

WHY RECRUITING MISSION WORKERS FOR THE ARAB WORLD IS HARD WORK

BY TANAS AL-QASSIS¹

1 Hostility

September 11, the Danish Cartoons saga, Islamic Fundamentalism on the march: in the popular imagination all these are the result of instability in the Middle East. In the past the call to mission fell on deaf or unwilling ears for the usual reasons - apathy or sheer hardness of heart. Now I sense many Christians have a changed attitude. It's no longer apathy but ignorance, hatred and even a wish for revenge that's standing in the way of people responding to the call of God to be missionaries in the Middle East. It seems that Christian world has become openly hostile to the Middle East and its people. "They deserve the bad things that are happening to them. Why should we care? They hate us so why should we help them?"

If we read the story of Jonah we see how God's viewpoint is very different. Jonah was asked to preach the gospel to his enemy. A Jew preaching to Gentiles! Unthinkable, and perhaps even dangerous! God knew how Jonah felt. He knew his fears. Even so his call was clear and unmistakable: "Go to Nineveh."

I am convinced that the same considerations apply today. The Middle East presents us with many complex problems. The Western world has been quick to label many of its peoples as 'enemies'. There's always the threat of danger. Even so, as in Jonah's day, God wants us to take the risk and step out of our comfort zones.

¹ Tanas al-Qassis is the CMS director who oversees its work in the Arab World.

2 What is need for the Arab World

CMS has worked in Islamic areas for nearly 200 years. Peter and Nancy Crooks, long-time CMS Mission Partners offer the following reflections:

1 THEOLOGY. It begins with being ‘sold out to Christ’. Then it needs to have a thoughtful and generous attitude. Too many wrongly informed Christians think Islam is entirely of the devil. In CMS experience the most effective missionaries to Muslims know how to find the common ground between their faith and Islam.

2 MATURITY. We were blessed with volunteers, young in age but mature in wisdom. They knew how to relate readily and responsibly to all sorts of people and had had some experience of work in a secular environment. It was also important that they knew how to respect other cultures. Occasionally Nancy and I wished some folk sent with Christian agencies had more experience of the ‘real world’ –ordinary life – before coming out hot from seminary or Bible colleges. They struggled even to relate to expatriate non-Christians and some thought they shouldn’t be relating to them at all.

3 PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE – The most ‘credible’ mission partners seem for the most part to be those with professional skills, needed and appreciated, in the country to which they go.

4 STICKABILITY – Favor and opportunity come to those ready to be more than Christian tourists, those committed to giving several years to an assignment. We also found that the locals appreciated being asked for their view of working situations and even more so when it was demonstrated that their opinions/views were valued by foreigners.

Another retired mission partner from the Middle East wrote to me saying:

My general feeling is that most of us relate to the Arab world through a number of different layers of narrative and perceptions - political, historical, relational, moral, and cultural, and that by and large there are not many of these layers that are positive at the moment. For instance, generally, mission-minded communities hear stories of Africa and Asia most frequently and they will feel that they can relate to them. They will meet Christian people from those continents most frequently, and they will relate relatively easily to their general cultural values of music, language, and shared history that come from many of the places in these regions.

In contrast to that, the perceived cultural values coming from the Arab world are generally seen to be more difficult to relate to, in terms of music, language, ideology, culture, history, politics, and predominance of Islam and its difficulties with Western values, etc. Contacts between persons from that part of the world are also generally less frequent, and the stories from those regions are far more inaccessible, behind doors of secrecy and generalities.

Finally, I think there could be real uncertainty as to how mission as it is often understood here might fit in within the existing structures of the receiving communities of that region, and this tends to make for doubt as to whether it is actually possible.

3 Conclusion

To conclude, I believe unless people who are called to mission are ready to carry their cross and follow Jesus, they will find it very hard to even want to be in the Middle East. Mission in the Middle East is not about talking, preaching, or giving bibles: it is about living the bible every day, being a light to others, walking the talk, and most of all being prayer warriors.