

PART I:

MAZHAR – A MAN OF SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE

MY PRIMARY MENTOR IN THE ARAB WORLD FOR FORTY YEARS

An interview with Greg Livingstone

God has chosen to use Mazhar Mallouhi in multiple and diverse ways as he has sought to walk in obedience to his Lord in the Arab world. Not least of these has been his friendship with Greg Livingstone, Founding Director of Frontiers, and formerly a leader in both AWM and OM, one much used by God to help raise up the current generation of workers among Muslims. The editor of Seedbed had the privilege of talking on the phone with Greg on March 20th, 2008, about the impact Mazhar had had on his life, and about his perspective on Chandler's portrayal of Mazhar. The following article is a slightly edited version of that twenty-minute conversation.

Greg, it's great to talk to you about Mazhar Mallouhi and his impact on your life. In a blurb on one of the opening pages of Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road, by Paul-Gordon Chandler, you are quoted as saying that Mazhar has been your primary mentor in the Arab world for forty years. You said: 'This Syrian Muslim, my shepherd, has been more committed to seeing me demonstrate Christ among Muslims than anyone else.' Can you share with the readers of Seedbed some of the ways that Mazhar has mentored you?

Yes, I think the main thing is that he has been a guide through the culture of the Arab Muslim, which is, of course, very difficult for a Westerner who has not been raised there to comprehend. Mazhar certainly sensitized me to seek to understand what's below the surface. Without that understanding, I doubt we can ever get close enough to an Arab Muslim for him or her to take us or our message seriously.

Take, for example, the simple matter of good manners. I know one excellent worker, who has a PhD, but didn't have what Mazhar would consider good manners with Arabs. Too often, if an Arab came to see him at an inconvenient time, he would tell him to

come back later! So often we have blind spots as basic as that. Mazhar helped me understand how Westerners come across, and what blockages are there, which must be overcome.

What else did you learn through Mazhar?

Well, he certainly helped me understand the difference between finding faults with Islamic teaching versus accepting a Muslim where he's at in his pilgrimage. I had to learn not to react or be steered in the conversation when my Muslim friend gives the standard answers of what he's been taught. Mazhar demonstrated to me how to get behind the Muslim's mantras to where he really lives on a daily basis. Then to share something of our Lord's teachings, which would get to the Muslim's heart.

Mazhar guided me out of the *somebody-must-win-this-discussion* mode, towards coming alongside to search for God in the same direction, instead of being an opponent.

That is so often hard for us Westerners to do. Any other lessons in this?

Mazhar also taught me not to defend



Western civilization. In fact, to do the opposite; to be humble and apologize for the behaviour of people called Christians, who have not been turning the other cheek at all for fourteen centuries, but have been bashing the Arabs, striking *an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*. We learned how important it is to point out that 90% of people called Christians, like 90% of Muslims, do not live out their faith. Until they can differentiate between a true follower of Jesus and a Western secularist, Muslims cannot 'hear' the Lord's claims.

Mazhar doesn't start with doctrine. He realizes it is not so much our *doctrine* that keeps Muslims from taking the claims of Christ seriously, it is HISTORY! We must mourn the history of fourteen hundred years of mutual offence. Because of history, becoming a Christian is a traitorous act for any Muslim. Very few will follow Christ and keep his commandments as Lord and Saviour until we find a way for them to fully keep the fifth commandment: to honour their father and mother. It must be possible for them to do that while also being 100% loyal to Jesus Christ, keeping his commandments as their final authority.

What are some of the things about Mazhar and his example that challenge and inspire you the most?

We try to get our co-workers to log thirty hours a week with Muslims. Mazhar probably logs sixty or seventy! He never stops meeting, befriending, sharing. He doesn't wait for opportunities; he *makes* opportunities. He continually perfects his stories and metaphors as he monitors what gets through, what awakens a Muslim to want to know more about Christ.

I've seen him, for example, in Morocco, face the anger of a Muslim who tells him

that the Injil is a bunch of rubbish. And in twenty minutes that same Muslim is begging him for a copy of it! Mazhar is saying, 'No, I won't give you a copy, because your hands are not clean. Unless you promise to read every word, I am not giving you one.' Then the man begs, 'I promise, I promise'. In wonder, I ask, how does Mazhar *do that*??

Also I'm inspired by the fact that he thinks Arab-world wide! Even though he is compassionate to an individual, fully 'there' with him, Mazhar has also raised huge amounts of money to put Muslim-sensitive books and Scriptures into every library in the Arab world! How many of us have that kind of vision?

Mazhar is well known for his sense of humour, and his love of practical jokes. Are there any particular ones you want to tell us about?

Well, I think, behind his jokes is a serious effort to help workers not take themselves too seriously. We are to take our mission seriously, but not think we are the thread on which the Muslims hang. We *must learn to laugh at ourselves and our foibles*.

One of my favourites of his practical jokes is when one of my co-workers was flying into Casablanca. Mazhar got one of the Moroccan believers, who worked at the airport, to pretend he was a policeman. As my friend got off the plane, Mazhar had his brother come up to him and say, 'Are you Gary___? Come with me.' Gary just about went in his pants! He was desperately handing every scrap of indicting evidence back to a co-worker walking behind him. For at least twenty minutes Gary was envisioning the next year in a dark dungeon!

Wow! (laughter) I hadn't heard that one.

Can we talk about Chandler's book, and his portrayal of Mazhar? When we met briefly in Malta in January, you told me to remember that



Mazhar and Chandler were not the same. Are there any particular parts of Chandler's portrayal of Mazhar that you do not find helpful or very accurate?

Let me say that Reverend Chandler is a very good man, a man with a great heart for Muslims, but I fear that he is describing Mazhar more in the way that he wants Mazhar to be. Not with a bad motive, but maybe, in places, Paul-Gordon is really saying more about his own hopes and perspective than he is accurately describing Mazhar. Christine Mallouhi disagrees, but I still feel like he 'led the witness' (i.e. he interprets Mazhar to say what he himself wants to say), particularly in the doctrinal areas.

Mazhar is an agreeable person, so I suspect he was answering doctrinal questions as he felt Chandler wanted to hear. Mazhar adapts to his audience. He probably didn't realize the book would be portraying his doctrine all over the world. If he had, I think he would have spoken with more carefulness. Since he loves Paul-Gordon, he doesn't want to write a disavowal and hurt his friend. Mazhar is not a careful theologian by any means, but he certainly does believe in all the fundamentals of the faith, much more strongly than the book portrays.

That leads to my next question. Some co-workers have found Chandler's portrayal of Mazhar's view of the Bible somewhat disturbing. He talks about his struggle with some of the Old Testament, and some of the stuff about the land of Israel. He also talks a lot about Jesus, and not so much about the church or the epistles of the New Testament. I wonder if you have any comments on that, on Mazhar's views, and Chandler's read on Mazhar's view of Scripture.

Well, it is true that I would take my methodology from Mazhar more than I would take my theology. We must remind ourselves that Mazhar is a writer. He communicates best with liberal literary-oriented Muslims. He's an evangelist, not a theologian. Like Christians in all cultures, he picks and chooses the Scriptures that he feels show his Lord in the best light. You are aware that most Arab believers steer around some of the stuff in the Old Testament that highlights Israel and the promises to Israel, especially when they are interpreted to make the Arabs the bad guys.

I also think that, being a poet and writer, he likes the more Eastern communication of the Gospels. The Apostle Paul's direct teaching is less Mazhar's style. Still, I've never known him to see the Epistles as less than authentic communication from God. I've never known him to deny anything in Scripture. But, as evangelists tend to be, he tends to be a chameleon in conversations and emphasize what he thinks his audience will find most palatable.

Thank you, that is quite helpful. In my opinion, one of the most important things about Chandler's book – and the strength of the book – is how he uses Mazhar to bring to light some of the crucial issues around the identity of a follower of Christ in the Muslim world. Both from what is in the book and from your own experience with him, how has Mazhar helped you understand and deal more effectively with this issue of identity?

Mazhar helps BMBs¹ understand they can be loyal, obedient followers of Isa Al Masih without defecting over to a Western style of Christianity. He is really trying to keep them at home in their own culture, so

¹ In this interview the acronym BMB (Believer from a Muslim Background) is used rather than the more familiar MBB (Muslim Background Believer). Greg used MBB, but the editor, having listened to a number of BMB friends who suggested the change, is seeking to increase its usage.

that they can be a greater influence. He is trying to avoid the BMB becoming extracted from his people. Extraction is a problem of mission history we all must face.

Mazhar sees in the Eastern churches some models that might be more helpful for the BMB to pick up than the Western Protestant style of church. I think he is right in trying to help a BMB keep his identity as a member of the community, differentiating between the theological stance of Islam versus staying integrated in his community to influence. He is trying to help them be 100% obedient to Isa Al Masih as Lord and Saviour, but at the same time become the most respected person in their Muslim family.

What is honouring to the Lord is debatable. Apparently, the Apostle Paul's exhortations reflect that debate (e.g. whether one can eat meat that has been offered to idols). Community loyalty and contextualization is not a new problem.

One thing I found in reading the book and in discussing it with other expatriate workers in the Arab world is that some feel the book is too critical of workers, almost implying that we try to extract BMBs out of their communities. Whereas I have never met a worker, in 25 years of working in and on behalf of the Arab world, who tries to extract them. It seems to me that Chandler is presenting this issue as if none of us ever wrestled with this problem before!

It appears that Chandler is struggling with his own very narrow background. He explained to me in an email that he was not writing a biography, but trying to do a portrait of how a BMB should look and live. What distorts the truth is that Mazhar would not have done many of the things he does without huge help from Western co-workers, including myself, and his wife. You know, he's married to a Westerner who has helped keep him on track, to say the least. I

think the book definitely omits huge influences that have come on Mazhar from his brethren from the West. When I talked to him, he absolutely agreed with that statement. He feels very bad that the book tends to omit any contribution made by Westerners. But, Mazhar did have some tragic experiences in his earliest Christian life, more from Arab Christians than from Westerners. But earlier workers did think 'faithfulness' was to *come out from among the Muslims and be separate*. It took some time for Mazhar to return to living among Muslims as 'one of them'. But even in that step, he was coached by Western friends.

Yes, the book refers to those early negative experiences and the unhelpful teaching he was given in the first years after his conversion. But that kind of teaching is not very common any more.

No, we are talking about the 1960s.

OK, just a couple more questions. Would you recommend this book for a new recruit who is headed for the Arab world but doesn't yet have any experience there?

Well, I would, as I recommend any book, pointing out the author's bias, presuppositions and any possible inaccuracies – just as I would for my own writings! But, if the person is able to discern and take the best of it, without swallowing everything, I would recommend it.

I would hope that any of our co-workers would learn how to do that with anybody's book, not just this one. Chandler's book certainly does give many excellent thought-provoking ideas as to how a Muslim who has come to know the Lord can live out his life in his own community.

On the other hand, I think it would be good to point out that others cannot necessarily imitate Mazhar's style. Neither

the Heavenly Man in China, for example, nor Mazhar, can be imitated. Don't try to be a Mazhar. You can't do it! Such men come along seldom in a generation.

I think the book is especially valuable for people who have been at it for awhile, for people who are living with and struggling with these issues, because Mazhar is a model of a BMB who has come a long way in learning how to live as a follower of Christ in a Muslim community.

Do you have any final comments as we wrap this up?

The most thrilling thing is that I prayed that God would give me a faithful man in the Arab world. He led me and Mazhar to each

other. The first few years were not fun. They were not easy, because he had a lot to overcome, a lot of anger, a lot of misunderstanding. What I pass on to others is, 'Pray that you would meet such a person, and then pray for grace to hang in with him for thirty or forty years.'

I was touched, reading in the book, of the time when Mazhar was struggling in Syria, and called you. You dropped everything, flew out and spent time with him. Your friendship is deep.

And I think that is what every BMB is looking for in a co-worker.

Amen. Thank you so much, Greg. This has been very helpful.

HOW MAZHAR'S GENIUS HAS MOST INFLUENCED ME

by Phil Linton

Phil lived with his family in Morocco from 1984 until 1997 when he returned to the United States and became Minister of Missions at Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church near Detroit.

Mazhar Mallouhi, along with J. Christy Wilson and Wendell Evans, form the constellation that I have steered by as a Christian navigating in the Muslim world. Reading *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*, like being with Mazhar himself, was helpful – not because it lays out a comprehensive guide for ministry to Muslims, but rather because it presents a model of deeply sacrificial, Christ-like ministry with Muslims that yet again shakes me out of my complacency and lethargy. Reading the book, I could hear Mazhar's voice telling me, 'You can do this, Phil; don't settle for timid little witnessing forays; be a *real ambassador of Christ*.'

The book highlights several aspects of Mazhar's genius that have most influenced me:

1. His courageous and lavish love for people. This is a matter of honour and a matter of obedience to the Master.

Mazhar taught by example that when a brother is arrested, it would be shameful to let fear keep us from visiting. When people needed help, Mazhar was usually the first to act. His willingness to drive long distances, to go to a hospital in the middle of the night or to open his home and wallet for people in need often had dramatic effects – changing casual acquaintance, or even enmity, into deep and abiding friendship.

2. The importance of good books.

Mazhar said that a good book could have a witness for Christ far broader in scope and longer in duration than any one individual. The good book he gave away might be a Bible, but it might also be something by C.S. Lewis (he always kept several copies of *Mere Christianity* on his shelves) or Dostoevsky. As influential as

