

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 19 MAY 2019

Worth a Thousand Years of Waiting

THE STAGGERING RISE OF THE CHURCH IN IRAN

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Robert Bruce, a Scottish missionary to Iranian Muslims in the late nineteenth century, wrote home to his supporters, "I am not reaping the harvest; I scarcely claim to be sowing the seed; I am hardly ploughing the soil; but I am gathering out the stones. That, too, is missionary work; let it be supported by loving sympathy and fervent prayer."

For many years, Iran was one of the most difficult regions of the world to reach with the gospel. A significant development occurred in 1979, however, with the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The ruling monarch, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was overthrown, and in his place an Islamic Republic was birthed, led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Sharia law became the law of the land, and Muslim clerics became the heads of state.

Many in those days believed the revolution would lead to a time of flourishing in Iranian society. The new regime made great promises about rights and economic progress, as Iran was finally free from the influence of the West. The laws of man would be replaced by the laws of God, they claimed. Under the Republic, conversion to any other religion was considered apostasy and could be punished with death.

Door Opens

As we near the fortieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, however, we see that the prayers of many Christians over the years have been answered, and the climate in Iran is vastly different. The gospel has spread throughout the land in unprecedented fashion despite increased persecution of Christian believers. To use the words of the apostle Paul, "A wide door for effective work has opened...and there are many adversaries" (1 Corinthians 16:9).

As of 1979, there were about five hundred known Christians from a Muslim background in Iran. In 2005, it was estimated that there were 40,000 ethnic Iranian Christians (not including ethnic minority Christians

who live in Iran). That number grew to about 175,000 Christians in 2010, according to the Joshua Project. Today, the average estimates of Christians within Iran range from 300,000 to upwards of one million, according to some missions experts. Operation World, a missions research organization, continues to list Iran as having the fastest-growing evangelical church in the world. In fact, more Iranians have become Christians in the last twenty years than in the previous 1,300 years, since Islam came to Iran.

Four Reasons for Growth

Several factors have contributed to the rapid growth of the church in Iran. Here are four of the most important.

1. DISILLUSIONMENT WITH ISLAM

Since the time of the revolution, the Islamic regime, which promised much in the way of economic development and freedom, has not delivered. Rather than prosperity and growth, the economy stagnated. The people also have been oppressed – women punished for not covering their hair, and others punished for speaking out freely in protest. As a result, the country has isolated itself further from the rest of the world.

Ironically, because the Islamic Republic in Iran has tied religion and state so closely together, the people's disappointment with the government has led to great scepticism of Islam. Consequently, Iranians have become increasingly open to hearing the Christian message.

2. PERSECUTION

The rise of persecution against Christians in Iran has served both as a sign of the rapid growth of Christianity within the country and as fuel for further growth. In the 1990s, several key leaders of the church in Iran were killed. One of the most famous martyrs, Mehdi Dibaj, gave a defense before the Islamic courts prior to his death that has become a rallying cry for many Christians in Iran. Dibaj declared,

... more Iranians have become Christians in the last twenty years than in the previous 1,300 years, since Islam came to Iran.

"I would rather have the whole world against me, but know that the Almighty God is with me; be called an apostate, but know that I have the approval of the God of glory..."

"Life for me is an opportunity to serve him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore, I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honour of his Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord and enter his kingdom sooner, the place where the elect of God enter to everlasting life."

Examples like this have emboldened the church as the faithful remember the words of Jesus, "Because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). In 2010, many church planters and leaders were arrested. I had the privilege of visiting with one of these faithful brothers after he served five years in prison. He recounted the moment when he received news that many of his colleagues were being arrested.

Briefly, he considered fleeing. But then he remembered the words of Jesus from John 10, that he is not the hired hand who sees the wolves coming and flees, but he is rather the good shepherd, who lays his life down for his sheep (John 10:11-12). He told me he went home knowing it would lead to his arrest, but he saw prison as an assignment by God to be a ministry post for him to reach many within prison.

This persecution has served to motivate further evangelistic zeal among Iranian Christians. These faithful servants are modern-day examples of Paul, who once wrote, "Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (Philippians 1:14).

3. THE DIASPORA AND USE OF MEDIA

A countless number of Iranian Christians have been scattered around the world. Many of these saints sense a unique calling to continue supporting the work of gospel advancement within Iran from the outside.

The advancement of technology through the Internet and satellite TV has made the Christian message more accessible to Iranians who may have never even met a Christian. The diaspora Christians have been active in broadcasting the gospel and Bible teaching into Iran. In the last decade, social media also has been a powerful tool to reach Iranians and teach them the truths of Scripture.

4. BIBLE DISTRIBUTION

Although persecution has not produced the results that the Iranian authorities wanted, they have continued to work hard to stamp out the message of Christianity. The Bible (especially the New Testament) is banned literature in Iran.

But the people have been hungry for the word of God. There have been over two million New Testaments

printed in recent years for dissemination in Iran, and about 180,000 entire Bibles have been distributed within the country. As Paul told Timothy, "The word of God is not bound!" (2 Timothy 2:9).

Three Ways to Pray

These are some factors that have contributed to the rapid growth of the church in Iran. But ultimately, the kingdom of Christ is spreading within Iran because God's Spirit is moving powerfully. Though there has been great progress, the need for prayer and support continues to be great. Would you join me in praying for Iran – its people and leaders? Here are three ways you can pray for the church.

1. COURAGE

Although the number of house churches and believers is growing every day, the opposition continues. Iranian Christians continue to be arrested and charged with acting against national security. House churches continue to meet secretly while shifting their meeting times and locations to stay undetected. Christians continue to evangelise, knowing they are putting their lives at risk.

2. UNITY

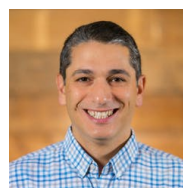
Since most of the activity of the church is done secretly, the Christians are isolated from each other. Iranian leaders are forced to work covertly and therefore apart from each other. Security concerns make collaborative efforts difficult, even among ministries outside of Iran that work within the country. All of this creates obstacles for unity.

3. TRAINED LEADERS

The nature of the underground church is such that, many times, house-church leaders are unqualified and untrained, and sometimes, there is no pastor in the group and the gathered believers are being fed solely through satellite TV. Some of the teaching that the church absorbs is not sound theology. Iranians don't have the same access to Christian literature and training as many believers do throughout the rest of the world. There are ministries who are already working hard to meet this need by making quality training available for leaders, and we need to pray for this work.

These words of Jesus may sum up the situation best in Iran: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). Let's pray the Lord of the harvest continues to send his labourers throughout Iran, so that millions more Iranians find forgiveness, peace, and the hope of glory through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*... he saw prison
as an assign-
ment by God...*



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Source: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/worth-a-thousand-years-of-waiting>