

Making Jesus Real

BECKY HANCOCK AND HER FAMILY ARE ON A MISSION TO MAKE CHRIST KNOWN TO ARAB AMERICANS IN THEIR CITY.

The sedate, tree-lined neighborhood in Dearborn, Michigan, may look like a picture of Americana. But in this city that boasts the highest concentration of Arabic people anywhere in the United States—the second-largest Arab population outside the Middle East—the Hancocks are a tiny minority.

Here, where two cultures sometimes clash, Becky and her husband, Trey, lead a quiet effort to introduce Christ to those who embrace Muhammad. They've been at it for 16 years, starting as itinerant missionaries with a pair of \$100 church pledges and a series of odd jobs as financial support.

The Hancocks hope to soon move their house church into an office building in the city's business district. That will transform Dearborn Assembly of God into a more visible congregation. But Becky insists the domestic touches will remain.

"Whether we're here or in the office building, we want people to feel like the church is their home," says Becky, 46, whose easy-going manner and hearty laugh exude a peaceful charm.

"Our sanctuary will be very much like a living room rather than a traditional sanctuary. We've tossed around a lot of ideas—pillows, couches and chairs."

CULTURAL ROADBLOCKS There's a reason for this design. One of the primary forces holding Muslims back from following Christ, the Hancocks say, is the all-too-real fear that if they come to Jesus, they will have to give up their families.

Among many of the Arabs Becky has met, relationships are so

important that they outrank everything, including time and schedules—as evidenced by the many unannounced visitors who drop by the Hancocks' home expecting their hosts to spend the next two hours talking.

Trey and Becky know that maintaining a welcoming atmosphere in their new church home will be vital. That's where Becky's gift of hospitality comes in.

Her knack for making people feel at home is greatly appreciated—not just by the 35 to 40 people who have been coming to their Sunday night services, but also by the church and parachurch groups such as Youth With A Mission that visit Dearborn several times a year.

"Whenever we have a group in, she does all the meals and coordinates everything," says Adam Simnowitz, who, along with his wife, Cindy, is one of four missionaries on the Hancocks' team.

"She's the engine. We house, feed and host them, and it's a lot of work. But Becky's the one who gets the ball rolling."

Another of Becky's gifts is prayer, adds team member John Koski. He remembers a particular time when an American woman was going through a nasty divorce from her Muslim husband.

"Becky invited the woman and her child into their home for several months," Koski recalls. "I remember going to court to support them. Becky had been fasting for three days over that issue."

"When she intercedes for people, it's not unusual for her to pray to the point of tears."

MINISTER WITHOUT A TITLE Though Trey, 47, has the official "missionary" designation from the couple's denomination, he makes no distinction between his preaching and community activities and his wife's hospitality and Bible teaching to

women and children.

The ministry is a family affair—one that includes not only Becky, but also 20-year-old Ashleigh (just back from a ministry internship in Europe); Grace, 17; and Paul, 13.

For her part, Becky is more concerned with doing the work of the ministry than garnering titles and getting public recognition. She respects her husband's leadership role as pastor. She also knows that she is a significant co-worker in a difficult mission field.

In addition to teaching the Bible to children and teens before the evening meal that precedes the Sunday evening service, she plays an important support role at the team's mid-week Bible study involving half a dozen women. She is there to encourage and reassure one particular participant whose Muslim husband refuses to allow her to attend church.

There have been small victories, such as the woman Becky helped through a rough divorce who has since returned to an Assemblies of God (AG) church. But there have been setbacks, too, such as the woman Becky disciplined whose subsequent marriage brought a quick return to Muslim beliefs.

Such setbacks can be discouraging in a ministry where converts are rare. The number of salvations the Hancocks have witnessed since 1987 number only about two dozen.

One guiding principle keeps Becky focused, despite the frustrations.

"I don't think of this as our ministry," she says. "I just see us as instruments of God."

Becky is convinced that God is up to something special in Dearborn. "My firm conviction is that God wants to do something here that will affect Muslims around the world," she says.

“God has brought many [Arab] people here. He didn’t do that without a reason.

“People can be more public about their faith here than overseas. That will help break the back of Islam.”

UNLIKELY CANDIDATE Her passionate statements belie the fact that the former Becky Severance was an unlikely candidate to become a missionary in Dearborn. Growing up in Saginaw 100 miles to the north, where her father pastured two AG churches, she never dreamed of one day living in the Detroit area—let alone liking it.

Becky accepted Jesus as her Savior at the age of 8. Although there were temptations to hang out with the wrong crowds at school, she credits God with helping her resist that lure—God, and her great respect for her parents.

At 16 Becky received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at a Charles and Frances Hunter crusade. She appreciates that though her life may not have taken any dramatic turns, her understanding of the Spirit-filled life grew and expanded over the years.

Her unfolding vision included serving as a missionary someday. Sparked by the missions conferences held at her father’s church and the many missionaries who visited their home, she dreamed of going to the mission field.

Her one stipulation: It had to be anywhere but Detroit.

“I didn’t want to live in Detroit,” Becky laughs. “When I was a kid, I didn’t even want to drive through the city.

“It was busy, and the traffic was horrible. I didn’t have any appreciation for it.”

But God had a different view—and a plan.

Enrolling in Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri, Becky

set out on a missions track, taking classes in cross-cultural communications, behavioral science and media. Then, between her freshman and sophomore years, the Lord confirmed her destiny. Awakening one night, she sensed the Holy Spirit saying, "I want you to be a missionary."

Ironically, missions was no longer Becky's desire. Something had intervened—a serious relationship with another student who would never accept her call to missions. He had set his heart on business, with Becky cast in the role of wife, mother and Sunday school teacher.

For a while Becky struggled with the conflicting pulls on her life. Finally she acknowledged that she had to yield every desire that didn't conform to God's plan. But she needed help.

"I can't give this guy up," she prayed. "You have to do that."

The next day, she recalls, the young man "walked into the cafeteria, saw me, walked on by and never spoke another word to me."

Though this abrupt rejection stung, Becky accepted the fact that God had answered her request. She also learned an important lesson: When you tell the Lord that you want to follow His will, He will work through circumstances to help you follow Him.

"If He has crafted and formed you to do something, you can allow yourself to be used in a lesser way, but you will never be satisfied," Becky says. "Only when you allow the Lord to use your gifts fully will you be fulfilled."

GOD'S DIVIDENDS This lesson was put to the test in 1987, eight years after Becky's marriage to missions-minded Trey Hancock. God directed Trey to attend a summer missions training conference in Detroit. And despite Becky's early reluctance to making Detroit her mission field, the couple wound up staying.

Becky's willingness to yield to God's plan for her life has paid dividends, according to Mark Gabriel, a former Muslim imam whose book *Islam and Terrorism* details the hostility he experienced after converting to Christianity.

"For Trey and Becky to sacrifice themselves and live in this community, for their kids to be part of the 5 percent of non-Arab students there, that is something," Gabriel says. "That is very encouraging to me. I say, 'Lord, send more people like them.'"

God has answered that prayer. In recent months, half a dozen people have taken roles in the Dearborn Assembly of God, in addition to the six already on the leadership team. The growth is especially significant in light of the recent war with Iraq, which inflamed tensions between many American and Arab communities.

Through it all, the Hancocks never stopped loving their neighbors. And if Becky has her way, nothing—including the church's move from their home to an office building—will disrupt the relationships they've nurtured or bring an end to the family atmosphere they've worked hard to develop.

"We are brothers and sisters and will be for eternity," she says. "There has to be a comfortableness together. Fellowship has to be high on our list of priorities.

"Ultimately the whole atmosphere has to be set by the Holy Spirit—and that's His heart."

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