

Conversion reported in Iran

Both former Muslims, the pastors say new believers are risking their lives to tell others about Christ

Two former Muslims who are now pastors in the United States have separately launched satellite TV ministries that try to reach Muslims in a country where it is illegal to evangelize.

Their groundbreaking work in Iran has resulted in thousands coming to Christ, many of whom become such fervent believers that they risk their lives to share the gospel in the Islamic republic.

“Islam has held a grip on this land for over 1,500 years,” said Reza Safa, 43, pastor of Fishermen’s House Church in Tulsa, Okla., and founder of Nejat Christian satellite TV station, which has sought to evangelize the millions of Farsi-speaking people in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan since May 2003.

Nejat means “salvation,” “freedom” or “deliverance” in the Farsi language.

“Iranians have seen the true nature of Islam and are desperate for change and the truth,” Safa told Charisma. “This is also God’s time of visitation upon that land. There is an openness and receptiveness to Jesus that I have never seen there before. Many are having dreams and visions of Him and are experiencing a tremendous hunger and thirst. ... We are seeing them accept Christ instantly, which has been unheard of in Iran in the past.”

Hormoz Shariat, co-founding pastor of the Iranian Christian

Church in San Jose, Calif., and founder of International Antioch Ministries (IAM), which has broadcast Iranian Christian TV (ICTV) since 2002, agreed.

"We are finding that many young people are converting their families and friends after they come to Jesus," Shariat, 49, told Charisma. "Still, they have to hide their viewing of the Christian broadcasts, as they risk imprisonment, loss of residence and jobs, and even death."

In December, the U.S. State Department's Annual Report on Religious Freedom assailed Iran among the worst offenders of religious liberty in the Middle East. According to this year's Open Doors' "World Watch List," Iran ranked fifth among nations that persecute believers.

A missionary working in the Muslim world who asked that his name be withheld because of security concerns said persecution of Christians has "grown sharply" in Iran, where Muslims make up 99 percent of the population.

Despite the persecution, he said, in the last decade an estimated 30,000 Muslims have become "isolated believers" through Christian radio broadcasts and Bible correspondence courses. "Satellite TV broadcasts have long been one of the only significant ways of reaching the Muslim world in any large quantity," he said.

Safa, who like Shariat was raised a devout Shiite in Iran and became a Christian after leaving the country, said Nejat TV has seen more than 3,000 Iranians and Afghans accept Christ since they started broadcasting.

With a goal of becoming a 24-hour station in five years, Nejat TV now broadcasts four hours daily into Iran and the surrounding area. Safa has received death threats, but he also receives hundreds of e-mails and telephone calls from curious Muslims, with many calling from cell phones to avoid government surveillance.

One of Safa's challenges is funding a religious program overseas via satellite, which doesn't come cheap. Through donations and preaching, he has raised \$250,000, with a goal to raise \$1 million to continue to grow Nejat TV.

Meanwhile, Shariat said ICTV's live call-in show has been "the catalyst" for more than 50,000 Muslim conversions worldwide. "One time we had 30 people listening in on a single phone call and all came to Jesus through our show, and we ministered to them off the air," he said.

ICTV broadcasts 18 hours weekly over two satellites, with the telecast seen in the United States, Canada, the Middle East and Europe. Shariat said it costs \$280,000 annually to broadcast in Iran over satellite. The ministry is paid for through donations, grants, partnerships with parachurch groups and tithes from IAM's four affiliated churches.

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For more information on International Antioch Ministries, visit or call 408-267-3274. For more information on Harvesters World Outreach, visit or call 918-488-9645.