

How Evangelical Churches in the Chicago Metro Area are Engaging Muslim Communities

The logo for the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) features the lowercase letters "ems" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. The letters are positioned within a dark blue circular background that is part of a larger header banner.

MIKE URTON

Vol 2:1 2022

Rev. Mike Urton (DMin) is the Director of Immigrant Mission for the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA).

How Evangelical Churches in the Chicago Metro Area are Engaging Muslim Communities

Currently there are 1.8 billion people in the world who identify as Muslim. Next, to Christianity it is the second largest religious bloc in the world. Many Muslims reside in the Western nations of Europe, North America, and Australia. Yet, attitudes towards Muslims living in these nations are often mixed. In 2017, the Pew Forum released a study on attitudes of non-Muslims towards Muslims living in four Western European countries. The words that the participants used to describe Muslims were “violent,” “fanatical,” “honest,” and “generous” (Lipka 2017).

Also, according to Pew, 3.45 million Muslims live in the United States. Due to factors like migration, fertility, and the youngest median age of religious groups, U.S. Muslims are projected to double in number by 2050 (Lipka 2017). Yet, on a “feeling thermometer” where Americans were asked to rate nine different religious groups on a scale from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest) Muslims were given one of the lowest ratings at 48 degrees. At least one reason for this is “About half of Americans (49%) think at least ‘some’ U.S. Muslims are anti-American” (Lipka 2017). This is even though around 55% of Americans believe that there is little or no support for extremism among U.S. Muslims (Lipka 2017).

Likewise, American evangelicals also seem to harbor attitudes towards Muslims that are primarily negative. In 2015, LifeWay surveyed 1000 protestant pastors both evangelical and mainline. It found that “two-thirds of Protestant pastors agree Christianity and Islam should seek to coexist in America” (Green 2015). But it also discovered that evangelical pastors viewed Islam as “a violent and dangerous faith,” whereas mainline pastors used words like “peace, love and compassion” to describe Islam (Green 2015).

While 9/11 and other terrorist attacks loom large as a source for negative attitudes towards Muslims among evangelicals, two other issues are also possible explanations for the friendship gap that evangelicals have with Muslims. The first is the relationship that American evangelicals have with the persecuted church around the world. David Cashin comments, “It has to do with the fact that the evangelical church is in touch with Christian churches in the Muslim world. More than any other religious group, they’re hearing the horror stories” (Shellnutt 2017, 14). Indeed, according to “The World Watch List 2020,” a list of countries around the world where Christians are the most persecuted which is published by Open Doors, Islamic Oppression is given as the reason for persecution in 31 out of the top 50 countries mentioned (Open Doors 2020).

The second issue has to do with the freedom that Muslims have to spread their faith and seek converts in the U.S. and other Western countries, but the favor is not returned in Muslim majority countries. Many times, Christians are not free in Muslim lands to do evangelism and plant churches. Also, often Muslims who do convert, even in Western countries, are threatened with death for leaving Islam to become a Christian (Redman 2010, 141-142).

These are certainly valid issues to regard and navigate in relationships with Muslims, but they do not negate the real need for evangelical Christians to overcome their negative attitudes and engage American Muslims. The motivation for this outreach is firmly grounded in Scripture, which evangelicals hold up as their final authority for all matters related to their faith. Examples of this are the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 to make disciples of people from all nations and the Great Commandment to love God and love our neighbor in Matthew 22:37-40. Thus, evangelical doctrine founded on the Bible should move local churches to embrace their Muslim neighbors.

One recent study highlights what can happen when the local church moves beyond its fears and reaches out to Muslims. The report was conducted by Fruitful Practice Research, a group that studies ministry practices in the Muslim world, in conjunction with Tyndale Intercultural Ministry (TIM) Center at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto, Canada. It is entitled “Fruitful Practices in Ministry to the North American Muslim Diaspora: A Mixed-Methods Study.” The researchers for this study interviewed 18 former Muslims who became Christians while living in North America. It suggests that the two top reasons for Muslims coming to Christ were an experience

with a local evangelical church and a relationship with a Christian friend (Kronk, Daniels, Chapman, and Watson 2017, 9). Furthermore, three quarters of the 173 participants in this study who work with converts from Islam did so in “the context of a ‘western’, non-Muslim background convert church” (Kronk, Daniels, Chapman, and Watson 2017, 9).

The Fruitful Practices study indicates that local evangelical congregations need to learn best practices for engaging the Muslim community, so that more of them will trust in Christ and grow in their faith. This article is a summary of a larger research project focusing on how evangelical congregations in the Chicago Metro area overcame their hesitations and reached out to the Muslim communities in their locale. It explored a main research question: how are specific local evangelical churches in the Chicago Metro area engaging local Muslim communities? Along with the two additional questions, (1) what are some of the challenges that these local churches encountered when engaging Muslims? And (2) what lessons can be learned from the experiences of these congregations when mobilizing churches to engage Muslims?

Ministry Context and Methodology

The ministry context for this study was seven evangelical churches in the Chicago metro area that were engaging local Muslim communities. The Chicago area was the focus because of the large Muslim community living in the metropolitan area. As one study estimates, there are at least 90 Sunni and Shi’ite mosques in the Greater Chicago area (Bagby 2011, 6). Garbi Schmidt describes Chicago as an “American Medina” after the second holiest city in Islam. She comments:

The “medina” in this book is Chicago, a city in the heartland of the United States where Muslims from all parts of the globe have settled. To these immigrants, Chicago is an American medina. In this city, they are creating a new home, combining habits of their homelands with an America way of life. In this city, they practice Islam and establish mosques, schools, and colleges (Schmidt 2004, 1).

Multiple case study methods were used to research these seven churches and their interactions with Muslim communities for three reasons. First, this research project examined how local churches are engaging Muslim communities. Second, this is a multiple case study design because it involved studying more than one single church interaction and examined seven. Finally, case study methodology was chosen due to its

reliance on triangulation where multiple sources of converging data are used to study a particular phenomenon (Yin 1994, 13). In this study the types of data collection included face to face semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence.

The churches in this project were mostly in suburban Chicago with one urban church being represented. These churches were chosen because they met the “Defining Evangelicals in Research” protocols developed by the National Association of Evangelicals and Life Way Research (NAE 2017) which include:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation (NAE 2017).

Each of these churches have dedicated ministry teams comprised of church members and regular attenders, and/or church leadership (pastors, elders, and staff) who are actively involving their congregation in outreach to a local Muslim community or communities. The following table gives a brief description of the churches selected for this study.

Table 1 – Churches Selected

Church	Description	Length of Engagement
Church A	Multi-site suburban church.	3 years
Church B	Medium sized suburban congregation of 200-220.	3 years
Church C	Large two service suburban congregation of 700.	3.5 years
Church D	Small suburban congregation of approximately 40-50.	5 years
Church E	Medium sized suburban congregation of 250.	12 years
Church F	Small urban church plant of 20-25.	3 months
Church G	Suburban mega church with two campuses of 3000.	10 years

The interviews were qualitative face to face semi-structured interviews. There was a total of 21 persons interviewed in this study with 13 being men and 8 being women. Their ages ranged from their early forties to late sixties, and they included three ethnic minorities, two of which were first generation immigrants from non-Muslim backgrounds. The criteria for those who participated were their evangelical commitment, leadership and/or regular involvement in their church's engagement with a local Muslim community. A greater emphasis was placed on those who have launched or are giving the primary leadership to these initiatives.

To protect the anonymity of those who took part in the interviews, each person was assigned letters, a number, and an additional letter indicating the church case to which they belonged in analyzing the interviews. Thus, the female leader from church A would be FL1A, the male leader from church B would be ML1B, a male volunteer from church C would be MV1C, a female volunteer from church D would be FV1D, etc. The designation of leader was given to those who launched and were responsible for the managing and direction of the ministry. The designation volunteer was assigned to those who were regularly involved in their church's relationship and outreach efforts to the Muslim community. The following table offers a description of those who were interviewed.

Table 2 – Interviewees

Case	Identifier	Age	Length of time involved	Details
Church A	FL1A	50–60	3 years	Former missionary in South Asian Muslim country.
	MV1A	60–70	2 years	Retiree. Had Muslim friend prior to involvement.
	FV1A	50–60	3 years	Certified ESL teacher, lived in the Middle East.
Church B	ML1B	50s	3 years	First generation South Asian immigrant. Outreach Director.
	FV1B	60s	6 months	Had a Muslim friend prior to involvement.
	FV2B	50–60	7 months	Former missionary in Europe in non-Muslim context.
Church C	ML1C	40s	3.5 years	Former missionary in Europe in Muslim context. Pastor of Global Mission.
	MV1C	40–50	10 months	Has an orphan ministry in Africa. Son of European immigrants.
	FV1C	40–50	n/a	First generation Asian immigrant.
Church D	ML1D	30s	5 years	Former missionary in Africa in Muslim context. Church elder.
	FV1D	60s	n/a	Messianic Jew.
	MV1D	40s	2 years	Short term missions in Europe in Muslim and Hindu context. Church elder.
Church E	ML1E	50s	12 years	Short term missions in Haiti and Mexico. Associate Pastor.
	ML2E	60–70	12 years	Missionary in Latin America, Europe, and Middle East.
	MV1E	50–60	12 years	Short term missions in Europe with Muslims.
	FV1E	60s	12 years	Short term missions in North Africa.
Church F	ML1F	30–40	3 months	Urban church planter.
Church G	ML1G	50–60	10 years	Former missionary in Asian Muslim country. Pastor of Global Outreach.
	ML2G	30s	6 years	Served with Peace Corps in African Muslim country. Director of local outreach.
	FV1F	20–30	10 months	Previous experience working with Muslim refugees in the U.S.
	MV1F	30s	1.5 years	Previous experience working at Arabic church and Muslim refugees in the U.S.

The participant observation aspect of the data collection involved taking notes after joining in an activity that a local church did with a Muslim community. Seven different events were observed. The following table offers some brief details about each event.

Table 3 – Events for Participant Observation

Church	Event	Date
Church A	International Picnic	July 2019
Church B	New Zealand Vigil at mosque	March 2019
	Iftar Dinner at mosque	May 2019
Church C	New Zealand Vigil at mosque	March 2019
	Iftar Dinner at mosque	May 2019
	ESL class	June 2019
Church D	Event canceled	n/a
Church E	Advent Dinner	December 2019
Church F	Interfaith Dialogue at mosque	August 2019
Church G	Arab Fellowship Bible Study	October 2019

Both electronic and hard copy documents were obtained from ministry leaders, as well as documents that were available during participant observations. These documents included meeting minutes, Bible study notes in Arabic and English, handouts from an interfaith dialogue, Iftar dinner agenda, ministry brochure, training materials, and church email newsletters announcing activities with local Muslims.

The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using a system of coding developed from chapter seven of *Qualitative Research* by Tim Sensing. Codes for the interviews were developed based on themes and patterns discovered by a reading of the raw data and the assigning of potential codes which demonstrated the patterns. The interviews were organized into the seven primary codes of training, outreach, relationships, leadership, team, prayer, and communication.

The notes from the participant observations were used to describe the events, highlighting pertinent factors, proceeding the discussion from the interviews in each case study. The documentary evidence collected was used in a supplementary way where needed in the discussions of the interviews and participant observations.

Findings

The themes discovered in the data collections were applied to each of the seven church case studies. These cases give a broad answer to the main research question of how local evangelical churches in the Chicago Metro area are engaging local Muslim communities. These case studies can be grouped into three different models of outreach. First is the Support Group model which is an organized ministry within the church that encourages people in the group to intentionally befriend Muslims. Second is the Organic model where outreach is infused generally into the entire congregation from a leadership level down to the congregation. The emphasis is the surrounding community and getting people in the congregation to do outreach in their personal lives. The third and final model is Represent the Church where a ministry within the church takes responsibility for reaching out to a Muslim community and identifies themselves as being from that local church. It has similar aspects to the support group model, but with the distinction that they are overt about representing the church. It is a congregation-on-congregation relationship. Since space does not permit us to look at each case study in-depth, one representative case for each of the three models will be discussed with a summary of their strengths and challenges.

Church A – Support Group Model

This is a multi-site church with seven campuses mostly located in the Chicago suburbs. The people involved with Muslim ministry primarily came from two suburban campuses. They had been engaging Muslims for three years at the time this study was conducted.

This ministry excelled in at least four ways in engaging local Muslims. First, they offered support in the form of monthly meetings where training was conducted along with prayer and encouragement for the relationships that they had with Muslim friends. This was also seen in how they planned and performed outreaches together, thus giving an opportunity to minister to Muslim acquaintances collectively.

Second, was the intentionality that they displayed in ministry. This was evidenced by how they invested in their friendships with Muslims by visiting them in their places of business, as well as in the hospital. Another way that this intentionality was seen was in how the members of this group shared their faith with Muslim friends. This was done through praying with them, sharing scripture with them, and engaging their Muslim friends in gospel conversations.

Third, they practiced hospitality and were also willing to receive it from Muslims. At a picnic they hosted respect for Muslim dietary restrictions was shown by serving halal meat. Also, they maintained separation of genders which showed that they were willing to accommodate their Muslim friends by honoring this custom. The practice of gift giving at the picnic and holiday parties combined hospitality with sharing their faith, as the gifts given either included scripture or pointed to a Bible story.

Fourth, they had an ethnically diverse ministry team including some Muslim Background Believers (MBB), as well as others. This diversity showed that the gospel is for all people and not just one ethnic group. This helps to dispel the perception that Christianity is only for westerners which is sometimes a stumbling block for Muslims.

A particular challenge for this ministry was a lack of recognition within the church. This was because publicity was not widely circulated due to security concerns. Given that this is a multi-site church the lack of internal publicity was a hinderance to spreading their influence on other campuses where people might also have contact with Muslims.

Church B – Organic Model

This church is a medium sized suburban congregation with an attendance of 200-220 on a Sunday morning. They had also been engaging Muslims for three years at the time of this study.

There were five practices that church B did that were effective in their relationship with the local mosque. First, the leader created opportunities for his congregation to interact with Muslims. This was seen in planning events like a Thanksgiving dinner and a Feed My Starving Children work project, both done in conjunction with the mosque community.

Second, he was intentional about modeling how to build a friendship with the Imam, as well as other Muslims. This relationship ranged from personal interactions to

publicly advocating for issues that the Muslim community was concerned about like attending a vigil for shootings that took place at mosques in New Zealand.

Third, this congregation was committed to prayer. This was evidenced by their taking the first Sunday of each month to pray for an hour for outreach in the community including among Muslims, instead of teaching Sunday School. It was also seen in how the leader encouraged his people to be constant in prayer in their own lives as they reached out to Muslims and others.

Fourth, like church A they practiced and received hospitality. Once again, holidays, like Thanksgiving and Easter, were used to extend hospitality and share Christ with Muslim friends. Yet, this relationship was reciprocal in that they also responded to a Muslim invitation for hospitality by attending an Iftar dinner during Ramadan.

Fifth, the ministry events and opportunities were communicated well to the congregation. Several venues were used and combined with announcements at prayer meetings and on Sunday mornings. These all served to make clear what activities were available with the Muslim community.

This church had some committed volunteers and events were well attended, but there were two main challenges that arose with respect to volunteers. First, at least two of the main volunteers interviewed for this study had not received any training. The second involved the age of the volunteers. While it was mentioned that a couple seminary students were involved, one interviewee stated that most of those involved were over fifty. Challenges like this one can produce a problem for long term sustainability of a ministry since younger people are not involved.

Church E – Represent the Church

This is a medium sized suburban congregation with an attendance of around 250. They had been engaging a local mosque for twelve years at the time of this study.

The intentionality that this church displayed in engaging this mosque was prominent in three ways. First, they made initial contact with the Muslim community by simply walking down the street and meeting the Imam at the mosque. Second, they conducted multiple events with the Muslim community and had them frequently. This included everything from an annual Advent dinner to interfaith dialogues to work projects to small groups.

The third way that this church demonstrated intentionality was in how they shared their faith. As one leader said the devotionals at the Advent dinner were a vehicle for sharing the gospel. Others on the team took the opportunity to share scripture with their Muslim friends when the occasion arose. Finally, the singing of Christmas Carols was another way that this ministry used to share their faith.

Another aspect to this ministry was the compassionate friendship that they enjoyed with the mosque. Their twelve-year relationship evolved into them using familial language to describe their Muslim neighbors. Out of the shared experiences that these two communities had the church walking with the mosque through a split was the greatest demonstration of the depth of their friendship.

There were two aspects that this ministry shared with each previous case. First, they practiced and received hospitality. This was seen by their hosting the annual Advent dinner, as well as attending an annual Iftar dinner. Second, the team members all had previous cross-cultural ministry experience.

While this ministry saw a lot of success, there were three areas that posed challenges. First, there was inconsistency in training. In the beginning, training opportunities were abundant and proved helpful in equipping people and changing their attitudes, but none had been offered recently. Second, they struggled to develop young new leaders. This might also be the result of not offering consistent training from which to recruit for the ministry. As we saw above, this problem leaves the future of the ministry in doubt. A fear of jeopardizing the relationship with the mosque over a Muslim who is interested in following Christ, was the final challenge facing this ministry. It was clear that those involved want their Muslim friends to know Christ, but the uncertainty of what this would do to the deep friendship they have was a concern.

Conclusions and Implementation

The conclusions of the findings were derived by offering a cross-case analysis that answers the two additional questions. The first question is what are some of the challenges that these local churches encountered when engaging Muslims? The second question is what lessons can be learned from the experiences of these congregations when mobilizing churches to engage Muslims? Suggestions for how local churches can implement ways to navigate the challenges and employ the insights from the lessons are also offered.

Challenges Encountered

While challenges were found in each of the cases discussed in the findings, when all the cases were considered together, five general challenges were discovered that these local churches encountered when engaging Muslims.

Lack of Training

In a number of cases several committed volunteers reported having no formal training. This was true for people involved with ESL, hospitality, and other outreaches even though they recognized their need for it. While several of the churches in this study offered training, at least for some of these volunteers it was done before they got involved. Commenting on an experience she had at an Easter Tea one woman said, “When we got to the Easter Tea, she [the Christian leader] asked if I could open in prayer and I thought well, but sure is it okay to pray in Jesus name? What am I supposed to say? Are there things I shouldn’t say? I want to know how to be sensitive to our guests and I want to be appropriate, but in terms of training no” (FV2B).

Thus, it seems that training plays a vital role not only as a tool for recruiting and equipping new people, but also in preparing already committed volunteers. Therefore, a regular rhythm for training should be developed, to make sure that all who are involved are being set up for a successful ministry experience. Several curricula mentioned in this study, such as *Bridges*, *Journey to Jesus*, and *Al Massira* could prove helpful in establishing a regular schedule for training.

Involvement of Young Volunteers

The regular involvement of congregants in their 30s and 40s also emerged as a challenge for these churches. The reasons cited for this were distance to travel for ministry, having young families, scheduling conflicts due to busyness, and lack of a clear pathway to bring new people onto the ministry team. Among these reasons the most concerning were the objections to evangelism and inviting Muslims to become followers of Christ given by people at church D. The leader of this ministry described one attitude in his church as “why do you want to do this and are you going to, sort of, evangelize and push religious crusade on them in some degrees?” (ML1D). Unfortunately, this coheres with a recent study conducted by the Barna group that showed 47% of Christian millennials “agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith” (Barna Group 2019).

This is where robust biblical teaching on evangelism topics like the Great Commission is needed. This combined with a way to intentionally disciple young people in Muslim ministry may help in getting more of them involved.

Barriers to Commitment

We have already noted that distance and busyness were hinderances to getting younger congregants involved. These two factors also proved to be barriers for getting congregants involved generally. Giving American volunteers specific time-oriented tasks that they can plan in their schedules may help in navigating the issue of busyness, and if given enough time and notice it may also help to alleviate the barrier of distance.

An additional obstacle to commitment was that the ministry was not promoted well within the congregation. As one leader shared, “I feel like there hasn’t been a whole lot of PR for it at our church. And like I said that’s partly because of security things. At one time when we had something going on and they put it as a banner on our website ‘Muslim outreach.’ Ok, that’s probably not the best plan. I think that kind of put a damper on the PR part of it” (FL1A).

Perhaps involving the church in a congregation wide effort to pray for Muslims, such as the *30 Days of Prayer* campaign that church C used, could be one way to create awareness of Muslim ministry generally. Also, regular prayer requests for the specific ministry that the church is doing could be communicated through the church newsletter. This could help to solve the problems of security, since the newsletter is circulated only to congregants, and promotion because people would be made aware of the prayer needs of the ministry on a regular basis. An extra step of cautioning people not to share these requests beyond the congregation could be added to alleviate security concerns.

A lack of commitment was not only witnessed on the church side, but also proved to be a barrier on the Muslim side. Speaking of his church’s experience one leader said, “So, our folks want to have more involvement with them than they want to have with us . . . You know, there is no sort of desire to continue relationship really . . . there just wasn’t a vision for building on that” (ML1D). Regarding this lack of reciprocity on behalf of the Muslims, despite the efforts of Christians to befriend them, it seems that the only option here is to pray that God would open a new path for engagement.

Fear

Fear was another obstacle that these local churches encountered when engaging a Muslim community. There were four specific types of fear mentioned in this study. First, it was the attitude of some congregants that Muslims are dangerous. Second, there was a fear that they might offend a Muslim person because they were not sure how to conduct themselves in a relationship with one. Third, as reported by church E, was the concern that the relationship with a Muslim community could end if one of them decided to follow Christ. Last, there was an internal struggle among Muslims and MBBs about what would happen to them if they decided to follow Christ and their family found out. A leader at church G that has an Arab Bible Study recounted a Syrian convert saying that he feared what his family would do if they found out he was now a Christian.

The first two fears mentioned can be rectified by adequate training and creating opportunities for Muslims and Christians to meet face to face. The interviews showed that the outreach events these churches conducted had a transformative effect on the attitudes of the volunteers and the congregation. As one volunteer at church C commented, “I can tell you for those who are directly involved it’s absolutely been transformative for us” (MV1C). Thus, it seems that hosting events where Christians and Muslims can interact face to face is one of the best ways to change negative attitudes.

A possible way to navigate the third fear of jeopardizing the relationship is to do what a leader at church E suggested by forming partnerships with other churches outside the relationship with the Muslim community and encourage Muslim seekers to visit these churches. Thus, developing partnerships with other local churches or individual Christians might be a way to help those seeking in this context without jeopardizing the relationship with the mosque.

The final issue of a MBB’s conversion and his/her family is more complicated, yet advice from two Muslim ministry practitioners may prove helpful. Phil Parshall suggests, “If a Muslim becomes a believer, he should be urged to witness quietly and carefully to his friends and family. If necessary, he may have to share his faith more by deed than by word” (Parshall 2003, 199). Roland Muller highlights the importance of a supportive Christian community: “New believers from Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds need support, friendship-discipleship, a place of refuge, and much more. If it is not apparent that these things are available in the body of Christ he or she may turn away from the Gospel” (Muller 2015, 145). Therefore, looking for subtle ways that a MBB can share his newfound faith with his Muslim family and friends, and the support of a loving Christian community may help to navigate this internal struggle.

Tension

In some situations where Scripture was taught, or theological issues were discussed, moments of tension arose between Muslims and Christians. After one leader shared a short devotional about Jesus' death on the cross at a barbeque, a Muslim man "started arguing and saying, 'you people are so conceited, and you think you have the only answer' . . . that whole thing cut them off and they didn't want to talk to me anymore" (FL1A). In the Arab Bible Study, some of the MBBs in the group were keen to point out at times that "The Qur'an is not correct.' And when that happens then there is a big defense that pops up to want to defend the Qur'an, to defend their Muslim faith" (ML2G).

When dealing with these tense situations, it is important for Christians and Muslims to realize that these moments are inevitable in their relationship. While we do have some doctrinal beliefs in common, such as monotheism, belief in divine revelation, and the final judgment, there are other deeply held theological convictions that are in conflict, such as the prophethood of Muhammad and the deity of Christ, that will emerge in these relationships. These doctrines are foundational to their respective faiths and thus, unless a conversion takes place, they cannot be compromised. In these interfaith relationships Christians and Muslims will have to learn to respectfully agree to disagree, while at the same time trying to understand why those on the other side hold these convictions so strongly.

Lessons

As with the challenges just discussed, taking all the case studies into consideration, there were seven overall lessons to be learned from the experiences of these congregations when mobilizing churches to engage Muslims.

Intentionality

A phenomenon that occurred across the categories of training, outreach, and relationships was that these churches were intentional about engaging Muslims. It is interesting to note that six out of the seven churches in this study initiated the relationships that they had with Muslims.

A leader at church E explained why the relationship his church had with the mosque had endured, "it required a lot of intentionality. It's not just something that you do

casually. You have to do it very intentionally . . . It won't happen by accident and the momentum could be lost very quickly. So, we've just been extremely intentional and very helped by the Lord" (ML2E). Given the fact that evangelical churches are far more numerous than mosques in the United States it is more likely that churches will need to be the initiator in the relationship.

Multiple Approaches

The different ways that churches initiated with Muslims, the variety of outreaches, the types of teams, the different ways that prayer was practiced, and the various ways of communicating with the congregation all point to the fact that there is no one way to reach out to a Muslim community, but that there are multiple approaches. When deciding what type of strategic model will fit their church best, a congregation can consider the Organic, Support Group, and Represent the Church models discussed and adopt one, or again use these as a guideline and create their own model.

Practiced and Received Hospitality

Another lesson to be learned from the churches in this study was that they both practiced and received hospitality. This phenomenon was seen across all the case studies. Many of the events that the churches hosted took place around holidays especially Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The most popular ways that they received hospitality were either an invitation to a Muslim home or attending an Iftar dinner. This highlights that holidays are a great avenue for both extending hospitality to Muslims and receiving it from them. Furthermore, traditional holidays provide rich opportunities for sharing our faith in multiple ways. A pastor described the devotional he shares at an annual Advent dinner as "An open door to share the gospel" (ML1E). He continued:

Every year I'm sharing openly the gospel in various ways. One time it was from focusing more on Mary because there is so much on Mary. One time it was focusing on John the Baptist because there is so much about John the Baptist. Another time it was more of an Advent yearning for the kingdom of God to come because of all of those Advent themes of peace and joy and justice and love, fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. (ML1E)

These churches also displayed a willingness to honor their Muslim guests by adhering to their dietary restrictions and providing lavish meals for them to enjoy. These abundant meals were also provided by the Muslims when receiving Christians as

their guests. It is also worth noting that many of these hospitality events took place in houses of worship, showing that church facilities and mosques are places that Christians and Muslims are willing to attend to extend and receive hospitality. The willingness of Christians to enter a Muslim house of worship for the purpose of receiving hospitality shows that they respect their Muslim neighbors and are willing to enter an unfamiliar space to be in relationship with them. The converse is also true when Muslims enter a church building for the purpose of extending friendship to Christians and experience hospitality from them.

Compassionate Friendship

The churches that had formed relationships with Muslim communities over several years had a compassionate friendship with them. This means that these Christians took to heart issues that concerned their Muslim neighbors to the point that some of them even used familial language, as noted above. Commenting on their long-term relationship, one volunteer at church E said that those in the mosque community were “family now for me” (FV1E). She continued, “I care about their families. I go to funerals . . . I love them enough now and now I’m going to tell them about Christ and now I’m going to go deeper because now I love them” (FV1E).

This compassionate friendship also manifested itself in two ways when Muslims and Christians worked together. The first was when they did joint work projects together serving both the local community and charities around the world. Second it was observed in the peaceful and harmonious relationships that they had formed with one another. The importance of this latter manifestation was mentioned by the imam at church E’s Advent dinner who believed that an intentional peaceful relationship with Christians, like the one his mosque had with the church, could have prevented the civil war that took place in his own country. Both are also demonstrations of how Christians can work together with Muslims on issues of public concern. Perhaps most of all it gives Christians the opportunity to live out the teaching of Jesus, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt 5:9), thus creating a more peaceful community in the present and setting an example for the next generation.

Bible is Central

The use of biblical references was also present across cases and was seen in multiple venues from gift giving to personal conversations to devotionals and interfaith talks.

This reflects an evangelical value of the authority of Scripture and a desire to share it with Muslim friends because of its ability to make them “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). One leader in church E’s relationship with the mosque described them as “Sufi leaning.” In sharing scripture with them he said, “we can really hit common ground when we talk about things like the Beatitudes. The taming the ego and loving God. All those kind of things . . . we can introduce scripture to them . . . We try to be very careful, any opening we ever have to say this is what our scripture says we read it right there and then” (ML2E).

It is worth pointing out that the Arab Bible study at church G was the only ministry that had seen Muslims become followers of Christ. The centrality of Scripture in these ministries demonstrates that Christians should use multiple avenues in introducing the Bible to their Muslim friends, especially if it involves a prolonged study of the Bible together. It is also incumbent upon Christians who have such opportunities to understand the beliefs and concerns of their Muslim neighbors and teach on scripture passages which speak to them.

Experienced Motivated Team

Another picture that emerged from the interviews and participant observations was that the ministry teams interacting with Muslims were experienced and motivated. Five of the nine leaders were former overseas missionaries who served among Muslims, one worked for a humanitarian organization in a Muslim country, and another was a first-generation immigrant.

The volunteers involved in these ministries (8 out of 12) reported having previous cross-cultural experience. Hearing how many of these volunteers described their own involvement it also seemed as if they were motivated for what they were doing. This experience and motivation was evident at several of the events that I attended where these teams navigated cultural issues adeptly and made sacrificial efforts to make these events happen. These also seemed to be elements that have sustained some of these ministries over the long haul, especially those who have been engaging Muslims for a decade or more like churches E and G. Thus, local churches would be served in identifying those in their congregation with long term overseas ministry experience when launching an outreach to a local Muslim community.

According to our present study, this would not only be true for those who have served as long-term missionaries, but also for those who have had any type of cross-cultural service. Perhaps those with longer term service should be looked to for leadership and those with shorter amounts of experience as initial volunteers.

One other aspect that contributed to the motivation of some of these teams was the support of the senior pastor or pastoral staff. Thus, even teams with experience and motivation are greatly encouraged when they sense that the pastoral staff are behind them.

Faith is Foundational

A final lesson that followed from this study was that the relationships that these Muslims and Christians formed were based on their respective faiths. This was evident in how those interviewed described conversations, as well as ones that I participated in. The conversations at my table during an Advent dinner ranged from family life to politics to faith. A genuine concern was voiced for raising children as religious conservatives in a culture that is struggling with gender fluid issues and seemingly devaluing traditional families. One Muslim man who had a six-month-old son asked me and another Christian at the table how we navigate the commercialization of Christmas with our kids. I shared that traditions and values need to be communicated with intentionality to children. It gave me an opportunity to talk about the family Advent calendar that my wife and I do with our kids to inculcate faith and teach them about the birth of Christ. The Muslim man seemed to appreciate that answer as to how we are intentional about communicating our faith to our children.

Another way that this was observed was in some of the social practices of the Muslims, namely, women wearing hijabs and the boundaries observed between opposite genders. While it is true, as noted earlier, that there can be moments of tension due to our respective faiths, it is also true that there is a uniting aspect as Christians and Muslims can come together around a shared conviction that faith is foundational to their identities. This is an observation that should encourage local evangelical churches to freely represent their faith as they interact with local Muslim communities, while affording their Muslim neighbors the same opportunity.

Conclusion

The aim of this project was to study how specific evangelical congregations in the Chicago Metro area are engaging Muslim communities, so that other evangelical churches can learn from their experiences and be encouraged to do the same. It is my hope that other evangelical churches can make use of this information to develop the best way forward as they seek to overcome their hesitancies, step out in faith, and reach out to Muslim communities near them with the neighbor love of Christ so that they might know him.

Rev. Mike Urton (DMin) is the Director of Immigrant Mission for the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA). He has served among the Muslim and Muslim Background Believer population of Chicago for 20 years.
He can be reached at mike.urton@efca.org.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. 2011. *Al-Massira: An open place to walk with the Prophets and meet the Messiah DVD*. Al Massira. Accessed November 4, 2020. <https://almassira.org/>
- Bagby, Ihsan. 2011. "The American Mosque 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders. Report Number 1 from the US Mosque Study 2011." CAIR. Accessed February 19, 2020. <http://buildingbridgeswny.org/wp-content/uploads/American-Mosque-2011.pdf>
- Barna Group. 2019. "Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism is Wrong." *Barna*. Accessed October 6, 2020. <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>
- Green, Lisa Cannon. 2015. "Pastors Grow More Polarized on Islam." *LifeWay Research*, October 2015. Accessed February 20, 2020. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/10/22/pastors-grow-more-polarized-on-islam/>
- Kronk, Richard, Daniels, Gene, Chapman, Mark, and Watson, James. 2017. "Fruitful Practices in Ministry to the North American Muslim Diaspora: A Mixed-Methods Study." *Fruitful Practice Research*. Accessed February 20, 2020. https://nextmove.net/uploads/FP-Diaspora-report_FINAL.pdf
- Lipka, Michael. 2015. Muslims are expected to surpass Jews as second-largest U.S. religious group. *Pew Forum*. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/14/muslims-expected-to-surpass-jews-as-second-largest-u-s-religious-group/>
- _____. 2017. "Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world." *Pew Forum*. Accessed February 19, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>
- Muller, Roland. 2015. *The Messenger, The Message and The Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter*. 4th ed. CanBooks.
- National Association of Evangelicals. 2017. What is an Evangelical? Accessed February 10, 2020. <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>
- Oksnevad, Roy & Urton, Michael. 2014. *Journey to Jesus: Building Christ-centered Friendships with Muslims*. Carol Stream: Tyndale.

- Open Doors. 2020. "The World Watch List 2020: The 50 Countries Where it is Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus." Accessed February 20, 2020. <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>
- Parshall, Phil. 2003. *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization*. Waynesboro: Gabriel Publishing.
- Parshall, Phil. 1999. "Going Too Far?" *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd edition, ed., by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 656-659. Pasadena: William Carey Library.
- Pew Forum. 2017. "Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans." Accessed February 19, 2020. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>
- Pew Forum. 2018. "Muslim in America: Immigrants and Those Born in U.S. see life differently in many ways." Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://www.pewforum.org/essay/muslims-in-america-immigrants-and-those-born-in-u-s-see-life-differently-in-many-ways/>
- Redman, Gerry. 2010. "The Westophobia Report Updated 2010." In *Islam and Christianity on the Edge: Talking Points in Christian-Muslim Relations into the 21st Century*, ed., by John Azumah and Peter Riddell, 127-145. Victoria: Acorn Press.
- Sensing, Tim. 2011. *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, Wipf & Stock, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Schmidt, Garbi. 2004. *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Shellnut, Kate. 2017. "How Christians See Muslims: Missions Experts Urge Concern For Both Souls and Security." *Christianity Today*, June.
- _____. 2017. "Most White Evangelicals Don't Think Muslims Belong in America." *Christianity Today*, July 2017. Accessed January 12, 2018. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/july/pew-how-white-evangelicals-view-us-muslims-islam.html>
- World Christian, 2019. *30 Days of Prayer: Muslim World Prayer Guide*. Colorado Springs: WorldChristian.
- Yin, Robert K. 1994. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.