

# Adventist Christians, Cultural Muslims: A Pilot Program

New Adventist communities remain within the Islamic culture.

by Jerald Whitehouse

IN JANUARY 1990, THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST Church launched a three-year experiment in outreach to the Muslim community in a country that must here be called Islamex to protect those continuing to carry out the project. The objective was and is to create within the Muslim community a remnant fellowship of believers in Isa, as Jesus is referred to in the Quran (Koran). This community is not only to witness to their belief in Isa as their redeemer, but achieve a level of self-support and nurture that will keep them from being dependent on outside financial assistance.

So far, 12 "change agents" are shepherding local believer groups totaling approximately 266 male believers in Isa. Local change agents

have been trained and placed in villages with basic stipend support. After gaining acceptance and respect in the village, they have gradually formed relationships and a spiritual fellowship for the study of religious matters. These groups, while remaining in the Muslim community, are building on the existing spirituality, to meet heart needs, and developing a fellowship of faith that mutually supports and encourages one another in spiritual growth. Outward forms of Islam are maintained as far as possible. Once a basic fellowship has been established, economic development activities are also implemented, leading to economic self support.

Basic religious materials are being developed to encourage and guide spiritual formation and understanding of these groups as God's last day people within the Muslim community. This work is carried out separately from any existing Adventist structures and utilizes Muslim believers in Isa to reach fellow Muslims. This article discusses this innovative program in some detail.

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*Jerald Whitehouse having worked for 15 years in predominantly Muslim areas, has recently returned from service as country director for the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. A graduate of Walla Walla College in theology, he has studied missiology at Fuller School of World Mission, and earned a doctorate in health science from Loma Linda University.*

## Surveying the Country

Islamex is a densely populated country with 87 percent of the population Muslim, 12 percent Hindu, and 1 percent divided between tribal animists and Christians. Socio-economically it is listed as one of the world's least-developed countries. In all development indicators it ranks among the 20 lowest countries. It is primarily an agrarian society with 85 percent of the population still classed as rural. Considerable foreign relief and development aid is utilized in the country annually through government to government and many non-government organizations. Frequent local and national disasters plague the country. Despite this, the people possess a high degree of ingenuity for survival and remain resilient despite tremendous odds. There are two principal language variations, one of the Muslim vocabulary and the other of Hindu vocabulary.

Islam entered Islamex first via sufi missionaries from Persia and vicinity in the 11th and 12th century A.D. Later military conquest

in the 16th century solidified the establishment of Islam. Much of the local culture remained to integrate with the Muslim practices with the result that the religion of the people today in Islamex could be described as popular Islam or folk Islam. The worship of holy men and their shrines is prominent. Beliefs in *jinns* and other evil forces are widespread. Protection against the evil eye is sought by all. Various rituals to obtain blessing and protect from evil forces are performed at the holy places.

Adventist mission entered Islamex in 1906. Mission strategy has concentrated on establishment of institutions, primarily schools and medical work through a hospital or outpatient clinics and dental clinics. Conversions are primarily from the poorer sector of the society and are almost entirely from the Hindu or tribal/animist groups. Public evangelism is used as the primary reaping method, with most of the meetings being held by guest evangelists. During the 86 years of mission presence I have been able to identify 22 baptisms from the Muslim community into the Adventist Church.



## Implementing a Pilot Program

The original pilot program plan of action drawn up in January of 1990 envisioned five growth levels for contextualized ministry to the Muslim peoples. In 1990 the pilot program achieved the projected first level, which was to create an awareness of change agents who exhibit holistic godly living through an incarnational ministry within Islam.

1990 was a learning experience. In March, an initial two-week training session was held, involving about 12 change agents. Much time was spent in follow-up visiting of the change agents. In addition, for several months there had been an urgent request from several believers in Christ in the "M" district for this

task force to assume responsibility for shepherding their area. Finally, the task force agreed to assume stipends for around 30 change agents and local teachers. This was done in the knowledge that this was obligating the entire budget for personnel costs. It seemed an opportunity that should be grasped at the time. It was hoped that some private sources of additional funds could be obtained for training and materials development.

Subsequently, this move was shown to be unwise. It obligated all the funding, leaving none for training. Private donations were not forthcoming. Spending all our funds on personnel also moved us too quickly into thinking of a large group of change agents. We should have been focusing on gaining experience with fewer numbers. We shifted our attention away from foundational activities that should have been our primary attention.

During this time in 1990 a couple of unfortunate events occurred that also hampered the work. First was the loss by theft of about \$1,000 worth of supplies from the training center. These have still not been recovered. Second, one of the other Christian groups involved in a similar ministry, due to some rather high profile activities that aroused too much attention in one locality, was attacked by mobs. Several houses were burned, two individuals were arrested, and a case was filed against the group, with a warrant for the arrest of three other individuals. Since one of our change agents had been involved with that group in past years, his name was one of those for

whom an arrest warrant was issued. This crippled the work and subsequently led to his having to leave the country for a time. Money was spent on legal fees to try to remove his name from the case, as he has not been involved with that group in recent years. The work in "M" also fell into disarray because of suspicions of individuals in our group in that area. Therefore, we suspended our activities in "M" as of October 1990.

By the end of 1990, the project had three change agents on stipend, active in three different locations. The strongest location had

32 believers, 19 of which are heads of families and the rest are single young people. There is some opposition from the local community but this is being handled well by the local change agent, who is functioning as a local village doctor and a leader of the local cooperative. A second location has about 20 believers. The third area has about 10 to 15 believers.

In December of 1990, a seminar on contextualization by

Dr. Gottfried Oosterwal, director of the Institute of World Mission at Andrews University, was disrupted by political developments in the country. Agitation for the resignation of the former government caused curfews and strikes. Dr. Oosterwal was able to spend only one day with one change agent. He did conduct a full week of devotional and instructive presentations on contextualization during the triennial session of the union.

During 1991, project coordinators continued to seek increased awareness, the first of

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five projected levels for the pilot program. They also sought to reach the second level, fellowship—the establishment of a group of believers who, while remaining in the Muslim community, share a common allegiance to preparing for the coming messiah. To complement this goal, Dr. Robert Darnell led out in a training seminar that focused on understanding our identity as a reform movement, the *Hanif*, a remnant gathered out God's faithful from within Islam. Darnell led the change agents—now increased from three to 10—in a close study of the Quranic basis for the key Adventist beliefs. As a result of the seminar, the change agents felt themselves better able to defend themselves within the Muslim community. The change agents began to develop a sense of loyalty to Adventist beliefs, to the idea of being God's faithful remnant, the *Hanif*, in the Islamic community.

Also during 1991, the book *The Message and the Messenger* was translated on computer, and a few copies circulated in a pilot testing. The *Inductive Bible Study Leader's Guide* was completed and reproduced in the local language. By the end of the year, the change agents were shepherding a total of 236 believers in Jesus.

During 1992, the last year of the pilot project, efforts focused on leading the change agents and the groups they were forming to reach the final and fifth level: a sense that they were a body of Adventist Muslim believers, a remnant within Islam, able to relate to the larger body of Christ.

## Islamex's Pilot Program Today

The best way to sense how well this objective has been realized is to simply share reports from each of the change agents given in the first half of 1992. The change agents' identity is protected by referring to them only by number.

The first agent meets with 35 to 40 believers weekly to discuss the *Torah*, *Injil*, and the Quran. Twenty-two are baptized believers who invite others to come to the weekly discussions.

The second agent at first handed out the Mennonite book *Allabur Banda*, or People of God, with answer sheets. At first the sheets were returned, but people began accusing the him of making Christians out of them. Now he meets and talks with people in a mosque. He has two groups of inquirers of 16 and 13 members.

The third agent has been in his village for only nine months. He first went to the mosque to talk with the people. As he became identified as a religious person, one by one, they began to come to him to talk. To begin with he only discussed Islam. He also made friends with village leaders and has formed a cooperative. Now he has his own weekly meetings of 25 people. He begins by discussing Isa, or Jesus. People saw the books *Allabur Banda*, *Injil Sharif*, and *Lives of the Prophets* in his house and began to ask questions, so he has begun to give them copies of *Allabur Banda*. Four have been baptized. Other are asking, if I accept Isa will I become a Christian? But they understand that if they continue Namaz they will be accepted as Muslims. By now his reason for being in the village in the eyes of the villagers is both as a cooperative farmer and a preacher about Isa.

The fourth agent was baptized in June of 1991, and has already formed cooperatives in three sub-districts. This was natural for him, as he had earlier worked for a non-governmental organization as a chairman of a farm cooperative. He conducts weekly meetings that discuss savings programs, then Isa. All together he has 67 inquirers, seven preparing for baptism, and four already baptized. He discusses religious matters in the mosque.

The fifth agent organized local non-governmental organizations for development

purposes, and carried out spiritual instruction on the side, through personal contacts. Originally, only seven believers met together. Three more have been baptized, for a total of 10.

Agent six must work quietly and secretly because of the strict fundamental Islamic environment in the region where he lives. He has a total of 22 inquirers in six groups. Four persons are ready for baptism.

The seventh agent works in his sister's village and the village of his wife's family. They are influential people in the area. In the village of 600, his wife's uncle is union chairman, another uncle is a village chief. A cousin is headmaster of a primary school and a believer. This agent has started a cooperative. It is called the *Al Amin Society*. They do *Namaz*, study the Quran, the *Torah*, and do good for society, so people accept them. In their studies they use *Allabur Banda* and study *Injil Sharif* about Isa. The agent is known as an herbal doctor in the area so people ask him about herbal remedies. Of the 12 cooperative members, two are believers.

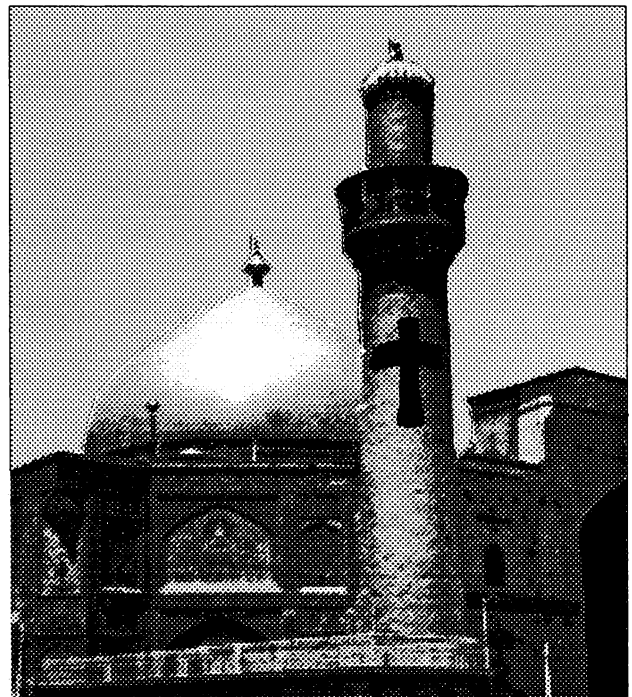
The eighth agent is a convert of one of the other agents—a local “lay leader.” He originally studied a correspondence course, and believed, but not sincerely. He then became sick, was given up as a terminal case, and transported home to die. God restored him to life and he rededicated himself to God. He has formed five groups with 22 people. He visits them regularly and tells them that before studying, they need cleansing. How? They must study the books. He feels he needs more time and some help with expenses to provide small entertainment items of food when he visits. Seventeen of the members are believers, with five more ready for baptism.

Agent nine works in his house as a village doctor. In the back of a market he talks with people and conducts meetings. He has just under 200 believers in eight villages. He anoints them with water before baptism, then sets the date for baptism. Many wives are

ready for baptism, but he has not baptized them without their husbands. He now has three volunteers who act as under-shepherds. He gives them a meal allowance to travel around and visit the eight villages.

His method is to strike up conversations in which he verifies that the person is not a spy or a thief. He then begins religious discussions with Quranic verses about Isa's greater role in salvation than Mohammed. He then gives them *Allabur Banda*. The key point in every discussion is, who can forgive your sins? He then asks, if you can be assured your sins are forgiven, will you follow a godly life? (John 5:24). He then tells them they can transfer their old sins to Isa through baptism, and a promise to live a godly life. He has lately established a cooperative called Beit er Nur. At its weekly meeting, he conducts a story telling contest. For example, who can tell the best story from Luke? He has communion monthly. Even though his family is not supportive, and doesn't invite him to special family occasions, in a crisis they will come to his defense.

Agent nine was articulate about his problems. He cannot attend the same mosque



frequently. Some believe that he is Christian, others that he has no religion. If he defends from the Quran, they say that it is only your *tafseer*. Some have rumored that when they become believers, at baptism they step on the Quran. Those who become believers are told to come to his shop because he has no community, no organization. When the supervisor visits, he should wear village dress.

The tenth agent has been in his village only six months. His wife is a Christian. In order to be reintegrated into his home as a Muslim, he said he is not a Christian. He is now accepted as a Muslim, as one of them. His mother and brother understand that he is a believer in Isa. Villagers have stopped questioning his wife, who comes from a Christian family. He attends mosque and occasionally asks questions. He has formed a cooperative of destitute ladies. On Saturdays he has a Bible study. He has good contact with about 12 inquirers whom he feels will be baptized by the end of the year.

Incidentally, I counseled him to stop saying that he is not a Christian, but rather to answer any questions or accusations about his identity by stating what he is: a true believer in the faith of Abraham, a *Hanif*. He follows the Quranic injunction to study the *Torah* and *Injil*.

Agent eleven has been in his village only nine months. During that time he has formed two cooperatives—one female, and one male. He is known as pump operator/owner, cooperative leader. The cooperatives meet weekly on Friday evenings. The male group has 10 members, studying *Allabur Banda*. Two members of the group are baptized. There is a *Tariqa* in the area which he visits regularly on Saturday also, who strongly believe in the soon coming of Isa. They have two leaders, one Iraqi and one Indian.

The twelfth agent has just moved to his village in April and is just getting established.

An assessment of the spiritual formation

among these groups indicates that we have successfully introduced the concepts of a remnant of God with Islam. We are now beginning to introduce Adventist beliefs in the context of the three-angels' messages.

## Implications for Mission

In Islamex, when a Muslim wants to join the Adventist Church, the father of that person (it has usually been a young man) is required to give written permission for a change of name and religious identity. This is taken to the local government office for the official transfer of identity. Consequently, he is totally rejected by his family, his community, and he has lost his identity. Since names are the basis of one's identity as a member of a particular family, this person then becomes dependent on the church for survival. Usually it means the person leaves the home area and possibly the country.

Even when the family accepts the new convert, the family and the economic unit of which the convert is a part of can be ostracized. Before our pilot program began, a young Muslim was converted in the traditional manner. The father of the young man was a headman. The surrounding community would not purchase produce (this being a agrarian-based village society) from the offending *para*. The religious leaders refused to visit and hold regular prayers. The *para* survived because they stuck together, assisting each other to sell produce to more distant markets. It was a year and a half before the ostracization gradually lessened.

When traditional Adventist evangelism extracts an individual from his or her Muslim communal context, we often produce a situation where the person has no identity and no reference points for a value system. Almost all exhibit a high degree of disorientation, instability, deviances in sexual conduct or other

moral behavior, or even a freer association between sexes in the Christian community.

Converts from Islam to Adventism that I have talked to feel a high degree of bitterness toward the church for various alleged mistreatments. Almost all are no longer associated with Adventism. Those that are reveal an attitude of dependence on the church.

We should not be surprised. Traditional Adventist evangelism requires a cultural transfer. Conversion requires that certain attitudes and cultural ways be transformed, but a total cultural transfer is never required in the Scriptures. Acts 15 and Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 9 makes this quite clear. To put it succinctly, we have required two conversions: one of the faith allegiance and one of the total culture. The first is biblical. The second has no scriptural support.

We need to get away from confronting Muslim communities with a "crusade." A crusade can only be responded to with a *jihad* (holy war, struggle). The term *crusade* should never be used in an Islamic setting.

Instead of a crusade, the pilot project is a community-forming endeavor. We are trying to create basic groups which will hang together, protect and defend members of the group, survive economically through difficult times, and nurture its own religious and social life. These groups are larger than a family, but smaller than a village—a minimum of about 20 families with a leader. Existing natural networks in the community are used to ensure survivability and sustainability in the commu-

nity. Utilizing people centered development concepts, we are endeavoring to raise the economic level of the groups through increasing farm production, and starting small businesses. Simultaneously, we are training *jamaat* leaders to care for the spiritual needs of these groups.

One of the questions confronting a fellowship group that is different from the surrounding culture, but aims to continue witnessing to its host community is, what identity should this group adopt? Some have suggested they be known as *Isai Muslims*—Jesus Muslims. In seeking to give an additional

"Adventist spin" to what we're about, we have developed the concept of the remnant not only from biblical sources, but Quranic as well. We are endeavoring to create a sense of identity as God's remnant—*Hanif*—within the Muslim community and within other religious communities. God is calling out within each cultural group a particular people to represent him in the community. He desires a remnant in the Hindu

community, the Buddhist community, the secular community, the Muslim community. Adventists are part of God's remnant that will be united when he reconciles all things to himself at his coming.

Since one of the basic assumptions of this ministry is that God has been at work in all cultures to preserve a measure of true spirituality, so far as biblical principles permit, we aim to reinforce traditional values in the Islamic society. We live, act, and speak in ways that allow the community to say: there is a

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godly person, a caring person, a praying person, a spiritually powerful person, a person who can help me be a better person. We must be perceived in the eyes of that community as strengthening noble and spiritually uplifting values.

Consequently, the pilot project uses the Quran as much as possible. Change agents show simple respect for Islam's holy books, thereby gaining much credibility in the Muslim community. "Quranic thought patterns" are used to explain biblical truths. A number of biblical truths are at least mentioned, if not substantiated, in the Quran. Muslims do not develop a questioning mind. *Takleed* (traditional interpretation) is more powerful. We have found it helpful to first introduce them to principles of study and interpretation with their own book. The pilot project has also encouraged the believers to continue certain practices. Believers wear the white cap during prayer. They continue to attend the mosque, fast during Ramadan, wear local village dress, including locally acceptable dress for a Muslim woman, and in the "house churches," sit informally on the floor. Observing *Eid el Adha* (the Islamic feast of sacrifice) has been a little more controversial. We have been open to either observing or not observing. The main objection has come from those of a Christian background who don't understand the original meaning of the feast.

In short, Islamic forms are encouraged as long as they are useful in communicating

Christianity. When they cease to communicate appropriately, they will be abandoned.

Obviously, the pilot project is not involved in a typical church planting. Institutionalizing the project into the traditional church structure would compromise many of the key principles and strategies of the project. It would also threaten the existing church. At present, the church structures and policies have no place for a contextual people movement along the lines we are pursuing in the project. We need to discuss the implications of the pilot project. We need to set up enough flexibility in our Global Mission and church structure to ensure the continuance of such "R&D" projects.

What structure should this contextual ministry develop? Are we willing to encourage and work with a rather unstructured underground house church situation similar to what occurred in China? What structures and support mechanisms perhaps outside the country do we need to provide to ensure the continuance of such movements?

A concluding word regarding the needs of those involved in ministry to Muslims. This is in reality a power ministry. The forces of evil arrayed against this ministry are real. Those forces take a number of negative forms, undermining the work that is being done. Much of the evil is directed at individuals involved in such a ministry. It is a lonely work. Those involved in such ministry need special prayer for their personal survival.