

Hope Amid the Ruins

War has devastated Afghanistan. Yet today, in spite of the continued influence of the Taliban, an underground Christian movement is growing.

You notice it as soon as you circle the mountains surrounding Kabul and look down. Wreckage and carnage litter the landscape of this barren land. As you exit the plane, you get a firsthand look. The planes, artillery, trucks and armored vehicles that line the runway in states of disrepair are proof of the devastation.

A bustling military base sits at the edge of the airport. United Nations planes take off and land constantly, adding a steady stream of diplomats, relief supplies and expertise to the effort of rebuilding the nation.

Outside the airport are even more signs of war-torn Afghanistan. It is difficult to find one building that isn't pockmarked by bullets or rocket fire. Parts of Kabul, a city of 3 million people, still do not have running water or electricity.

There is no central bank in Afghanistan, no newspapers or media, and no national identity. The nation is divided into nine provinces, each with its own culture and language. There is much animosity among the tribes, sporadic attacks from well-armed warlords and little trust for the central government based in Kabul.

And the farther one gets from the capital, the less secure the countryside, especially in the south, where the Taliban remnant maintains a tenuous hold. Aided by the terrain and the

proximity to Pakistan, the Taliban remain a threat to any lasting peace in Afghanistan.

For many the question is, can the Prince of Peace make an impact in this land of war? For those who trust in Him, the answer is yes, but the timetable is yet to be determined.

There are signs everywhere of the devastating effects of the last 25 years of war, genocide, invasions, Soviet occupation, tribal brutality, religious repression, U.N. sanctions and the militant Islamic dictatorship of the fanatical Taliban. It seems too much for one nation to bear.

The devastation of the last 25 years is all around, but nowhere is the horror more evident than on the faces of the people themselves.

Some faces are hidden. Many women still wear burqas, the traditional veiled dress that covers every square inch of a woman's body, including her face. Those men and women whose faces are visible are somber, cautious and ever watchful, as if they are wondering: How long will this fragile peace last?

An Underground Church

Before the Taliban regime, Afghanistan was one of the least-reached countries in the world, with fewer than 3,000 Afghan believers. There were 48,000 mosques but not one church building. There were 70 people groups living in the country, and all of them were considered unreached.

Before the Taliban came to power and during their brutal

regime, many Afghans fled their nation. After the war was over, officials expected about 600,000 of those refugees to return. But to their surprise, more than 2 million have come back—and some are bringing with them what they didn't have when they left—faith in Jesus Christ.

“It is surprising how many people found the Lord while they were in Pakistan,” one relief worker comments. “Many had supernatural dreams, where Jesus appeared to them and revealed Himself to be the truth. Others were won to Christ through the network of Pakistani believers in remote, mountainous areas.”

Information is difficult to obtain about the state of the underground church in Afghanistan today, and most foreign Christians working in the country are reluctant to give out information that might compromise their work and the safety of Afghan believers.

But evangelism is alive and well—not only among the Christian workers who have come to help rebuild the country, but also among the Afghan believers themselves.

“It is unnatural for Afghans not to talk about God,” one Christian worker explains. “They are looking for something new, knowing that they cannot go forward with what they had in the past. I talk about Jesus every day because people ask me. It's that simple.”

Another worker shared this account of his work in Afghanistan: “We are currently working on a program to train 45 Afghan families that have [become believers]. We've got the training material purchased in their language [and] strategies developed, and we are now waiting on the funding.

"I've met many of these families," he continues. "The first time was in a secret location, and 16 of the men were in a room sitting around a large wooden table. When we walked into the room, they all stood. It was like walking into the very throne room of God. I have never felt or experienced the presence of God in such a tangible way.

"Thus far I've had the privilege of meeting with this group on three separate occasions. Each time there were three or four of us who are supposed to do the training, but I have been the only one able to speak. It is strange to watch full-time ministers, who make their living by talking, just sit there speechless and weeping. It's like stepping back 2,000 years."

And that is the key to what the Holy Spirit is doing in Afghanistan today. While Jesus has personally revealed Himself to some, others are hearing the truth because God's people are bearing witness to the truth. Most bring practical skills to help rebuild the nation, and all bring the hope that is in them, and they are willing and eager to share it with the Afghan people.

There are 2,000 nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in Afghanistan to address such needs as literacy, poor health conditions, land-mine dangers, orphans, refugees and more. "Kabul is awash with NGO money!" one worker says. But corruption is rampant, and often the money promised doesn't come or doesn't reach the people and issues that need it most.

That is why God's people know they must act with integrity and urgency if they are going to be effective witnesses and make a difference.

“We are teaching the people what integrity is,” one Canadian worker says. “We are doing simple things like showing agencies how to cooperate and communicate. When people ask me why I’m here, I get to tell them, ‘Because Jesus sent me here.’ They are amazed and want to know more.”

Other workers are met with distrust. “You just want Arab oil and to oppress Muslims,” an Afghan man accused an aid worker. “I know you are a Christian, and you want to start a church.”

The distrust is not surprising. Militant Islam teaches hate for the West (Americans in particular) and for Christians. Add to this the West’s (particularly the United States’) support of Israel, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the recent war with Iraq and promised aid money that doesn’t arrive in a timely manner. All this promotes a general mistrust of outsiders.

Yet in the midst of it all, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is touching the people of Afghanistan. And He is doing it through His people who have come to help rebuild the lives and infrastructure of this nation.

Risks of Persecution

It is still extremely dangerous for Muslims in Afghanistan to become believers in Jesus Christ. Culturally, if not politically, they can be killed for their decisions.

There are few teaching materials available in Dari, the main language of Afghanistan. There is not even a complete Bible translation—only a New Testament. And there are no translations in minority languages spoken by various people

groups in the country.

Because evangelism is still repressed, one of the best ways to further the kingdom in this needy

land is to serve the people, says an American physician serving in Afghanistan. He believes this is a strategic time for Christians to serve Afghanistan with love in a way that will bring lasting change to the people and country.

"We have a chance to work and rebuild a nation from the ground up," he explains. "That doesn't happen too often. There is a great need here for people who can teach English and computer skills. Students are returning to the universities, and they want to learn English; they want to learn about free enterprise."

As a doctor, his main concern, of course, is the desperate lack of medical care in the country.

"There is a critical need for health-care providers and for teachers with expertise in nursing, dentistry and medicine," he says. "If we had the workers, we could start a nursing school tomorrow. There is [also] a great need for basic science [teaching] and clinical faculty for all medical schools."

Foreign Christians working in Afghanistan do so at great risk, but all believe the fruit they are seeing more than makes up for the ever-present danger.

"I have people over to my home all the time, and we watch the Jesus film," one worker explains. "Then we talk. I have prayed with many people. It may not be a public outreach crusade, but evangelism is definitely happening."

"We need people who aren't easily intimidated," another worker says, "and who understand something of Islam and are willing to serve. We can use people whether they can come for three

weeks or three years.”

Afghan officials are writing a new national constitution—a process that is an opportunity for prayer, according to an intercessor who came to Afghanistan to pray for the country and people.

“We are believing that Christianity will be declared a minority religion in Afghanistan for the first time ever,” the intercessor notes. “I pray for hours every day and then I go to work at a local orphanage. That’s what I get to do every day for Jesus in this land of war. It doesn’t get any better than this!”

The intercessor is one of many believers from all over the world who are in Afghanistan to serve the people, help rebuild the country’s infrastructure and bear witness to the truth. Some are there for three weeks; some are planning to stay much longer.

The physician quotes from a passage in Isaiah 58 to describe what is happening today in Afghanistan: “‘The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. ... Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings’” (vv. 11-12, NIV).

He adds: “The people I work with and I use these verses as a guideline for what we do here. We know we must help rebuild the country if we want to talk to people about Jesus and provide an atmosphere where the church has a chance to flourish. Otherwise, our converts today will be the martyrs of tomorrow.” *

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An uncertain future: An Afghan woman holds her son in a war-battered building in Kabul. Many people returning to Afghanistan today face grinding poverty and few job prospects.

AFGHANISTAN

Population: 28.7 million. This is estimated because an official census has never been conducted.

Area: 251,825 square miles, slightly smaller than Texas. During war with the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1989, much of the country was bombed and mined, and half of all housing was destroyed.

Percentage of the population that is Muslim: 98 percent

Number of Christians in Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion: 1,000-3,000

Number of Christians in Afghanistan today: Reliable figures are not available.

Number of U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan: 9,000

AP PHOTO/NATACHA PISARENKO

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JOHN W. STANKO/PURPOSEQUEST

Called to rebuild: Afghan pastors receive training at a conference in Kabul.

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Muslim territory: Many Afghans today mistrust

Americans and view missionaries with suspicion.

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