

The Miracle of Iran's Underground Church

Last week during a trip to western Australia, I spoke in a small church comprised mostly of Iranian immigrants. The worship was in Farsi and English, and the pastor typically gives his sermons only in Farsi. My translator that evening, Mehrzad, told me he encountered Jesus for the first time just a few years ago.

Before I left Australia, I became good friends with three more young Iranian converts to Christianity. All of them left Iran to find a better life in Australia. All of them told me that Iranians back home are disillusioned with Islam and are on a desperate search for spiritual reality.

One of these men, whom I will call Bahram, began developing a strong hunger to know God after he saw the 2016 Mel Gibson film *Hacksaw Ridge*, in which a framed copy of the Lord's prayer is shown during a key scene. Bahram had never heard of the prayer. He looked it up on the internet out of curiosity.

A few days later, two random pages of the Bible ended up on his doorstep, blown by the wind. The pages included Luke 11, where the Lord's prayer appears. Bahram saw this as a sign from God, and he eventually gave his life to Christ.

"Back home in Iran, young people my age have turned away from Islam," another young convert, Mahmoud, told me.

I was not surprised to hear these testimonies. Missionary strategists have been reporting for some time that Iran is experiencing the most impressive surge of church growth on the planet. Elam Ministries, based in England, says more Iranians have become Christians since 1979 than in the previous 1,300 years. Some organizations estimate that there could be as many as 800,000 to 1 million believers in the country.

But Iran is also one of the most difficult places on earth to be a Christian because of persecution from the hard-line Islamic government. Believers are jailed and tortured. Churches are forced to meet in secrecy. Yet one ministry there has reported that so many people are being converted they can't keep enough Farsi Bibles in stock to give to new believers.

Elam Ministries says Iranian churches typically have between eight to 12 members only. To stay safely off the radar, the small churches multiply quietly. But this method of small-group discipleship actually produces stronger Christians than a bigger church would. Elam also reports that many people make decisions for Jesus after watching Christian television broadcasts.

In May of this year, Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Mahmoud Alavi, gave a speech to Muslim clerics in which he publicly decried the alarming growth of Christian faith. He announced that mass religious conversion to Christianity is "happening right before our eyes."

Iran's revival is also gaining more attention because of the new film *Lambs Among Wolves, Vol. 2*, a documentary produced by Frontier Alliance International Studios. One unidentified church leader in the movie asks: "What if I told you the mosques are empty inside Iran? What if I told you no one follows Islam inside of Iran? Would you believe me? This is exactly what is happening inside of Iran."

It's no secret in the Muslim world that Iranians are rejecting the core values of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian Revolution, which he launched in 1979. An article published in June 2019 by Al-Jazeera, the Middle Eastern news service, admits that a majority of Iranians today believe Khomeini's period of rule was a failure that took away their rights.

Many young Iranians want nothing to do with Islam now, even

though they are forced to pretend that they support it.

An unidentified Iranian pastor in the *Sheep Among Wolves* video said the harsh ayatollahs indirectly helped the cause of the gospel. "The ayatollahs brought the true face of Islam to light and people discovered it was a lie," the pastor said. "After 40 years under Islamic law—a utopia according to them—they've had the worst devastation in the 5,000-year history of Iran."

The Al-Jazeera report states that only between 10 to 15% of Iran's more than 80 million people actually are loyal to the idea of an Islamic Republic. Mosques are emptying. Most people reject the idea of an all-powerful Muslim cleric running their country. At some point, as hard-liners lose power, democracy and an unexpected wave of religious freedom will become a reality in Iran.

And that's why Iran's believers need our prayers more than ever. Pray for the believers who are languishing in jails. Pray for the leaders of house churches as they seek to reach others for Christ secretly. And pray that what is happening in Iran will spread throughout the Middle East.