



# Jesus, Prince of Persia

**Matt Vaughan investigates the astonishing growth of the church in Iran**

**Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution which forced out the Shah and installed an Islamic Republic, Iran has become a byword for Islamic fundamentalism.** Nowhere has the so-called “clash of civilisations” been put into sharper relief than in the tortured relationship between Iran and the US, with President Bush labelling Iran as part of the so-called “Axis of Evil” in 2002 and President Ahmedinejad describing the September 11th attacks as “a suspect event”. Under these circumstances perhaps Iran, run by an oppressive régime incapable of tolerating dissent, is one of the least likely places in the world to witness a large-scale revival of the body of Christ. And yet, amazingly, that is the situation in modern-day Iran. The spirit of God is moving over the parched sands of Persia.

The history of the Iranian church is remarkably long. Acts 2: 9 records “Parthians, Medes and Elamites” hearing the gospel on the day of Pentecost and there are churches in Iran that date back to the days of the apostles. Ancient churches and historical artifacts testify that Christian missionaries from Persia travelled as far as India and China in the 8th and 9th centuries. Even though Christianity in Iran has been a minority religion throughout its entire existence, buffeted by the whims of Zoroastrian and Muslim authorities over the centuries, the Iranian church has survived.

This, in itself, is remarkable, but even more remarkable is the extent to which the church is thriving. Western missionaries worked in Iran for over 100 years, scarcely seeing any fruit at all, but the seeds they planted were crucial. Thanks to their work, and the work of people like Haik Hovsepian and Seth Yeghnazar, along with his sons Sam, Lazarus and Luke, by 1976 a few small churches had been established. Following the 1979 revolution the new régime allowed Christians and other minority groups to gather openly and then clamped down savagely, closing churches and imprisoning Christians across Iran. These attacks culminated in the 1990s with several killings of senior Iranian churchmen. In 1989 Hossein Soodmand, pastor of the Assemblies of God (Jama’at – e Rabbani) church, was executed for apostasy. Mehdi Dibaj, another member of the Jama’at – e Rabbani, was imprisoned for ten years, from 1983 to 1993, before being freed in January 1994 following a global outcry. At his trial he boldly declared ““I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honour of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord”. Following his release he was abducted and murdered later in 1994. In 1993 Haik Hovsepian, an Iranian bishop in the Jama’at-e Rabbani, was asked by the government to sign a document stating that he would not allow Muslims or Muslim converts into

his church. He refused, declaring “our churches are open to all who want to come in”. He was murdered in January 1994.

The brutality of this persecution forced many Iranian Christians to meet in underground churches, but, as is often the case with persecution, it strengthened and encouraged the Iranian church rather than destroying it. There is currently an extensive network of underground churches in more than 40 cities across Iran, largely consisting of recent believers from Muslim backgrounds, and recent developments such as Christian satellite broadcasting are reaching millions more. The website of 222 Ministries ([www.222ministries.com](http://www.222ministries.com)) contains many testimonies from Iranian Christians and stories of how the church in Iran is growing – Muslim clerics, leaders of mosques, drug addicts and prostitutes all testify to the power of Christ. 222 Ministries even run an online theological college which currently has over 800 students, including Muslim clerics, and their staff members receive 1,000 phone calls a month from Iranians wanting to commit their lives to Christ. Lazarus Yeghnazar, the President of 222 Ministries International, calmly states that “conservative estimates put the size of the Iranian church at over one million people”. The scale of this revival is astonishing.

Naturally, spiritual warfare being what it is, the persecution of the church in Iran is intensifying, a testimony to the size and momentum of this

revival. Since April 2008 there have been 53 arrests of Iranian Christians all over the country – in Tehran, Mashad, Esfahan, Shiraz and elsewhere. In July 2008 an elderly Christian couple were leading a gospel meeting at their house church in Esfahan and baptising new believers in a tub of water in their lounge when their house was raided. The police were particularly incensed when they discovered that the husband, Abbas Amiri, was a respected haji who had visited Mecca on several occasions and who had also fought for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. He was beaten and died on his way to hospital. His wife Sakineh Rahnama later died of shock. Recently the Iranian government provisionally passed legislation demanding the death penalty for Muslims who leave Islam – previously courts could hand down hard labour sentences or jail terms instead, but the death penalty could soon be the only option. The flourishing church is not the only evidence that many Iranians are unhappy with their government – for example, a United Nations report in 2005 revealed that Iran has the highest drug addiction rate in the world, and the Iran Press Service reported in 2006 that government agencies are considering creating legalised brothels to combat a massive rise in prostitution. It’s hard to escape the conclusion that something is rotten in the state of Iran.

Although precise statistics regarding the church in Iran are hard to come by – it’s an underground church, after all – what is clear from many sources and from the increasingly desperate restrictions introduced by the Iranian government is that the message of Christ is spreading in Iran, and spreading fast. Lazarus Yeghnazar believes that the church around the world needs to be prepared for an avalanche of new believers both inside Iran and in the extensive Iranian diaspora around the world, and wants Christians to pray for this as a matter of urgency. The ancient bones of the church in Iran, dating back to the time of the apostles, are coming to life in thrilling fashion, providing a wonderful example of the power of Christ over the plans of men.

**For more information on 222 Ministries, please visit [www.222ministries.com](http://www.222ministries.com)**

**For news on the church in Iran, please visit the Farsi Christian News Network at [www.fcnn.com](http://www.fcnn.com)**

**For prayer requests, go to [www.prayforiran.com](http://www.prayforiran.com)**

