



Lessons of Isolation: Learning from the Arabian Peninsula Church During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nagi* was a devout Muslim living in the Arabian Peninsula (AP). He observed the five obligatory prayers each day and often went to the mosque to pray between midnight and dawn. During one of these pre-dawn prayers, Nagi encountered Christ.

"After a long prayer, I laid my head on the carpet to rest and as I was drifting off, Christ spoke to me," Nagi said. "I was startled awake, but I also heard another voice telling me, 'Don't think about Christ right now. You're on the right path.' At that point in life, I had money and was comfortable, but I was far from God."

Nagi continued his life as a Muslim for ten more years. Then, the building where Nagi stored the goods for his shop was destroyed in a fire, and everything burned. He grew depressed, but eventually found an online ministry and came to faith in Christ.

Initially, he was convinced that he should leave his country because he felt there was no church where he could grow spiritually, and he was afraid as a believer on his own.

However, as he searched for a way out, he met a believer online. This man also lived in the AP and he introduced Nagi to another believer living in Nagi's city. The two began to have fellowship together in a small group.

This face to face connection was made possible thanks to modern technology, and outreach via social media. Tamer*, a believer working in the AP, described the work of follow up and the need for security. He said, "One of our roles and that of our partners is to help connect believers to one another. We make sure they have coaching and support and encourage them to start new groups. I understand that you might want to know how we do this, but because of the hostile context we work in, it's important that the details of this process remain private."

AP Christians know that being a follower of Jesus on their own isn't easy. They also know the power of being kept by grace. "It's Christ who holds on to them," Tamer said. "It's Christ who keeps them holding on to their faith and keeps them persevering through months and sometimes years of isolation."



Because of COVID-19, the whole world now knows what it means to be isolated. Christians everywhere are experiencing the challenge of lacking access to a church building and of not being able to meet with other Christians face to face. These are new, uneasy, and difficult experiences for many.

But the Church can find encouragement and hope from what isolated and persecuted Christians have experienced for years. The isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic can help the broader church gain a deeper appreciation and sense of solidarity with these brothers and sisters in Christ. Thank God that even from our own isolation, we can support and learn from AP Christians!

For these believers, disease has not been the historical reason for their isolation, though the impact of feeling alone is similar.

“Believers are isolated, or feel isolated, because they think they are the only believers in the AP,” Tamer said. “Because they are new believers, some are afraid to evangelize for fear of being expelled by their family, arrested, or even killed. Others are very zealous and may evangelize in an unwise way.”

In the AP, as in most of the Middle East, family ties are sacrosanct, and Islam is strict. Many new believers keep their faith in Jesus as Lord a secret in their house and from their family. With no public churches for AP nationals, there are few ways AP believers in the region can connect with other Christians. But this can have a positive consequence. Believers are learning to use their isolation as a motivation for sharing their faith with people they know and love.

“As a new believer, I felt alone,” Ibrahim* said. Ibrahim is from a small town, and for him the chance of finding fellowship with another local believer was even lower than that of an AP believer in an urban area. Ibrahim came to faith through a reoccurring dream and listening to Christian radio. “I only had contact with one man from another area who would visit occasionally to disciple me. I asked him if there were any other believers near me, or if I was truly all alone. The man told me that there were lots of other believers like me, but that he wouldn’t introduce me to them.”

The man wanted to encourage Ibrahim to preach the gospel to his family and his own social network.

“He knew that there were other believers not far from me,” Ibrahim said, “but he didn’t connect me with them personally. He wanted to encourage me and give me the sense that I had a family out there, while also challenging me to go and make disciples.”

As Ibrahim continued to meet with this man, he learned that being a disciple of Christ means more than just believing.

“He told me that it’s not enough just to repent, believe, and be baptized,” said Ibrahim. “Before I met this man, no one else knew about my faith. He took me from the point of repenting and believing to sharing the Gospel with those around me. That became my mission. After I started sharing my faith with others, the man did introduce me to another brother living nearby, who took on the role of mentoring me in my maturing faith.”



Salem* is another believer in the AP. Before he became a believer, he went through several personal tragedies. Then one night he came across a Christian TV program that spoke about Christ. Salem was attracted by the message and began to follow the program until he came to know Christ for himself. He contacted the TV station and a representative followed up with him online. Eventually, he was put in contact with local believers in his area.

"I was very mad with the Muslims before, but now I am upset with you and all the other Christians," Salem said to those believers. "If not for God's plan, I would never have met Christ. You haven't spread Christ's message enough!"

Many people are hungry to hear of the love and redemption of Jesus. Persecution and isolation forces creativity in these locations, like the development of radio programs, TV broadcasts, and social media campaigns, through which some are responding, like Nagi, Ibrahim, and Salem.



Physical separation, or being only one of a handful of believers in a region, aren't the only things that cause isolation for believers in the AP. Persecution causes them to be cautious in opening up about their faith, separates them from their families, and can sometimes lead to the severity of being isolated in prison.

"We encourage persecuted families and advise them about how to live wisely in a society that can be hostile towards those they consider to be apostates," Tamer said. "One of these families is Selwa's family. When Selwa got married, she was a devout Muslim. However, as the months went by, her husband began to tell her about Christ. Although he himself was a new believer, he knew he had the mission to tell his wife about Christ."

Selwa was surprised to learn that the faith she had grown up with had misled her, and went directly to her family and announced that she had become a Christian. Her family beat her and her brother warned that he would kill her if she didn't recant her new faith. During the beating, Selwa managed to escape from the house. She went directly to a police station, turned herself in, and told them she was a Christian.

"Selwa was held in prison for two months," Tamer shared. "She was subjected to beatings and intense persecution. In court, she confessed to the judge that she was a Christian. However, the local church was able to arrange for a lawyer to defend her and she was finally released from prison. After that, Selwa and her husband moved to the city, where they are now living with their children. Her brothers and sisters in the faith meet with Selwa and her family regularly, and are guiding Selwa to balance her zeal for Christ with the wisdom and discretion that will allow her to share her faith effectively within AP society."

Selwa's story illustrates the importance of discovering new believers early and helping them to connect with more mature believers via social media, and even face to face, so that 'pre-mature' persecution doesn't negatively impact them.

While some Christians around the world do not experience these intense pressures, isolations, or persecutions, the global pandemic we are currently living through can open our eyes to the realities of our brothers and sisters who do experience these things on a regular basis. We can learn from their perseverance, their courage, and their commitment to one another. And, as our hearts are softened, we can pray more specifically and purposefully for them.





Prayer points:

- Pray for the believers in the AP, that they will have the courage and the wisdom to share their faith effectively.
- Pray that new believers will quickly find someone who will walk them along the path of discipleship, either online or face to face.
- Pray that strong and mature Christian communities will spread over the peninsula and that God will add more AP nationals to His Church.
- Pray for our local partners on the ground and for those who work through online media to support (new) believers in the AP.

- Isolated AP believers can reach out and connect with other believers who are practicing their faith in community on the AP through the CAP Voices Facebook page: https://web.facebook.com/cap.voices0/?_rdc=1&_rdr

- Write to info@dev-ap.com for more information about current initiatives assisting and empowering AP believers to connect, share their faith, and impact the society around them.

- To make a gift to the initiatives of our local partners on the ground in the AP please visit: ChristianResponse.org/give and **Choose CAP Fund** as the designation for your gift.

