

Charismatic Pastor Says Michigan Muslims Open to Gospel

✖ A charismatic pastor says Muslims in Dearborn, Mich., a heavily Islamic Detroit suburb, are showing a surprising openness to the gospel, with more than a dozen coming to Christ during a recent evangelistic event.

Barbara J. Yoder, senior pastor of Shekinah Christian Church in Ann Arbor, Mich., said roughly 150 Muslim men and women packed into the Arab-American Friendship Center (AAFC) in Dearborn to hear her testimony recently. The crowd, including women wearing burqas, allowed her to pray with them afterward and 16 people accepted Christ.

“I just felt an open heaven,” said Yoder, who has ministered in several predominantly Muslim nations as leader of Breakthrough Apostolic Ministries Network. “We were astounded at the response in that meeting. I was overcome with the presence of the Lord.”

She said there are fringe Islamic elements in Dearborn, which has the largest concentration of Muslims in the U.S. “They are there, and they are adversarial,” she said. “But I found the people are hungry for relationship, and I found [Dearborn] increasingly open and receptive.”

Yoder’s experience, as well as her approach to ministry, is in sharp contrast to that of four Christians who were arrested June 18 while publicly preaching during the Arab International

Festival, which draws hundreds of thousands of attendees to Dearborn each year.

The four, from a ministry known as Acts 17 Apologetics, were charged with disorderly conduct and jailed overnight. They were released on bond the following day and are currently fighting the criminal charges with legal assistance from the Thomas More Law Center in Ann Arbor. An arraignment is scheduled for July 12.

In a video the four recorded the day after their release, the Christians said they spoke only with those who approached them and engaged in civil conversation. As they were ending one of the conversations, they said police officers approached and arrested three of the missionaries. A teenager who was videotaping the incident was later arrested and her camera confiscated.

“These Christian missionaries were exercising their constitutional rights to free speech and the free exercise of religion, but apparently the Constitution carries little weight in Dearborn, where the Muslim population seems to dominate the political apparatus,” said Richard Thompson, president and chief counsel of the Thomas More Law Center.

Acts 17 leader David Wood, a former atheist, and fellow missionary Nabeel Qureshi were also removed from last year’s festival after their evangelism efforts led to a confrontation with a Muslim. The pair has been accused of instigating attacks from Muslims with their in-your-face approach, but Wood said there is a type of Shariah law operating in

Dearborn.

“Under Shariah law, if you are a Christian you are a second-class citizen,” Wood said in the video. “You cannot go out and proclaim the gospel to Muslims. You cannot go out and disagree with Islamic law or criticize Muhammad. And that’s exactly what we see being enforced in Dearborn.”

Dearborn ministers say those claims are unfounded and worry that the arrests will hamper their efforts to reach Muslims. “It really discredits us as a Christian when we make claim that Shariah law is being implemented in Dearborn,” said pastor Haytham Abi-Haydar of Arabic Fellowship Alliance Church, who has ministered in Dearborn for more than a decade. “Any guy above 50 percent IQ score would know that that’s not true. So our credibility in the community is being compromised. Second, we are being perceived as hostile. We evangelical Christians are coming across as [if] we are out to get [Muslims].”

Christian groups have evangelized at the festival for years without incident, said Scott R. Cherry, a minister who has served among Muslims in Dearborn for 13 years. He said at this and previous festivals evangelical author Josh McDowell and several Arab Christian ministries have reserved booths to distribute evangelistic pamphlets in an area reserved for such groups.

“I’ve been one to walk away from the restricted table, to push the envelope, and I’ve found that if I’m not aggressive, if I’m not obnoxious, nobody has bothered me,” Cherry said. “And

if they have, they have asked me to go back to my table area. At which point I say I'm OK with that."

"But the way that Acts 17 does it, they want to attract hostility, they want to attract negative attention," he added. "They want to get the authorities to surround them so they can say this is evidence of Shariah law."

Abi-Haydar, who has evangelized at the festival for more than a decade, said Wood and Qureshi provoked the crowd. He said Wood challenged a young Muslim man, who began to scream at him.

"He started yelling at them, shouting against them," Abi-Haydar said. "The police was concerned because the circle was growing. He told them to break it up. ... If I was the police, for their own safety I would have told them to break that circle and move on."

Thomas More Law Center senior trial counsel Robert Muise, attorney for the Acts 17 missionaries, said his clients were exercising their free-speech rights. "Preaching the gospel on a city street that Muslims may find offensive so Muslims are shouting threats and profanities at the Christians so that's the basis for the police to arrest the Christians? I think not," he said. "The fact that people who are listening to the message that they may object to the message ... doesn't mean you silence the peaceful speaker. Is it provocative for a Muslim to hear message of the gospel? Well maybe it is, but it's protected by the First Amendment."

Abi-Haydar takes issue with those claims, arguing that the First Amendment does not give Christians the freedom to insult others.

“Nabeel and David are not interested in reaching out to the Muslim community, they are interested in exposing Islam,” said Abi-Haydar, a Lebanon-born convert from Islam. “I don’t have a problem with exposing Islam, but there is a wrong way to do it. ... If a Muslim guy came to our church and started attacking our faith, guess what we’re going to do to him? We’re going to kick him out. And that’s what they were doing to David and Nabeel.”

Yoder said friendship evangelism has proved effective in reaching Muslims in Dearborn. She points to the Arab-American Friendship Center, a Christian ministry that offers English and citizenship classes as well as Friday night Muslim-Christian fellowship services, where many Muslims have come to Christ.

“Muslims don’t respond to angry confrontations over apologetics; they respond to grace and friendships,” Yoder said. “I have found the Muslim people very open.”

Since 9/11 many Christians have been responding to Muslims in fear instead of the love of Christ, she said.

“If we’re Christians, we can’t move out of fear, we’ve got to move out of faith,” she said. “We’ve got to see it as, they have been delivered to our doorstep. We don’t have to go to the Middle East to win them to the Lord. We can do it right here. So we’ve got to cry out to God to overcome us with love and compassion for them as a people group.”