

Iranian Church Sees Growing Muslim Convert Population Despite Risk of Death

Iran's new president has promised to protect the country's Christians, but attacks are intensifying.

As they work to survive, CBN News was given a rare view that few outsiders witness: a secret meeting of new Iranian believers in a neighboring country, not far from the border.

The brand new followers of Christ received Bible teaching and participated in their very first communion.

After a few songs and prayers, several were baptized. Then they returned to more late-night Bible study and training before returning to Iran.

Secret Believers

For the first time, these Christians learned how to look up and memorize Scripture. They're Kurds, former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

If their identities and location were revealed to secret police, Iranian agents would have come to arrest them. Some may have been killed for being apostates.

One former Muslim—we called Daoud—knows the dangers all too well. Before he became a Christian, Iranian police caught him eating a sandwich instead of fasting during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

That violated Sharia law. A judge ordered him to receive 70 lashes, a punishment similar to that imposed by the Taliban.

"I was tied down. A mullah held the Koran in his hand and

recited a verse and then a soldier beat my back with a cable," he explained.

"It made me feel deep hatred against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran. All I did was grab a sandwich and eat it. Why is that a sin?" he asked.

Later, Daoud met some Christians on the Internet who introduced him to Christ. He embraced Christianity after witnessing miracles of healing and deliverance.

Daoud keeps his new-found faith secret, while quietly and cautiously sharing Christ with others in his city.

"Right now, it is really scary because if the government knows about it, I'm pretty sure they will execute me," he said.

Criminals and Apostates

Reza, another former Muslim-turned-Christian, says he shares his faith because he wants Iranians to live in the light.

While President Hassan Rouhani promises societal reforms, Reza said an aggressive government crackdown against Christians continues.

"Iranian agents come and arrest us saying that we are spies for Western countries. They say because of that, you are a traitor to your country and should be executed," he explained.

In fact, few of the 40 or so known Christians imprisoned in Iran have been charged as apostates or for spreading the Gospel. The official charge is usually espionage or undermining national security.

That's the charge against Iranian-American Pastor Saeed Abedini, still serving an eight-year prison sentence.

"Saeed is well known because he is an American, and we certainly need to pray for him and his situation and his

family, but there are many others like Farshid,” David Yeghnazar, with Elam Ministries, said.

Security police arrested 35-year-old Iranian Christian Farshid Fathi during a Christmas raid against house churches in 2010. He is serving six years in Iran’s infamous Evin Prison.

Yeghnazar said a prison guard recently broke Farshid’s foot during a mass inmate assault. The foot went untreated for three days.

“Farshid wrote a very beautiful letter saying that it was an incredible moment for him because he was in this pain over the Easter weekend and it gave him a very different view of the whole Easter story and finally having some relief on the Sunday morning was great,” Yeghnazar said.

He added that Farshid went on to say, “We forgive them for all they have done because we are followers of the one who says, ‘Father, please forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing.’”

The Growing Iranian Church

Yeghnazar said the Iranian church continues to grow in Iran despite—or perhaps because of—the inhumane treatment of prisoners like Farshid and Saeed.

“Their courage means that the church continues to grow so it’s really, although it’s a story of suffering, it’s also a story of growth in the Church in Iran,” he said.

Iran has one of the fastest growing Christian populations in the world. Evangelist Reza said that more Iranians tell him they’ve grown tired of the oppressive policies of the ayatollahs.

“And people feel a hunger and a thirst to know the truth. When I talk to them about Christ and tell them how God loves us, they become so excited and they just keep smiling,” Reza said.

So, what role can the U.S. government play to help protect Reza and other Christians inside Iran?

“It would be important for politicians all around the world to put the pressure on Iran, not just for religious freedom, not for just Christian freedom, but for the freedom of many inside the country,” Yeghnazar explained.

Reza requests prayer.

“Pray that God will give us strength and power in our faith because Christian faith in Iran is not easy,” he said. “It’s difficult, dangerous and risky. And pray for salvation to come—that all Iranians will be saved.”