a strong prophetic vision.

“I believe that this phenomenon [will] even snowball into a major avalanche,” Yeghnazar says. “This is still a rain. This is not yet the avalanche coming ... but it will be happening very, very soon.”

He believes a “massive opening,” spiritually speaking, exists in Iran today. His conviction is supported by the findings of mission researchers Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk. In their Operation World prayer guide, they point out the weaknesses of Iran’s Islamic Revolution that deposed the Shah in 1979.

“Twenty years of anti-Western, anti-Christian propaganda has opened many Muslims to seek for alternatives to Islam,” they write. “Iranians are more open to the gospel than ever before.”

When you witness Yeghnazar opening some of the evangelistic Web sites he has helped construct—as well as telling some of the stories behind the statistics—you start to believe his dream, too.

Clive Price in England

For more information about Christian work in Iran, visit or send e-mail to info@.

When a Nation Is Shaken

The recent earthquake opened huge doors for the gospel in Iran.

Within hours of the magnitude 6.7 earthquake that struck Iran on December 26, 2003, Christian relief organizations and churches across the United States were gearing up to help.

Because visa requirements had been relaxed by the Iranian government, American relief teams gained access to Iran with unprecedented ease—and headed straight for the quake-ravaged city of Bam, where more than 41,000 bodies were pulled from the rubble and tens of thousands of survivors were left grief-stricken and homeless.

Amid Bam's heartache, the door swung wide open for Christian humanitarian groups to work alongside Iranian churches, providing unparalleled opportunities for Christians in Iran to reach out with compassion to the Muslim community.

"Such an opening might not come this way again," said Clive Calver, president of Baltimore-based World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. "We don't distinguish between 'Christian' and 'Muslim' when it comes to helping people desperately in need of comfort and hope."

Christian aid workers were able to pray with those in utter despair and sensitively share the hope of the gospel. "An Iranian pastor approached a young man sitting on a pile of rubble, under which his family was crushed to death," Calver recalls. "The thing that this heartbroken man needed the most, the pastor was able to give him—the offer to pray with him in Jesus' name."

"Kash man ham morde budam! [I wish I had died, too!]" wailed a distraught grandmother whose entire family, according to the aid worker who witnessed her grief, suffocated under the rubble while she listened to their muffled cries.

"The people are traumatized, dazed and in shock," explains

Monty Crisp, a relief worker with Arizona-based Food for the Hungry. “To listen to them, to look with them at the photos of those who’ve died and to mourn with them seems as important as giving them things that meet physical needs.”

A relief worker with Elam Ministries agreed, recalling Ali who dug with his bare hands in a desperate attempt to rescue his wife and four children—all of whom perished. As they prayed and wept together, Ali repeated: “Dear Jesus, holy Jesus, help me, heal me.”

Franklin Graham, president of Samaritan’s Purse, summed up the relief efforts, saying: “Our hearts are broken. ... We want to do all we can to help bring comfort.”

World Vision provided tents, blankets and other supplies for thousands of families sleeping outdoors in the bitter cold. In addition to shipping urgently needed medical supplies, Missouri-based Convoy of Hope helped set up a temporary school for displaced children.

Several major church denominations also sent emergency aid. Nazarene Compassionate Ministries shipped 7,200 Crisis Care Kits containing hygiene supplies and soft toys.

A Southern Baptist team from Alabama gained a remarkable opportunity to share Jesus when excited Iranians pointed to the word “Alabama” on supply crates. Loosely translated into Farsi—the main Persian language—“Alabama” means “God with us.”

While agencies transition from relief to rebuilding, Christians will be involved in the massive reconstruction effort, providing opportunities for ongoing witness. “Helping

Bam's people rebuild will take months or years," predicts Kelly Miller of Seattle-based World Concern.

Julian Lukins

Julian Lukins, a former daily newspaper reporter, is a writer based in California. He and his wife, Rebekah, have two daughters.