

# Muslims Converting to Christ: Effective Evangelistic Methods in the West Bank

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## Abstract

This paper provides a summary of the findings of field research (Ph.D. University of Pretoria, 2014)<sup>2</sup> conducted among Palestinians who came to faith in Christ from a Muslim background in the West Bank since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994.

The information gained from open-ended interviews is organized according to three questions: 1) How was evangelistic contact established? 2) How did Christians successfully evangelize Muslims? 3) What were the barriers to conversion and the corresponding solutions that led to conversion?

## Participant Demographics

For this research twenty-four respondents were interviewed in Arabic, Hebrew and English, or some combination of those languages between June 2010 and March 2011. A gatekeeper, who knew each of the respondents, arranged the in-depth interviews.

In order to participate, the respondents had to be at least eighteen years old at the time of the interview and must have been Palestinians, not Israeli-Arabs,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> DUNNING, C.A. 2014. *Palestinian Muslims Converting to Christianity: A Survey of Effective Evangelistic Methods in the West Bank*. Ph.D., University of Pretoria. Available for free download at <http://idunning.com/palestinian-muslims-converting-to-christianity/>.

<sup>3</sup> The author theorized that legal and social opposition to Muslims converting to Christ would

whom were evangelized in the West Bank.

The respondents were fairly evenly distributed according to gender and age with thirteen males and eleven females whose ages ranged from sixteen to fifty-three at the time of their conversions. Their religious identities prior to conversion were also fairly evenly mixed: seven considered themselves very religious; seven identified as semi-observant; two were traditional; and eight were non-religious, describing themselves as agnostic, secular, and atheist.

## **Introduction**

Perhaps the most encouraging result of this research is empirical evidence that Muslims are coming to faith in Christ within the Muslim majority West Bank. Under the Palestinian Authority, religious and social pressures against conversion away from Islam have been heightened by the legal implications of the Basic Law of the Palestinian Authority, which says, “Islam is the official religion in Palestine” and “Islamic Shari’a shall be a principal source of legislation.”<sup>4</sup> This combination of pressures – religious, social, and legal – creates, among Muslims, an *a priori* negative attitude toward the gospel, and among Christians, a fear to share the gospel with Muslims. Yet, some Christians are sharing Christ and some Muslims are coming to believe in Christ.

This paper explains that process by answering three questions: 1) How was evangelistic contact established? 2) How did Christians successfully evangelize Muslims? 3) What were the barriers to conversion and the corresponding solutions that led to conversion?

## **How was evangelistic contact established?**

In this context, which could be described as hostile toward the gospel,

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be significantly higher in the Palestinian Authority context than in Israeli controlled areas.

<sup>4</sup> ABBAS, M. 2009. *Basic Law of Palestinian National Authority*. Available :<http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/>.

initiating gospel relationships can seem impossible. Simply walking up to a Muslim in the market and asking, “Do you know Jesus?” or “Are you saved?” would likely be more confusing than helpful in starting meaningful gospel conversations. How, then, can evangelistic contact between Christians and Muslims be established in a place like the West Bank?

This research revealed that no single *method* of initial contact was utilized, though there were two primary *types* of first contact: Muslim-initiated and others-initiated contact. Among the respondents, seven Muslims initiated contact with Christians; and on fourteen occasions, someone other than the Muslim initiated first contact.

### **Muslim-Initiated Contact**

The primary motivation for each of the Muslim-initiated first contacts was to find relief for a personal crisis, which included medical and financial problems, spousal abuse, internal turmoil and dissatisfaction with Islam. All of these people, except Respondent Eight, *knowingly* initiated contact with a Christian in order to gain relief from their crises. Interestingly, two of these (Respondents Four and Nine) even considered themselves to be very religious Muslims when they contacted the Christians. This suggests that a clear identity as a Christian may not necessarily be an evangelistic stumbling block in the West Bank if the Christian maintains a good reputation and is helping alleviate suffering.

Each of the Christians involved in these Muslim-initiated encounters addressed the issue of human suffering holistically, combining their concern for the individual’s crisis with concern for the individual’s spiritual condition. Advocates made their identities as Christians known by way of kindness and good works among Muslims. Some Christians provided professional services like a crisis hotline and others made Christian literature available, as was the case of the bookshop that sold Respondent Eleven a New Testament. Respondent Nine found shelter from an abusive husband with a pastor’s family while Respondent Ten asked to meet Christians because of a dream.

These examples illustrate a variety of ways that Christians are making themselves available while both helping alleviate suffering and caring for the souls of the lost in the West Bank.

### **Others-Initiated Contact**

Fourteen respondents were involved in others-initiated gospel contact, which was typically initiated by the primary advocate, but not always. The basic pattern for this group was as follows: At the initiation of someone else, a Muslim became acquainted with a gospel advocate, which eventually led to the Muslim's conversion to Christ.

Primarily motivated by a love for Jesus and a belief in eternal judgment for those without Christ, Christians created contact with Muslims in a variety of ways. For example, Christians befriended Respondents One, Two, Twelve, Thirteen and Eighteen at work or in the community. Christians offered English lessons to Respondent Three and computer and self-enrichment courses to Respondents Sixteen and Seventeen. The most frequent others-initiated contact - Respondents Five, Six, Nineteen, Twenty, Twenty-One, and Twenty-Four - was by family members who had been born again.

These others-initiated contacts are similar to the Muslim-initiated contacts in that they demonstrate the value of intentionally seeking opportunities to share the faith while being involved in the community. Additionally, these examples illustrate the importance of new believers sharing their faith with family members.

### **The Variety of Advocates**

The first-contact advocates referenced in this study were both professional ministers (pastors, missionaries, or Bible scholars) and lay members of local churches. Of the seven Muslim-initiated contacts, four contacted professional ministers (though two did not realize they were contacting professionals), two contacted lay members, and one initiated contact by purchasing a Bible at a bookshop. Among the fourteen others-initiated contacts, lay members initiated

eight contacts and professionals initiated the remaining six.

Gender segregation was typically followed among the advocates, though it was stretched in the following ways: If males initiated contact with females, the contact occurred in a group setting, or the females' husband or father was present. If females initiated contact with males, the male was an unobservant Muslim, or the son of the female.

The self-identity of the advocates included Jews and Arabs who identified as born again believers. The Jews referred to themselves as Messianic Jews, and the Arabs – whether coming from a Muslim background or a traditional Christian background - all referred to themselves as *Masihi*, the normal Arabic word for Christian, or as *Aaber*, which indicates crossing over. None of the Muslim Background Believers (MBB) presented a Muslim identity, whether Messianic Muslim, true Muslim, or something else. Indeed, they had rejected Islam and any corollary Muslim self-identity.

### **First Contact Conclusions**

Based on the above summaries, West Bank Christians should recognize the evangelistic value in having a publically known Christian identity and in seeking to minister holistically to the physical/emotional needs of Muslims. Additionally, all West Bank Christians should utilize their spiritual gifts and personal interests to initiate contact with Muslims or to prompt contact from a Muslim. Although the cultural norms typical of a Muslim majority context are basically in place in the West Bank, Christians should not feel excluded from the possibility to initiate contact with a Muslim regardless of professional qualifications, gender, or age.

### **How did Christians successfully evangelize Muslims?**

While some measure of evangelism occurred during the initial gospel contact, this question focuses more specifically on the typically longer and more thorough effort of an advocate to persuade a Muslim to believe the gospel and place their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Once evangelistic contact was established, the

advocates employed a variety of evangelistic methods or techniques, including, among other things, Bible study plans, gospel literature and tracts, Q&A sessions, and the Jesus Film. Perhaps the most important finding in this regard, though, was that the evangelistic method was less important than the type of person evangelizing.

### **Preparation: Qualities of an Effective Advocate**

The advocates who were effective in the West Bank expressed their fitness for evangelism through certain character qualities. These qualities included patience, flexibility, courage, and spiritual maturity.

The respondents reported that they frequently canceled appointments to meet with their advocates, often at the last minute. Additionally, they regularly ended gospel conversations abruptly or altogether because of fear that someone may be listening or, at times, because they were getting close to believing in Jesus. For many, believing in Jesus was a frightening proposition that required sober consideration as they counted the cost of true discipleship, which often caused the respondent to be on-again off-again. Respondent Four, for example, invited advocates to teach him the Bible, and subsequently cancelled the meetings after becoming angry about what was taught. Later, he reconsidered and invited his advocates back to his home. This pattern was repeated many times over several months. Without patience it is unlikely that an advocate could have succeeded at witnessing in such circumstances.

While maintaining the integrity of the content of their message, the advocates practiced flexibility in how they delivered the gospel. Though the content of their message was non-negotiable, the means by which the advocates delivered the gospel was negotiable. In addition to the more traditional methods of delivery like Bible studies and gospel tracts, they also took advantage of available technology. Satellite television, the Jesus Film, MP3 players, and mobile phones were all helpful tools. Weekend camps, Christmas parties, a community culture center, and taxi rides also provided opportunities to share the gospel effectively.

Finally, a measure of courage and spiritual maturity aided the efforts of the advocates. The advocates mentioned in this research risked much to be engaged in gospel work among Muslims, including physical harm and financial ruin. This reality was not lost on the respondents who frequently equated the risk of the Christian advocates with their own. In their interviews, ten of the respondents specifically mentioned that they were impressed with how Christians openly lived out their faith with patience, longsuffering, compassion, and true love in the presence of Muslims, which reveals the value of living an openly, spiritually mature Christian life in the West Bank.

### **Principles of Effective Advocacy: Focus on the Bible and Prayer**

The respondents revealed that irrespective of any specific method of evangelism employed, the evangelists were committed to two principles in their advocacy: First, keep the focus on the Bible. Second, utilize prayer before, during, and after evangelism.

#### *Focus on the Bible*

The advocates utilized the Bible in their evangelism in three ways. First, they encouraged Muslims to simply read the Bible and let it speak to them. Eighteen respondents mentioned *personal* Bible<sup>5</sup> reading as a major influence on their decision to believe in Jesus. The reasons the respondents started reading the Bible varied. Some read because of a dream, others to prove Christianity wrong, one because the Bible was included in a box of aid relief and he wanted to continue receiving such boxes, and still others to find the answer to their religious or philosophical questions. Respondent Twenty-Three “suddenly felt drawn” to read the New Testament, so he picked it up and began reading. As he read, he recognized that it made sense and he could not stop reading it.

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<sup>5</sup> All eighteen reported reading the New Testament. Seven of those also mentioned reading at least some portion of the Old Testament. In this context, unless the respondent specifically mentions the “Old Testament,” it should be assumed that “Bible reading” means New Testament.

Not all of the respondents felt the same level of compulsion to read the Bible, nor did they all engage the text with equal thoroughness. Nevertheless, the importance of personally reading the Bible was a theme that clearly emerged from their testimonies.

Among those who personally read the Bible, many read it in *bulk*, which is defined as an amount of Bible reading that seemed large and/or intense in comparison to the reading habits typical of Western Christians. Some representative examples include Respondent Two, who “read the New Testament five or six times and the Old Testament three or four times” over the course of about twelve months. On five or six occasions, Respondent Eight read the Gospels in two days. Respondent Eleven read the complete gospel of Matthew every day for six months and Respondent Twenty-Two initially read the New Testament in one week, then three more times over the next month.

Six respondents did not mention personally reading the Bible, though each one received Bible content orally through Bible lessons, MP3 files, and the Jesus Film. All twenty-four respondents participated in some type of Bible lessons through which a pastor or evangelist explained the gospel and other biblical themes privately or in a group setting.

The second way the advocates utilized the Bible in their evangelism was in a simple “thus sayeth the Lord” or “the Bible says ...” approach to engaging a Muslim with the gospel. Even though some respondents did not appreciate such a direct approach, none of them indicated that it seemed hostile. In fact, the gospel message was the offense, not the person or the method of sharing.

Finally, the advocates utilized the Bible in an apologetic defense of the faith. Twelve respondents specifically mentioned the importance of question and answer sessions with their advocates. In these sessions, the advocates used the Bible to answer questions and standard Muslim objections frequently revolving around the person of Christ or the integrity of the Bible. The advocates were always careful, to avoid as much as possible, the controversy surrounding the

person of Muhammad. Rather than argue against Muhammad, the Qur'an, or Islam, they focused on defending the Christian faith.

### *Prayer*

The advocates' evangelism was effective not only because they maintained a focus on the Bible, but also because they prayed. Almost 60% (14 of 24) of the respondents mentioned being prayed for, witnessing Christians pray, or actually praying themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The advocates represented in this research affirmed that, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16 NKJV), and they implemented this affirmation openly in a variety of ways in their evangelism. Prior to their evangelistic conversations or Bible studies, the advocates prayed for and in the presence of the respondents 1) for God to meet the respondents' needs (e.g., emotional, financial, and medical), and 2) for God to open the respondents' eyes and give them understanding of the truth recorded in the Bible.

Respondent Five is representative of those who were effectively persuaded of the truthfulness of the gospel by answered prayer. And this occurred even though their initial appraisal was that the Christian-type or style of prayer was odd, even off-putting: men and women prayed together, some sat while others stood, eyes open, eyes closed, hands up, hands folded, etc. In spite of the confusion these different styles caused, the respondents' minds were eventually changed as they saw God answer these prayers favorably.

In addition to the influence of the advocates' use of prayer upon the respondents, the respondents were influenced toward faith in Jesus by their own use of prayer. The first type of respondent-prayer occurred when the respondent prayed in the way they had seen their advocate(s) pray. For example, after about one year of reading the Bible and occasionally visiting an MBB church,

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<sup>6</sup> Here, a Christian-type of free prayer is intended, not Islamic *salat*.

Respondent Fourteen began to pray, asking God to help him know when to believe and to progress without fear if Jesus was the correct way.

The second type of respondent-prayer occurred in response to an advocate's challenge to pray. This challenge was usually offered after an extended yet unsuccessful effort to persuade the respondent of the truth of the gospel. The challenge was straightforward: "Ask Allah if Muhammad is the way, or if Jesus is the way." Respondents Ten, Twelve and Thirteen were among those who prayed this challenge prayer and came to faith as a result of God answering it.

### **Successful Evangelism Conclusions**

The advocates represented in this research serve as a model for Christians who want to evangelize Muslims in the West Bank. In summary, West Bank Christians should 1) be committed to evangelism over methodology; 2) develop character qualities like patience, creativity, courage, and spiritual maturity; and 3) keep their focus on the Bible when evangelizing and pray much before, during, and after their meetings with Muslims.

### **What were the barriers to conversion and the corresponding solutions that led to conversion?**

Except for Respondent Sixteen, who believed immediately upon hearing the gospel the first time, all the respondents experienced a variety of evangelistic efforts that lasted from two months to several years. Regardless of the methods, each one was encouraged to believe certain facts about Jesus and to make a personal decision to place their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and savior. What is it about this message that would cause Muslims to resist it so steadfastly?

#### **Barriers**

Initially, the responses to this message ranged from angry refusal to believe to disinterest, though the disinterest always escalated to some type of active rejection. None of the objections were atypical of those expected within Muslim

majority contexts. The objections were both theological and social. The deity of Jesus, the Trinity, Jesus' identity as the Son of God, and alleged errors in the New Testament were among the theological barriers. Three respondents specifically mentioned fearing the loss of their families or social circles. Three said their primary barrier was the traditional understanding that Muslims are not Christians and should not consider becoming Christians. Respondent Three said she simply did not know that a Muslim could become a Christian, Respondent Seven said that thinking of God as his friend was an impossible barrier, and Respondent Nine objected because believing in Jesus seemed way too easy.

Regardless of the details or the intensity of his or her specific objections each respondent's story can be described as a struggle against believing the gospel. The West Bank context – religious, social, and legal - programed them to struggle against the gospel. However, whether actively or passively struggling against the gospel, through continued witness, the evidence became sufficiently overwhelming that 1) the respondent concluded that believing was the only reasonable alternative, or 2) the respondent simply realized that they believed.

### **Solutions**

The respondents did not see their argumentation against the gospel or their investigation of the gospel as merely a matter of answering some questions or doubts that had been raised. They saw the process as a pursuit of truth. And this pursuit of truth was the foundation upon which all of the elements of the process rested.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). This verse was one of the central themes of the respondents heard repeatedly. It was used to headline gospel tracts. It was referenced repeatedly in Bible studies and discussions. It appeared in Respondent Twelve's dream. This constant reference to "the truth" became the theme of their journey to faith in Jesus, which they labeled or described in some way as a pursuit of the truth.

The emphasis on truth reflects the contradictory claims of Islam and Christianity. Islam claims that Muhammad is the final prophet and that salvation is found only in Islam. The New Testament claims that salvation is found only in Jesus. These contradictions appear to create a desire in the potential convert to arrive at a level of certainty that might not be the case in other contexts. Perhaps adding to these respondents' need to be certain is the Islamic doctrine of punishment for those who reject Islam, both in this life and the one to come, and the similar Christian doctrine of damnation for those who reject salvation through Jesus Christ. If both groups claim exclusively to offer the way of salvation and the result of rejecting their claims is damnation, it makes sense that one who is deciding between the two would think soberly about their decision.

The respondents were also driven to be absolutely certain of their decision to leave Islam and follow Jesus due to contextual considerations. In Islamic contexts it is usually assumed that leaving Islam to follow Jesus will result in some type of loss; if not the loss of life, certainly the loss of community and possibly family relations. This latter consideration is why so many respondents spent months to years counting the cost of following Jesus and making certain His claims were true.

In their pursuit of truth, Bible reading, dreams, and the involvement of their advocates emerged as the most helpful solutions to their objections.

### *Bible Reading*

Bible reading was the most important element of advocacy among these respondents. Many mentioned reading the Bible in large quantities and being drawn to Jesus as a result. The Bible also was persuasive for those that did not read the Bible in bulk because they were still exposed to Bible content through personal testimonies, Bible lessons, Q&A sessions, and occasionally some were directed to the Bible through dreams.

The Bible verses that were persuasive varied from respondent to respondent. But the most dominant theme to emerge was the love of God. Hearing that God

loved them was very persuasive for these respondents.

John 3:16 (NKJV): For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Romans 5:8 (NKJV): But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Galatians 2:20 (NKJV): I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

I John 4:8 (NKJV): "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

I John 4:18 (NKJV): "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."

Love in action as Christians helped needy people or prayed and visited the sick or simply loved one another in community validated the witness of the New Testament as the respondents read verses like John 13:34 (NKJV): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" and Galatians 5:13 (NKJV): "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

### *Dreams*

Half of the respondents experienced dreams that helped them confirm the claims of Christ. In their dreams, they saw different symbols (e.g., crosses or stars or the Bible) or a person of light, or they heard a voice. The dreams functioned as either *confirmation* or *direction*. As confirmation, the respondents understood the dreams to confirm what they had *already* read in the Bible or had heard from an advocate. Alternatively, the directive dreams directed them to read a gospel tract or the Bible, both of which were delivered by an advocate.

Although the dreams aided the evangelistic process, in *no case* was the

content of the dream alone sufficient for the respondent to convert. Additional advocacy always was necessary. In summary, the dreams pointed to a messenger with a message about Jesus Christ or confirmed the information they had already heard or read.

### *The Participation of Advocates*

The advocates served two vital functions. First, they evangelized. The Apostle Paul highlights the indispensable function of the advocate in the process of making Jesus known when he asks, “But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless *someone tells them?*” (Rom 10:14 NLT).

In addition to their role of advocating on behalf of Jesus, the advocates also served as a source of encouragement and security, which is critical in a high-risk context. Because many of the respondents had never known of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus, personally meeting Christians – MBBs and non-MBBs – was an important element in their conversion process. While an analysis of their testimonies reveals the value of advocacy for *all* the respondents, seventeen specifically mentioned the importance they placed on meeting Christians during their consideration of the gospel.

When asked what was the most decisive factor in her coming to faith, Respondent Three noted several critical factors: An initial contact with her college classmate opened the door. A picnic retreat planted seeds. Devotions at work and Bible study with a pastor gave her information and answered most of her questions. She also mentioned Bible reading and dreams as important elements in her testimony. But, two factors that were *most* important in her coming to faith were personal interactions with believers. First, that her boss (a non-MBB and a bi-vocational pastor) was patient, kind, and not pushy while she considered the faith. Second, she added that consistently spending time with older female (non-MBB) believers made an important impact on her decision as

they prayed with and for her, studied the Bible with her, and encouraged her to seek God.

Describing the essential things that brought him to faith, Respondent Ten said, “dreams and having someone to encourage me to consider Jesus.” Likewise, Respondent Twenty said, “The power of the dreams, Jesus’ help, and fellowship with MBBs” were indispensable in his becoming a believer.

Respondent Seventeen, who began her journey to faith as an atheist, said that she doesn’t know exactly when her atheism transformed into theism or a specific thing that changed her view, but she does connect it directly to the *personal* testimonies she heard daily. She said, “Knowing them [MBBs] and hearing their testimonies was very important to me.”

These four testimonies not only accurately represent the testimonies of the remainder of the respondents, they also illustrate the importance of Christians – MBBs and non-MBBs – risking their own personal well being to be involved in the process of advocating for the gospel in a hostile environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the West Bank, conversion is typically a very holistic process that takes into account both spiritual and social considerations. And the truthfulness of the gospel was validated rationally and existentially. Thus, there was generally not a single answer or event that caused belief. Rather, more typically, the decision to believe was the result of consideration of the totality of the evangelistic experience, including the things the respondents read in the Bible, the dreams they experienced, the answers to their many questions, the answers to their prayers, and even the character and kindness of the advocates. After considering the various factors, the respondents concluded that believing was their most rational option.