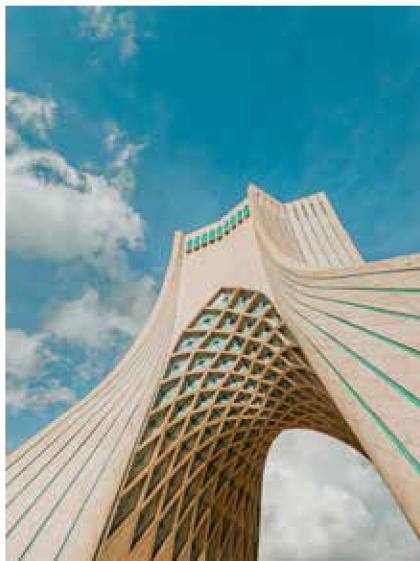


ANNE SHEARER

IRAN'S GROWING CHRISTIAN CHURCH

"We are ready for anything"



Despite much of the world viewing Iran as a geopolitical aggressor, the Iranian people themselves are converting to Christianity in large numbers even in the face of dire persecution. More than a decade ago, the Operation World Manual (2010) reported Iranian evangelicals were growing annually by 19.6 percent. More recent calculations by Open Doors and others estimate that over 1 million Iranians consider themselves Christian.

"In Iran, when you decide to change your religion [from Islam], you basically accept death for yourself, because at any moment you may be hanged," said Ali, a Christian convert who fled Iran last year. (*Ex Fonte* interviewed Ali via text so that translation software could support his intermediate English.)

Ali and his wife became Christians after God sent his wife a dream and healed their baby daughter's blood condition. They fled Iran when the government discovered their house church of seven members and arrested their pastor. They still don't

know what became of their pastor, but, Ali says "God has been so good to us. Every morning we ask God, 'Why are you so good to us? Why do you show us so many miracles? What do you want from us? We are ready for anything.'"

Open Doors reported that Christians are regularly monitored, arrested, and sentenced without fair trials in Iran. For those born Muslim, like Ali, converting to other religions is illegal. Regardless, senior Iranian cleric Mohammad Abolghassem Doulabi stated last year that 50,000 of Iran's 75,000 mosques have closed because no one attends them. Iran International reported that active mosques have decreased by a third.* Iranian people are leaving Islam, says Ali, "because they are sure now that the government has tricked and deceived them through Islam." The theocratic regime promised prosperity, but living conditions have worsened and people have no freedom or privacy, he said.

Dr. Hormoz Shariat, founder of Iran Alive Ministries, points to the government's weakening as the fulfillment of a prophecy from Jeremiah: "I will set my throne in Elam [modern-day Iran] and destroy their king and officials, declares the LORD" (49:38, ESV). Iran "will be a Christian nation that will be impacting the world," he says. "Iran will be saved, and we're moving in that direction, really fast."

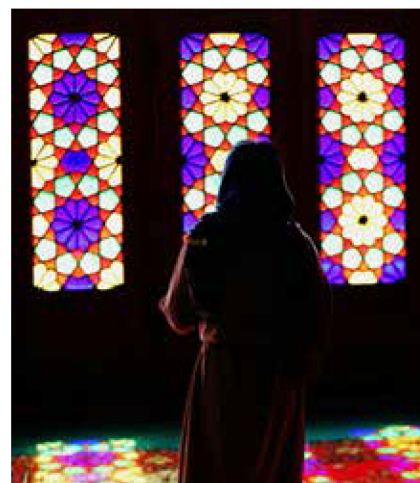
Iranian people first received the gospel at Pentecost, as noted in Acts 2 when "Parthians and Medes and Elamites" heard testimony in their own language. Today, Iran allows historical Armenian and Assyrian Christians to meet. However, the law discriminates against non-Muslims and it is illegal for these churches to aid Christian converts. Ali reported that even priests of the historical legal churches have been suspiciously killed in recent years.

Shariat's ministry focuses on ed-

ucating Iranian Christians for church leadership. He says Iranian Christians are evangelizing the country faster than leaders and elders can be trained. "They're hungry; we don't have enough mature teachers and pastors to take care of them right now."

Ali said it is good that people are rejecting Islam, but added, "the bad thing is that when you talk to anyone and want to tell them about Christ and Christianity, they say, 'We were deceived once, and all religions are the same.'" He added, "But I am sure that because of the religious background of the Iranian people, if the government changes, people will open their arms to Christ and Christianity."

In the years since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the government began



monitoring churches to prevent Muslim-born individuals from attending. This scrutiny led to people meeting at home, fueling the house church movement. "They are bold," said Dr. Shariat, "especially the younger generation. They are ready to live and die for Jesus, many of them, and they are serious." 

*To learn more about the Iranian church's needs, visit Iranalive.org. For more information on mosque closings visit <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202306027255> and <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312124517>



NO THANK YOU, IRS

Charities look to protect donor confidentiality in a polarized political climate

This July, donor-advocacy organization MinistryWatch reported increasing numbers of Christian organizations have sought exemption from filing an IRS form which discloses revenue and spending in tax-exempt organizations. Some ministries cite donor confidentiality as a reason to stop filing. For others, the lack of transparency is concerning.

IRS Form 990 discloses the sources and spending of revenue for nonprofits. Under IRS regulations some charities, including “a convention or association of churches,” may request exemption from filing Form 990, a classification some Christian ministries now claim. These include Focus on the Family, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA).

Focus on the Family spokesperson Paul Betura cited donor confidentiality in Focus’s decision to stop filing Form 990. He told MinistryWatch, “In recent years there have been several occasions on which non-profit organizations—on both the right and the left—were targeted for information, including the names and personal details of their donors.”

Issues of transparency versus the free speech rights of donors reached

courts in 2021, when the U.S. Supreme Court determined that organizations don’t have to file donor information with individual states. The court couldn’t justify collecting so much personally identifying information (PII), especially when state databases proved susceptible to simple hacking. Even so, 501(c)(3) nonprofits still have to file a federal Schedule B with the IRS.

Focus on the Family and the ECFA post a Pro Forma 990 online, which cover selected parts of the

“In recent years there have been several occasions on which non-profit organizations—on both the right and the left—were targeted for information, including the names and personal details of their donors.”

990 but exclude sections with donor information. The BGEA shares audited financial documents. Other ministries have not been so transparent: Ministry Watch raised alarm in August about Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), which sought the 990 exemption years earlier and now continues to operate with no transparency in its finances and little clarity about what its operations are. 🇺🇸

PAKISTAN CHANGES MARRIAGE (AND SO KIDNAPPING) LAW

This July, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari signed the Christian Marriage Amendment Act, raising the minimum marriage age for Christians to 18. Christians hope this will help prevent the abduction, forced conversions, and marriages of young girls. Some remain skeptical, however, because abductors often forge age certificates for their victims and seldom face justice.

The Associated Press reports that about 1,000 Pakistani girls a year are abducted and forcibly converted to Islam. Older Muslim men abduct girls

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(sometimes young as 10) from religious minorities and refuse to return the girls to their parents, claiming the girls have converted to Islam and cannot return to non-Muslim homes. In one of many cases highlighted by International Christian Concern, marriage documents falsely stated that a 14-year-old girl was 19. The girl’s family sued to contest the documents, but a court eventually ordered her to return to her abductor. She escaped and now lives in hiding with her family.





Pakistan reserves its lowest-paying jobs for non-Muslims, so poverty compounds the vulnerability of girls in religious minorities. Activist Jibran Nasir told Voice of America (VOA) that poor, marginalized non-Muslim girls are easy targets “for older men with pedophilia urges,” suggesting that kidnapping motives are less about religious conversion and more about sex trafficking.

Under the previous Christian marriage act of 1872, the minimum marriageable age for Christian men and women was 16 and 13, respectively. Christian leaders and activists who attended the law-signing ceremony celebrated the long-demanded amendment.



A press release from the President’s office stated, “[Pakistan’s president] highlighted that minorities should not be disheartened by some isolated incidents, saying that they had equal ownership over the homeland as much as anybody else.”

The AP reported that in 2021 Pakistan’s parliament rejected a bill that would have criminalized forced conversions. Parents who report kidnappings often suffer harassment and apathy from police and justice officials. No one accused of forced conversion in Pakistan has been found guilty so far. 🇵🇰

Anne Shearer is a news writer for Ex Fonte.

PARIS OLYMPIANS GIVE GLORY TO GOD, DESPITE SECULAR LAW FORBIDDING IT

France’s law, *laïcité*, or secularism, outlining the separation of church and state meant Olympic athletes this past summer in Paris were forbidden from displaying symbols or showing expressions of faith in the arena. Even so, Christian athletes found creative ways to give glory to God:

- U.S. sprinter Freddie Crittenden sported “the four” bracelet, showing four symbols of the 4-point gospel message of God’s love, sin’s division, Jesus’s sacrifice, and an individual’s response.
- Brazilian skateboarder Rayssa Leal and racewalker Caio Bonfim used sign language to share Christian messages after their wins.
- In the Olympic Village, Team Fiji began every morning with worship and hymn-singing.
- In an iconic photo, Brazilian surfer Gabriel Medina leapt off his surfboard and pointed to God after receiving a nearly perfect score.

