

Inside Iran: An Interview With an Iranian Pastor

Iran is all over the news. President Obama and President Hasan Rouhani talked just over a week ago—the first time the presidents of the two nations have spoken since 1979. This is being hailed as good news, and I tend to think that starting conversations is a good first step.

Yet even in that conversation, religious liberty became an issue. I am thankful President Obama brought up pastor Saeed Abedini to the Iranian president.

Iran is a complex place when it comes to the gospel, religious liberty and sharing Christ. Recently, I had a conversation while in Central Asia with some workers in that nation. It was a powerful and moving conversation, shared here with their permission.

I was privileged to sit down with Sam to talk some about what God is doing in Iran. We basically edited the comments of his transcript (via a translator) into paragraph form.

Sam and Elam's Story

Sam's ministry with Elam is steeped in family history and Christian heritage. His father, Seth, was born into and raised in a Christian Armenian family in Iran. His father had come to faith when he was in his 20s, and the Armenians are nominally Christian. His father, however, really committed himself to Christ. When he shared his faith with his fiancée, she also accepted Christ. They began their married lives as Christians. Sam's father started a house church that was open to Iranians every day. There were many Armenian and Assyrian Christian groups, but Sam's father reached out to the Iranians. They would have prayer meetings every day, and from that house church the Iranian church grew.

Making God's Word Accessible

One of Elam's projects is the distribution of the Bible in the Iranians' Persian language, Farsi. They have personally experienced the desperation many feel for the Word of God. From people who have printed it themselves and from people who have been given copies, the Elam team has heard this testimony: "You know, I have been searching for this for so long. I've been wanting to find out about Jesus for years, and this is the first time that someone has given this to me."

"Wow, someone has actually thought about me in my own language."

Sam explained that the Iranian people are so hungry for the Scriptures because it is in their language. Let me stress this point: These Bibles are not in Arabic or another similar language. These Bibles are in their own Persian tongue, Farsi. When they discover that they can actually read this Bible, they are so excited, and they think, "Wow, someone has actually thought about me in my own language."

Making God's Word Available

In addition to making it accessible in its own language, the Elam team also makes the Bible available for free. They have a copy on their website, and the Christians often carry copies, should they discern someone's desire for God's Word. In fact, some of the Christians have seen New Testaments in area stores. When asked about it, the shopkeepers have said they "found these great things and are selling them for this price." According to Sam, the Elam team then offered to provide more to sell should they run out. By making God's powerful Word accessible and available, the Elam team spreads truth in a very tangible way.

Equipping the Saints for Ministry

Just as the Elam team spreads truth through Bible

distribution, they also train pastors and leaders to start house churches all over the region. Sam described the training process in our interview. Many emerging leaders go through special Bible training. Sam explains that at Elam, their desire was to reach the Iranians in the region. They recognized a need and worked to fill it. Sam's father worked for the Bible society for several years, and Sam worked for the Bible society before he founded Elam Ministries. Sam saw a huge need for the Iranians to hear the gospel and believed that if they could reach the Iranian people, the doors to the Middle East would open as well.

Throughout their training at Elam, future leaders have the opportunity to learn through instruction and through practical experiences. Often Elam will send future leaders to someone who is already leading a house church or participating in a specific ministry, that they might gain authentic experience for a few months before they establish their own church or ministry.

Training in Community, Calling and Competencies

Sam explains that the goal of training is to help future leaders discover who they are in Christ. The training builds upon and emphasizes five "C's."

First, the future leaders need to be rooted in *Christ*. As they are involved in a healthy *community*, they grow personally in Christ and develop and grow in *character*. As they grow, they experience a deeper sense of *calling* towards the mission God has designed for them. Furthermore, as they study, they discover and develop their *competencies* in different areas of ministry.

Students at Elam learn about various aspects of ministry through four different dynamics: instructional, relational, spiritual and experiential. For example, rather than merely hearing an explanation of how to practice evangelism, students

practice evangelism in the real world. Elam wants its students to understand the importance of being accountable, so they provide mentors who afford the relational dynamic. To encourage the spiritual dynamic of learning, students spend each morning in personal prayer, small group prayer, corporate prayer and worship. By training through instructional, relational, spiritual and experiential dynamics, Elam focuses its students on the practicality of their ministry while encouraging profound depth in their walks with Christ.

God Is Using Pre-Evangelism Dreams

After students have completed their training and shadowing, many are sent out to start house churches. When asked how many house churches are in the region, Sam mentioned the difficulty of nailing down a number. He stated that many believers in Iran are not yet connected to a house church because of the varied ways that many come to faith without ever meeting anyone. For example, he has met some who have come to faith through a television program or website. Many other Iranians come to Christ through dreams.

Sam recalled one encounter an Elam team member had with a cab driver. The Christian had been running late for a meeting, so she hurriedly called a cab. When she got in, the cab driver looked at her very seriously in the rearview mirror. Thinking, "I'm late, can we go?" she asked, "Sir, are you OK?" The driver said that he had seen her in a dream the previous night and that she had been wearing the same scarf. She replied, "OK," and he continued. He said, "In my dream, I heard a man say to me, 'This woman will give you what you need.'" The Christian said, "OK, I know what that is," and, handing him a New Testament, she said, "This is what the man wanted me to give you."

Elam and the Quiet House Churches in Iran

Due to the varied ways in which Iranians come to faith in

Christ, it is difficult to estimate the number of Christ followers. However, Sam describes the different types of house churches that Elam partners with and helps establish. Most house church planters have a prior connection to the community in which they plant. Perhaps the initial house church group consists of family members who then reach out to the community through evangelism. With each family member sharing, word spreads quickly to the community.

Beyond just sharing in their community, however, house church members seek to share Christ with people outside of their community. Since prior connection is important, when people from other communities come to Christ, they may be raised up to plant another house church in their community. Then they continue reaching out to those individuals in their neighborhood until they form new house churches.

When asked what a house church service looks like in Iran, Sam explained the difficulty of being in an oppressive country. Though they love to sing really loudly, they cannot express their worship in that manner because of the risks involved. He said that Iranians love to come together and worship at conferences because they can actually sing and praise God as loudly as they wish. Sam comments that the privilege to express our worship to God in freedom is something the politically free church takes for granted.

How Can We Pray for Elam?

To conclude my conversation with Sam, I asked him how he would encourage Christians to pray for Elam Ministries. He first shared his own prayer for the ministry. In Jeremiah 49, Jeremiah prophesies that the Lord will restore the fortunes of Elam. Sam points to that as the heart behind Elam's ministry. The prophecy says that God would scatter the nations, which has occurred. There are few places in the world without Iranians. They are scattered. Yet Sam says that they hold on to their identity as "Elam" and that God will restore the

fortunes of Elam. To that end, they work to spread the gospel throughout Iran.

In addition to prayer for restoration, Sam requested that Christians join in with their “Iran 30” Twitter initiative, which affords short, key ways that individuals can pray for their ministry. That prayer guide can be found on Elam’s website or at the Iran 30 website. Christians can also join Elam’s prayer database as a direct partner in their ministry to Iranians.

Sam concluded our time by sharing his gratitude and the gratitude of his fellow believers for Christians around the world who are willing to partner with their ministry through prayer. He requests continued prayer and encouragement for those who face imprisonment and other forms of persecution as a result of their efforts to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of Iran.

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