



News and Current Events :: Iran's Christian Revolution Gains Momentum

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TEHRAN, Iran -- Speculation is growing that the Iranian government may soon resort to violence to bring an end to pro-democracy protests. At the same time, the Islamic regime is finding it's incapable of reversing the rapid spread of Christianity there.

CBN News Chief International Correspondent Gary Lane visited the country last year to get an exclusive look at the Iranian church.

He said the idea behind the Iranian Revolution was to establish the world's first modern state governed solely by Islamic law. Ayatollah Khomeini believed a more prosperous society could be created if the Iranian people and their government adhered to tenets of the Koran.

But 30 years on, the revolution is faltering and many Iranians are disillusioned. They've taken to the streets to protest a stolen election and government corruption.

Todd Nettleton is with the Voice of The Martyrs.

"The people look around, they see the poverty, they see the discontent, they're not happy so they have questions. Why isn't it working out, we're doing it the Islamic way, why isn't our country great? So, they are ripe to hear a new way," he said.

And Nettleton said the new way that many are embracing is Christianity. But the faith is not new to Iran. The gospel actually arrived here 500 years before Islam. Persians are believed to have been among those in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

Less than one half of one percent of the Iranian population is Christian.

There were nearly four times as many Christians just before the Islamic Revolution, but many fled the country because of Islamic extremism.

Some of those who remain often share their faith with Muslims. As a result, the evangelical house church movement is now growing rapidly.

"The church is exploding in terms of numbers, but it is coming with a price," Nettleton said.

"The people are arrested, they're harassed, and they're persecuted, in some cases they are beaten severely. It is not an easy pathway."

Christian praise songs blast from the cassette player of an Iranian taxi cab. The driver is a Muslim convert to Christianity. Despite risk of arrest and possible death for apostasy, he's unafraid to share his faith. A cross hangs from his rearview mirror. He keeps his bible on the front passenger seat beside a can of STP gas treatment. He shares the gospel with his passengers and gives them a bible if they want one.

That alone could lead to his arrest.

Their suffering and sacrifice is not just a modern-day experience here. Many have come before them, like the missionary Catherine Mary Ironside. Her grave is in the city of Isfahan. She was here until she died in 1921. She was not martyred, but she was one of many Anglicans from the Church Missionary Society sent to share the gospel throughout the Middle East. An inscription on her tombstone reads, "Will you not follow if you hear the call?"

Her grave is given a place of honor at the Armenian cathedral in the city of Isfahan. It is one of 73 churches registered in Iran.

But it's not established churches that the Iranian government fears most, but the rapid growth of unregistered churches.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is so concerned that he has made it his aim to stop the house church movement, declaring: "I will stop Christianity in this country."

Starting in 2005, he launched an unmerciful crackdown against Iranian house churches. At least 50 house church leaders were believed arrested last year.

And last summer a war veteran and his wife died from beatings they received during a raid on their house church meeting in the city of Isfahan.

Also a little over a year ago, Christian Tina Rad and her husband were arrested and severely beaten. Held for four days, they were accused of committing activities against Islam and Iranian national security. Both are former Muslims.

We promised to protect the identity of a house church leader who told us the crackdown has caused Christians to grow stronger and more serious.

"God is testing our faith because he wants us to become more like Jesus," she said.

The house churches are now meeting in smaller groups and Nettleton said while Ahmadinejad is trying desperately to halt church growth, his crackdown is actually having an opposite effect because Christians are moving around more.

"We see outreach of people traveling to other cities, they're traveling to other parts of the country and they are in turn planting these little house churches in those cities and in those parts of the country as well."

What should Christians around the world know about their brothers and sisters in the faith in Iran? The house church leader tells us they should know that Jesus Christ is with Iranian Christians and will "never leave them nor forsake them."

And what can believers around the world do for the persecuted Christians in Iran?

"We have to pray for them. That is their first request. Pray for us, pray for us, pray for us," Nettleton said. "I challenge people to really pray for the Iranian government. Pray for Ahmadinejad to have a personal meeting with Jesus Christ. Imagine how that would change that country; imagine how that would change the world."