

PART 2: A NORTH AFRICAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON PLANTING CHURCHES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD (A MINI-SERIES)

Part 1: The Church in the House: Understanding, Opportunities & Challenges

by Abdellah Larage

Raised in a Muslim family and won to Christ through the ministry of a church planting team in his city in the late '80s, Abdellah has since been planting house churches in Morocco for about 15 years. He has agreed to write a several part series for SEEDBED in which he shares his vision for church planting and some of the things he has learned planting churches in his country.

In this opening article, he describes the nature of a church in a home, the strengths it offers and some of the challenges that such a church model encounters in his Muslim nation.

Understanding and Counting the Cost

Do you want to plant house churches? I was once teaching a group of young adults about planting house churches. I started by asking them who wanted to plant churches. Initially, all of them said they wanted to do it. However, after they heard the heaviness of the cost, all of them said that they no longer wanted to be involved in a church planting ministry. If anyone wants to plant churches and does not know the nature of the work and what is expected of him, he will be discouraged and unable to continue.

What do I mean by counting the cost? Briefly, this is what the planting process demands of the church planter. A church planter begins with prayer. Then he will start evangelising, while continuing to pray. When some start to accept Jesus, he will disciple them and continue evangelising and praying. With ongoing prayer, evangelism and discipleship, he will then need to start a regular meeting of the house church. After that, while continuing to pray, evangelise, disciple and lead the house church, he will need to begin to train leaders. While he is doing all of this, he also must do proper preparation for preaching and teaching and leading worship. In addition, because all the others are new believers, he does counselling and other pastoral care ministries. A church planter soon realizes that he has to do many things at the same time: pray, evangelise, disciples, train, counsel, give pastoral care, preach, lead worship and so on.

Since the situation in the Arab world does not allow church meetings in public places, it is normal that all the different meetings take place in homes. For many years, the weekly program in our house included: church meetings, Bible study meetings, prayer meetings, counselling sessions, and meeting for seekers. In addition, since my wife was doing social work, she was teaching sewing and painting

in our home three times a week. In addition, every two or three months we ran a weekend conference in our home for new believers or leaders.

Having meetings like this takes a lot of energy, particularly since Arab culture is a culture of hospitality. My wife worked hard preparing food and cleaning. In our culture it is not enough just to offer sandwiches for food, we have to prepare a meal. If it is not lunch or dinnertime, we have to offer something to eat along with coffee and tea. Many times my wife cooked for 40 - 60 people when we hosted conferences in our home. Even though the apartment was not small, it was not designed for 60 people!

Another cultural reality is that people can come and visit without calling ahead to say they are coming. We often had unexpected visitors—believers and non-believers. You cannot ask them when they will leave because that would imply they are not welcome, and they might stay for up to one week. I remember one of our relatives, married with a daughter, visiting us for three months. She then went home for three months and then visited us again for another three months! It was very strange. Once I began to feel as if we had no home of our own—so many meetings, appointments, my office at home—it was very difficult for us for a time.

The House Church, Hospitality and Arab Culture

The house church model can work everywhere in the world. Yet, since we are talking about the Arab world in this article, it is good to see that this model is closer to the culture and the nature of the Arab world in which relationships are very

important, in which the sense of family is very strong and has deep roots. People like to live a highly relational life. They often visit each other; hospitality is highly valued; they spend lot of time together as families; they like to eat together. Most times when they meet, they eat together. When a visitor comes to a family, the culture dictates that he can stay as long as he wants. This is true for everyone, not just for relatives. The Arab world culture is very open to relationships. It is very easy to build relationships and to be invited to homes. Therefore, the Arab world is good soil in which to plant house churches.

What is a House Church?

We want to see house churches planted. This model is found in the early church in the Book of Acts, and in other New Testament documents, though it is not the only model that God has used. In history, the house church model has been very suc-

cessful and has more recently made good contributions in China, the former Soviet Union and in Muslim countries.

The church is a group of people who believe in the same Name, the name of Jesus Christ. They have this common belief. The church is a group of believers because God wants his followers to be together. Jesus told Peter that he will build his church and when the apostle Paul was encouraging men to love their wives, he said as Jesus loved the church and died for it, so Jesus died to build a church. Clearly, the church is God's plan and will.

If we want to define the house church in a very simple way, it is the church that meets in the house. There is no difference in the basic concept of church, between the house church and the sanctuary church. It is the model that is different.

House Churches in the Bible

The cultures seen in the Bible are cultures of hospitality. From the book of Genesis, where we see Abraham inviting the three passersby to stop for a meal, to 2 Kings where we see the Shunemite woman providing hospitality for Elisha, and on into the New Testament, hospitality is seen throughout the Scriptures. The heart of hospitality welcomes everybody: not only the prophets, but also the people of God. Most importantly, when the families knew someone was God's servant, he was more than welcome. This is still the culture in Arab countries where there are Christians from a Christian background. It is very easy for a church leader to go to houses and have a meeting with a family.

Jesus was born in the Middle East. So it was natural that Jesus liked to visit houses and had meetings in the houses of so many people. Jesus himself told many people that he was going to come to their house for dinner. Many of the parables of Jesus were given when he was in houses. He ate in the house of Zacchaeus who was saved because Jesus invited himself into his house. Jesus loved to be in houses with people to eat and talk. On many occasions he was in open places with thousands, but in a house, the atmosphere was more private and intimate.

The culture of hospitality in Bible times was very strong. Because of this culture, Jesus could sleep in different houses. He did not have a house during the years of his public ministry. He was always going from one place to another. To find a place where he could sleep was not a problem. The same was true for the apostles, who when they were visiting different places to share the message of the word, found it was very easy for them to be invited into the house of someone.

According to 1 Timothy 3:2, an overseer should be hospitable. To be hospitable is not to bring people to your house for the goal of preaching to them or teaching them or praying with them. Hospitality is not a means to an end. It is not a tool to be used

to evangelize. Hospitality is a biblical value in which you welcome people in, have fun together, prepare a meal, eat together and spend intimate time with each other.

It is easy to find examples of house churches in the New Testament since from the beginning the church met in houses. In the mission trip that Jesus sent the disciples on, he sent them to visit houses. In Matthew 10:13 we read: 'If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.' This mission trip was a mission to the families in their houses. The disciples could enter a house, share the message, pray for the sick, stay with the family and teach them about God's kingdom.

One of the best examples of the house church in the New Testament is in Acts 10. When Peter he arrived at Cornelius' house, he found not just Cornelius but his household. Acts 10:24 reads: 'And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.' Cornelius was a man seeking God's face. He saw that Peter's coming to him was an opportunity to invite others so they could also hear the news. While Peter was talking to them, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. God used Cornelius to host a church in his house. The church is the family of God and Cornelius invited the members of his family to the meeting.

The house is the setting for planting churches in the New Testament. Jesus sent the disciples to houses; the Word of God was shared in houses; people were filled with the Holy Spirit in houses. The Word was shared also in synagogues and public areas, and people were filled with the Holy Spirit in these places, but the focus is on house churches. When Jesus asked his disciples to wait until they received the Holy Spirit, they were waiting in a house, and from that house, they started their ministry. Paul wrote to Philemon, sending his love to him and to 'the church in your house' (Philemon 2). This is the case with other people in the New Testament, where the house is the primary location of the church. People came together to meet as a church in the home of someone who was part of the church.

The house church is not, as some believe, the consequence of there being only a few believers in the early years of the Church. When the disciples were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come, there were 120 in the gathering. After they were filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter preached the word of God and three thousand accepted Jesus. It was a very good opportunity to start a sanctuary church but the disciples did not do that. The growing number of followers of Jesus did not affect the practice of having the church meet in homes.

It would have been easier for the disciples to start a sanctuary church. Their Jewish background would incline them to think this way since they were used to going to the temple and synagogues. Jesus himself visited synagogues many

times, but when he invested time in the life of the disciples, he did not do so in the temple or in synagogues.

The model of the house church was something new; it was not an imitation of the model of the temple or synagogue. One of the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that in the OT, the temple was a holy place where God dwelt, but now *we* are the temple of God and together we are the Body of Christ.

House Churches around the world today

Now, around the world, many people are thinking seriously about going back to house churches. In China, because of persecution, the sanctuary churches are under the authority of the government while the house churches are outside of the control of the authorities.

In Korea, there is no persecution but they teach about house churches. Therefore, they came up with a model in between the house church and the sanctuary church. They kept the big building where the church meets on Sundays. At the same time, they created the house groups. It is a good model that strikes a balance between the two different models. However, we cannot call these house groups 'house churches' because they are not allowed to baptize new believers, celebrate the Lord's Supper, or collect tithes. Still, even if these house groups are not house *churches*, they provide an environment very similar to the house church. In the New Testament there were no 'house groups', only 'house churches'.

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Why has the house church model become primarily the model of the persecuted church? There are many reasons why the house church is not the most popular model around the world. Unfortunately, a sobering reality is that the *sanctuary church throughout history has far too often persecuted the house church*. What is more, government authorities throughout the centuries have wanted to control the church, and it is much easier to control the sanctuary church.

The house church is most often found where there is persecution, like China and the Muslim world. This is because given the conditions in this part of the world and the situation of believers from a Muslim background, the house church is a good model and the best choice.

The positive features of the house church

I. Family life and relationships

The church is the family of God. There are two main things that make a group

of people a family: family relationships and family life. The church is a family regardless of the model and the house church is the best environment for family life within the church.

Not all human relationships make a family. The bonds of family relationships are much deeper and more powerful than other relationships. The church is the Body of Christ, formed from those who have a personal relationship with Jesus. Since the believers in Christ have one heavenly father, they are brothers and sisters. As we have one heavenly Father, we have one Saviour. In John 15:5, Jesus said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches.' All believers are branches in the vine, which is Jesus Christ. By him and through him we are connected to each other. 'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.' (Eph. 2:19)

Family relationships without true family life create a distant and unconnected family. House churches provide a positive environment for a church family. It is much easier for believers meeting in house churches to follow the biblical admonitions to take care of each other, to encourage, help and serve each other. One of the features of family life is that they eat the Lord's Supper together. In the New Testament the Lord's Supper was a real meal in which the believers ate and drank together. It was not simply a religious service as it is today in most churches around the world. The Lord's Supper was a real meal and it is very easy for house churches to practice the Lord's Supper around the table as the believers eat together. In this environment, as a meal is shared, family life thrives and the roots of the family deepen.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:33-34: 'So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.' Churches today use this Scripture passage during their observance of the Lord's Supper, but Paul was referring to a real meal and not just a small piece of bread and a little sip of wine. When Jesus sent the disciples on their mission he told them in Luke 10: 8: 'When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you.' The mission is not only preaching the Word of God; it is also about building and living family life: eating together and living with others. This also helps to build a bridge, since in this way it becomes easier to share the Word with them. Eating with people is a good way to share the good news of Jesus.

The disciples in the early church ate together regularly. 'Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts' (Acts 2:46). Eating together is not just for the sake of eating, but is the normal life of a family: sharing homes and food

with joy and happiness. The message of Christ is a message of joy. We live it; we do not just preach or teach it.

As the church eats together they share the spiritual life. They live what is written in 1 Corinthians 14:26-28:

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.

It is difficult to put this passage into practice in the sanctuary church. However, in a house church it is far easier for each member to share. At the same time, it is difficult in house churches when someone does not share. One of the things we did many times in our house church was that instead of one person preaching, every member shared for two minutes. This way all the church members could share as a body and a family and we heard what was on each person's heart.

A house church is also a good environment for discovering spiritual gifts because there are always many opportunities for each member to participate in leading. This way each believer feels a responsibility regarding the other members of the house church. It is not normal to have members who just come to attend; everyone participates. Because of our Arabic culture, when we meet in our house churches we spend a lot of time together. When people arrive, the first thing we do is to exchange news: how was our week and other things. Then we start our worship and the other parts of the meeting, and finish by having tea and eating something together. This way we spend up to four hours together.

One of the powerful features of a house church is that because we meet in the house of one of the families, each believer gets to know this family in their home. Relationships become very deep; every believer gets to know the real life of others in the church. This is what makes communication easier and gives a greater possibility of helping each other. If someone does not come to a meeting, everyone notices that. Sometimes during the house church meeting one of the members will call the absent person so everyone can hear his news and why he did not come.

2. It is easy to multiply house churches

'So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7).

A house church can experience fast growth because of its nature. The majority of people like to enter into relationships, friendships and fellowship. This is what helps the house church to experience an increase in the number of members. When a house becomes too small for the increasing number of members, they divide the church into two house churches and this way we see the multiplication of house churches. This growth in God's kingdom is to be a normal, natural and spontaneous life.

The house church is the model of the early church in Acts and because our Arab culture is so similar to the culture of the early church in Acts, it is a good model for us. The early church began in the Middle East and for this reason it is a better model for the church throughout the Arab World. This does not mean we should apply the same model everywhere. It would be a mistake to try to do that or to copy it. In the Arab world the house church model is needed. The sanctuary model is not as good a fit for Arab culture, and this is one reason why the sanctuary church is growing so slowly in this part of the world.

3. House churches can survive persecution more effectively

Persecution is expected in the Muslim Arab world. The matter of fact acceptance of persecution seen in Philippians 1:29 is understandable for those living in the Muslim world: 'For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.' Because of the nature of the Arab Muslim world, the followers of Jesus in these countries can expect to be persecuted.

The house church is a model that survives during times of persecution. Persecution cannot stop the church. This is what we see and experience today. In many different parts of the world where persecution is taking place, house churches still exist and are growing. This is because the number of members in house churches is small and because there is no big church building. There are some house churches that do not meet every week in the same house. If there are three families, each week they meet in a different house so as to avoid problems with authorities. Another example of the resilience of house churches during times of persecution is the church in China. Even though the authorities are doing their best to stop it, the house churches are growing more and more. As much as there is persecution, just as much is there growth in house churches.

Challenges in Planting Churches in One's Home

1. Requires that the church planter have multiple gifts

This ministry is unique in that it combines a number of ministries and gifts even when it is done by one person e.g. prayer, evangelism, discipleship etc. A preacher may only preach, a teacher may only teach, but to plant a house church, multiple

gifts and ministries are necessary. The church we want to plant is a body in which we practise, encourage and discover the gifts.

2. Witchcraft and demonic possession

Since the church is a dangerous attack against the powers of darkness, a body that can storm the gates of hell, I believe that planting house churches is the ministry most attacked by the enemy. I have seen and heard many testimonies from different missionaries about enemy attacks in their lives. Over the years we have found occult objects in our home that people had brought with them and put somewhere in the house. Once, when a leader from another country stayed with us for two weeks, he went to the bathroom and felt heaviness in his spirit. He fell to the floor and was hardly able to get out of the bathroom. He told me there must be some occult object in the bathroom, so I went in and sure enough, I found something. Another time I went outside and found our doorstep covered with blood.

One missionary shared with me that someone had killed a small cat in front of the door of their home and put blood there. Once I was teaching about prayer in another country and when we finished the evening meeting I went to the home where I was staying. At four in the morning I felt an attack from the enemy. I started to pray and at eight in the morning we discovered that someone had killed a small animal in front of the door and put blood there.

Many times when a new believer comes to a meeting, or when someone just wants to attend our church meeting to see how we live our Christian lives, our meeting is disturbed by demonic manifestations. Many times when we start praying or worshipping, someone starts to scream. In homes it can be very difficult to pray for demon-possessed people. It creates problems with the neighbours and if the neighbours know that we are Christians, they will complain. Even if they do not know, they will knock at the door to find out what is happening because they may think there is a problem and they want to help.

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3. Challenges from authorities

If it is not easy for a Muslim to accept Jesus. However, the reaction of the authorities makes can make it even more difficult for house churches. For example, Moroccan prohibits any group from meeting without official permission from the authorities. Any meeting of five or more people (non-family) is illegal unless they have received permission to meet. Because converting from Islam to the Christian faith is illegal in Morocco (as it is in most of the Muslim world), if we were to ask for official permission to meet, we would not receive it. Simply put, there is no way

that believers can meet in their homes with official permission. In March 2009 the police entered a house and arrested all the believers. They were taken to the police station for twelve hours of interrogation.

In December 2009 the police entered a meeting in another house and deported the missionaries and interrogated the Moroccans. When I began to write this article in 2010, more than one hundred foreign followers of Jesus had just been expelled by the authorities in Morocco.

4. Challenges from the family

A major challenge for the house church is that because this is a family's home, the house church meeting depends on the presence of the family. If the family is not at home because they are travelling or for some other reason, the house church meeting can easily be cancelled. So during the summer months when families take holidays, the meetings of the house church often stop.

In many house churches, there is primarily one family who hosts the church. In addition, because of the Arabic culture, relatives can visit the family anytime without any prior warning. So in such a situation, because the relatives are most often not believers and do not know this family are Christians, the meeting of the house church is cancelled.

5. Challenges from visitors in the home

Since the house church meets at the home of one the families, it is very natural that a new believer who joins a house church and enters the home of this host family gets to know everyone in the house. He learns a lot about the family and becomes a member of the family. Yet, this very positive reality can create many problems because there are many people who declare their faith in Jesus just because they want to know what is going on in the house church. Then, once they know all about the church, they try to make problems for the church.

In Egypt, one of the leaders received in his house a brother from a Muslim background after his family expelled him when he became a Christian. Within a week, this professed believer stole a large amount of money. Another missionary welcomed a new brother into his home and, trusting him, gave him the keys to his house when he went out with his family. They returned to find that this 'brother' had stolen all the electronics in the house. He even wrote a letter, telling the missionary that if he went to the police, he would report him to the police.

One day, a young woman confessed faith in Christ. We welcomed her into our house and she started to attend the house church. Soon after, two high school sisters in our house church were confronted by Islamic fundamentalists at their school. He said that he knew they were Christians. The two sisters ran away and

came to me. Eventually we discovered that the new ‘sister’ was from a fundamentalist group. She had pretended to be Christian just to infiltrate for the fundamentalists. So we confronted her, and even though she denied any relationship with this group, the same week God led me to encounter her with the group. I went up to say hi to her but did not say anything more. We continued to welcome her to our meetings and one day she eventually truly accepted Jesus.

In March 2010, someone who said that he was Christian was welcomed by a Christian family into their home. He stole some pictures and put them on Facebook, saying they were Christians. He asked everyone who received the link to pass it on to others. He wrote that they were trying to change the religion of Muslims and that they needed to be stopped. They also put the pictures of many other believers including me, my wife and, our daughter on Facebook. These are just a few of the many stories of ways a house church can be in danger at any time.

6. Challenges within the house church

One of the difficulties the house church faces is the lack of good teaching. It is not that all house churches do not have good teaching, but the majority suffer from the lack of it. What happens when there is not a good teacher in the house church is that every member has his own opinion on many subjects, and everyone wants to teach. This happens because the leader of the house church normally has very little Bible teaching and sometimes no training at all.

One day, because the authorities were persecuting Christians, one of the members of a house church asked permission to share something and then said that the house church should stop meeting because God does not want any of his followers to be in prison. Thank God that the house church did not stop meeting. This man was the only one who stopped attending the meetings.

One time a Mauritanian brother shared with him that he had a vision for the growth of the house church. He said God put it in his heart to marry twelve women and have many children and in this way he would help in multiplying the number of believers.

On a number of occasions we sent a few Moroccans with a Mauritanian brother to visit and encourage the church in Mauritania. One time a Mauritanian brother shared with him that he had a vision for the growth of the house church. He said God put it in his heart to marry twelve women and have many children and in this way he would help in multiplying the number of believers. This illustrates the sad reality of poor teaching.

One day I met with some believers from Algeria. I asked them if they had any program of teaching and they said that they do not need any program. They pray and God teaches them and does miracles. This is very dangerous thinking. The lack

of good teaching becomes more dangerous when it is based on spiritual experiences without a biblical basis.

A pastor from Jordan, whom I met, was teaching that demons could not speak in tongues. I asked him why he thought this and he said that one day when he was praying with someone who was possessed by demons, he asked the demon if he could pray in tongues and the demon said no. Therefore, this pastor began to teach that demons could not pray in tongues. The question here is not if demons can speak in tongues or not, the issue is that this pastor built his teaching on what the demon said, not on the Bible—and demons have been known to lie from time to time.

Abdellah will continue this series in the next issue of Seedbed. Future topics will include reaching the youth and passing on the vision for church planting among new believers and emerging house church leaders.