



Open Doors in Arabia

By John Folmar

“They were telling us Bible stories.” Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, the Foreign Trade Minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), recently reminisced about her upbringing fifty years ago. Christians, she recalled, had arrived in the 1950s and established mission hospitals to care for the locals and reduce the intolerable infant mortality rates. These missionary doctors were beloved by the local people. (They arrived before oil wealth was discovered, and so their motives were unquestioned by the locals.) The Sheikha remembered these missionary doctors living openly as Christians among the nationals, serving the local population, and even sharing Bible stories with the people who visited the clinics. “But,” she insisted, “nobody ever converted.”

Why is evangelism so difficult in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and the surrounding



region? Even when seeds are scattered (as with the Sheikha 50 years ago), why is this ground so hard?

The Problem: *Islam + Materialism*

Ever since Samuel Zwemer arrived in Arabia in 1890, evangelism here has proven to be slow-going, resisted by the culture, and often without any visible fruit. More recently, persecution and religious violence are increasingly expected. Enormous social pressure intimidates many locals who might otherwise consider Christianity. *Operation World* observes,

“In a handful of coun-

tries, the courts may sentence a national to death for becoming a Christian; imprisonment awaits in several other countries. Beyond the government stance on such apostasy from Islam, community leaders and family members pressure new believers to revert to Islam and, occasionally, will murder those who do not.”

Add to this the spiritually deadening influence of materialism. Most Muslims believe that Allah gave them the oil and gas reserves that they currently enjoy. Massive wealth has fueled extravagant shopping malls, entertainment

Top to bottom: Silhouette of Dubai skyline; the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world; Most of Arabia is desert.

centres, and creature comforts. According to worldly standards, life is good for most Gulf Arabs. So why would they want to change their religion? The anesthetizing effects of wealth plus the blinding influence of Islam make for an irresistible internal block to change.

The Only Solution: *Proclamation of the Gospel*

God told Ezekiel to speak to dry bones, and they lived (Ch. 37). Paul said, “faith comes from hearing the message” (Rom. 10:17). We believe the Word of God is the most powerful force in the universe, and so our job is to herald the message of the gospel here in Arabia.

Local Churches —in Arabia!

Verbal proclamation takes place most naturally in healthy local churches, then cascades outward into communities, workplaces, and schools. Surprisingly, there are a growing number of evangelical and Reformed churches (consisting mainly of expatriates), even here on the Arabian Peninsula.



The church I pastor has become increasingly centred on the gospel during the last several years. We have witnessed the conversions of people from all over the world, in addition to steady spiritual growth among the believers. More and more, our church desires to be a “gospel platform” for outreach throughout the United Arab Emirates and the region. And we’re not alone. We planted another evangelical church on the other side of the city, and now multiple neighborhoods in Dubai are being penetrated with the good news of Jesus Christ.

With the help of MERF, there is a growing network of like-minded churches throughout the region (e.g., Bahrain, Beirut, Qatar) sharing limited resources, exchanging ideas, and encouraging health and faithfulness.

Top to bottom: Before oil, Gulf States were built on sea trade; The Folmars—John is senior pastor of United Christian Church of Dubai, UAE; Luxurious shopping abounds in Dubai.



Pastoral Training

Pastors and missionaries are best developed not in seminaries, but in healthy local churches, and so we have established a pastoral internship programme in Dubai for young pastoral candidates, to expose them to good models for church planting, and then send them out to continue the work of evangelism, shepherding, and planting. It’s already bearing fruit.

Student Work

The brightest area of evangelism in Arabia is on university campuses. In Qatar, the UAE, and even Saudi Arabia, these multi-cultural centres are oases of free enquiry in an otherwise repressive Muslim society. For example, a Muslim-Christian Dialogue was recently held at Knowledge Village and was well-received among the local people.



Strategic Evangelism— Internet and Radio

The Arab Spring has proven that “closed” countries are actually open to the media. Millions of young people on both sides of the Arabian Gulf are online and inquisitive. We have not yet fully exploited the evangelistic and discipling opportunities that are available online and on the airwaves, especially in Iran, where there appears to be unusually high levels of interest.

Obviously, we have many miles to go. Believers in Arabia are in need of endurance, partnership, and prayer. Churches here need courage and faithfulness to the gospel. But we trust that a sovereign God is at work behind the scenes, and we desire to continue sowing the seed until He comes.

✠ Praise God for Gospel opportunities in Arabia.

✠ Pray for Christians endangered by upheaval and unrest in other Arab countries.

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International Evangelical Church

Meets Sundays 10:30 am and 7:00 pm at
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