

Women's Ministries Section

Church Planting That Includes Muslim Women (Part II)

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

[Editor's note: In Seedbed Vol. XV 1, we inadvertently printed only part of the article by this title. Our apologies to the author. The remainder of the article follows:]

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.

While reaching males first can be the main paradigm, it should not be the only one. Missionaries are becoming more aware to this injustice and are deliberately setting about to correct it. I have found three ways that missionaries are trying to deal with this situation: (1) By teaching the Word and setting a personal example, male missionaries are able to challenge new male converts. (2) Missionary wives give personal attention and ministry to the women of the male converts. (3) Missionary teams deliberately focus on strategies to reach Muslim women.

It is apparent that Muslim women will not automatically become believers even if their husbands or fathers do. We can't go about our church planting efforts with our heads in the sand—a mentality which hopes that the new male converts will do all the hard work for us and eventually bring in the women. Our ministries to Muslims must be undergirded with wisdom, understanding and knowledge (Proverbs 24:3). I have found that the Church Planting Phase program developed by Frontiers, a mission agency focused exclusively on planting churches among Muslims, can guide missionaries into the wisdom that is needed to fill new churches with those rare and beautiful treasures of Muslim women.

Six or seven steps or phases in the church planting program are identified in the Church Planting Phase List (*Frontlines*: 1996). These steps take a team of church planters from the initial steps of ministry all the way to reproducing themselves and then exiting the field. It allows the mission organization to identify where missionaries are in the church planting process (acting as a measuring stick), and helps missionaries envision, the next steps they need to take (acting as a guidebook). I have taken each phase and illustrated from personal examples and from the ministries of other missionaries, the attitudes, activities and strategic thinking which will help missionaries minister to

Muslim women. These activities should be complementary to other ministries. My suggestions are intended to help women minister alongside their male colleagues in establishing churches where both Muslim men and women are brought into the church.

Launching the Team

In this first phase, the most important activity to undertake and attitude to have is to *pray for compassion for Muslim women*. Muslim women can appear to be inaccessible, tucked away behind veils and harems. Fears of reaching them can be dispelled by compassion when we understand the hurts that Islam has inflicted on them: polygamy, easy divorce, inferiority of women, female genital mutilation, forced veiling (in areas ruled by fundamentalists), imprisonment and divorce for being raped, and even honor killings.

Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, compellingly draws us to this compassion when he says, "My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees. What I see is grief to my soul because of all the women of my city" (Lamentations 3:49-51).

Preparing to Sow

A missionary woman works hard during this phase, balancing family and team demands while trying to make a home in her new culture. Her long list of activities can overwhelm her as she tries to survive, understand and to be understood. However, for women who work among Muslims there is an even more crucial dimension to pre-

paring to sow, a dimension which if not cultivated will over time undermine any ministry she might have. *In this phase it is important for missionary women to act as honorable women*, ones in whom Muslim families and especially the men can trust. The ways women conform to what the society says is honorable and right will be keys to the effectiveness and longevity of their ministries with Muslim women. There are several ways to communicate and develop trustworthiness, but the most immediate is in the area of dress, public behavior and modesty around men. Too often our cultural traditions, and sometimes even our supposed freedom in Christ, make us insensitive to clear biblical teaching about modesty (1 Peter 3:3-4; 1 Timothy 2:9-10). We equate the Muslim woman's veil and dress, which covers almost all of her body, as Islamic and therefore something Christians should avoid. Unfortunately, our lack of respect and appreciation for Islamic culture sends a message: not one of freedom in Christ but freedom in sexuality.

An acquaintance related an experience about inviting a Muslim woman to her home, not realizing that she would bring her husband. The woman acted cold all evening, not even attempting to make eye-contact or conversation. Puzzled, the American woman tried to guess why there was such a shift in her friend's attitude. Eventually it hit her: she had been wearing jeans, and had not changed into something more modest when the husband walked into her home. Her Muslim friend never returned.

When I was a new missionary in Asia, I wanted to treat my friends to trips into town to window-shop and eat together, a very normal thing that women in America love to do. The Muslim wives finally found the courage to tell me that their husbands were upset. Honorable women did not go out during the day when they should be doing housework or taking care of children. The husbands were suspicious of my intentions, believing that I was distracting their wives into frivolous and loose behavior.

Sowing

An often used statement by missionaries among Muslims is that Muslim women don't want to talk about God. How then, they question, can we evangelize people who have no spiritual hunger? A male colleague told me how sorry he was that the job of evangelizing Muslim women was so much more difficult than evangelizing Muslim men who love to debate about God and religion. My reply was that although men might enjoy talking about God, women enjoy talking about life. There is almost nothing a woman does not want to talk about, and this rapidly increases opportunities to minister to her and bring God into her every day situation. It is to our advantage that women want to talk about life because the Bible has so much to say about this. *In this third phase our job is to bring God into a Muslim woman's every day life situations.* In bringing God into the life of a Muslim woman, missionary women have found numerous creative ways to

share the gospel: through counseling, through classes where skills are taught, through shared activities and community involvements, through ministries of mercy, and through praying out loud and in their presence for and with Muslim women. As urbanization increases, and with it the anonymity and independence of Muslim women from traditional family values, so will our opportunities of ministry increase. These ministries may look very modern as we shelter abused women, counsel families in crisis (especially in the areas of children drug abuse and sexual promiscuity), give career guidance, and help women struggle with the stresses of balancing job and family demands (Hitching: 1996).

Our ministries will be effective to the degree that through our communication of bringing God into their individual worlds, we shape their perception of reality. We may not be able to change the fact that their husbands might marry younger wives, but we can show them how God loves them and how he views marriage.

A unique approach to bringing God into the everyday conversations of Muslim women was given to me by a missionary in Morocco. After befriending several neighborhood women, this missionary was asked what she thought about a certain topic. Wisely, (from a cultural perspective) she replied, "I am just a woman. What I think is not important. But I know what my Prophet says about this." She paused. Intrigued, the women asked her to tell them what her Prophet had to say.

After several other incidences like this, the women began to ask her what her Prophet had to say about very personal issues affecting all women (such as divorce, marriage relationships and so on).

Discipling and Beginning the Church

By this phase we mean discipling individual believers and then gathering them into fellowship groups. This is probably the most crucial phase for ensuring that discipleship groups become churches and that Muslim women become part of those churches. Time and again the stories are similar: fellowship groups struggling to stay alive because they are made up mostly of single men. No wonder many prayer requests from the field ask for the conversion of women so that the male believers can have Christian wives. Christian marriages bring stability to the churches and make possible entire families coming to Christ, changing emerging and incomplete fellowship groups into established and complete churches.

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 am concerned that although we say this is the most critical phase to the establishing of the church, we have done very little strategic thinking about how women fit into all of this. Our Western ecclesiology of males only as elders and pastors might be inadequate in cultures

where women and men don't mix in religious gatherings.

The problems of having Muslim men and women mix in Christian groups was brought home to me when a worker in Sri Lanka asked me what to do about the older women who refused to be in the same room with men. Or Muslim women who refused to become Christians because they heard that they would have to be baptized by men. Or women who were uncomfortable mixing with men and having evening meetings, and who asked to meet with women only during a noon hour.

Because of these problems it seems best to look at the church planting process as a continuum from the emerging church to the established church, and to allow an all women's group to be on that continuum. These women's groups would be nurtured and developed just like any church, with care given to allow the group to assimilate naturally into the larger body of men and women.

In exegeting biblical passages, we need to pay close attention to the lives of women in the Bible, to see what kinds of ministries women had in Israel's religious system and later on Paul's church planting ministry in the early churches. Frequently, the cultural views of women during biblical times is strikingly similar to what we see in Islamic cultures today. If the women back then could do what they did, we should expect no less for Muslim women converts today. As missionaries we need to be praying for Lydias, Priscillas, Phoebe, Junias, Eunices,

Loises, Dorcases and others like them (Acts 16, 18; Romans 16; 2 Timothy 1; Acts 9). To the measure we believe we can have women like these in our churches is the measure by which we will receive these women into our churches today.

A practical theology of ministries to Muslim women must also be developed as a result of addressing their felt needs. This covers more than just applying the Bible to their needs. It means creating a church system, and ministries within that system, which will make Muslim women feel safe and comfortable in which they can grow in their gifts and in their walk with the Lord. This environment is best facilitated in house churches. Although the norm in most Muslim contexts will be house churches, sadly to say, many missionaries go out to the field with little or no experience in planting house churches. They end up reproducing, or trying to reproduce, the ministries of a traditional church structure, thereby inadvertently losing many opportunities given them by the house church model for the more rapid and deeper spiritual growth especially for Muslim women.

There are numerous advantages for women through the house church structure, several of which are: (1) House churches will usually form around family networks and so are places where women can feel most comfortable. This is their domain, and where they feel safe with people they know. (2) House churches depend less on one teacher and more on partic-

ipatory discussion. In this atmosphere, women are encouraged to ask questions and to share insights. (3) House churches focus less on having church services and more on the transformational ministries of changing lives. In this context, a Muslim woman can ask for and receive help in any area of her life, knowing too that her husband and children or other family members will be receiving the same attention and help. But perhaps the single most important advantage is the natural environment a house church gives for women to develop their gifts and leadership, ingredients necessary to the reproduction of church.

One practical method we used to develop women in their gifts and leadership was through a children's ministry. Children will naturally become a part of house churches. The women, especially the mothers, assumed responsibility for the spiritual education of the children. Children did not intimidate them, and their natural love for the children compelled them into ministry. The women learned how to pray, teach Bible stories, and memorize Scripture along with the children. I believe that having a children's ministry is an important part of discipling Muslim women believers.

Training Leaders and Exiting

This phase includes completing the church by training and appointing of leaders. Developing them and then releasing them into leadership. Many missionaries would say that the completion of the church occurs when male elders are appointed. But as I have

tried to point out in this article, male eldership (while certainly important) is not the only leadership criteria for a self-sustaining and growing church among Muslims. *Titus 2:3-5, where the older women are training the younger women, must also be in place.* How their leadership responsibilities are defined—as elders, pastors, senior shepherds, overseers—will be shaped by the theological convictions of the missionaries. My plea is for missionaries to go beyond titles and offices and to open up the concept of church leadership to what will be best for Muslim women. Women leading women, in cooperation and partnership with men, is what will be best for them.

When the pastor of the church we planted in Indonesia was ordained, his wife was ordained with him. It was clear from the beginning that they were a team, and that she was being commissioned into the ministry along with her husband. Several years earlier, as they were contemplating going into the ministry, they looked closely at the Priscilla and Aquila model in the New Testament. They believed this was the model they wanted to follow. When the wife gave birth to her second son during this time, she and her husband named him Aquila, signifying their teamwork in the leadership of the church.

In summary, I have discussed the problem of why Muslim women aren't becoming part of emerging churches, and have given suggestions for the attitudes and activities missionaries should take in each of the seven

phases of church planting among Muslims. These suggestions include: praying for compassion for Muslim women; building trust by acting as honorable women; bringing God into the everyday life of a Muslim woman; developing a relevant and helpful ecclesiology, practical theology of ministry and biblical models for discipleship; and developing and appointing women leaders.

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