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MERF News

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Middle East Reformed Fellowship—“Declaring the Whole Counsel of God”

“Faithful, Fruitful and Cost-Effective Indigenous Missions!”

Witness in Yemen



photo by Steve Evans

Once a major prosperous trade hub on the end of the Arabian Peninsula where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean, Yemen is now one of the poorest nations on earth. Early on, the gospel spread south via busy land and sea trade routes from the eastern Mediterranean to the Red Sea coast down to Yemen.

Good Beginning

The Christian faith advanced well in western Arabia and Yemen. From the beginning of the second century to the middle of the fourth, the gospel spread with relative ease. Modern archeological excavations have uncovered remains

of simple worship facilities used by the thriving early Yemeni Christians. Sadly, the church became theologically weak and syncretistic. It was heavily impacted by monasticism.

Persecution

From the latter part of the fourth century until the rise of Islam in the sixth century, weakened Yemeni and Arabian churches began to encounter strong persecution by the economically and militarily powerful emerging Jewish political establishment. The early followers of Islam also faced immense local opposition from these small, but prosperous Jewish commu-

nities.

Weakened Church

The prophet Mohammed and early Muslims sympathized with and defended some Christian beliefs that are vehemently denied by Talmudic Judaism. Islamic teaching always affirms Christ's virgin birth and respects his and his mother's integrity. Still, the weak, fragmented Christian community drifted away from the blessing and protection of God's Word. It lost the gospel message about the pervasiveness of sin and the riches of God's saving grace in Christ. So, at the pace that Islam advanced, the Yemeni and Arabian

churches shrank, absorbed into Islam.

Islamized

Beyond the middle of the 8th century, there is no evidence of an organized national Christian church in Yemen. Small groups of Islamized Christians continued to value some Christian concepts inherited by oral tradition, such as reciting the Lord's prayer and the beatitudes. They also had access to the Book of Psalms and fragments of the New Testament.

Small New Beginning

The Ottoman empire

revived trade routes between Yemen and the eastern Mediterranean, opening the way for Yemenis to interact with Middle Eastern Christians. The British colonial period enabled some missionaries to begin small low-key evangelistic efforts in Yemen. The full Arabic Bible became available. This was blessed with a significant number of conversions in major urban centers such as Sanaa, in the north and Aden, in the south. Nobody knows for sure the present number of Yemeni Christians.

Radio and Internet

Today, the majority of the population of 34 million belongs to Sunni Islam. A significant minority follows a form of Shiite Islam. MERF’s Arabic gospel radio broadcasts and internet ministries provide immense opportunities daily to reach the Yemeni masses. The dawn of the Internet has made it possible to establish contact with a small but growing number of Yemeni converts.

The vast majority remain quiet about their faith. In the past, there were incidents of severe persecution and even a few martyrdoms. However, in recent times, sensational claims of persecution could not be credibly documented.

Yemeni believers gather in homes for worship and Bible study. Internet contact enables us to connect faithful Yemenis to one another. In urban areas, some interact with believers in other countries by internet.

Civil War

Sadly, since 2011, Yemen has suffered immensely from a protracted proxy civil war between the two branches of Islam, the Shiite north versus the Sunni south. Each is supported by rival countries in the region, like Iran and Saudi Arabia. So, much of the population suffers economically, deprived of sufficient food and medical care. This has resulted in significant levels of disenchantment with Islam in both communities.

East and West

A few years ago, in the Lord’s providence, a faithful Canadian pastor connected us with a believing young Yemeni couple he met over the internet. Their baby daughter was born with a life-threatening condition. They were enabled to travel to Cairo, Egypt for her treatment, where we and other MERF staff met them. The Lord graciously provided the expert medical care needed to save their baby’s life. We rejoiced to learn that other members of both sides of their family have also come to faith in Christ. Thanks to the internet, we still have fellowship with them and other Yemeni believers.

T and K, of Aden, Yemen are a middle-aged couple who were not interested in religion when they married in their teens. Providentially, together they first heard the gospel over the airwaves 18 years



ago. They agreed to continue listening and decided to request a copy of the New Testament. Within three years, they confessed their faith to one another and to T’s aunt, whom they discovered belonged to a small home meeting. They joined the group, together with their daughter and her husband and a few other believers. T says: “...18 years ago we heard that Jesus gives new life. We first joked and laughed about it...We now know that it is a most precious divine gift...”



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