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THE VITALITY OF THE REFORMED FAITH: FACING THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

By

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SUMMARY

Numerically speaking, Islam is the world's second largest and fastest growing religion. It controls most of the people who live in the "10/40 Window" – the least evangelized area of the world. Muslim leaders are increasingly radical and outspoken in their demands for Sharia (Islamic Law) to be implemented in Muslim-majority countries as well as within Muslim-minority communities in other countries, especially in the West. Humanly speaking, Islam is the greatest threat to the Christian faith at the present time.

How can the Reformed community respond to the challenges of Islam? This paper will focus on two areas: (i) the response of the Church to opportunities to reach Muslims in their own countries; and (ii) the response of the Church to Muslim penetration into the "Christian" West. Much of the material will be practical and will rely on examples from ministries in which the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church is involved. The goal will be to use these examples as illustrations of principles which can be applied more universally within the Reformed community.

(i) The Response of the Reformed Community to Opportunities in Muslim lands.

World Witness, the Foreign Missions Board of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, has recently completed a strategic analysis of its fields. The Board believes that our focus over the next ten years should be on outreach to the Muslim world, specifically in three countries: Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. Each of these countries provides separate challenges and opportunities which will be outlined in this paper.

World Witness has served in Pakistan since 1906 and currently has two main ministries which are focused on Muslims in that country: the Christian Hospital in Sahiwal; and the Karachi branch of the Pakistan Bible Correspondence Institute. The Hospital reaches approximately 30,000 patients and their family members each year. Although it is becoming increasingly difficult to be involved in public evangelism in Pakistan, there is complete freedom to share the Good News within the four walls of the hospital. World Witness has responded to this opportunity in two ways: (i) developing a credible platform for verbal witness by providing high-quality medical care and distinctively Christian behavior on the part of the hospital staff; and (ii) training all our hospital staff in a method of evangelism (Evangelism Explosion) which directly addresses the most profound spiritual needs of the Muslim community.

The Karachi office of the Pakistan Bible Correspondence Institute has a long and illustrious history. The aim is to "let the Word speak for itself." Bible Study lessons are provided which ask simple questions about the passage and focus on the Holy Spirit guiding the mind and heart of the Muslim to understanding. There is little actual teaching provided in addition to the questions

about the passage of the Word of God. It is more a “journey of discovery” led by the Holy Spirit. Approximately 94% of Muslim-background believers in Pakistan have a series of Bible Correspondence courses as a part of their pilgrimage to the Christian faith. However, the ministry is now in decline. Whereas there were 700 Muslim students at any one time during the 1990’s, this figure has currently declined to about 130 Muslim students at any one time. The other four centers of the Bible Correspondence Institute have experienced a similar decline. The reasons for this decline need further exploration.

World Witness’s ministry to Iran began in the US through a former missionary who was forced to return to the US after the Islamic revolution of 1979. He became the pastor of an ARP congregation in Washington, DC, and began planting an Iranian congregation within the same church building where his Anglo-American congregation was worshipping. Many of the Iranians attending the Farsi language services were first-generation immigrants to the US. Growth was dramatic as the Iranians have become the most responsive Muslim community in the world today.

The Iranian/Persian work then expanded to more of a teaching/training/mentoring ministry to Iranian pastors serving the Iranian Diaspora around the world. Louis Berkhof’s *Introduction to Systematic Theology* has been translated into Farsi. A “model house church” meets monthly in California and its meetings are broadcast into Iran by satellite. Iran has the highest rate of television viewing in the world and this has led to a number of ministries taking advantage of this opportunity. In order to strengthen the Reformed understanding of the Scriptures in Iran, World Witness has focused on recruiting Farsi speaking theological teachers as missionaries for this ministry.

World Witness ministry in Turkey began approximately 15 years ago. The work began with one missionary family and has grown to five missionary families focused on aggressive church planting. World Witness has taken advantage of the desire for Turkey to join the European Community and the consequent desire to demonstrate openness and freedom of religion in that land. A ministry center has been established in the city of Izmir. Currently three other centers have been established outside of Izmir. The team is expanding especially to those towns and cities which have no missionary presence. In addition, the Anatolian Theological Institute provides Turkish-language theological and biblical courses for the nascent Church in Turkey. Approximately 200 Turkish Muslims have come to faith through these ministries in the past ten years.

These ministries show that there are significant opportunities for Reformed church planting in Muslim lands. The work is sometimes dangerous and the Muslim governments are often capricious in their actions vis-à-vis the Christian and missionary communities. However, the situation is no different from that experienced by the Early Church and simply require the zeal, commitment and focus which was demonstrated by the Apostle Paul and his fellow missionaries. There is a desperate need for Reformed teaching within the context of cooperative ministry with other evangelical mission agencies and denominations.

(ii) The Response of the Church to Muslim Penetration into the “Christian” West.

Islam has increasingly penetrated the West. This is more so in the case of Europe than the USA. However, the goals and methods of Islamic evangelists seems to be similar in both cases: The goal is to dominate.¹ The method involves: neutralizing any opposition (fear, debate, dialogue); exploiting democracy's preference for the rights of a minority; insisting on the special right of Islam to its own legal, educational and social culture within the context of a larger society; and then unashamedly promoting Islam as the solution to cultural and moral anarchy in the West.

After 9/11/2001, the ARP Synod in the US mandated that its home and foreign missions agencies respond together to the challenge of Islam in the USA. A join ministry called ARPCConnect has been established and has functioned effectively since that time. There is a two-fold stated purpose to this ministry: (i) equip and resource the ARP denomination in contact, outreach and ministry to the Muslim community; and (ii) lead the ARP denomination in direct outreach to Muslims in the US. We believe that the reason why the Lord allowed Muslims to come to the West is so that they can have the freedom to openly respond to the Gospel, a freedom that does not exist in most Muslim countries.

The equipping task includes: a web site (<http://www.ARPCConnect.org>); training seminars for churches which cover both the historical development of Islam as well as its current forms. Governments in the West focus primarily on the more violent forms of "radical Islam" and try to separate this from the more "moderate" Muslims. However, it is our contention that, although the vast majority of Muslims are non-radical and certainly non-violent, the training in outward conformity that is integral to Islam means that the moderate majority will not stand up to the radical minority. The whole community is therefore radicalized. This results in the Islamic communities in the West being alienated and isolated from the Christian and secular communities among whom they live.

This isolation demands an aggressive response from the Reformed community in the West. We cannot expect Muslims to come to us and our churches. Instead, because the cultural differences are so great, we believe that the most effective method of outreach is to appoint missionaries who are not only resources for the Church in the West, but also focused on training others in cross-cultural outreach to the Muslim community in the West. The Muslim community is a mission field (a cultural context which requires specialized training) no matter where it is geographically located.

The ARP denomination believes that its focus on the Muslim community is a strategic use of its resources at a time in history when the evil one is using Islam to attack and cause serious harm to the Christian community around the world. Islam, like other religions, is spiritual slavery. Those who are perishing must be rescued from him who holds them in his evil grip. As Reformed Christians we rejoice that "the gates of hell will not prevail" against the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Humanly speaking, the battle is hopeless. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, who works through the witness of Christ's people, and the clear teaching of His Word, the world of Islam will face spiritual defeat and many will be brought into the glorious Kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

¹ "Islam isn't in America to be equal to any other faith, but to become dominant." Council on American Islamic Relations, Chairman Omar M. Ahmad, July 1998.