

Iranian Church Growth 'Mind-Boggling'

Elam Ministries has been training Iranian nationals to evangelize their nation for nearly 20 years

Ministry leaders say more Iranians are coming to Christ than ever before as many become disillusioned with the fundamentalist Islamic government that has brought them war, economic chaos and a religious dictatorship.

"I believe with all my heart that millions of Iranians can be won for Christ in our generation and profoundly impact not only the character of Iran, but also the whole of the Middle East," said Sam Yeghnazar, founder of Elam Ministries, an organization that has been evangelizing in Iran for nearly 20 years.

Christians in Iran are also optimistic, said John Reinhold, president of the American Evangelistic Association (AEA), which partners with Elam. "They are completely convinced that Iran will become a Christian nation and will be the messenger to the Islamic world, that revival will spill out of there and actually change history," he said.

Iran is largely Muslim, and conversion from Islam is illegal. But Yeghnazar said Iranians are very open to the gospel. "[Jesus] reminds them of all that they long to see in a true hero—a man who will stand up for truth, who is willing to sacrifice Himself for others and who will return to judge the world in righteousness," he said.

With bases in the United Kingdom and U.S., Elam has been

offering leadership training in Iran since it was founded in 1988. "It's not a Western agency working to get Westerners into Iran," said Clive Calver, former president of the Christian humanitarian organization World Relief and senior pastor of Walnut Hill Community Church in Connecticut. "It's basically about Iranians ministering to their own people."

But ministering among their own people has not shielded these Christians from persecution. Iranian government officials have not only required pastors to report proselytizers to the Ministry of Information but also have been known to tap phones, send informers to services and have pastors followed, Yeghnazar said.

Church leaders have also been imprisoned, and many have been martyred. But the threat of death has not stopped Iranian Christians. Yeghnazar said Assemblies of God churches, which have faced the most opposition, have "never shrunk from proclaiming the gospel to Muslims."

The Tehran Assemblies of God church has a huge cross outside it, Calver said, "which is just 'in your face' to everybody. That 'secret' church ... [is] openly showing its commitment."

In the midst of such danger, Yeghnazar says Elam leaders are motivated by "the conviction that every Iranian should have the opportunity to hear the gospel."

In addition to offering ministry training, Elam publishes books, broadcasts Christian television programs and translates Scripture into the Persian language. But Reinhold said what God is doing in Iran is "mind-boggling" and can't be attributed solely to traditional evangelism methods. "The Lord

seems to be taking a shortcut to reach the Islamic culture and mind," he said.

Reinhold said an Iranian doctor told him he accepted Christ after seeing a vision in which Jesus told him, "You are Mine; follow Me."

Yeghnazar said he has seen God do incredible wonders in Iran, but it always moves him when young Iranian men and women embrace the call to missions. "I don't know what will happen to them," he said, "but I know that the Lord of the harvest has promised: 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'"

Rachael Cox