

Family Matters: Christians Standing Alongside

- *Family matters*: the importance of maintaining blood family relations, if possible, between new Christians like Amjad & their blood family can not be understated.
- *Waiting to say*: research indicates that if a new Christian waits to tell their blood family after a period of time of their new faith, rather than straight away, the better the long term outcome for family relationships. A new Christian needs support in living out their new faith in their relations with their family; but families should be told only when he/she is ready and after much prayerful consideration.
- *Building friendships with the family*: if Church members can get to know the natural family before the news is broken this can help ease any later issues
- *A bad reaction*: if a new Christian's blood family reacts badly to the news key areas of the new Christian's life may, because of high family input, be affected:
 - Job*: natural families may be able to influence the employability of the new Christian, leading to their dismissal, so help can be needed with jobs
 - Accommodation*: the new Christian may still be living in the family home, as is common in Eastern cultures, and could be evicted as a result, so help finding a new home may be needed.
 - Marriage partners*: Muslim families often expect to have a role in finding marriage partners for their children, if they are absent Churches may need to help find a marriage partner for the new Christian.
 - Asylum*-some new Christians like Amjad may come from abroad and face persecution for their new faith and can need assistance to apply for asylum.
- *Reacting to loss*: new Christians like Amjad can go through the five stages of grief if they are rejected by their blood family, so providing good emotional support through Church groups and a "close" Christian family is key.
- *Things can get better*: whilst initially familial relationships can be strained, with the passage of years many relationships generally improve⁴.

Support for Christians...

- *Equipping Christians*: a basic knowledge of Islam can help all Church members, particularly 'discrete family' members, through courses such as Friendship First, Encountering World of Islam and Through Their Eyes
- *Discipleship Courses*: Come Follow Me (Green, T., 2013, Lulu), Alif Course
- *Supporting networks*: Christians sharing knowledge and experiences can be one of the best forms of support, such as the Mahabba Network & the South Asian Forum (Evangelical Alliance)
- *Recommended books*: *Welcome Home: Caring for converts from a Muslim background* (Pietzch, H. B., 2010, Nairobi:SIM)

Sources:

1. Discipling BMBs: An Attempt at Good Practice (2011:CRIB)
2. Joining the Family (2013:Mahabba)
3. From Conversion to Maturity (Working document 2013:CofE)
4. Voices from Christians in Britain with a Muslim background (2005: Birmingham, Walsh T. J.)
5. Losing religion: Three stories of losing faith in Islam (BBC 28/11/13 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25148281>)

Joining the Family



A Story...

After leading his normal Sunday service Nigel was introduced to Amjad, an Iranian Muslim, by one of the church members Elizabeth. To their surprise Amjad announced his wish to become a Christian then and there. Somewhat taken aback, Nigel and Elizabeth agreed to his request and led Amjad to faith in Jesus through a time of prayer and confession. Though delighted at Amjad's new faith both Nigel and Elizabeth, felt out of their depth, as they knew little of Amjad's culture, previous Islamic faith, or how being a Christian would impact Amjad's lifestyle and family relationships. Yet they both wanted to follow Jesus' command (Matt 28:18-20), by helping support Amjad to grow as a disciple of Christ, but the question was how*?

The Aim...

This pamphlet outlines some key areas to help any Christian come alongside the increasing number of new Christians from a Muslim background and help them grow in their new faith as disciples of Jesus.

*Based on a true story, all names in this leaflet have been anonymised

What life is like for these new Christians?

As for all new Christians the experience of Jesus' love is amazing, yet as Christians like Ijaz may also reject their Eastern culture which they associate with Islam for a period or indefinitely, and adopt Western culture. Haddad of the Islamic Sharia Council rightly says "if we understand Islam as a comprehensive way of life, which [it] is, then of course leaving Islam will change everything". Outlined below are the kinds of changes these new followers of Jesus may experience & why, as well as how Christians can support them.

Loss of Community

n experience: Mohamed featured in a recent BBC documentary, described that becoming a Christian meant that he "felt isolation, I felt that I was being rejected [and] demonised" by his family and the wider Muslim community. Sadly as result of his faith in Jesus his parents have not been willing to see him for 28 years.

hy did this happen:

- Shame of Conversion:* conversion to Christianity is regularly frowned upon in the Muslim community, as it can be seen as a source of great shame on the family and by some theologically akin to treason.
- What is shame:* Mohamed's and Amjad's are from honour-shame based Eastern cultures that rank the importance of the families respectability within the community above that of the individual and often above all else³.
- Disown to avoid shame:* So profound is the sense of shame that like families like Mohamed's may disown Christian family members in order to avoid or reduce public shame.

Loss of an Ordered Lifestyle

n experience: after becoming a Christian Ziva said "Most of the guidelines in life, from what to wear to what to eat [clearly outlined in Islam], are replaced with a confusing 'freedom in Christ'"

hy is this the case:

- The Clarity of Law vs Grace: In Islam everything aspect of life is clearly defined, for example prayers 5 times in a particular way with particular words. Therefore for new Christians like Ziva the relative lack of regulation in Christianity can be very confusing as it is can seem very unclear how to do things in Christian way, such as how to pray.

Loss of Identity

- *An experience:* Akbar said "I think that the most important thing for new believers [is] the issue of identity", and Ijaz said that on he becoming Christian ""I was ostracised from the community, I lost my identity, I was nobody"
- *Why did this happen:*
- Islam and Identity:* right from birth people like Ijaz and Amjad will have been regarded first and foremost as Muslims, indeed Sara in a BBC interview said "All my Mum cares about is that I am Muslim", so in leaving Islam one of the central pillars of persons identity is lost.

-*Questioning Culture:* In coming to terms with their new identity, some new Christians like Ijaz may also reject their Eastern culture which they associate with Islam for a period or indefinitely, and adopt Western culture.

How can we 'be family' for these new Christians

New Community in Christ

- *Christians as family:* Jesus says Christians & the Church are his family (Matt 12:50) and that we should regard new Christians like Amjad as own "brothers and sisters" (James1:2). This means just as with our own blood family, sharing our lives, time and love with Christians like Amjad beyond Sunday's is crucial.
- *Church being family:* There are two key aspects to being family:
 - *Building a new identity in Jesus:* helping these new Christians deal with key questions surrounding identity & building a new identity "in Christ" (2 Cor 5:17)
 - *Practically stand alongside:* being willing to spend time and love Christians like Amjad through the joys and difficulties that often follow faith in Jesus.
- *Church as extended & close family:* One way of being family is for Churches & individuals to work out who will act as "close" & "extended" family members:
 - *Extended family:* ideally the whole church will be receptive to Christians like Amjad & act as an 'extended family' meeting specific rather than daily needs.
 - *Close family:* a small number of discerned & established Christians who take responsibility for the everyday well-being & discipleship of the new Christian.

New lifestyle in Christ

- *A Christian model:* St. Paul wrote "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1), highlights that the patterns of a Christian lifestyle are often most effectively 'communicated' for new Christians by modelling of a Christian lifestyle a "close [Christian] family" member.
- *Law: freed from, but for a purpose:* With Islam's emphasis on law it is important for Christian's like Amjad to understand that whilst Christians have been set free from the Law (Rom 6), it is not a freedom to do what ever we please; rather it is freedom to be who God fully created us to be by "imitating Christ's" way (2 Cor 5:17). This means that a Christian lifestyle is one empowered by the Holy Spirit to live the way of Jesus as set out in the Bible.

New identity in Christ

- *Practically building a new identity in Christ:* Building a new identity in Christ is absolutely essential, below are is some suggested patterns that can help.
 - Daily:*
 - *Bible readings:* encourage the daily reading of the Bible, particularly books that focus on a Christian's new identity in Jesus such as Romans, 1 Peter, 1 John & the Gospels
 - Prayer:* can be aided by prayer book readings or by reading a Psalm a day to replace the five daily prayers in Islam³.
 - Weekly:*
 - specialised discipleship:* offer specialised courses run by the 'close family' to provide fellowship & Bible study (see Support)
 - *culturally based midweek groups:* many new Christians find meeting in para-church groups like Iranian fellowships helpful.
 - Long term—identify ministry area:* look with them for areas they can serve in.

- *Culture and Christianity*: There is often a false belief that Western culture and Christianity are the same thing. However new Christians like Amjad should be encouraged not to reject their Eastern culture because of their new faith