

# Underground Church Growing in Muslim-Dominated Indonesia

✘ Pentecostals on the tsunami-ravaged coast of Indonesia are experiencing a wave of conversions and healings.

In the strongly Muslim Aceh province of northern Sumatra—where 167,000 people died in the 2004 tsunami—the underground church movement is growing, with Pentecostal congregations thriving.

Indonesia has an official policy of religious tolerance, but in Muslim-dominated areas Christians face open hostility and persecution. In Aceh province, churches must register with the authorities and are not permitted to evangelize. Many Christians choose to meet in unregistered—or underground—churches.

Sumatra is one of the least evangelized places on earth, according to *Operation World*. But since the tsunami—which wiped out 15 percent of the population of Aceh's provincial capital Banda Aceh—numerous underground churches have put down roots.

Pastor Nico (full name withheld for security reasons) started an underground Pentecostal church four years ago with only six members. Today 90 people from the neighborhood make up the Spirit-filled congregation. They endure persecution for their faith. One church family had rocks thrown through the windows of their home, and another family was forced to relocate because of threats.

“It’s very difficult for the Muslims to accept us here,” the 34-year-old pastor told *Charisma*. “If the authorities knew where we meet, they would close us down.”

Despite the risks, the congregation is mission minded. “We’d like to go to the homes in this area, to the marketplace, to share about Jesus and start another church,” Pastor Nico

explained. "We love God, but we also have to love people—even those who don't love us."

One of the church members, Novi (full name withheld), grew up in a Buddhist home, burning offerings of money and incense at her family shrine. Two years ago, a traumatic experience set the 24-year-old Novi on a spiritual quest that led to healing and faith in Christ.

Whenever Novi was close to her husband, she felt a peculiar sensation, which she described as worms wriggling under her skin. "You could actually see something moving under the skin," recalled her husband Fumin.

Deeply distressed, the couple sought help from various sources, including witchdoctors, traditional healers and their Buddhist idols. But Novi's condition worsened, leaving her on the verge of a breakdown. "I thought: 'I'm going to go crazy and die,'" she recalled. "I couldn't sleep. ... I felt an overwhelming sense of fear."

Novi became convinced the affliction was a spiritual attack. A relative suggested the couple cross the sea in order to "leave the evil behind." In desperation, they flew to another island, but the attacks intensified.

At her wit's end, Novi listened to her sister who had become a Christian. "My sister told me that I should go to the Highest Power for healing—that is, Jesus," Novi told *Charisma*. "I thought: If Jesus can heal me, I will follow Him forever."

As they prayed together in Jesus' name, Novi felt a "cleansing surge" through her body. A few days later, she felt another attack and cried out to Jesus. Since then, she has never suffered a recurrence. Now her husband is a leader in the church, and their testimony has drawn others to Christ, including his parents, brother and sister-in-law.

The new converts in Aceh's growing underground church include

former Muslims like Ernawati (full name withheld). As a little girl growing up in a devoutly Muslim home, Ernawati visited the mosque with her parents and knelt to pray five times a day.

However, she often asked herself: *Who is God? Does He really hear my prayers?* Her curiosity grew when she saw the crucifixion scene on *The Jesus Film*, an evangelistic movie produced by Campus Crusade for Christ. "I wanted to know more about this Jesus," she said.

Shortly before Christmas 2004, 30-year-old Ernawati was at home when a man wearing a white robe appeared and said to her: "Do not be afraid."

"Naturally, I was very afraid," Ernawati recalled. "I didn't know who he was ... and then he disappeared."

Just days later, the tsunami struck. Submerged by the wave, Ernawati cried out: "Jesus ... save me!" Although she could not swim, she suddenly found herself above water and scrambled to safety.

Thousands drowned that day but she was one of the miraculous survivors. Ernawati gave her life to Jesus and joined the underground church. "Now I know the Truth, and the Truth has set me free," she testifies. **-Julian Lukins in Sumatra, Indonesia**