

WOMEN'S MINISTRIES SECTION

Introduction to article by Fran Love

by Donna Smith

In the autumn of 1999 I made my annual visit to a North African country where there are many new believers. It is very exciting to see how God is touching lives to believe in Christ and be baptised. The major work of discipling them and forming local healthy units of the Body of Christ will require great effort. The need to consider and solve the challenges concerning the women (and children) must not be ignored.

Fran Love has written a thought-provoking article about the place of female MBBs in the church. Although her experiences are from the cultural background of East Asia, there is much that can be adapted and applied to the situations we find in other parts of the Muslim world, such as the Arab world of the Middle East, the Gulf, North Africa and in immigrant populations.

We must make progress together in helping our sisters in Christ participate as a part of the Body of Christ. So much of the language and formation of local groups can exclude them. They often do not have the same freedom to move out into the public arena of society where 'meetings' take place.

They cannot always identify with programmes of 'leadership training'. Male MBBs may not yet be aware of their past cultural baggage which makes assumptions about women as good wives and daughters, submissive to the men in their lives and separate from men in religious matters. Relationships in the church, which take people out of their usual family ties, can lead to stressful or awkward situations.

Christian workers also need to look at these questions in depth in relation to their discipling and beginning the church. Fran Love writes: "In this phase missionaries need to form an ecclesiology which reflects the cultural realities of male-female interaction, a biblical exegesis of ministry roles women can have in the churches, and practical theology of ministries to women." I invite the readers of SEEDBED to read this article, to enter into discussion and to make suggestions so that the Body of Christ across the Muslim world includes committed women believers as active participants.

Church Planting That Includes Muslim Women

by Fran Love

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By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. Proverbs 24:3

When my husband and I were planting the church in Indonesia, I like to think that the church was built by wisdom and understanding and that the rare and beautiful treasures of Proverbs 24:3 were Muslim women.

Over the last two decades as a missionary to Muslims, as well as in conversations with missionaries working with Muslims, I have come to the conclusion that Muslim women are too often left out of strategic church planting due to what I call a “gender-blind missiology.” This mission theory states that missionaries need first of all to influence heads of households and leaders who will in turn influence their families and those under their authority. While based on conventional wisdom and perhaps generally true, it is nevertheless an incomplete perspective both for biblical and practical reasons.

First of all, there are the Lydias in the world who will be used of God as strategic bridges to reach others, contrary to normal male-oriented cultural conventions (Acts 16). Second, experience in the Muslim world teaches us that the gospel does not always follow along these male bridges of God. When applied to church planting among Mus-

lims this is inadequate because it creates strategies focused almost exclusively on reaching men, not women, and thus the label “gender-blind missiology.”

It is marvelous when men give their lives to Jesus Christ and then, because of their new joy and love, introduce Jesus to the women in their families. Sadly, this has not always been the case in many countries. At a recent conference I attended, workers among Muslims testified that while the men had become Christians the women had not. Recently I talked with workers in Yemen, Bangladesh, China, Mauritania, and Turkey. When I asked why women had not come to Christ, I found several reasons:

First, the attitude of many Muslim men to Muslim women is that they are creatures who are neither worthy of nor interested in spiritual matters. Typically, a Muslim convert will say when questioned why he doesn’t bring his wife to a Christian gathering, “She is a woman, she wouldn’t understand.” Sadly, our missionaries reinforce this stereotype when they complain that Muslim women aren’t interested in talking about God. Missionary women especially become frustrated at trying to bring God into their conversations with Muslim women who would, they say, rather talk about the price of vegetables at the market, babies, cooking, and methods of birth control.

Second, the religious role of Muslim women stresses that to be good Mus-

lims means they are to be good wives and daughters. While a man's religiosity ties him directly to God—one who is in submission to God—a woman's religiosity ties her directly to the men in her life—one who is in submission to her father, husband, brother, and uncle. A Muslim woman's life has value to the degree she brings honor to her family (Mallouhi 1994). This spills over into the life of new converts, especially when a new male convert to Christianity would see little value in fostering an independent relationship between his wife or daughter and God. It is enough that they bring him honor.

Third, women are perceived as rivals to a man's earnest attentiveness to God. Fatima Mernissi in her book, *Beyond The Veil*, says of a man and woman's relationship, "Such involvement constitutes a direct threat to man's allegiance to Allah, which requires the unconditional investment of all his energies, thoughts and feelings in his God." (1987:8). For this reason there is a strict separation between men and women (in most Muslim countries) when it comes to religious matters. Women seldom go to the mosque and when they do they sit behind partitions. Religious talk is

almost exclusively between men, seldom between women and never between men and women.

The fourth reason concerns the fears of the men themselves. A male believer can be afraid that his wife's family will pressure her to divorce him. He may also fear spiritual retaliation by the women in his family, a not unlikely possibility due to the high percentage of Muslim women who are deeply involved in animistic and occult practices. Then he may fear that as soon as his wife is converted, the family will be labeled as a Christian one, with painful consequences of ostracism, economic pressure and limited educational opportunities for his children.

These four reasons alone have robbed many Muslim women of opportunities to hear the gospel. I am writing this paper to supplement the strategies of church planters whose vision may be clouded by gender-blind missiology. Muslims are hard enough, even more so Muslim women who constitute the hidden half of the unreached Muslim world. We need a comprehensive strategy to reach Muslims that includes Muslim women.