

An Iranian Awakening

Media reports about Iran typically focus on its nuclear weapons ambitions or Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's poor human rights record. But an Iranian evangelist says much more is happening inside the biblical land of Persia.

Lazarus Yeghnazar, founder of England-based 222 Ministries, says a vibrant New Testament church is thriving in Iran despite brutal persecution. He claims more than 3,000 Iranians are converted each month through 222's Farsi-language television and Internet broadcasts, even though the Iranian government has cracked down on satellite television and smashed satellite dishes in Tehran and other cities.

Yeghnazar says the churches are growing so fast in Iran that some leaders have wondered if they should stop evangelizing. "One church leader told me they have stopped sharing their faith because every Iranian they witness to comes to Christ," says Yeghnazar, who fled Iran in 1988 with his wife, Maggie, to base their operations in the U.K. "[The leader] told me, 'We don't have enough New Testaments to handle the growth.' There is a huge need for discipleship."

The challenges in Iran are equally as big. The country has an extremely high rate of drug addiction, and at least one-fourth of the people suffer from depression. About 60 percent of the nation's 71 million people are under age 26, and many of these are university students who are growing increasingly restless under Ahmadinejad's dictatorship.

Police brutality is common and often aimed at Christians who gather in groups smaller than 20 to worship. "Believers in Iran are not praying for persecution," Yeghnazar says, "but they know it is helping fuel the growth of their churches."

Iran has exported trained terrorists for 30 years and fueled the growth of Hezbollah, the Palestinian Intifada and suicide

bombers in Iraq, as well as radical Islamic movements in North Africa and the Philippines. Yet Yeghnazar believes there is an unprecedented open door for the gospel. The evangelist quotes from Isaiah 65:1 to describe what is happening: "God said, 'I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, "Here am I, here I am," to a nation which did not call My name.'"

Iranians are not only coming to Christ in record numbers, but they are also downloading Farsi New Testaments on MP3 players, receiving smuggled Bibles and training young pastors to start new churches.

"In this repressive atmosphere people are coming to the Lord in record numbers," Yeghnazar says, noting that almost 200,000 unique visitors come to 222's Farsi gospel website each month. He said many are seeking discipleship because they just gave their hearts to Christ."