

PART I: TOWARDS WELL-LED MATURE CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS

A Case Study in an Apostolic-Style CPM: An Interview with Pastor Afeef

By Don Little with Pastor Afeef

Pastor Afeef is the Founding Director of Arabs 4 the Arabs (AFTA). Don Little is the editor of SEEDBED & Pioneers' Islamic Missiologist.

In the summer of 2013 I met Pastor Afeef in a consultation in Cairo. I had several opportunities to talk with Brother Afeef, and was deeply impressed by what I heard about the ministry of the mission he founded in 1998. He felt God calling him to begin a ministry led by Arabs, staffed by Arabs and funded by Arabs, in order to plant churches among Muslims of the Middle East. The name of this ministry is *Arabs 4 the Arabs (AFTA)*.

Last summer Pastor Afeef added some helpful background and terminology that he does not mention in the interview. He is one of the founding pastors of the Nazarene Church in Amman, Jordan, and was either personally responsible for planting, or helped to plant, most of the several dozen 'above ground' Nazarene churches in the country. As Afeef mentions in the interview, below, the vast majority of the Christians in these 'above ground' churches, the ones known and legally recognized by the government, that also have church buildings, come from Greek Orthodox or Catholic backgrounds. Then, fifteen years ago, as Pastor Afeef recounts in this interview, God called him to begin to train church planters to plant 'below ground' churches among *Muslims*, rather than only amongst Christians. God has since birthed a remarkable movement across the Middle East under Pastor Afeef's leadership. Now, the vast majority of people planting these 'below ground' house churches among Muslims are themselves BMBs, even though when AFTA started, all the church planters were from Christians backgrounds.

Since this issue of Seedbed is focused on developing healthy movements of churches in Muslim nations, I asked Afeef if he could write an article for SEEDBED that would describe the movement he is leading as a case study of a healthy movement of multiplying churches. Though Afeef was willing to participate, he was unable to *find the time to write in time for this issue of SEEDBED*. Fortunately for us, he agreed to carve out time to answer my questions in a Skype interview. On Thursday, May 8th, I spoke with Afeef for about an hour, and the

written version of that interview here has been checked by Pastor Afeef for both accuracy and security.

Many who read SEEDBED are praying and working towards seeing movements of churches being established across the Muslim world. David Garrison's 2014 book, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (see review in this issue of SEEDBED), describes a number of kinds of movements that God is raising up across the Muslim world. The movement that God is using Afeef to lead does not fit the model of the kinds of movements that Garrison was highlighting. Neither does the shape of this movement match what are typically called church planting movements (CPMs). Of the four movements whose expatriate facilitators I interviewed in Indonesia in May 2013, only one somewhat parallels this movement being led by Afeef.

I think the term that most accurately describes this movement would be an *apostolic* CPM. It is being led by an apostolically gifted man, who is in turn training and helping raise up leaders who have apostolic gifting in eleven Middle Eastern countries. In Garrison's study of movements, he used the cut off criteria for a *movement* to be 1000 baptized believer or 100 churches planted in the previous decade or two. This AFTA-facilitated movement across the Middle East easily fits within Garrison's criteria for a movement since, according to Pastor Afeef's account, there are at least 300 'below ground' house churches with an average of about 20 – 25 baptized believers in each (see below). This means that the movement has at least 6000 believers, the majority of whom are from Muslim backgrounds, and is thus the largest movement that I am aware of in the Middle East outside of Algeria and Iran. And it began only fifteen years ago!

I have chosen to preserve most of the informal format of the *actual recorded interview* that I did with Pastor Afeef because I believe it best enables the passion and vision of this apostolically gifted leader to shine through.

An Interview with Pastor Afeef, conducted by Don Little

Editor: *As we begin, let me commit our conversation to God in prayer.*

Father, I thank you for my brother Afeef, and for the way that you are using him in mighty ways. I ask that you would guide our conversation that it may bring glory to your name – both the conversation and that which is written for others to read. We ask that you will guide in the questions I ask and guide Afeef as he responds and thinks how to share. We ask that your presence will be strong with us as we talk together now. Amen.

Editor: *To start out, can you first introduce yourself. Tell our readers a bit about yourself, your family, where you live. Then share about your experience church planting and how you were led to begin to train others to do church planting.*

Afeef: I was born in 1959 in the south of Jordan in the ancient country of Moab. Our whole tribe think of ourselves as Moabites. My family were nominal Greek Orthodox, but they were communists. So we didn't have any religious upbringing and I never saw a Bible until I was almost 18. Church meant nothing. Church was only the place to go to get baptized, to have weddings and to have burial services – and that was it. And we were kind of threatened by the Muslims because we couldn't answer their questions and we were not supposed to answer their questions, because we were afraid of provoking the giant.

I moved from the village to the city to finish my high school. During that time I was involved in a little gang and I was part of the Communist Youth Party. And one day I heard about a little evangelical church that was having a private meeting behind closed doors. And I thought, OK, I am going to go and attack them, break the door and see if their Jesus can help them. I don't know why I was provoked. I was a troublemaker, a wrestler, a bodybuilder. I went with a friend and we kicked the door open. It was a little room with less than thirty people and we shouted at them, you know, screamed at them... They didn't scream back, and they offered us some seats with them in the small room packed with less than 30 people. And the young man leading the group was a Lebanese, who was visiting... You know him – I am talking about H. A. It was his first visit to Jordan.

And he continued his talk and he was explaining the sinner's prayer. And then he started explaining, really vividly, even using drawings, the amazing transformation that what would happen when someone would receive Jesus into his or her life. And I said to myself, 'Boy, I have been trying all my life to change my life, and I couldn't'. And feeling guilty, I had tried to commit suicide a few times out of guilt. And H.A. was saying that just a simple prayer, words to someone called 'Jesus', would change my life! I was struggling within myself. And I could hear a soft voice within me saying 'What if it is true?' And I said, 'boy, am I lost.'

And I just prayed, and invited this person called Jesus... I said: 'Jesus, if you are really as this man says, and you can change lives, please change mine.' And I felt something coming over me, from the top of my head through to the tip of my toes. I couldn't express what I was experiencing. And that was the beginning of my coming to the Lord. It was a Thursday evening, the 24th of February, 1977, around 7 pm. The next morning, when H.A. was still doing his training, my friend went to him and said, 'If you don't tell me what happened to my friend Afeef, I'll beat you up!' He explained the gospel to my friend, and he too believed. He is today a full-time pastor in a city in the north of Jordan.

That is who I am. I am a married man, to one wife, and we have four children. Ah, making my life story short... I was trained as a lawyer. The Lord changed my plans, and I went to Manchester, England, for theological training. After I finished, I came back and started planting my first church in Amman, Jordan in 1984. It was a miserable experience, because for five years, I couldn't win one soul. But then, after five years, a revival broke out. And as a result, many people I trained became full-time pastors. In 1998, I...

Editor: *Can I ask you a question? Was that first church planting ministry with Muslims?*

Afeef: No. It was among the Greek Orthodox and the Catholics. At that time I never believed that Muslims could become Christians. It was, like, impossible. That's what we were told.

Editor: *Go ahead, you were going to mention something that happened in 1998.*

Afeef: In 1998 I woke up one night after having had a dream. I saw waves of ants coming out of Jordan and going throughout the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world. And I tried to ignore the dream. I thought that I had eaten something bad. But almost every night the dream came again. It became a nightmare. It became a distraction. When I was with people, and I wanted to pray, I would close my eyes, and see the ants swarming out of Jordan. Evidently, God was saying something to me. And a friend from OM said, 'God is calling you to the mission field, to the Muslims, my friend.' And I prayed with him about this interpretation.

He was getting ready to go to the land of the Queen of Sheba. So, I thought, OK, I'll talk with my wife, and we will pack our things and go there, since it is one of the most unreached countries. Well, my wife, being a very obedient Arab wife, said to me, 'Over my dead body!' I showed her a video of the only five star hotel in the country. But nothing! Eventually she released me to go and, 'spy out the land.' And I went there on a two week trip. I couldn't find schooling for our kids and I was shocked how terribly primitive conditions were.

Editor: *Did you go only to the capital on that trip?*

Afeef: No, I also went to other cities, and to villages, which were even worse! I came back having been shocked. And I thought, 'It must be something else.' A few weeks later, my wife allowed me to go on another trip, and after I came back, I said to the Lord, 'You have got to do something! You've got to take this nightmare out of my life, or you've got to explain to me what it means!' As I was praying, it dawned on me that I didn't see one little ant. I saw waves of ants! And I realized that God was not speaking to me about simply being another missionary – he was speaking to me about starting a movement! And that was the birth of what we now call AFTA – *Arabs 4 the Arabs*.

That year we began training people for five days, people who were interested in going on trips to other Arab countries. To go and try to find opportunities to share their faith, and if they could not, to simply walk and pray in the streets. And we sent them for two weeks, and when they came back the reports were amazing!

Editor: *And were these people all from Christian backgrounds?*

Afeef: Yes, we didn't have any BMBs with us then. But they came back and told me about Muslim people wanting to receive Jesus, and praying. And already some had had a vision in which Jesus appeared to them in a supernatural way. And boy, that was what I needed! And in 1999 I started preaching missions everywhere. I had 13 crazy young men and we started a 13 month training school – I had NO idea what I was doing!!

Editor: *But you knew you had to train them.*

Afeef: Yes, I knew they had to be trained. And I knew it wasn't simply a 'fill in the blank' kind of training that was needed. And I knew I needed to live with them to share my life with them. So we lived together. I rented a big apartment for them, and we literally lived together; we ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together. We would wash dishes, do the cooking together. We did the shopping together, prayed together, cried together, cleaned the toilets together.

And during this time, the Lord sent to me someone from YWAM, who knew how to do Discipleship Training Schools, and we started organizing things. At the end of the training, we sent these people out for two months. They went to different countries, and most of them ended up being in Sudan. And I went and visited them and stayed with them for two weeks in Sudan, and it was life changing! And from that time we began sending people, but just short-term.

Now we have 82 full-time long-term church planters. Most of them are local BMBs, and they have planted over 300 underground house churches. Actually, only God knows the real number, but at least three hundred. And we are in eleven Middle Eastern countries. Next month, in June, we are starting training for North African church planters. There will be about twenty of them coming together for training, from Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. That is our first move into North Africa.

Editor: *Can you tell a little bit about the churches being planted: their size, ratio of men and women, and so on?*

Afeef: The size varies. Our definition of a church is any number of people who are committed to obey Christ and are committed to each other.

Editor: *So, four or five people is a church?*

Afeef: That is a church, but we have churches also of as many as eighty people. They don't want to divide up. Some churches have a vision for dividing and multiplying, but others like to stay together because they feel secure in a larger group. So, we have from five up to eighty. But the average is from 20 to 25 people.

Editor: *And are they typically made up of young men, or young families?*

Afeef: They are mainly young people. Few churches have older people. The majority are people from the early twenties up to the early forties in age. And we are talking about young couples, husbands, wives and children. And now we have seen even the third generation. Because in some countries they get married when they are twelve or thirteen even. And so we see the third generation and the grandfather is not yet fifty!

Editor: *And are there some countries where there is a lot happening, and others where it is just starting?*

Afeef: In certain countries, or in particular people groups, God is really at work. Among the Kurdish, in the land of Aram, the land of Abraham, in the northern part, it is all Kurdish people. We have one full-time single male worker. He has churches in sixty villages. There are something like three hundred and sixty villages from the same Kurdish people group, who believe they are the remnant of the ancient Medes, mentioned in the Bible. So, right now he has organized churches in sixty villages. He has all volunteers and he is the only full-time worker.

The other area we are starting to see great response, is in the same country, near Damascus and toward the Jordanian border, a huge revival among the Sunnis. For example, one of our church planters is a blind man. He is married with no children. Nine months ago they had eight house churches. And because of all that is going on in the civil war, today they have nineteen churches! In the last nine months it grew from eight to nineteen. He, and three full-time workers are training twenty-five new leaders. The requests are too much, with people asking him (the blind worker) to come to their homes, pray with them, read the Bible with them, and so on. They have a few Druze and a few Shiites, but most are Sunnis.

And because of the influx of refugees into our country as well, many Sunni Muslims have accepted the Lord, and have been baptized by members of our team. And they have Bible studies, children clubs, and so on, in Jordan. And they did a medical outreach among them. In three days they saw more than 900 patients.

And now God is doing amazing things in Upper Egypt. In villages outside M. and outside B. When I mention these places to Egyptians, they have never

heard of them. And now we have eighteen full-time workers just in Upper Egypt. They have more than thirty-five regular house meetings.

All of the workers are Egyptian. Most of AFTA workers now are locals. Earlier I mentioned that we began in Sudan. The last non-local in our work there was deported from Sudan almost a year ago. We train locals and empower them. And we have full-time coaches. We have poured everything we know into the lives of these coaches, so that they can do the discipleship training, the leadership training, the church planting training within their countries in their own settings.

Editor: *Is the vision of the church planters you are training to plant and then pastor the church, or to plant and have other people lead the local house church once it is planted?*

Afeef: It is part of our training to teach the church planters to raise up local people in the churches to lead the churches. When you plant a church, you pick up a leader as your assistant, and when things are growing, you move out, and leave the leader there and go and start another church, and encourage the new leader to also start another one. And because of what is going on, people are often scattered, and wherever they go they plant more house churches. They are opening their homes for their friends. That's why we don't really have an accurate idea of the number of church groups.

Editor: *You are probably aware of an approach to church planting that works on the basis of inductive Bible studies and small group meetings. Are you using this style, or is it mostly more a preaching style?*

Afeef: We are using this style – using the inductive Bible study principles, and storytelling. They are using story telling mainly for outreach. They are using it a lot and it is very effective. And when they meet together, they do inductive Bible study. It's all interactive. We don't have pulpits.

Editor: *It's all in the homes...*

Afeef: It's all in the homes, and they have fellowship. They pray together. They have communion. They apply the Word of God. They even have offerings and they decide together how to use the collected money. And they do outreach. Sometimes the only outreach they can do is that they have the names of their unsaved friends and they pray for them. If they cannot talk to them, they start with prayer.

Editor: *As churches are being planted, what kinds of patterns are you seeing? How long does it take for a church to be planted? Are there patterns you see in most countries?*

Afeef: They are almost the same. They are friends sitting together in a house. The only problem is that in some settings, ladies cannot sit together with the men. So, they have them sit in another room, and they listen. Unless they are having a big celebration. Then the men would sit in one corner, the women in the opposite corner, and the children in between. And in some countries

the ladies are totally covered, and in other countries, they dress like they are Europeans.

Editor: *Have you penetrated the more wealthy countries of the Gulf?*

Afeef: We do have two church planting efforts in two different Gulf countries. There are two groups, but no multiplication yet. It is slow there.

Editor: *You said that your training began with intensively living together with young men. Is that kind of intensive training continuing, or has the training changed somewhat?*

Afeef: Yes it was very intensive. It was living together. But now we have changed the training. We are having some people who are already disciplined. We have some who went away and got a degree in theology. When we do the training, we first ask: What kind of people do we need? What kinds of outcome do we need from the training program? Then we look at the group of people who want to be trained. We interview them and discover where they are at. And, from the level they are at we adapt the training. For example, with some people we share the Gospel to make sure they are born again. We did this for two weeks in Turkey, for a group from the land of the queen of Sheba. And while we were doing that, one journalist who was with us, in that class, he accepted the Lord.

For example, I am going to do three months of training for ten people from the country of the Queen of Sheba. We will do the training in the first country mentioned in Isaiah 19.

Editor: *Will you personally be there for some of the training?*

Afeef: I will be there for the first week, and another two weeks, later. I will be teaching the Gospel at the beginning, to make sure that they are all believers and that they have assurance of their faith. So, I start with this, even if they have been believers for many years. First of all, I make sure they know the God they believe in. And if they have not really received Jesus, I give them the opportunity. If they want to share the Gospel with others, I make sure they know the essentials of the Gospel, the skeleton of the Gospel. Without that, you cannot make progress! So that is a must! We start with it.

Then we deal with having your own private time with the Lord. How do you worship on your own? How do you use the Scripture, how do you pray? How do you listen to God? You know, so these people will build their personal relationship with God.

Then we talk about the character and characteristics of God. Then we talk about inductive Bible study. We talk about the meaning of being a follower of Jesus. We talk about inner healing, because we want them to be healed from things in their lives. We are aiming at the character rather than at head knowledge.

Editor: *And does that inner healing also include deliverance on occasion?*

Afeef: Oh, absolutely! Deliverance has to be part of the inner healing. And the impartation of the Spirit, laying on of hands, deliverance, asking the Holy Spirit to come and help them, to set them free. And many people are delivered. Casting out demons is part of it. They have previously been involved in a demonic religion. Let's face it! And now they need deliverance; they need to be cleaned up.

Editor: *This is why you want to do a three-month long training – to have time to get through a lot of these things?*

Afeef: The first month I call the honeymoon month. Everyone pretending. Everyone putting on their best. Then after a month, all the mess starts coming out as they live together in one place.

Editor: *It's very intensive. So, after you get through this inner healing, and prayer, and then you start working on preparing them to be church planters?*

Afeef: And then I start working on *Servant Leadership*. Or I call it, Jesus leadership. Then I give them the pattern of how Jesus did ministry – Jesus ministry. Then, three weeks before the end of the training, I start teaching them church planting. I teach them the book of Ephesians – I do a verse by verse study of Ephesians because this is a really good basis for discipleship.

Then we talk about discerning one's mission. What is God calling them to do. I teach them the big picture of God's Kingdom and God's plan for the world, and how to discern my role in his plan. I teach them that they need to receive an understanding of their role in God's work directly from God through prayer and listening to God.

Then, the last week, we talk about their roles and how to start. When you go out from here, back to your country, what do you do? We talk about specific action plans, and then we follow up with them, once they return home and begin their ministry.

Editor: *And when they return and begin their ministry, does AFTA help with their funding? How does it all work? Do they support themselves?*

Afeef: No, they have no support from their homes. Most people do not have any church background.

Editor: *No, I mean, self-support in the sense of working, paying their own living expenses through a job.*

Afeef: Yes, most of them support themselves through their jobs. A few receive subsidies from AFTA. And probably less than one in ten will be fully supported. We would support a leader who would be the trainer of the trainers. Because my job is to work myself out of a job as soon as possible. I

would like to see a local person doing everything I know – and hopefully more than one local person!

So, usually we take one person, and we keep training him and bringing him with us, training him, make him an assistant, and helping us. For example, after they go and talk to their friends, we like them to bring their disciples. We go to their country, or a neighboring country, wherever security permits us. And when they bring their disciples, we do a discipleship training for their disciples, and they are our assistants, the leaders. And then we send them back with their disciples. And it starts growing.

And then we say, Ok, we want you to do another discipleship training school. The disciples who we trained previously are the assistants, and the leaders, who were our assistants the previous time, do the main teaching, as they teach the disciples of those who were disciplined the last time. We are there to help them organize and do practical things but they do most of the teaching during the day.

In the evenings, we will teach the leaders more practical leadership skills. Any issues that arise during the training we turn into a case study, examining in the Scriptures how Jesus faced such a challenge and thinking through together how best to deal with such situations. So we are giving them ongoing training. And it is also ongoing training for us, because we are always learning from them as well.

Editor: *And when you say that you will fund one person to be a trainer of trainers, how do the other ten leaders live or support themselves? Are they still doing their old jobs?*

Afeef: Most of our church planters have their own jobs. And if they need financial help, that is for their local house church to decide, because they have offerings and tithing, and they can help each other.

Editor: *So you start with offerings and tithing right from the beginning?*

Afeef: Yes, we teach tithing as part of the church planting skeleton. It is part of our worship to God. We don't do it because there is a need, because we want to do ministry with it. It is simply part of our worship to God.

Editor: *When you think of the churches in the movement, how would you describe a healthy, thriving church? What does an unhealthy church look like? How do you distinguish?*

Afeef: What do we mean by healthy? That is my question. If we mean by healthy, that there are no problems – there is no such church! If we mean by healthy, that they know that they are saved by grace and preserved by grace, and they need Jesus in everything in their lives... Oh, yes, there are plenty of them! And when we say healthy, we mean they worship, they pray, they experience the power of his presence. The Word of God is bearing fruit in their lives and they are responding to God's call to reach out to others, then yes, there are many churches like that. But if one thinks that healthy means that they are

happy and there are no problems, no attacks from the enemy – there is no such church!

Editor: *I have found that a key component in seeing churches stay healthy is that they are led by maturing servant leaders. Has this been true in your movement as well?*

Afeef: You know, Don, we tell our leaders – they have to be fathers. They are fathers. And I tell them the difference between a father and a leader. A tiny little difference. A leader can tell you everything that you are supposed to do, but a father does it with you. And that is a huge difference! So, if they are not willing to be like Jesus, to wash the feet of others... If you open my Bible, you'll find a piece of a towel in it, that is now growing yellow with age. And I tell them, 'This is my ID card. I'm a servant.'

Editor: *So you're modelling and teaching servant leadership all the time.*

Afeef: Oh yes. Because even the ministry we do, we call 'Jesus ministry'. We don't borrow strategies from the secular world as they do in the West. We just go and see how Jesus did things. How did Jesus pray with sick people? How did Jesus open a topic of conversation? We don't have three point sermons. We allow people to interrupt our teaching all the time, and we respond to their questions. If Peter would submit his sermon in Acts 2 to any lousy Bible college, he would get an F. Don't you think so?

Editor: *If it's a good Bible college, I would hope not!*

Afeef: (Laughter!) But, what I meant is, too often we teach our people the Roman and Greek style of teaching and ministry. But we need to go back and ask, how did Jesus do ministry? He's our example. So I call it 'Jesus ministry'. So, they keep trying to model themselves and their ministry on Jesus, rather than on other models.

Editor: *In this movement, how often do you see one church multiplying and planting other churches, verses one church planter planting many churches in succession?*

Afeef: You know, you have both – both are happening. This is not an issue for me. The issue is the kind of churches we are producing. Are they really biblical churches? We encourage them to be after the model of Jesus, and if they are, I have no problem.

Editor: *Yes, but are you finding that, say within a church, two or three people decide to start another church?*

Afeef: I have found this. And I find other churches that would grow, and become thirty or forty, and then they would split into two. Or even, one person in a church saying, sorry, I need to go back to my village and tell my people about what happened to me. And he would go back there, and most of the time he would be stuck there, because he's planting a house church, and another house church, and then another. For example, one person went back to his

village in the summer to pick up olives – one of our workers. And we couldn't contact him for more than three months. When he came back from the village after three months, he told us about twenty house churches that were planted in that area.

Editor: *Praise God! That is so beautiful!*

Afeef: And he brought the leaders of the house churches back to the city to be trained by us.

Editor: *Amen! Hallelujah. The blessing and anointing of God clearly appear to be on this movement! What would you say are the two or three biggest challenges you face right now? Both you personally, and the movement?*

Afeef: The biggest challenge personally is myself, because I need to discern and to be sensitive to His instructions. There are times when I walk ahead of him, or when I am holding things back. I need to understand his calendar. I need to understand what he is doing, and what he wants me to do in order to tune in with what God is doing. That is the biggest challenge all of us have.

The second challenge is, sigh, the Judas. Security. Everywhere in our country, and in our part of the world, in Egypt, Assyria, Israel... Because of the kind of people we work with, or the political environment. Everything is hostile. I mean I have friends who've lost their lives.

Editor: *Is that happening regularly, or more rarely?*

Afeef: Not regularly, but there are a number of them. Every year there is an incident here or there. Sometimes it is not intentional. Like in the area neighboring Aram, a rocket hit a house next to the house in which a house church was meeting. A shard from the rocket hit a brother and cut off his shoulder, and after eleven days in an intensive care unit, he passed away. It wasn't persecution, it was a causality of the civil war. But we also have people who have been shot, or hung because of their faith in Christ.

Editor: *So the first challenge is learning discernment, and the second is dealing with Judases. Which other big challenges are you dealing with?*

Afeef: May I mention something...? And I hope you will not misunderstand me, and even your readers will not misunderstand me. Having some people bringing new theories about how we do church planting. And they come and they think the Middle East is their laboratory. Like the 'insider theory'. It's theories, you know. And it's confusing the locals.

Editor: *And this particular theory, the 'insider theory' is bothering people in your movement?*

Afeef: It's bothering all the friends I know. For example, I am scheduled to meet someone on Monday who is supposedly being persecuted by his family. He lost his job, and his life is threatened. And you know what? That man does not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the incarnate God! And he is paying

a huge price. What kind of a Gospel are we preaching to these people? We are diluting the Gospel. We are trying to make Jesus only a prophet. And you can add Jesus to your faith. And you can continue to believe that parts of your holy book (the Qur'an) are inspired! How on earth can we tell that to people? This is human wisdom!

Editor: *So you are encountering these kinds of converts too often, who do not really understand the heart of the Gospel?*

Afeef: Two years ago, a leader from a group in the Queen of Sheba country came to my place. And the people who introduced me to him (he was coming for medical treatment) said that he had been a believer for many years. I discovered that the man didn't even know the Gospel. And he received Jesus with us. And we prayed for him and the Holy Spirit came over him, and he was transformed. For them, he was a believer for many years! But the man never read the Bible, he didn't even know who Jesus really is. For him, Jesus was only a prophet! If Jesus is only a prophet he cannot save!

You see, this is human wisdom. I know that these people think they are doing good. They have good motives. *But we cannot compromise the truth of the Gospel!*

Editor: *That is why you start your training with a strong emphasis on the Gospel and by making sure that people really know Christ?*

Afeef: This is the bare minimum! This is the starting point, the skeleton upon which everything else hangs. You and I, even if we come from different theological backgrounds, we agree on this. This skeleton has the same number of bones, the same shape. But maybe you look blond, or black or Asian, but it is still the same skeleton inside that holds it together!

Editor: *Before I go on to another question, is there another big challenge that you want to mention?*

Afeef: There are other challenges. My biggest challenge is that people in the Middle East want to be part of a big crowd. They see the Christians, they see that they have churches. They like buildings. And I think if we want to go back to the model that uses buildings, we will not be able to fulfill the Great Commission.

Editor: *So, is it often the case that as a house church grow to 30 or 40, they want their own building?*

Afeef: Yeah! And of course, (laughing) I don't have the resources for buildings! And I don't want to have such resources (laughter)! It's up to them. I don't care. Because with us, we are not a denomination. Our ministry is kingdom ministry. I want to see Egypt, Assyria, Israel worshipping the Lord, a blessing upon the earth. That is my vision – that is my scriptural mandate.

So we do church planting. We do reconciliation. We bring people from Egypt, Assyria, Israel, and we lead them in identification and repentance, and we teach them that the Kingdom of God has nothing to do with Israel, except that Israel was the first born, that Israel has been chosen, not for their own salvation, but that they might be lights for and servants to other nations. We do such gatherings from time to time, in secure locations. And it is a huge thing! It is a real blessing for all of us.

Editor: *Amen! Are there one or two stories, of what God is doing, that you want to share, to give glory to God?*

Afeef: Yes! Let me give you this fresh story from the land of the Queen of Sheba. I just came from there about ten days ago. I met with a young man in a coffee shop, who was introduced to me by a mutual friend. We call him 'Ali'. Ali told me that he got to know about Jesus through a program on the Internet. And he was in his last year of study as a pharmacist. And when they found out that he had become a follower of Jesus, the professors failed him in all of his final exams, so that he was disqualified and could not complete his studies. And I thought Ali would be sad about this. But he looked at me, with his shining eyes, and said, 'Don't think I am sad. I feel honored to pay this price. And if they want to kill me, that would be the highest honor.'

And then, Ali went on and said, 'I wanted to disengage my people from their religious studies, so I decided to run a campaign to make the largest candle in the world.' He said, 'I announced this campaign on Facebook and on the radio. And I said, "If you are disgusted with what is happening in our society, and you want hope for our society, then the only hope for the darkness that our society is going through is the light of God. So, let us build the largest candle in the world."' And he told me that thousands of people came and brought candles. And they started building this big candle. And other Christians joined him, to the point that, the President sent people from the palace and told them, 'Boys, we like what you're doing! Why are you doing this? And Ali said to them, 'Because we need the light of the world to light our country.'

I asked him what he meant? Ali said that Jesus is the only one who can change my country, who can transform the politics, the economy, the social systems. No one had talked to him about transformation! But they know it! Their knowledge of the Bible is very limited. They only barely know enough to be Christians and they don't know much of the Bible. They haven't even read the whole New Testament, and now they are talking about transformation!

Ali will be one of the ten people we will train for three months. Because I see in him an apostle!

Editor: *And it's these kinds of people whom you are asking God to raise up?*

Afeef: Absolutely. You know, they are using Facebook. Not only is Facebook being used for the Arab Spring. It's being used to spread the spiritual Arab Spring in that country. Facebook has been their main tool for evangelism – sharing their faith with others.

Even when I was in the training school, I would check my Facebook account before going to bed, and would see hundreds of comments. One person said that he had wanted to go to a church, so he went to an Ethiopian church. But the church wouldn't allow him in, because he was not Ethiopian, he was a local person. They told him that it was against the law, and the government would close them down if they let him into their church. And then, he throws this experience up for discussion: 'Is this right? Shouldn't I have the freedom to choose which religion I believe? And people, hundreds of them, began writing comments. And so I wrote on my post: 'Freedom for all! People should have the right of religious freedom.' And I put some verses from the Bible on the post. Then I discovered that many involved in the discussions were believers! Because they would send me private messages and say, 'Hey, Pastor we know you. We are glad you are helping us with this!' It's amazing!!

Editor: *So, social media is really helping the whole church planting process.*

Afeef: Oh yes, oh yes. Now, we are setting up a digital church. I have a friend, from the land of the Queen of Sheba who now lives in Cyprus. We are working through YouTube, Facebook and a website, to write material for the whole Gulf, for the house churches. To train them, to help them understand the Bible, to provide them with Arabic worship songs, news, prayer requests, everything. It's almost completely set up. That is his ministry. We call it 'Digital Church.'

Editor: *Another question. Are there certain things you strive to put in place to ensure that these churches thrive over the long haul? What are they?*

Afeef: I think that the most important thing is that they take the Word of God seriously. And I want them to have a personal relationship with Jesus, not just when they meet together, but as individuals. If they don't have that personal ongoing relationship with Jesus, forget it. When they meet, I want them to know that they are there to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, to listen to him and obey him, *and* to minister to each other as one body. So, I tell them: You are a family – what would you do in a family? I tell them that they don't choose their family members. Whether you like them or not, they are your brothers and sisters. You need to love them, you need to help them, and you need to stand by them. And I say, if the blood of Adam can make us one *human* family, how much more the blood of the precious Lord Jesus Christ. And if they don't live like a family, the church won't carry on. If it's only like a club, and they just come when it is convenient, it won't work.

Editor: *So, submission to the Word of God, an intimate personal relationship with Christ, and intimate, deep family church life.*

Afeef: Yes, commitment to each other, yes.

Editor: *A different question now. What two or three top counsels would you give to expatriate church planters who have moved into the region in order to be involved in church planting?*

Afeef: **Number one:** Make sure that is it God who has called you over here. It is not just an adventure!

Number two: Find local believers, work with them and learn from them—come as a student.

Number three: Work with the locals, even if it is humbling, even if it is frustrating, because that is the way that you will be most fruitful, and don't plan to stay forever, as if you never expect to leave! Work yourself out of the job as soon as possible.

Editor: *You are clearly excited about what you are seeing God do. Can you describe what you envision God doing in the next two years, five years, ten years? What vision has God put in your heart?*

Afeef: I tell you. I am expecting him to come in twenty-four months (Joyful laughter)! I am expecting that the ground will no longer be able to hold down the surging underground water, and it will break the ground and it will become public, and it will shock the whole world. It cannot be underground anymore! Because of what God is doing. It's amazing!! And it will be a wonderful shock for us. And the rest will be blown away!

Editor: *Just a few days ago I read that Al-Sisi, the newly elected president of Egypt, wants to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood. I suspect that you would think that the Muslim Brotherhood is going to be destroyed by a spiritual revolution, rather than by force.*

Afeef: You know, the biggest service to the kingdom of God in this region was that Morsi became the President for a while. He exposed it! People started to see the ugly face of their religion. But the problem, the challenge is, do we have the alternative? Do we have the REAL option for them? Do we have the structure, the patterns, the systems in place, as the church, to take over the influence in our societies?

I am not going to wait until the millennium to see the kingdoms of the world become his kingdom. I want to see it now. I want to see him bringing it over my people. I want to see my people enjoying the freedom, the liberty, the light in Jesus. So that they become truly human, in his image.

I want to see him transforming the governments. I am in the process of starting an NGO to challenge anything that is not in accordance with human rights and with the principles and values of the kingdom of God. And I am going to register it legally in Jordan. This is one of the ways I feel that God is

calling me to prepare the people – to prepare both the church and people in society generally. It is in envisioning the believers and preparing the unbelievers that there is more for you than simply this empty practice called ‘religion’.

Editor: *Your vision is so massive! How many do you work with now as your core team? Do you have a dozen or forty leaders that you work with to accomplish this grand vision?*

Afeef: I have eighty-two people. And out of these people, for example, in my office, we are four. And, in every country, I have one person who is the leader of the team in that country. So now there are eleven country leaders. But in some countries, like in Egypt, for example, there are three leaders. So we are talking about twenty people with whom I work closely, on an almost daily, or at least weekly basis.

Editor: *So my last question is simply: What else would you like to add? Any final thoughts?*

Afeef: I want to add one thing. This region has a redemptive purpose, according to Isaiah 19, to become a blessing to the world. And I believe that, not only will Egypt, Assyria and Israel worship Jesus together, but they will become, once again, a blessing to the whole world. In the early church, the blessing came from this region. And now, it will come out of this region, and to the whole world, until we see the King of Glory coming back.

Editor: *Hallelujah! Will you finish our conversation with prayer, my brother?*

Afeef: It is an honor, my brother.

Father, I thank you and I bless your holy name, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, I pray, Thy Kingdom come! Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven, in the Middle East and North Africa, as it is in heaven! And I pray, Father, your hand upon my brother, and that through the writing of this article, Father, that you will mobilize your people into mission. Because, Father, I understand from your Word, that we are here for one purpose—that is the purpose of bringing your kingdom to this earth. The purpose is mission—preaching Christ, the only hope. And Father, I pray, in the name of Jesus, that people will respond, and that many people will understand your season and your time, and they would tune in, and become your hands and your feet. Help us, Father, to live on this earth as your living body. That we would become channels of blessing, of your blessing, to the nations around us. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.