

Moving of Lay Evangelist to Kababir

Ibrahim Sim'an, the secretary and translator of the Baptist

magazine, Al-Jama'ah, was impressed by the spiritual need of

the Christian minority in Kababir. His family had originally come

from the village of Tur'an which is located on the road from

Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. Tur'an also had a Christian minority

living in the midst of a two-thirds Muslim majority. Mr. Sim'an is

an Arab, and was formerly a member of the Greek Orthodox Church.

He had become a Baptist while studying at the Baptist High School

in Nazareth. He had learned English at the Baptist School. In

addition, he had become fluent in Hebrew while working as a painter

with his father in the kibbutzim (Hebrew: cooperative farming

communities) of the Mapam political party, of which they were active

members.³ He had developed a deep desire to bridge the social gaps

that existed between the Arab and Jewish communities in Israel.

Because of his fluency in languages, he was often called upon to trans-

late for political rallies.

Some of the Baptists in Nazareth were doubtful of the validity

of this deep involvement of a member of their church in politics,

but Mr. Sim'an maintained that this was his way of witnessing in the

world outside of the church. At the same time he was becoming more

deeply involved in translating in Baptist worship services and

conferences, from English into Arabic and Hebrew and vice versa.

³The Mapam Political Party is a socialist party with Marxist

leanings. It has championed the cause of Arabs in Israel and attempted to bring together both Jews and Arabs in its programs and party lists.

He expressed the personal conviction in 1965 that he felt that God might be calling him to prepare for missionary service in Africa. He felt that the black man of Africa would be more likely to listen to an Arab than to a white western missionary. As a step of preparation, he determined to become more deeply involved in the evangelistic program of the Baptist Churches in Israel. The needs of the Christians of Kababir and the invitation of the Sheikh had fallen on listening ears and a willing heart.

On October 28, 1966 Mr. Sim'an moved, with his wife and child, from his father's home on the outskirts of Nazareth, into a rented house in Kababir. One must know the deep ties that can exist in the Arab family between father and the elder son to appreciate the courage and determination such a move required. The future expansion of the evangelical Christian witness in Israel will be dependent on the willingness of men like Mr. Sim'an to move out beyond the confines of traditional family and church ties to where the need exists.

Early Meetings

The first Christian worship service was held in Mr. Sim^c's living room on Wednesday, November 1, 1966. The informal

atmosphere of these early home meetings gave an opportunity to ascertain the needs of the Christian families in Kababir. The

services centered around prayer and Bible study and offer opportunity for discussion of matters relevant to the Christians of the community. Meetings were also held in the homes of other Christians in the

community as opportunity arose.

Mr. Sim^c's work as translator and secretary of the newly opened Christian Service Training Center in Haifa required his

moving from Kababir to the Training Center in 1967.⁵ The meetings were continued in the home of Mr. Caesar Mattar, an Arab

Christian. Mr. Sim^c commuted to Kababir to lead the services.

The work in Kababir was sponsored by the Haifa Baptist Congregation and assisted by Dr. Dwight Baker.⁶

⁵The Christian Service Training Center (CSTC) was opened in 1966 under the direction of Dr. Dwight Baker to train Arab Christian laymen for church related service.

⁶The Haifa Baptist Congregation was constituted into a local church on November 1, 1969. It serves both Jewish and Arab members. Mr. Sim^c served with Dr. Baker and a Hebrew Christian pastor on a pastoral committee in the early stages of the development of this congregation.

Establishing Social Rapport

The Arabs of the villages of Israel are often related by family and friendship ties with other Arabs in distant cities and villages. Several years earlier Mr. Sim'an's sister-in-law had lived in Kababir and had formed a close friendship with an Ahmadiyya family. On moving to Kababir Mr. Sim'an and his wife became acquainted with this family and a deep friendship developed. This opened the door to genuine good will.

The daughters of the Ahmadiyya family assisted Mrs. Sim'an in caring for the Sim'an's daughter when a new child was born. This kindness was later reciprocated when the Sim'ans recommended one of the Ahmadiyya girls for nurses training in the Nazareth Hospital.⁷

A deep friendship was also formed with one of the sons of the Ahmadiyya family. When the time came for this son to marry, he asked Mr. Sim'an to be his witness and best man in the wedding party. Mr. Sim'an said of this experience that it was, "one of the highlights in my relations with my Ahmadiyya friends."⁸

The relationships between Christians and Ahmadiyya had been limited due to the landlord-tenant economic structure and the social differences described above. Mr. Sim'an determined to try to bridge this formality by accepting the customary greetings extended to him as a neighbor by the Ahmadiyya.

⁷The Nazareth Hospital is sponsored by the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society. It carries on an active ministry to Israeli Arabs.

⁸Sim'an, Letter, February 3, 1970.

A "circle for literature lovers" was formed by two Ahmadiyya school teachers in Kababir after Mr. Sim'an's encouragement. It was designed to appeal to the youth and intelligentsia such as poets, lawyers, short story writers, etc. Each was to give a lecture in his field and the circle would be held in homes upon invitation. At the first meeting Mr. Sim'an was the only Christian present and no orthodox Muslim had been invited. So he invited the next circle to meet in his home. He invited Christians and orthodox Muslims in addition to Ahmadiyya. This was an opportunity to break down many of the barriers between the religious groups.

The Christians were customarily invited to Ahmadiyya weddings out of politeness. But the Christians usually failed to attend. Mr. Sim'an encouraged the Christians to go with him to the wedding parties and to enter into the festivities with the Ahmadiyya.

Also, he formed a group of "greeters" among the Christians to greet the Ahmadiyya for their feasts. As a result the Ahmadiyya began visiting the Christians for their feasts also.

There were several occasions in which Mr. Sim'an was asked to be a mediator in domestic problems in orthodox Muslim and Christian homes. These problems usually were created when a son or a daughter wished to marry someone who was not fully approved by one of the parents. There was such a case in which a Christian girl had decided to elope because of the objection of one of her parents. Mr. Sim'an managed to intercede in time to get the parents consent, thus enabling a proper wedding.⁹

All of these social contacts were to pay dividends at a later

stage when the Baptists sought to establish a center in Kababir.

Baptist Center Established

Informal worship services were held in the home of Mr. Mattar for a year and a half. During this time it became obvious that a

permanent meeting place was needed. More space was required to accommodate the large group of children from Christian homes that came for Bible study. Meetings in the home had the advantage of informality but the inadequacy of the space available to accommodate larger groups limited the outreach.

Mr. Sim^Can approached the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel for advice and assistance in setting up a permanent meeting place. I had been appointed as Field Representative by the Association and was asked to assist Mr. Sim^Can in locating suitable space for meetings and to work with him in any way needed.

The search for suitable space for a meeting hall was discouraging in the beginning. Much to our surprise, a prominent Greek Catholic family refused to rent available space in their building for a Baptist meeting. We had hoped to obtain space in a building owned by a Christian. Some of the Christians who attended our meetings were afraid that the Ahmadlyya or orthodox Muslims might put pressure on them at a later date and prevent them from holding meetings. This fear was to prove foundless.¹⁰

One Christian family offered to sell a plot of land but it was on the outer edge of the village and far from the homes of those who attended the services. Moreover funds were not available for such a purchase.

¹⁰ A prominent orthodox Muslim was most helpful to us in seeking possible meeting places.

The other Christians, being landless renters were unable to help us. The Ahmadiyya landlord in whose building home meetings had been held was approached. He was willing to rent a basement apartment but the cost of finishing it was beyond our budget. After investigating other available space, additional funds were received from the Association and a price was agreed upon that would enable him to finish the meeting hall. We found this man, as all of the other Ahmadiyya who offered their help, to be a man of integrity, with a quiet and firm faith in Ahmadiyyat.

A rent contract was drawn up with the assistance of a resident of Kababir, Mr. Wajdi Tabari, an orthodox Muslim. Mr. Tabari's son was a graduate of the Baptist Center School at Petach Tikvah, near Tel Aviv. Mr. Tabari had long been a friend of the Baptists and a strong advocate of the Christian-Muslim dialogue.

A clause in the rent contract gave us an opportunity to meet the new Ahmadiyya missionary in Kababir, Sheikh Bashir al-Din 'Abid Allah. Several persons in the Ahmadiyya community were concerned lest the Baptist center be used as some form of social club and affect the morals of the young people in Kababir. Such a club had caused disturbances in a neighboring Druze village on the Carmel. We made an appointment to discuss the matter with the Sheikh and to assure him that our purpose was purely religious.

Sheikh 'Abid Allah greeted us cordially and expressed pleasure at the opportunity of being able to meet us in person. He remarked that he

Many rental apartments in Israel are plastered, tiled and wired by the landlord after rent is paid in advance.

had heard much about Mr. Sim^c's work in the village. We assured him that it was our intention that the center be used for the teaching of the Christian religion to the children of Christian families and for informal worship services for adults in the Baptist tradition. Mr. Sim^c invited the Sheikh to attend the opening service. Though the Sheikh would not commit himself to attend, he did not appear displeased at the invitation. I expressed to him my interest in Kababir and my study of Ahmadiyyat in seminary. At Mr. Sim^c's suggestion the Sheikh gave me a copy of the book by J. D. Shams, Where Did Jesus Die? We shared our mutual concern for religious freedom and the spiritual welfare of the Christian and Muslim families of Kababir. The entire conversation was held in English, but on leaving the Sheikh spoke to us in classical Arabic. Following the visit to the Sheikh a clause was added to the rent contract specifying that the center would be used for religious purposes. The room was completed in a few months time and was opened for services on Wednesday, May 22, 1969. Films on the life of Christ were shown for several weeks, drawing large groups of children and some adults. The meetings were strengthened when a newly married Christian couple moved from Cana of Galilee to Kababir to be near the husband's work. The young man had been a leader in the Greek Orthodox Church in Cana. His wife had been active in the girls mission group at the Cana Baptist Center. She became immediately involved in teaching Bible lessons to the children. A common problem in a village ministry is the mobility of the young people. A village ministry tends to become a training ground for young people who later reinforce the city churches. Many of the young

of the Arab villages in the Galilee move to the larger cities of Haifa, Acre and Nazareth when they finish their education and marry. The larger cities offer better job opportunities. Kababir, fortunately, is situated in the larger city of Haifa and is beginning to attract these young people.

Response from adult Christians was not as good after the

opening of the new center as had been anticipated. One difficulty

was in finding a time when interested families would be free from

work. This is particularly difficult in Israel, where in Jewish areas

Sunday is work day. Baptists in Israel have adjusted by holding meet-

ings either on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, depending on the work

habits of the people in a particular area.

But the main reason for lack of adult interest was probably

apathy that had developed through long years of separation from the

church. In addition, Baptists are still a relatively new missionary

movement in the area.¹² While parents are willing to have their

children learn the Bible from the Baptists, most are not willing

openly to join the Baptists because of loyalty to the traditional Catholic

and Orthodox churches. The apathy of adult Christians in Kababir

should change if a vital and interested evangelical ministry continues

in the village.

The fact remains that the Catholic and Orthodox churches have

not had adequate personnel or interest to minister effectively to

small Christian groups as the one found in Kababir. After many

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The first Baptist church in the area of Palestine that is now

Israel was begun in Nazareth in 1922 by Shukry Musa, an Arab

businessman who was converted while on a business trip to the United

States. But the church was scattered in 1948 during the Arab-Jewish

conflict, most of the members leaving for Jordan and Lebanon.

Membership has grown since 1948 from a handful to approximately

250 members.

centuries they are still dependent on missionary assistance from abroad. There have been attempts at union among the various Catholic and Orthodox churches, but often this process has resulted in frustration and confusion for the average parishioner.

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The Arab Christians in Israel are in fact a minority within

the larger Israeli Arab minority. They feel subtle pressures from Muslims and are caught up in the cross-currents of the political conflict between Israel and the Arab countries. Many feel deprived of adequate economic opportunities and often contemplate emigration to Canada or the United States. The program of the Baptist churches is to provide a message of hope in the midst of discouragement. And at the same time it encourages education and professional training that will enable Israeli Arabs to adapt to the job opportunities that are available in the country.

Baptists have also endeavored to teach and practice the concepts of tithing and self-support. Through the long centuries of economic deprivation in the Middle East the Christian churches were looked to for material as well as spiritual nourishment. A pattern of receiving from the church rather than giving to the church was formed. There is still talk among the Arab people of the days when food, clothing, and even a donkey, were given to new converts. Whenever a person converts to another faith in the Middle East it is assumed by most people that the conversion was for reasons

13 The hopes of many Arab Orthodox Christians received a setback in 1969 when a notice was issued by the leaders instructing Orthodox faithful not to participate in the worship services of other churches until the outcome of union talks were clear. Catholic and Orthodox laymen had shared the hope for many years that some agreement might be reached by the hierarchies, especially on a unified date for the observance of Christmas and of Easter.

of money or marriage. Due to the failure of the churches to teach the biblical concept of stewardship priests of many churches have to make periodic calls on their parishioners to ask for funds. Therefore, beginning with the first meeting in the new Baptist Center in Kababir an offering was taken and the concepts of biblical stewardship were taught. A savings account was opened and the money has been used to pay for the expenses of the meeting. In this way a small beginning has been made toward the ultimate goal of self-support.

Relations with the Ahmadiyya

The Baptist presence in Kababir has offered numerous opportunities for a Christian-Muslim dialogue. The rapport of the Ahmadiyya has continued since the establishment of the Baptist Center in Kababir.

The most common reaction of the Ahmadiyya people to the Baptist presence in Kababir has been the statement, "We are

missionaries to the Muslims. You are missionaries to the Christians. You are welcome!" This statement is a summation of the missionary experience of both groups in the Holy Land. All of the Ahmadiyya converts have come from orthodox Islam, and all of the Baptist converts among the Arabs have come from the various Catholic and Orthodox churches. As will be seen in the next section of this study, both groups are foreign missionary revival movements that have

drawn converts out of the larger, but spiritually weaker established mosques and churches. The larger religious communities have been understandably unsympathetic to these missionary activities,

especially when they resulted in conversions. But at the same time, the presence and activities of the Ahmadiyya and Baptists have served as a catalyst for more vigorous religious activities among the priests, khadis, and laity of the established religious communities. Also, they have evoked feelings of deep appreciation from the common people for their contributions to the moral, mental and religious education of the Arab young people in their communities.

Islam has proven to be the most successful in resistance to conversion to Christianity of the religious groups in Israel. Because of the limits of religious freedom within the millet system evangelical missions have tended to work primarily among members

of the ancient Christian churches, and to re-establish a Christian-
 Jewish dialogue.¹⁴ Following the 1967 conflict, this writer knows of
 only three Muslims in the entire area west of the Jordan River who
 are baptized Christians. Only one of these is from Israel proper.
 Therefore, the Ahmadiyya of Kababir have felt little reason to be
 threatened by the presence of a Christian missionary group in this
 community.

¹⁴The subjects of conversion and baptism within the Christian
 churches have been discussed widely by ecumenical leaders in recent
 years. A penetrating study of these subjects is found in
 The Ecumenical Review (Geneva: World Council of Churches) Vol. XIX,
 No. 3, July 1967. It includes articles by such noted church leaders as
 Dr. Paul Lotter, Evangelical Church of Germany; Professor
 Nikos A. Nissiotis, Church of Greece; Rev. Dr. Billy Graham, Baptist
 world evangelist; and Rev. Dr. C. H. Hwang, Presbyterian Church
 of Formosa. A bibliography for these subjects as they pertain to
 Christian relations with the non-Christian faiths is presented by
 Dr. Wilhelm A. Bijsteld in an article, "Trends in the Contemporary
 Discussion on Christians and Men of Other Faiths", The Hartford
 Quarterly (Hartford, Connecticut) Spring 1968, pp. 49 ff. "The
 main issue at stake is clearly this very question, whether 'conversion
 to Christ' (necessarily) means joining a separate Christian
 Community," states Dr. Bijsteld in Footnote 48, p. 59.

Similarities Between the Baptists and the Ahmadiyya

Interestingly, there are similarities of background, attitudes, and approach between the Baptists and the Ahmadiyya. ¹⁵ These

similarities may explain partly the ability of the two groups to exist side by side in such a community as Kababir.

First, both groups arose as "counter-reform" movements in a period of reform in their respective religions. The

Ahmadiyya arose as a counter-reform to the rationalism of nineteenth century Islam in India. The Baptists arose as a radical reform of

the Anglican, Catholic, and Lutheran Churches during the Protestant Reformation of the fifteenth and sixteenth century in Europe. Both

groups sought to turn their respective religions back to the "true faith" expressed respectively in early Islam and primitive

Christianity.

Secondly, both Ahmadiyya and Baptists hold almost fanatically to the infallibility of their respective scriptures, the Qur'an and the Bible. Both feel their scriptures to be the verbally inspired

Word of God that is without error. They both use proof-texts to prove their theological views and to convict their opponents of error.

The Ahmadiyya do not believe in the traditional theory of the abrogation of texts within the Qur'an. Many Baptists have likewise

opposed the methods of modern historical-textual critics of the Bible. For both their respective scriptures are the basis for "faith and

practice."

¹⁵ There is an acknowledged risk of oversimplification here. The "Baptists" referred to here are for the most part the Southern Baptists with whom the writer is most familiar.

Thirdly, both groups have an exclusivist attitude toward other Muslims or Christians. Both Ahmadiyya and Baptists feel themselves to be closer to the spirit and practice of the 'true faith' and look upon members of the larger Muslim or Christian bodies as potential converts. Southern Baptists have refused to join the ecumenical and union movements within Protestant Christianity. The Qadian group maintains its exclusive identity whereas the Lahore group maintains an open posture toward other Muslims, refusing to call them Kafirun.

Fourthly, both groups believe in religious freedom that will allow men liberty of conscience to convert to their religion from the dominant traditional faiths. They have both experienced severe persecution because of their departure from the accepted norms of their respective faiths. As a result both groups advocate the separation of government and religion, and hold a conservative view toward the involvement of their members in politics. Finally, both Ahmadiyyat and the Baptists are vigorous missionary movements which place great emphasis on personal piety, stewardship of time, talents, and money, and witnessing to 'the lost' who are outside their faith. Both groups raise large sums of money to send missionaries around the world to spread their message. As missionary groups, both place a great emphasis on education in an attempt to create a better atmosphere for conversion of others to their groups.

Admittedly, these similarities can be considered negligible in the face of the fundamental difference that exists between the believers of the Ahmadiyya and the Baptists, as well as most other Christian groups, about the death of Jesus. The Ahmadiyya hold to the "swoon" theory and do not believe Jesus died on the cross. But to Baptists, the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection

from the dead are the central doctrines of their faith. As Walter has said, "Ahmad declared, unqualifiedly and repeatedly that if Christians were right in their assertion that Jesus died and rose again, Christianity was true and he was an imposter."¹⁶ Neither the Ahmadiyya or the Baptists have allowed this basic theological difference to exclude each other from their friendship in Kababir.

¹⁶ Walter, The Ahmadiyya Movement, pp. 89-90.

The Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam arose as a counter-reform movement against what Ghulam Ahmad felt to be a decadent Islam of the late nineteenth century India that had fallen prey to western rationalistic thought, Christian missions, and the Hindu Arya Samaj. His claim to be the Promised Messiah did not win a significant number of Christians to his movement but it did provide the Muslims with answers to the claims of Christian missionaries that the Muslims worship a dead Prophet. His polemic against Christianity and his claims that Jesus swooned, revived and died of old age in India, succeeded in winning many orthodox Muslims to his movement. Through the influence of his personality and teachings, the succeeding Khalifas developed the Ahmadiyya Movement into a vital, exclusive missionary movement in Islam.

In the local expression of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Kababir, are found many of the unique characteristic features of the parent body in Rabwah, Pakistan. The Ahmadiyya of Kababir are more faithful in their prayers and more dedicated to witnessing to their faith than the average orthodox Muslim. The education of women and their subsequent freedom of expression is also characteristic. The influence of the Ahmadiyya teaching of peaceful Jihad has had a marked influence on the Ahmadiyya of Kababir. It has rendered them politically neutral in the Arab-Jewish conflict of the Middle East. The Ahmadiyya of Kababir also share the displeasure of many orthodox Muslims, as do their counterparts in other parts of the Muslim world.

CONCLUSIONS

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