

Iranians turn to Christ on their holidays



Street evangelism in the countries surrounding Iran is as easy as going fishing in Australia ? there are so many fish, says US-based Iranian pastor Mansour Khajehpour.

For the past two years, Khajehpour and his wife, Nahid Sepehri ? the director of the Iranian Bible Society in Diaspora ? have put Persian Bibles into the hands of Iranians who are holidaying in Turkey and Armenia, during the Iranian New Year celebrations in March.

?This past March and the last year, Nahid and I have been managing to deliver mass numbers of Scriptures into the surrounding countries of Iran,? Khajehpour says.

They don't call it smuggling ? they call it ?Special Handling Overwhelming Care and Kindness (SHOCK) delivery of the Bible.'

?This coming March will be our third year that we are taking teams from the US and Europe to Turkey and Armenia and we go meet people individually, talk to them, respect them, love them, and then ask them if we can give them a gift. The gift could be a Bible, a New Testament, a children's Bible, a booklet or a children's game board. Then we tell them that ?this story is about Jesus Christ. If you are interested, this is our address ? come and hear the story of Jesus Christ.?'

Over a two-week period in March 2017, the team distributed 7500 pieces of Scriptures to people, one by one. ?Out of that we personally had 35 individuals coming and accepting Jesus Christ, but we strongly believe the number is massive,? Khajehpour says.

The Iranian Bible Society supplies Persian Scriptures to Iranian Christians around the world from its base in the US city of Seattle, where Sepehri and Khajehpour live with their children, Rebeka and Matthew.

In 2015, it managed to distribute 150,000 copies of the full Bible inside Iran. But the main method of distribution now is digital. In 2016, it distributed one million digital Bibles, 500,000 non-print New Testaments and 7500 print Bibles and nearly 10,000 print New Testaments.

?We are using multiple platforms ? satellite TV, radio, the internet, micro SD cards and intranet ? to distribute audio and digital versions of the Today's Persian Version Bible in many shapes and formats,? says Sepehri, who is the daughter of the last executive director of the Iranian Bible Society before it was confiscated and closed down by the government in 1990.

So why does Khajehpour describe bringing Iranian Muslims to Christ as easy as ?fishing in Australia??

?Among many Muslims in the Middle East, Iranians are fed up by the situation in the Middle East,? he says. ?In the last three decades, more Muslims have been killed in the name of their common god by their fellow Muslims than Muslims being killed by non-Muslims in 1400 years, all accumulated together.?'

Khajehpour says God is mighty enough to use this 'horrible, ridiculous situation to bring people into awareness of their longing and their thirst for peace.'

'And that's what we do. We just go in all honesty. We don't give them a rosy picture; we tell them pain, suffering continues, but there is a companion, there is an Emmanuel. We talk about the Emmanuel. Ever since we became Christians, we have faced more challenges than before, but nonetheless we tell them 'it is out there, it is real, but the hope is out there that there is a God that would walk with us through this whole process' and then you see tears are shed, hearts open, knees bend.'

As one who converted at age 15 from a Muslim background, Khajehpour has been disowned by his family, kicked out of home, arrested and imprisoned by the Iranian government.

'But those are a few occasions ' God's mighty hand has been in our lives. We've seen it over and over and over again in different situations,' he says.

Sepehri suffered her own challenges after her father was kicked out of the country in 1989, having successfully fought to print the first Farsi Bible inside Iran.

'I was in Tehran working in the Iranian Bible Society in the translation department. In February 1990, we were working and we heard someone ringing. One of the men went to open the door and ' we realised some Muslims are coming in our office. Soon we put our robes on and they came with the gun, saying 'you are spies,' so they confiscate, they took everything and they pushed us to sign 'we are not coming in this office any more, you are not working for Bible Society.' After that, everything was gone,' says Sepehri.

'After our marriage, the government took us for questioning and for two weeks they told us we are not allowed to drive out of the city. Every day we have to go to the office, sign there and they put a death penalty for my husband.'

After the couple had their daughter, Rebeka, Khajehpour took his opportunity to escape to Athens while he was on a bond out of prison. Then he tried to figure out how to get his wife and daughter out of the country. 'I was bargaining with smugglers how to get Nahid out to Turkey and how to walk through the waters into Greece,' he says.

But Khajehpour and Sepehri feel that God miraculously intervened to bring them out of Iran, in style.

'When Mansour went out, I was thinking 'am I going to see him again?' We don't know what's going to happen. Maybe tomorrow the government's going to come and capture me. I didn't have a visa to go to join him, but my father was in the US and he said 'stay home, stay safe and I will do something.'

Sepehri's father told her to get a new passport without any stamps and send it with her brother to Germany ' which is illegal. But the German embassy granted visas to Sepehri and her daughter without any quibble.

'They looked at this blank passport, it didn't have any stamp that she had entered Germany, and they granted Nahid a visa to Greece without Nahid being at the interview ' if this is not God's providence, what is?? says Khajehpour.

'She and Rebeka flew on an aeroplane, they got a delicious breakfast, and three hours later they were in Greece. This is amazing.'

A year later, on June 28, 1997, the family entered the US as refugees.

'We entered the US with \$100 given to us by an American missionary. That's it. Within 35 days of arrival, Nahid and I had three jobs. Within 11 months, we bought two cars in America, we got all household items and then we saved money to move to Seattle, so that I could become a 'tentmaker'/pastor. And this is amazing,' says Khajehpour.

?In America, we have been able to achieve great things. We have been able to raise up our kids in a God-fearing family. We've been able to freely worship. We've been able to pursue education. I attended Fuller Seminary and Princeton at the same time as Nahid has been doing this amazing job.?

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