

Where There Was No Church

POSTCARDS FROM FOLLOWERS OF JESUS
IN THE MUSLIM WORLD



EJ MARTIN, EDITOR

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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What Others Are Saying About
Where There Was No Church

Gone are the days when the only people writing about Islam and its adherents were academics. Books by reflecting practitioners, such as this one, are complementing the scholars. Gone are the days when approaches to Muslims were sincere but mono-cultural. Books such as this one, take the cross-cultural task seriously by rolling up their sleeves and entering into the world of Muslim people, taking the gospel with them as a lifestyle. The contributors to this book work hard to reflect well on good practice and what resonates best with Muslim people as they follow Jesus Christ. It is therefore an invaluable read that already sits high on my most recommended reading list.

Steve Bell, author and trainer in Islam and Christian witness, England

This compilation of true stories is a must read for all who want to learn from the experiences of others. It gives great insights into the practices God is blessing in raising up Jesus followers among Muslims. With resources that have been developed over many years by a multi-agency team, this book will help to equip you for the task. Don't leave home without it!

Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry, Dean Emeritus and Senior Professor of Islamic Studies, School of Intercultural Studies, **Fuller Theological Seminary**, USA

With its compelling narratives illustrating solid research, this book doesn't attempt to give you all the answers, but it could well help you ask the right questions.

Dr. David Greenlee, PhD, International Research Associate, **OM**, Switzerland

Where There Was No Church helps us to understand new movements of people who may want to follow Christ if they understood Jesus and the Gospel in a new way. I commend these fantastic stories to you; they come from people who are not just theorists but also practitioners. May this book equip us to share Christ meaningfully in the modern world.

Dr. K. Rajendran, General Secretary, **India Missions Association** and Chairman, **World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission**, India

Across the Muslim world, the Holy Spirit is quietly but powerfully writing a story of people coming to love and follow Jesus. This book tells something of that story. It calls us to pray believingly, to reach out in love and to witness wisely. Let's dare to join in the Spirit's story!

Mrs. Rose Dowsett, Vice-Chair, **World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission**, Scotland

I have used *Where There Was No Church* in a small group setting to encourage creative ways to think about mission. Each person, no matter what their background or previous experience with cross-cultural ministry, could identify in some way with the stories. The book caused each of us to stop, think and pray for those who do not have the same freedoms as we do, and encouraged us to reexamine how we see and do church in our own context.

Rev. Lanny Arensen, International Director, **AIM**, England

This book brings together great stories of God at work in the Muslim world. As you read it, you will grow in expectancy, learning more of how to partner in what God is doing. I am certain that *Where There Was No Church* will help us to find a path to fruitful ministry among Muslims.

Mark Kim, International Director, **Global Operation**, Korea

Everyone who seeks to glorify God wants to bear fruit, but many faithfully serve and see little fruit. *Where There Was No Church* is a training manual that brings together stories of fruitfulness from those serving in some pretty tough places. I use *Where There Was No Church* with IMB workers as they prepare for ministry among unreached people groups.

Dr. Jim Haney, Director, Global Research **IMB**, USA

Church has historically been done in a doctrinal and political way, leading to denominations. But when it comes from stories like these, of the gospel moving in new areas like Islam, church is dynamic, reflecting the words of its founder: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

David Bok, Bible teacher and cross-cultural facilitator who relates to Muslims through inter-religious dialogue, Southeast Asia.

Do you want to understand what principles are bearing fruit in pioneer church planting among Muslims? *Where There Was No Church* is a very helpful tool for Great Commission Christians who want to discover how we can be “workers together with God.” You will learn how to analyse a ministry and better think through principles. You will also rejoice as you read about places where there are now Muslims who are “obedient to the faith.” Highly recommended to those who love God with their minds as well as their hearts.

Dr. Greg Livingstone, Founder, **Frontiers**, England

Where There Was No Church: Postcards from followers of Jesus in the Muslim world

EJ Martin, editor

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THE STORIES

The following stories are true stories about real people who are following Jesus the Messiah as Lord. To protect the privacy and security of those involved, the names have been changed and the location left unspecified. Minor details may have been changed in order to make the stories read smoothly as a story.

In the Islamic cultures where these stories are set, Jesus the Messiah is usually known by his Arabic name, Isa al Masih, and his good news is called the Injil.



Nabil reclined on a mattress on the floor with his mother and his six-year-old nephew, Ahmed. Nabil was trying to make funny faces to lighten their mood, to counteract the gloom that spilled over them as bomb blasts filled their ears. Nabil's sister, Sarah, came in with a sandwich and a cup of milk for her son, Ahmed. She had mixed up the milk powder with more water than usual. Who knew when they'd be able to get to the supermarket again? Or whether there would be any milk on the shelves when they did. Ahmed didn't seem to mind. He gulped down the milk in spite of its watery taste.

"Allah!" Sarah exclaimed as a nearby explosion rocked the building.

Although many families were trying to escape the bombing by fleeing to another town, most of Nabil's neighbours had nowhere to go. Even if they did, they couldn't afford to leave. It was rumoured that taxi drivers, the only ones who really knew the roads well enough to navigate the hazardous route

quickly, were charging ten times the normal fare to drive people out of the city. That would be almost a month's salary for Nabil.

Sarah felt overwhelmed. She flopped down on the cushions and began to weep loudly. "Pull yourself together! Be strong for the sake of the child!" her mother told her.

Sarah sighed and sat up against some cushions, burying her head in her hands. Earlier that day, Nabil and Sarah had pulled all their mattresses and blankets into the tiny hallway that led to all the rooms in the flat. By shutting all the doors, they made a little room that had no windows, except for the opening that led to the kitchen, but they had covered the kitchen window with tape to protect themselves from flying glass. It was safer, they hoped, but it was also darker, and the electricity had been off for a while.

Ahmed finished his sandwich and milk and reached for Nabil's mobile phone. The light that came on when Ahmed began to push buttons randomly gave Nabil an idea. He opened the door to the guest room and brought back a wooden stand with a Bible on it. He took Ahmed into his lap and showed him how to point the phone towards the words on the page. Nabil turned to the section called the Psalms of David and located Psalm 23, one of his favourites. The imagery of shepherds and sheep evoked images of the fields outside his grandparents' village. Though he'd never been to their village, he felt he knew it as well as the town where his parents had come as exiles and where he had been born.

"The Lord is my shepherd," Nabil began in Arabic.

Sarah looked up. "What is this?" she interrupted.

Nabil drew himself up. “These are the Psalms of the Prophet David, peace be upon him.” His sister propped herself up against some cushions and listened. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander to her grandparents’ village, to the ancient family home and the fertile orchards. If only we could return to that paradise now, she thought. But in her heart, she knew it no longer existed. Perhaps all the houses had been destroyed by those who had driven her grandparents and the other villagers out, or maybe settlers now occupied the ancient houses. Either way, if she ever got a chance to go back there, it would not match up with the stories her grandparents had told. For a moment, her fear turned to hatred toward those who had driven her grandparents from their home and were now trying to destroy her own generation. “God, where are you? Why don’t you destroy our enemies?” she wondered.

Nabil turned to another Psalm and continued reading:

Though a thousand fall at your side,
 Though ten thousand are dying around you,
 These evils will not touch you.

More explosions sounded nearby. “I take refuge in God,” their mother mumbled, fingering her prayer beads.

If you make the Lord your refuge,
 If you make the Most High your shelter,
 No evil will conquer you;
 No plague will come near your dwelling.

Sarah continued to listen as her brother read from the Psalms of the Prophet David. She was strangely comforted by the ancient words. For almost an hour, Nabil read Psalm after Psalm. Now it was dark outside, and Ahmed was asleep.

His grandmother laid him gently on a mattress and covered him with a thick blanket. Even though it was the middle of summer and the weather was hot and sticky, she didn't want to put her grandson at risk to catch a cold by sleeping uncovered. Sarah laid herself down next to her son and tried to rest.

Nabil slipped quietly into the kitchen and filled a glass of water from the tap. His voice was hoarse from reading, but he was thankful that God had shown him a way to comfort his sister. And he thanked God that he had let himself be convinced to start reading the Bible in Arabic instead of English. What if there had been only an English Bible in their home? How much would his sister have understood? Even if she had understood the words, would the Psalms in English have comforted her? And what about his mother? She wouldn't have understood any of it.

Nabil thought back a few years to the time when he first started talking to Pete and Dave, the Americans he worked with, about God and the prophets and about their respective holy books. He enjoyed getting together with them. Although they were fun-loving and ready to joke, they also seemed respectable and God-fearing. They didn't fit his previous image of Westerners. So it wasn't long before he started asking them questions about their spiritual practices, such as prayer and fasting. He also had some questions about the Bible. Because they worked in English and his fluency in English far exceeded theirs in Arabic, these early conversations had been in English. Soon, however, Pete and Dave began to improve in Arabic to the point that most of their conversations shifted into Nabil's language.

One day, Pete and Dave introduced Nabil to their friend Terry. He wasn't in the country for a long visit, but he and Nabil hit it off, so they spent a lot of time together. They visited each other and had long conversations about Jesus over thick Turkish coffee and then read the Bible together. Since Terry spoke no Arabic, they always read from the English Bible and spoke English together. Nabil loved Jesus and he loved reading about Jesus and the apostles in the Bible. Eventually his love for Jesus grew into a desire to serve him, and Nabil began to count himself as one of the followers of Jesus.

Nabil was well-respected in his work place, and many of his friends and co-workers were eager to hear what he had to say about his encounter with Jesus. After about a year, one of his close friends, Sami, also decided to become a follower of Jesus. Together, Nabil and Sami would invite their friends to



Photo credit: Matt Brandon, www.thedigitaltrekker.com

meet together on their day off to read the Bible and discuss what they read.

Nabil thought back to one of those early meetings. A group of young men was lounging on low couches around the guest room in Sami's family home. Sami's wife had made them coffee and then had left them alone to study and talk. He remembered how he had taken his treasured copy of the Bible out of his brief case. He had opened up the Bible and read a passage from the Good News of Matthew: "Don't store up treasures here on earth where they can be eaten by moths"

Then the group launched into a discussion of the passage in Arabic. Their discussion had been fruitful. At least his friends were thinking about the teachings of Jesus and asking questions.

Later, Nabil told Pete and Dave about the success of the meeting. They were really encouraged, but then as he pulled out his Bible to show them a verse the group had discussed, they realized that Nabil had been reading the Bible only in English. "Why English?" they asked. "Is there anyone in the group who doesn't speak Arabic?" Nabil told them he felt it was more prestigious to read in English, and that was the language in which he himself had first encountered the Bible.

Then Dave challenged him, "Don't you think it would connect with people's hearts more strongly if you read the Bible in Arabic?"

Nabil was open to the idea of holding their meetings only in Arabic. The next time the group met, as they finished their coffee, he glanced up at the Quranic verse framed on the wall opposite him. "God is the light of the heavens and the earth,"

it read in beautiful Arabic calligraphy. Nabil was suddenly confident that God could reveal his message in Arabic as well as in English. He prayed for God to guide them as they listened to God's revelation – this time in Arabic.

For the first time since the group had begun meeting together, Nabil picked up the Arabic Bible from the table in front of him, opened it, and read the passage to be studied in Arabic. To his surprise, he found that more of the young men were participating and that they seemed to grasp the message better. He even noticed that they seemed to be interacting with the issues they discussed from their heart, rather than just their minds. "What do you think about only reading the Bible in Arabic?" he asked the others after they had finished the main part of their discussion.

One member of the group spoke up. "When you read in English, it was confusing for us. Sometimes we didn't understand what the passage meant."

Another said, "We didn't understand why the Bible had to be read in English. We didn't know why English was better than Arabic." Nabil then realized that communicating with his friends in the language of their heart was essential to helping them grow in faith.

The sound of an explosion nearby brought Nabil back to the present. He finished his glass of water and went back into the hallway where he found his family asleep. Let them sleep, he thought. Nights are the worst for bombing, and they will be awake soon enough. He carried the Arabic Bible and its stand back to the guest room. He was glad that Pete and Dave had encouraged him to read the Bible in Arabic with his friends.

The whole family slept late into the next day, having been awakened several times in the night by bombing. They were out of coffee anyway, so it was just as well that they slept through the early morning coffee time that Nabil loved to share with his sister. With the music of the famous singer Fairouz playing on the radio, and the rest of the family just waking up, their morning coffee time usually gave Nabil and Sarah the chance to confide in each other. On this particular morning, Sarah put together a breakfast with odds and ends. She hadn't been out to buy vegetables in a few days and what she did have was starting to wither in the summer heat. Perhaps if Nabil went out today ...

After breakfast, Nabil decided to go by his work place to see if anyone was going to be at work that day. He called out at the gate and exchanged greetings with the old guard who came shuffling out of his shelter. It seemed no one had been there since the bombing started. "God help us!" the guard exclaimed and went back into his shelter. Nabil left and went to the apartment of his friend, Sami.

Sami greeted him with kisses on both cheeks and led him into the guest room where his wife served them coffee. Since Nabil was a close family friend, she remained in the room, exchanging news and asking about Nabil's mother and sister. "Sarah was really shaken up by the bombing last evening," Nabil confided. Nabil turned to Sami and said, "I read to Sarah from the Psalms of David. It was really comforting for her, and for Mama too. Do you remember how we used to read the Bible in English at our discussion times?" Sami nodded and laughed. Nabil went on, "I'm really glad that we started reading the Bible in Arabic with our friends. That experience made me realise that the message of God needs

to be in the language of their heart. And that's especially true with our families."

Sami's wife excused herself and went back to her household tasks. As she left the room, Sami motioned in his wife's direction. "I've begun to read to her from the Injil every night," he whispered. Nabil looked up on a high shelf at the Arabic New Testament that Sami had placed on an ornate stand. A lamp was positioned above the stand and Nabil knew that, had there been electricity, the light would have been shining on the holy book.

Nabil responded to his friend, "It's good for her to hear the words of the Injil at the same time as she sees the signs of it in your life." Nabil paused and thought of his own faith journey. Then he continued, "My family has definitely seen the difference in my life that has come from following our Lord Jesus. I was never very religious as a youth. In fact, I'm not really religious now in terms of outward practices and habits – although of course I still pray and fast – but they can see that I am serious about obeying God. My mother even said that I seem more like her son now than before I believed in our Lord Jesus."

"It's true," Sami confirmed, "they can see the spark in your life." Then he went on, "do you remember when you first began following our Lord Jesus, and you were really outspoken in telling people about him at work? For me, I'm like that with my own family, but for those in my clan, I'm taking it more slowly."

"Is that because your clan is a bit more traditional? That you still make decisions as a group?"

Sami nodded. “I am just doing subtle things, like putting that Injil up there. And I am sowing seeds here and there, sharing about our Lord Jesus little by little until there are enough people to decide by consensus to follow him. And most of them don’t know English. I could never reach them without using the Arabic Injil.”

“By the way,” Nabil asked, “does your family know English?” Nabil meant Sami’s wife, but out of politeness, did not refer to her specifically.

“Not a word,” Sami replied. “My wife is very smart, but she didn’t finish her education. And my children also do not know English. Not yet, anyway – oh!” Sami interrupted himself. “Let me show you something.” He went out of the room and came back with a box of cassettes. “These are the stories of the prophets, peace be upon them. They aren’t in our dialect, but we can understand them. I love that they use our traditional music too. When I first heard these stories, I said, ‘This is our language. This is our message. This is not a foreign message.’ I listen to them in the car as I travel for my job, and I feel so close to God when I listen to them. Eventually I will let my family listen to them.”

Nabil’s eyes lit up, “I would love to listen to those stories. I really like some of the cassettes I got from Dave that have some inspirational prayers and messages about the Injil, but I think stories of the prophets would be useful for my family.”

Sami and Nabil enjoyed a long discussion. Finally Nabil got up to leave. “I promised my mother and sister I’d try to find some vegetables,” he said.

As Nabil was leaving, Sami's wife handed him a black plastic bag with a bunch of locally-grown bananas in it. "These are for little Ahmed," she said.

"God bless your hands," he said. After a prolonged leave-taking, he continued on his way through the neighbourhood. He bought some tomatoes, cucumbers and potatoes for an exorbitant price and then ducked into a supermarket run by a family friend. As predicted, there was no more powdered milk, but Nabil bought some cans of tuna and sardines and some processed cheese before heading to the bakery to pick up some fresh bread. Even war didn't shut down the local bakeries. They were part of the foundation of the neighbourhood.

Sarah received the supplies gratefully. Nabil knew that his mother and sister were creative enough to come up with a wonderful meal no matter what he brought home to them. Later that evening, as they sat down to a pleasant meal of salad, fried potatoes and sardines, Nabil picked up a loaf of pita bread and the plate of sardines. "Did you know," he said to Ahmed, "that our master Jesus once performed a miracle with just a few loaves of bread and a few fishes?"

Ahmed shook his head and said between bites of banana, "Tell me the story, uncle!"

Epilogue

The violence in Nabil and Sami's area eventually ended, and normal life resumed for their families. Due to the violence, the group of young men who used to meet to discuss the Bible dispersed. Sami and Nabil turned their attention to their family and clan networks. Nabil's sister, Sarah, and

their mother have since become enthusiastic followers of Jesus, as have Sami's wife and daughter.

Andrea Gray has worked for ten years in Asia and Africa. She is involved in research, consulting and collaborative outreach projects with Muslims and Christians.



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