

# **Beginning Our Christian Witness to Muslims**

*First Installment*

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When people discover we live in Dearborn, Michigan, they generally ask two questions: “Are you afraid?” and “How did you end up living with all those Muslims?”

The answers are “No” and “Our pastor asked us to spend two years in Dearborn planting a church.”

Well, that was 30 years ago, and our church plant became a mission station to the largest concentration of Arab-speaking Shia Muslims in the Western world. It's been a fabulous journey, and we've been both challenged and enriched by the Middle Eastern people we have had the pleasure to serve over the last quarter century plus.

God made it very clear to us, as a church, that the Arab Muslim people were in America by the will of God, for the purpose of hearing the Gospel. God uniquely positioned His church in Dearborn to be involved in His plan. God called us to pastor all of Dearborn's residents and empowered the church to fulfill God's mission. By 1995, this was the premise of our ministry in Dearborn.

## **Getting Started**

Not all immigrant communities are the same, so there is not a one-size-fits-all ministry model that applies to every Unreached People Group. For example, within our community's Arab population, many different Arabic dialects are spoken. The culture of the tribal people from Yemen is much different than that of the Lebanese.

Yet, there are some general guidelines we should consider when developing a strategy to engage immigrant communities. Those strategies include strategic prayer and worship, understanding your neighbors, depending on the Holy Spirit, and sharing Jesus.

## **Strategic Prayer and Worship**

We started prayer walking in 1995. We first covered the streets next to the church, and from there we moved out in all four directions. Eventually we combined prayer walking with house-to-house tract distribution and offering to pray with people. Muslims welcome your prayers when they are facing sickness or difficulty.

To date we have covered about 30,000 homes. In the last three years we've added “cross walks” in parks and college campuses.

Prayer impacts the spiritual environment, and it positions the church to hear the mind of God concerning how best to witness. Prayer also prepares the hearts of those we are trying to reach. We pray for divine appointments and open doors, asking the Holy Spirit to lead us to the right people.

Love is the essence of evangelism. Through prayer, love develops for those we are praying for. We feel God's heart toward them, and His love constrains us to open our mouths and use our hands in witness.

It's important to note you will not love people you do not pray for – especially those who are culturally and ethnically different than you, and whom many people consider to be their enemies. (The prophet Daniel is a great example of someone who interceded for his enemies.)

Many immigrant communities are passionate about their religion, and this is particularly true of Muslims. Many of their imams are very charismatic, and it is not uncommon for the people to loudly express their belief in the greatness of their god. For instance, I saw a crowd shouting praise to Allah during the rescue of a young child from the rubble left by an earthquake. I mention this because it has been my experience that Muslims who step into a Christian church are not bothered by passionate prayers, exuberant worship, or boisterous preaching.

Just as happened on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Arabs, Persians, and Iraqis are being drawn to Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

### **Understanding Your Neighbors**

We tend to shy away from people who are culturally different from us. Differences in music, food, family, societal structure, and religious beliefs can be either roadblocks or stepping-stones in building relationships with immigrant communities.

“Project Dearborn” was born out of our need to understand and engage our Muslim neighbors. It is a five-day annual training and immersion program where participants learn about Muslim practices, beliefs, and history, and Christians learn how to share their faith. Many past participants have ongoing relationships with Muslims whom they met during the training.

Effective witness happens when we intentionally learn about those we are trying to reach and use that knowledge to form a contextualized message.

### **Dependence on the Holy Spirit**

My telephone rang early one morning. I recognized the caller as one of my elders.

“Pastor, my mother has had a heart attack and a stroke, and the doctors are giving her 24 hours to live.”

I asked him if he would like me to go immediately to the hospital to pray for her.

“Yes, but she doesn’t like you, so I have no idea how she’ll react.”

I asked, “Why doesn’t she like me?”

My elder replied, “Because I’m attending your church instead of the mosque.”

“Don’t worry. God will show me what to do when I get to the hospital.”

When I arrived, Alice was by herself in a darkened room in ICU. Tubes were running everywhere, and the only sound was coming from the machines that were keeping her alive.

The Lord whispered in my spirit, “Tell her she is dying, and ask her if you may pray for her in the name of Jesus.” That’s what I did. Though she couldn’t speak, she affirmed my request by gently nodding her head. As we prayed, the presence of the Holy Spirit enveloped the room. Alice was out of intensive care and in a regular room within two days.

About a year and a half later, the Lord told me that Alice’s day of salvation had come. While visiting in her home, she accepted the substitutional death of Jesus as payment in full for her sins.

Similar events have been taking place in Dearborn for many years. The Holy Spirit will direct us as to when and how to engage our Muslim friends.

### **Give Them Jesus**

I believe it was a Texas evangelist who coined the phrase, “Read the red and pray for the power.” He was referring to the words of Jesus that are highlighted in the New Testament with red ink.

When talking with Muslims, we focus on the life and words of Jesus. Muslims have a deep respect for Jesus, believing He is a miracle worker, healer, and great prophet. So, Jesus is where we begin our witness.

Most Muslims have never read the New Testament, even though they recognize it as an inspired book. They are unfamiliar with the extent of Jesus' ministry. They don't understand concepts like the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and His substitutional death.

I have been praying for and witnessing to some of my neighbors for over ten years, spending countless hours explaining who Jesus is and what His life, death, and resurrection really mean. Most of our conversations have been initiated by my neighbors.

There are some specific concepts within the Muslim religion that we use to witness to our Muslim friends; one is the concept of sacrifice. The story of God stopping Abraham from sacrificing his son on an altar, and then providing an animal sacrifice, is celebrated by Eid al-Adha, or "the Feast of Sacrifice." Anyone who is serious about presenting a contextualized message to Muslims need to familiarize themselves with this celebration.

Finally, remember we are out to win hearts – not political, religious, or geographical arguments. These few guidelines will go a long way in helping you engage the Muslim people in your community.

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