

**RECRUITMENT OF CHRISTIAN WORKERS
FOR THE ARAB WORLD:
AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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1 Introduction

Mobilising Christian workers for ministry in the Middle East has long had its challenges. Since global dependency on oil, the formation of Israel, and the Islamization of the Arab World became major features of the geo-political landscape, the Middle East has tended to polarize people's opinions, usually towards the negative. These factors, along with significant changes in the ecclesiological and missiological practices of the Western evangelical church in the same timeframe have impacted interest in serving Christ in the Middle East. This paper explores some of the issues, both external and internal, that currently affect the success of mobilizing workers for the Middle East and suggests some ways that these can be overcome.

2 Security fears

Security fears often present very quickly when discussing service in the Middle East with people. Western media coverage of the region is dominated by war, terrorism, general acts of violence (e.g. honour killings or inter-religious hostilities), political and social instability, and sometimes even major transport accidents. Background briefings on these stories are rare, even less the larger historical, political or social context. Without deliberate private research, a perspective on the significance of these incidents and to what extent they effect everyday life is impossible. Many people's

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entire knowledge of the Middle East has been learned through the media, based on an assumption that the Western media is objective and as comprehensive as is necessary. Media organization jingles such as “the most comprehensive coverage” and “...reporting from an Australian point of view” convince many that their knowledge and outlook gained through these sources alone is sufficient. Of course, some people do research further and have a deeper intellectual understanding of the broader issues. However, it is still difficult to get a true picture of everyday life and the environment for ministry without hearing from people who have been and lived there, or by personal experience.

With many Western countries also directly affected by Muslim terrorism, or at least threatened by it, security fears relating to Arabs are further strengthened. In some countries, Arab Muslims have increasingly tended to group in neighbourhoods, distancing themselves from their host societies. While this is somewhat related to a desire to practice their faith and lifestyle without the perceived corruptions of the West, it has also been shown that their failure to integrate correlates in no small part to the willingness of their host societies to actively relate to them. Unwillingness to interact is, in part, connected with fear of terrorism and, in some places in Australia, threats of violence from gangs of disaffected Muslim youths. The nature of ‘threat’ is that only a very small number of people are able to create widespread fear. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for isolated acts of violence to be regarded as indicative of Muslim culture. Furthermore, some outspoken Christian leaders generate fear of growing Muslim influence in the social and political life of the country and propose confrontation as the solution rather than dialogue, informed debate, or showing the ‘way of love’.

While security concerns negatively impact those who might otherwise feel drawn to serve in the Middle East, they often affect their families even more. Responsibility to family is one of the greatest issues facing those who feel called to overseas service

generally and, in our increasingly risk-averse Western societies, fears relating to safety are often the most significant component. Extended family members are likely to have a less informed perspective on life in the region than a missionary candidate, and every stage of life provides arguments against service over responsibility to family. For Christian families, even Biblical justifications can be found to strengthen these points of view.

3 Ignorance about Arab Churches

Widespread ignorance about Christians in the Middle East deeply affects interest in serving there. Many people are quite unaware of the church there; its achievements and struggles, its strengths and its weakness, its potential and its needs. This is probably due to many factors, such as overlooking the historic church by some contemporary evangelical denominations, lack of general knowledge about Middle Eastern society, an assumption that all Arabs are Muslim, the distance from the Middle East especially from the Americas and Australia, and a pre-occupation with matters closer to home.

4 Focus on ministry at home

This focus on ministry at home is an important aspect of attempts to mobilize Christians for ministry in the Middle East and indeed other regions. Many church pastors struggle with declining church attendances and the marginalisation of Christianity in Western societies. The belief that “there is too much to be done here” is widespread and has some validity. Further support for this idea is provided by increasing migration of Muslims to Western countries, bringing them to our doorsteps without us having to venture overseas. However, neither the Biblical theology of mission nor statistics can allow this to stand. Most Western countries have many thousands of Christian workers, both professional and volunteer,

and huge sums are found to spend on buildings, equipment and salaries. At the same time, ministry to the Middle East suffers from miniscule funding and support by comparison. Also tempting church leaders to favour support for work at home is the fear of losing gifted people from their congregations to overseas ministry. In addition, emerging missiological ideas gaining currency in the evangelical community further militate against overseas service, especially in the Middle East where colonial histories have been regretful and where fruit is not clearly apparent. Theories such as those opposing the sending of missionaries in favour of money as more efficient and respectful of receiving cultures, those which reject cross-cultural missionary endeavor as colonialism by another name, or those which support efforts only in regions where fruit is highly visible and dramatic (thus ‘validating’ God’s will that work should focus there) undermine the model of service many agencies are committed to.

5 Dispensationalism

In some denominations, especially those which adhere to dispensationalism, strong support for Israel as God’s chosen people with a central role to play in the eschatological out-working comes at the cost of ignoring gospel imperatives for Arabs and support for Middle Eastern Christians. At the other end, it also seems that the relativism now standard in secular ideology is quietly emerging in Christian conviction if not stated doctrine.

6 Postmodernism

An increasing belief that Christians don’t have the right to influence other religions or cultures and that the claims of the gospel are not exclusive dilutes confidence in the missionary enterprise to faraway places. Church ministers are arguably the most influential people in the lives and beliefs of their congregations. However,

they are faced with the huge challenges described above, some of which they are unprepared for due in part to disappearing cross-cultural missiology courses from their training programs.

7 Ideas for mobilisation

In light of the above challenges, we can no longer assume that people mobilized and ready for service will be delivered to sending agencies. While many provide some basic preparation training (mostly specific to their agency), most have historically seen themselves largely as selection and placement organisations, having outsourced mobilisation to churches and their leaders and pre-departure preparation to Bible colleges. However, church ministers no longer universally support or understand cross-cultural mission, and the availability of quality career missions training courses is decreasing, at least in Australia.

7.1 Influence Church leaders

I believe some mission agencies will need to increasingly participate in all aspects of the mobilisation process if they are to grow. Firstly, we will need to focus more attention on influencing church ministers and leaders. One possibility is to operate pastors' tours of the Middle East where they can experience the Arab church themselves and interact with its leaders. Being the birthplace of Christianity, the Middle East offers other attractions to ministers and church leaders.

7.2 Serve the Church

Secondly, we have found success by offering to serve their church in some way. Some ministers do have a nascent interest in cross-cultural service but lack the expertise, knowledge, contacts or confidence to give it a higher profile in their church. Coordinating a weekend missions program with live Skype hook-ups to workers in the Middle East or running programmes such as Kairos or Perspec-

tives for church members are some ways to envision and equip church members.

7.3 Stories

Thirdly, stories of work in the Middle East must be shared. This is a particular challenge for a region where security issues need to be taken into account. However, for the current and emerging generations, the power of stories to motivate is well recognized so we need to find ways to obtain and deliver them to the Christian public without compromising security.

7.4 Creative information flow

Fourthly, information flow about opportunities to serve in the region needs to be creative and well-organised. For a region that is distant and mysterious to many, agencies need to provide this information to encourage people to see specific ways in which they can serve.

7.5 Short-term placements

Finally, short term individual or team placements in the Middle East must remain a vibrant part of the overall mobilisation process. All of the above suggestions require dynamic cooperation between the recruiting and receiving fields, and for some aspects, personnel dedicated specifically to recruitment activities.

8 Training

Along with greater involvement in the mobilisation process, agencies dedicated to long-term ministry will need to increase their participation in the training and preparation process to overcome some of the challenges outlined previously. Effective Christian ministry in the Middle East requires a long-term outlook in an age of decreasing commitment and ill-defined allegiances. Engendering this long-term commitment to the Middle East, to the agency, and to

the integral mission approach cannot, I believe, be mostly outsourced. Following on from the suggestions above to mobilise, engendering long term commitment will need deeper engagement and commitment on the agency's part. This may mean the exploration of mentoring and internships, possibly through deliberately structuring short-term programs to build long-term workers who can truly transform lives and communities.

Quality education and publicity material aimed at mobilisation and placement in the Middle East is desperately needed. With the high level of misinformation and ignorance already described above, up-to-date material in all formats would provide products all people in the mobilisation process could use.

9 Role of long-term missionaries

We will also need to consider ways in which long term workers can better promote the region while on home assignments. Current workers are our best assets for raising the profile of the Middle East, educating the public, correcting the misinformation about the region and mobilising people for service. They need to be well-equipped and resourced if we are to benefit from its full potential. Some agencies create teams of workers gifted in education and promotion who tour sending countries sharing the needs. Can we learn from this? Coordinating and resourcing tours by Arab leaders gifted in communicating to Western audiences may also reap great benefits.

10 Prayer

It probably goes without saying that the Middle East needs prayer! Mobilising people to pray needs to be a core task at all levels. Providing prayer resources is central to effectiveness and this could be done at two levels: ongoing or longer term prayer needs and urgent, immediate ones. Apart from our monthly prayer bulletin, we

have begun an email group for urgent needs and are about to trial an SMS version. In a world of instant communication, such technologies lend themselves well as prayer resources and motivators. Furthermore, gathering people to pray seems to be increasingly difficult and at first blush this may seem lamentable. However, there is good evidence that messages sent through instant message technology (email, SMS, instant messaging) are immediately read and acted upon, providing much wider involvement than gatherings have in the past. The Middle East has enjoyed widespread involvement in programs such as Pray Through the Arab Peninsula and 30 Days Muslim Prayer Focus which have provided general prayer resources. However, individual agencies and projects need to disseminate specific material on a regular basis in order for specific prayers to be answered and so that those praying feel connected with everyday needs. This can only be done through agency-specific coordination.

Interest in service in the Middle East has clearly suffered for many years, largely because the region is misunderstood, especially in some sending countries. From my observation, interest in particular fields of service also seems to follow trends in sending countries over time, sadly tracking tourist trends. One of the reasons for this is that the tourism simply makes the needs better known. We need to do everything we can to make specific needs in the Middle East well known while at the same time encouraging the Christian public to focus its resources on the most needy; not the most trendy, nor the most accessible, nor even the most seemingly fruitful.