

Diaspora Ministry to Muslims in Japan, New Zealand and Sweden

Dave Cashin

Published in www.GlobalMissiology.org July 2014

During a six-month sabbatical from my university I have had the opportunity to drop in on a number of ministries to Muslims in Japan, New Zealand and Sweden. Some of these ministries I initiated. Others are on-going and have reached a level of maturity in terms of their vision, methods and fruit. This paper will look at a range of diaspora ministry as it relates to the structure and vision of the local Church. I do not claim to be comprehensive in any way but provide in this article vignettes for the ministries I have visited. These three countries show different levels of islamization and this has an effect on the kinds of issues that diaspora ministry faces. This paper will analyze some of these issues and provide outlines for effective strategic approaches to diaspora Muslims.

1. Introduction: Types of Ministries Examined

In general there are four types of approaches and some works that combine types. I define these broadly as large church versus house church and multicultural versus culture specific. I am not arguing for any one model but rather different models seem to work better with certain people groups for reasons that I shall explain. Flexibility in method is essential.

Larger Churches sometimes develop an interest in Muslims but I have noticed that some have picked up a significant number of Muslim seekers without specifically aiming for it. These would be churches that have a vision for reaching out to the immigrants in their area and offer activities such as English classes, childcare, youth activities. I have visited several churches that had significant numbers of Muslim background believers and enquirers without singling out that demographic as a focus. In one church, on a single evening, we ran into 5 separate Iranians who either came to faith earlier or met Christ in the Church. They were not interested in having a separate Iranian language Church and seemed very interested into assimilating into the local language and culture. Muslims who have rejected Islam or who are refugees with baggage (such as Afghans) may feel more comfortable in a large Church setting where they can associate with the local western culture and help their children to assimilate to it.

Many Muslim cultures are characterized by a high level of distrust, political and ethnic divisions. Highly educated groups, such as Iranians, see their future in the West and want their children to be successful. Their concern is for integration and they may be more open to Bible studies of mixed ethnicity because of the more relaxed atmosphere. I have also been surprised to find Iranian and Turkish believers in what one might call the “rock and roll” Churches with high volume music and emotional energy. There was little immigrant specific emphasis in the outreach efforts, yet they were seeing fruit. There are also believers found in more liturgical circumstances. This is certainly true in the orthodox Churches in the

Middle East. Even the seemingly dead state churches in the West, if there is still a believing priest around with an eye to immigrants, can see numbers of Muslims coming to faith. I spent an afternoon with one ethnic background priest who has seen Muslims from various backgrounds come to faith in his youth work. His biggest problem is his church hierarchy which directly discourages conversion and believes that Muslims are already true believers in God.

On the other hand there are also examples of actual churches emerging with a specific ethnic background. Here again Iranians figure importantly as do some Afghans. I have come across two Iranian Church each with about 200 members led by an Iranian female clergy from a State Church! Apparently that constellation allows them to avoid the ire of the hostile non-evangelical Church hierarchy while maintaining a more liturgical approach that some Muslims find attractive. The ethnic approach is also typical of many smaller groups that meet in a larger church but maintain a separate meeting for their group. This is probably the most common ministry constellation.

House Churches have become an important factor in outreach to Muslims. In a sense all the movements described above started out in a house level format. The difference lay in the goal. For the movements described above, once the group outgrew a small house the congregation moved into a larger building, usually a Church. Sometimes the group remained ethnically focused, sometimes a multicultural identity was maintained. House Churches, however, seek to “split and grow”, maintaining a more intimate home group emphasis. Here again the focus may be either multicultural or ethnically based. Needs most often dictate approach. Somalis tend to be very ethnocentric and quickly form communities wherever they go. One house church movement I encountered tries to specifically reach Somalis. They have a believing leader and see a mono-ethnic approach as essential at the start. Language issues are critical here. They are aware of emerging communities of Somali believers in Holland and South Africa where larger group meetings are possible. In other ways they seem to mirror the approach of larger churches. The Somali group is sponsored by a multi-ethnic house church effort. Flexibility in approach seems to be the major lesson here.

There are also multi-cultural house church movements. I encountered two in Athens (although we met in New Zealand and Sweden) that focus on Muslims of various backgrounds. They have seen fruit amongst Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians and Afghans and are mixing the various groups. These are new movements and their constellations may change as leadership emerges from the various groups. The following example, called “grid 1” represents these approaches and uses some of the works we encountered as examples.

Grid 1: Types of Ministries

	Traditional Church	House Church
Multicultural	Churches that switch to this: Husby in Sweden Churches planted this way: Västerås Sweden	Hamilton house church NZ Uppsala house church movement., Sweden
Monocultural	majority of Churches in the world: Cambodian/ Thai in NZ Iranians in Stockholm.	A common pattern for emerging groups: Somalis in Sweden, Iranians in Borås, Kazue Japanese house church in Nagoya

With these approaches in mind let's turn our attention to the specific situations in Japan, New Zealand and Sweden.

2. Islam in Japan: The "Trader" stage.

Islam's presence in Japan is small. According to Muslim writers there are about 100,000 Muslims in Japan of whom around 10,000 are Japanese converts¹. According to these writers there are 50 mosques in the country but 35 of these are "house" mosques². I have visited the mosque in Nagoya several times and seen brochures of the other mosques in Japan. Given the relatively small size of the mosques I'm inclined to believe that the 100,000 figure is either inflated or includes population largely uninvolved in the mosques³. The Japanese government does not keep figures of religious affiliations so the number and size of mosques is probably the best estimate of the community's relative size. The Japanese total is also probably high since the Muslim writer Mozammel Haque mentions large numbers of Japanese converts falling away from the faith. His own term for Islam in Japan is "marginal"⁴.

¹ Seems to be based on a similar statement by Michael Penn, in "Islam in Japan: Adversity and Diversity," (*Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 2006) who estimated that 90% of Muslims in Japan were foreigners and 10% were native converts. But there are no accurate figures.

² Dr. Mozammel Haque, Islamicmonitor.blogspot.se/2011/05/islam-and-muslims-in-japan.html, published 2011.

³ Keiku Sakurai, professor of Islamic regional studies at Waseda University estimated the legal resident Muslim population at 56,000 in 2008, up from 13,000 in 1990. The total number of illegal immigrants is estimated at 67,000 in 2013 but most of these are non-Muslim. (Shoki Fujimoto, "Illegal Immigrants in Japan" in *JAPANSociology*, 2013, <http://japansociology.com/2013/06/29/illegal-immigrants-in-japan-2/>).

⁴ Dr. Mozammel Haque, Islamicmonitor.blogspot.se/2011/05/islam-and-muslims-in-japan.html, published 2011.

I call this stage the “trader” stage since most of the Muslim community is foreign and have come to Japan for trading and other business purposes. There is a significant sub-continent Muslim community as well as groups from Central Asia. Some have inter-married with locals and this is often the strategic approach in establishing a native Japanese Muslim community. One wife of a Pakistani Muslim leader I have met is a Japanese convert from Christianity.

Because of the relatively small size and distribution of the Muslim community in Japan I have not been able to identify any outreach efforts that specifically focus on Muslims. My own efforts at initiating outreach to this community have involved teaching on Islam at a Christian seminary in Nagoya and taking 30 students on two separate occasions to a local mosque. The mosque in Nagoya is a beautiful 4 story building built with the help of Saudi Arabia. According to the mosque community’s own count, there are about 300 Muslims in their community in Nagoya. The mosque includes an Arabic language school and a women’s prayer area. It is small and probably not more than 100 could be accommodated in the prayer hall at one time. The purpose of the mosque visit was to expose the students to Islam as it is being practiced in Japan and to start a Bible study that the students would then follow up on. My results have been mixed. Despite extensive training in the classroom and two discussions that actually led to Muslims agreeing to study the Bible, the students struggled to develop a personal contact ministry. The second time I led an initial Bible study with our Muslim friend and thought I had found a champion in whose home we had our initial study. She has continued the contact but it seems a bit weak.

This is a problem that I have found over and over in other contexts so it is not just typically Japanese. Some of the problem may simply be that there is so much other work to be done amongst people who may seem easier to reach. The Japanese Church is overwhelmed with just trying to reach Japan. There may also be something I like to call the “fear factor”. Terrorism has done an effective job of turning the hearts of Christians away from Muslims. This is ironic since Muslims are turning to Christ in an unprecedented way. Satan’s primary goal seems to be turning Christians against Muslims to ensure there is no hemorrhage out of Islam. His strategy is failing in many areas but in “trader stage” Islam it seems to work.

For now, there is very little work amongst Muslims in Japan. A community which is less than 1/10 of a percent of Japan’s population is probably not the first priority to reach. The community is growing fast, however, and some strategic thinking needs to be done. Perhaps we are awaiting the return of some Japanese missionaries from the Muslim world who can champion effective outreach at home. I have met one Japanese missionary who worked with central Asian Muslims. I would make the sending of Japanese missionaries to the Muslim world my top priority to prepare for that future cadre of workers. The key skill to learn is how to follow up on a personal contact and develop a study in the Word.

3. New Zealand: Emerging Islamic Communities

Between 1991 and 2001 the number of Muslims in New Zealand rose from 6000 to over 23,000⁵. This has risen to around 46,000 in the 2013 census⁶. The Muslim population has tended to concentrate in the larger cities and certain ethnic groups have established their own communities, such as the Somalis who have a large community in Hamilton. Many have come as political refugees. The most recent arrivals have been Afghan's, generally those who worked with New Zealand armed forces in Afghanistan. This is a fairly large group in New Zealand terms and likely to be rejected by the larger Muslim community due to their status as "traitors" who have worked for the Western led forces in that country. Part of my discussion here will concern strategy in working with this group as there are a number of Christians who have expressed a vision for starting such a work.

New Zealand has a long tradition of missionary service and many missionaries that have worked in Muslim countries have settled back in New Zealand. Some are engaged in reaching Muslims and I have met a number of them. I have not been able to locate any ministries at present that are exclusively focused on Muslims or Muslim ethnic groups. Most of the ministries encountered are multicultural at either a larger church or house church level. Several church ministries that I have attended engaged in youth work, English teaching and other services to immigrants. There were many Muslims attending these activities but it was not clear whether they were moving closer to faith in the process. Several workers contacted me wanting to find out how to focus on Muslims or to incorporate more effective strategies in working with the Muslims already in their group. There is a group interested in developing a specific focus on Afghans but it has not fully formed yet. I also encountered a house church group that has two Muslim couples attending who are moving towards faith in Christ. The leader of this work is an experienced missionary who served in the Middle East.

New Zealand has a lot of experience in dealing with non-Christian ethnic groups and spreading the Gospel either through smaller groups in the Church or through establishing ethnic congregations. I have attended several such outreaches such as the recently planted Thai Christian Church in Auckland. There are two such congregations and they have an effective outreach to the Thai. Most of the principles that are used in these contexts would also work if applied in the Muslim context.

What seems to be lacking is a more extensive effort in that direction. The situation of islamization is more evident in New Zealand than in Japan. There are many Islamic shops and the large meat and food product industries are deeply influenced by Islam for trade reasons. I did not find an Iranian Christian community in New Zealand and this may explain the relative lack of a catalyst. In Europe, Iranians take a leading role not only in reaching their own people, but in showing the general Christian population that it is possible for Muslims to turn to Christ in relatively large numbers. Perhaps we need an Iranian missionary or two in New Zealand! I would also encourage those who want to work with Afghans to pay close attention to Hazaras. They are likely to be predominant amongst those coming as refugees and immigrants to New Zealand. They are also proving to be the most open group to the Gospel as we shall see in the next section.

⁵ New Zealand census figures for 1991 and 2001. <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2001-census/data-tables/total-by-topic.aspx>.

⁶ This is about 1% of New Zealand's population. New Zealand census figures for 2013. <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/data-tables/total-by-topic.aspx>.

4. Sweden: Established Islam

Muslim immigration to Sweden has been a strong movement since the 1970's. This is clearly reflected in the Muslim demographics of the country. In the early 80's the Muslim population of Sweden was estimated at about 50,000⁷. Today the estimate is between 650-700,000⁸. However, the statistics on which these are based have some major faults. They assume that everyone who has immigrated to Sweden from Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Eritrea and Pakistan is Muslim in Background. This is patently false as there has been a much higher rate of Christian migration from these countries due to endemic persecution. In some cases well more than half are orthodox Christians or members of other groups such as Bahai and Yezidi, and this has been highlighted on Swedish television⁹. If we take the community population estimates from these countries and divide by half and then add to the other statistics which are accurate¹⁰, we arrive at a figure of 412,000 Muslim background people living in Sweden. Various estimates claim 3000 Swedish converts to Islam providing a final figure of 415,000 or about 4.3 % of the total Swedish population of 9.555 million.

The largest Muslim populations in relative order of size are: Iraq, Iran, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Bosnia, Somalia, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Pakistan, all with over 10,000 in their greater community. From a Christian perspective the most interesting of these groups are the Iranians. My wife and I worked with Iranians in Gothenburg during the early 1980's. Even then there was significant openness and we saw a number come to Christ. Today the Iranian Church has blossomed into a very important factor in the Swedish Church, both former state Church and in the free churches. On both a small group and larger church level there has been a major people movement. I am aware of two ethnic Iranian Churches that have emerged in the former state Lutheran Church led by female Iranian Muslim background clergy. Many other churches foster smaller group Persian language fellowships. In still more churches one can find numerous Iranians who have become part of local Churches without those Churches even making a specific effort in that direction. It is in Sweden that I have seen former state church Lutheran pastors finding significant numbers of Muslim enquirers and baptizing significant numbers. This is in spite of the official Church frowning on such activity.

All of this movement is not just restricted to Iranians. One house Church movements is working specifically with Somalis and has seen some fruit. But it is clear that the Iranians have become a

⁷ This estimate was provided by Swedish newspapers at that time.

⁸ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SwedesWithMuslimBackground.pdf> derived from the Swedish Statistiska Central Byrå, 2013.

⁹ I have watched Swedish television programs, both news and cultural, concerning persecution of Christians and their large-scale migration to Sweden from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Eritrea. One program series entitled "Religioner I Sverige" (Religions in Sweden) on television 1 detailed the emergence of various communities particularly of orthodox Christians. There have also been programs on religions such as the Bahai and Yezidi which detail their newly established communities in Sweden.

¹⁰ Figures on Somalis, Turks or Afghanis would certainly all be Muslim backgrounds, and the statistical bureau does provide breakdowns of Muslim population from mixed countries such as Bosnia and Ethiopia. They do, however, make a statistical error on the conservative side by not including Muslims amongst the immigrant population from India.

catalyst. First, their significant numbers spread broadly throughout the Churches have introduced westerners to the fact that Muslims can become Christians. Iranians have sought to assimilate in Sweden and have established no mosques and no separate Iranian community. There is nothing that encourages the average person to witness more than meeting someone from the Muslim community who has come to faith in Christ. Several churches mentioned how their Swedish members are getting engaged through this¹¹.

Secondly, Iranians have taken the lead in reaching out to the Afghan community in Sweden. This was not initially an obvious development. Though they speak the same language Iranians have tended to look down on Afghans as country bumpkins. Afghan refugees to Iran have also been poorly treated. But several workers have mentioned their astonishment that the Iranian Christians have not been showing the superiority attitude to their Afghan brethren. I saw the demonstrated in a Persian language fellowship in Borås where numerous Afghans had either come to faith or were serious enquirers, and were well accepted in the fellowship. The group responding were all Hazara in background and a similar movement is taking place outside of Stockholm where a much larger group of Afghans has met the Lord.

I would guesstimate that 10% of the Iranian population in Sweden has become Christian based on the numerous churches, small group fellowships and individuals that I met, often without prior arrangement, across Sweden. That is about 8,000 out of a community of 81,000. There is much to glorify God about in these movements. But there is still much to be done. The Somali community is still largely unevangelized. Iraqi and other Middle Eastern Muslim refugees are still largely unreached.

It seems also clear that different strategies will be needed for different groups. Somalis tend to congregate in tight knit communities. They will need a more people group specific approach with incorporation beginning at the small group level. In areas where the Muslim population has established a ghetto, such as Rinkeby, a different kind of cautious approach will be needed. Several excellent paradigms, from Rinkeby itself, already exist. Churches that are picking up stray Muslims without trying need to learn how to encourage those Muslims to share their faith with their countrymen, and to awaken their Swedish members to get involved in the movement. In each of these works God is using house churches, large and small Churches, multicultural and monocultural efforts to reach the Muslim community. Method, per se, is becoming less important.

What is important are the following factors in relative order of importance:

- A. Learning how to develop a personal contact evangelistic ministry. Conversions and new disciples are happening where believers understand the priority and make the effort to meet and share with the individuals that they meet. Muslim background believers are

¹¹ It should also be mentioned that some traditional former state churches have shown a stand-off attitude to these new movements, partly because they are a threat to the comfortable old ways and also due to the fact that the Church hierarchy is opposed to the conversion of Muslims (and anyone else for that matter). I sometimes look upon the former Swedish State Lutheran Church as a suicidal organization that may be saved in spite of itself by the immigrants. The immigrants have a subversive advantage. Condemning their enthusiastic activities seems downright racist.

- taking the lead in this regard but we need to see local Christians activated. There is a harvest going on and this is the time for evangelism. The particular method in evangelism does not seem to matter.
- B. Sensitivity to the varying needs of the groups we serve. There is no one-size fits all approach. As we develop our personal contact ministries there will be many different kinds of approaches as outlined above that will be our goal. And, that goal may change over time. House churches may morph into a larger church movement. Mono-ethnic congregations may discover their need to diversify, particularly as their children grow up. Multi-cultural congregations may discover they are neglecting a group that needs a more mono-ethnic focus. Flexibility is key.
 - C. Perseverance. Many testified to an initial very prickly response to the Gospel and to the efforts of believers. But working with a person over time is bearing fruit in increasing numbers.
 - D. Networking: Groups that have a specific focus need to learn how to network with each other. Who is doing what and where? What are the prayer needs? What materials are available in the language of the heart? Communication and shared learning is key. I find that it is difficult to set up and sustain these kinds of email networks. They get started and then they get dropped. This priority needs to be learned.

Bibliography

Fujimoto, Shoki, "Illegal Immigrants in Japan" in JAPANsociology, 2013, <http://japansociology.com/2013/06/29/illegal-immigrants-in-japan-2/>.

Haque, Dr., Mozammel, Islamicmonitor.blogspot.se/2011/05/islam-and-muslims-in-japan.html, published 2011.

New Zealand census, stats.govt.nz/Census/2001-census/data-tables/total-by-topic.aspx.

Penn, Michael, in "Islam in Japan: Adversity and Diversity, *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 2006.

"Swedes With Muslim Background", Swedish Statistiska Central Byrå, 2013.