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Former Muslims Reach Out

A Bay Area alliance spreads the Gospel by satellite to Iran and elsewhere in the world of Islam, where a leap of faiths can put converts in danger.

By Louis Sahagun, Kelly Niknejad and David Streitfeld, Special to The Times
March 27, 2006

SUNNYVALE, Calif. — As Afghan officials considered last week whether a medical aid worker should be executed for converting from Islam to Christianity, an alliance of small Christian congregations in the San Francisco Bay Area was working to spread the Gospel to more Muslims in the Middle East.

"We are very proud of that man because he has not denied his Christianity," said Navid Moborez, 29, an Afghan Christian and former Muslim who now lives in Fremont and belongs to the Iranian Christian Church here.

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On Sunday, charges against the convert, Abdur Rahman, were dropped. Moborez said he had been praying for Rahman, but he thinks the issue is bigger than the fate of one man.

"If they kill him, they can't stop Christianity from growing, inside or outside of Afghanistan," Moborez said.

Spreading Christianity is the mission of the Iranian Christian Church, which has affiliated with three other congregations in Northern California that primarily serve former Muslims.

The churches, which have a combined membership of about 450, produce six hours of Farsi-language Christian programming Mondays through Fridays in a television studio under the same roof as the Iranian Christian Church. Those broadcasts, as well as the Sunnyvale church's Sunday service, are transmitted by satellite to Iran and other parts of the Middle East.

The weekday program, "Mohabat TV," instructs viewers in such things as how to find the Bible on the Internet and recommends studying Scripture for at least a year before starting a home church by sharing the faith with a spouse, then children, then relatives — all in secret.

Under Sharia, or Islamic law, Muslims who convert to Christianity are considered apostates and can be sentenced to death. Not all predominantly Islamic countries enforce Sharia law.

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"We tell them not to shout out, 'I am a Christian!' but to share their testimony, which is a great risk," said Pastor Kamil Navai.

Navai hopes that the new converts will influence other Muslims.

"We're not in the business of bringing people from Iran to the United States," he said. "Iran needs these new Christians. We teach them to start home churches and to be leaders."

The broadcasts are produced by International Antioch Ministries, an umbrella organization for the four churches.

Church officials said the broadcasts cost about \$700,000 a year and are funded by donations from individuals and large evangelical groups.

Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network has allowed the group to use its satellite.

"The message of the Bible used to be transmitted by books, by print," said Razmik Karabed, a member of the Iranian Christian Church and an engineer at a semiconductor firm, who has lived in the U.S. since 1974. "Now the methods are more sophisticated, but the intent is the same: to help others start a relationship with God."

Antioch Ministries, which features the slogan "leaders in bringing Muslims to Christ" on its business cards, says it can't know for certain what effect the broadcasts have had in the three years they've been transmitted to Iran. But the group estimates it has brought 50,000 Muslims to Christianity, based on letters, phone calls and e-mails.

Elham Davidian, director of what the church calls follow-up programs, says each broadcast generates responses from viewers abroad. In the church office, she pointed to a 9-inch-thick stack of papers, which she said were messages accumulated over three weeks from prospective Christians asking for prayers or advice.

About 150 people attended services Sunday at the Sunnyvale church. Those who weren't afraid of being recognized in Iran sat in front, where they might appear on camera; those for whom this could be a problem sat in back.

The high-tech evangelical Christian service is aimed at worshipers in Sunnyvale, with few reminders that it also is intended to gain converts abroad. But once during the service, two huge video screens at the front of the church displayed a map of Iran overlaid with a cross.

Much of the service was conducted by Navai's wife, Pastor Nadereh Navai. Iranian officials, she said, might take particular note of a woman in her role.

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