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The POBLO Movement: What It Means to Reach Muslims in America

It was the beginning of my second year of seminary. “Are you ready for this long trip to Australia?” I asked my wife of only one and a half years.

Janet replied, “Sure,” not so convincingly.

It was her first time out of the country. We were in our early twenties, nearly broke, and off to a year and a half living in another country — just for the experience.

“At least they speak some brand of English,” I tried to comfort us both — unsuccessfully.

Janet had received information from the Australian consulate: There was a good chance she could get a job teaching in an elementary school. I would attend seminary and get a job at a church. We arrived in Adelaide, South Australia, a seaport city on the south side of the continent, close to halfway between the East and the West. We landed with \$20, no place to live, no friends or relatives. This was long before Internet or Skype. An “air mail” letter, written on blue tissue paper, took two weeks to or from our Midwest American relatives and friends.

As we looked south, over the ocean, I said, “You know, if you could see far enough,

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you'd be looking at Antarctica.” It was a reminder that we were at the south end of the world and we knew no one. It was a harsh discovery: *We were immigrants!*

The seminary let us stay in a guest room for one week — so we could find somewhere to live. Our third day in the “land down under” was Sunday. We looked up a church, took the bus to the nearest corner, walked a couple of blocks, and began our first serious experience.

The greeter at the door welcomed us. When we responded by saying, “Good morning!” our new identity became a reality.

“You’re Yanks!” the greeter smiled with enthusiasm. Before that, we were simply “Americans.” We were “visitors.” For the next 18 months, we would be “Yanks.” We would be “immigrants.” We never saw it coming!

Nor did we ever think about what it meant to be an immigrant. In fact, we never thought about immigrants to America being — “immigrants.” It just never crossed our minds. We heard the word, but missed the concept entirely. Now, we *were* them. We realized how helpless we were — about how to do lots of things, like drive on the other side of the road. Where is a bank? How does the money work — what’s an American dollar worth? What’s the exchange rate? Where do you shop? How do you get used to eating lamb five days a week? We had only eaten lamb once in our first 22 years of life — and we thought it was awful!

We sat down in church. Again, the person next to me said, “You’re Yanks!” After church, that person and his family asked us the usual questions: “When did you arrive? Why? How long will you be here? Do you have transport?” I learned a new way to talk: not, “Do you have a car?” but, “Do you have transport?”

Then they asked if we’d like to come to Sunday dinner at their house. That’s when we learned, personally, about *immigrant receptivity*. It’s the first thing you need to know about how to reach new immigrants to the U.S. Imagine what it would be like to be a Muslim in America.

Receptivity

Receptivity can be measured on a scale. Receptivity to meeting Christ, even for a Muslim, is a gift from God. It doesn’t last forever. And, if it’s a blind spot for you, God wants to change that!

For an American moving to Australia — honestly? The culture shock on the international scale is miniscule. Consider someone from the Middle or Far East moving to North America. Can you imagine the trauma of moving to Milwaukee — not even considering snow? Or Houston. Or Minneapolis. It must feel somewhat like landing on another planet.

**Friend
for Life**

Here’s my point: If you can be a friend, the immigrant will *never* forget you. We’ve been there, done that. I know. Those friendly, helpful people are guides on foreign terrain. You can be a friend who helps navigate unfamiliar territory at every turn, from any angle. God gives you

favor. It is a rare moment of influence, a time of sharing genuine love; a window of opportunity to share faith.

International Friendship Centers

This is a true story on the level of Kingdom breakthrough. Even if you don't live in an area where Muslim immigration is occurring, you need to learn this, as a Christian.

When Muslims move into a community, the first few are barely noticed. The next wave is somewhat tolerated. The following wave can be traumatic for long-term residents. This results in "culture shock." The "cut and run" emotion kicks in. This occurs whenever any culture of change (real or perceived) takes place. But it doesn't need to be that way!

God has a different plan. The perceived "problem" is often a hidden "possibility." It's amazing, how God works! He can take your church building and use it as leverage to help everyday Christians, like you, become missionaries. How does it work?

I've seen churches in England that are now mosques. Yet, it doesn't have to go that way. Some American churches, suddenly surrounded by Muslim immigrants, feel the culture shock. When a community culturally changes, some people move out. The church declines. Most Muslims are not going to walk into your church. It's as foreign-looking, or even more foreign, than anything "back home."

This is where POBLO International comes in. The leaders of POBLO are Pakistanis by birth, Christians by faith, and incredible missionaries by passion. They get it. At the invitation of your church, they will explore the idea of starting an International Friendship Center. It can operate in the fellowship hall, basement, or a classroom of your church. The POBLO leaders will help you discover those in your church who are willing to experience cross-cultural miracles. It is certainly not everyone.

10 BEST PRACTICES FOR REACHING MUSLIMS FOR CHRIST IN AMERICA

1. Ask God to help you get over your fear of the unknown.
2. Recognize that many Muslims in the U.S. are not practicing their religion.
3. As immigrants to a new nation, Muslims are exceptionally receptive to your helpful friendship.
4. Learn the basics of Islam from the many resources available.
5. Recognize that radical Islamic fundamentalism has increased receptivity to Christianity among many American Muslims.
6. Accept the reality that the decadence of much of western culture is a potential roadblock for reaching Muslims. As a Christian, you can agree with a Muslim that the decadence is horrible and, you can establish that Christianity is not related to this trend.
7. Understand that many Muslims who become Christian have developed a friendship with a Christian who has provided them with assistance.
8. Stretch your worldview, if necessary, to accept that many Muslims who become Christians have had Jesus speak to them in (1) a dream, (2) a vision, or (3) a miraculous healing.
9. If your church is located in a community with a growing number of Muslims, consider developing an International Friendship Center with the guidance of experts from POBLO International.
10. If you have a son, daughter, or extended family member who is dating a Muslim, get advice and direction from the POBLO staff as soon as possible.

Yet, POBLO will train those who are “ready” to be friendly missionaries. They learn what Muslim immigrants need: how to shop, how to cook American food, how to get a driver’s license — and a thousand other things the rest of us take for granted. Here’s what you need to know: In Islamic cultures, they befriend and care for only fellow Muslims. Muslim immigrants are amazed that Christians would care for them so selflessly. You don’t need a Ph.D. in missiology to be nice or to be helpful. You don’t have to be a “super Christian,” either. Most of all, you have to be willing to give it a try, under expert supervision.

Before long, the International Friendship Center begins to provide sewing classes for the immigrant women, who are most receptive. They also provide English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Meanwhile, as friendships develop, these *relationships* are the platform for sharing about how to live in America and, from an eternal perspective, about Jesus. This is not rocket science. It doesn’t begin with Bible verses or preaching. It is simply being yourself, as a Christian. God will provide the window of opportunity! The way POBLO equips Christians to do this is brilliant. And God blesses it!

New Life for Your Church

Involvement in an International Friendship Center changes the Americans involved. This has an impact on the church, as well. Your church gets a boost of spiritual energy. There’s a powerful ray of hope. Slowly but surely, people realize that God can bring a turnaround — new life for your church! Along the way, God touches the first Muslim or Muslim family. They inquire about the Christian faith.

American Christians are often surprised by the receptivity of Muslims. Then comes a few baptisms, and eventually, some become new members — from halfway around the world! *In that church, a movement is born!* There is new life! But that is only half the story.

More of your church members start getting involved when they see the enthusiasm among friends who serve in the International Friendship Center. Whether they realize it or not, everyone involved in this effort is a missionary. You can be a missionary and still go home at night and sleep in your own bed, see your kids or grandkids, watch NFL football. That doesn’t happen to most missionaries around the world. But this mission field has come to

KEY RESOURCES

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you. What a blessing!

The third stage for your church, with an International Friendship Center, is a phenomenon that I would wish for every evangelical church in America. Your congregation takes on a “mission culture.” This is huge!

One of the reasons most churches in America are plateaued or declining — and aging — is that, for decades, they have been maintenance-oriented. Pastors who lead these churches were trained at seminaries and Bible colleges to be “managers” of Christians. Now, these pastors catch the missionary model they missed in their training. And once you catch the missionary “bug,” you are incurable!

Imagine this: The “challenge” of church members who are stuck in “churchy comfort,” with the help of POBLO, could return thousands of local congregations to the mission posture God intended in the first place! You might even pray, “Thank you, God, for bringing Muslims to this country, and for waking us up.” And we might add, “Thank you, POBLO, for leading us to a new age of mission, a season that will heal the outreach impotence of many Christians and their churches.” Think of how many church mission budgets would change radically to support a movement like POBLO: missions in our backyard!

How God Will Stretch You

One of the realities you face working with Muslims is the moral decadence of our own western culture. Our spiritual meltdown is not a secret. It’s on the world stage, through television, movies, and news outlets. It’s reflected in social media. This is a hurdle for mission-minded Christians and churches. Here is what Muslims don’t always know: We Christians are as repulsed as they feel about the decline of morality. America is *not* a Christian society. Yet, Christians *are* different.

This means you should be transparent and clear about your values and beliefs. Turn the challenge into an opportunity. As you see it through their eyes, your embarrassment about the image many Americans cast beyond our borders may discourage you. Instead, look at it as an opportunity to witness what Jesus has done to make your life different.

Another stretch point may be how God is working among many Muslims, even before they get anywhere near a Christian, or an International Friendship Center, at your church. It is common for Muslims to experience Jesus talking to them in a dream and introducing Himself. They will ask you questions about this when they learn you know this Jesus. As you work with them, you may

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likely be asked, “Who is this Jesus who speaks to me while I sleep?” Many “sophisticated” Christians may not have encountered this. Yet, this type of experience is common on the mission field.

An additional stretch point is related to the fact that Muslims sometimes have visions of Jesus. As a missionary, you will come to realize that when a people group has no access to the Bible, or Bible-believing Christians (or churches), God works in other ways. With or without us, He is going to make sure people get reached. Don’t get freaked out. It happened in the Bible. It happens today. God is really interested in people coming to know Him — whether local churches or Christians are interested or not!

This is also true of other miracles, especially healing. Don’t be shocked if you hear of someone with a Muslim background telling you they were healed by Jesus. This happens among some Muslims. It is God at work, in spite of us. It opens their hearts to know more about Jesus — just like the New Testament. When they share with you, God is delivering you a spiritual opportunity on a silver platter! Don’t be uncomfortable. This stuff is in the Bible.

Another stretch that may take you out of your comfort zone — and your traditional way of learning about Jesus — can be a theological challenge for you. But it shouldn’t be. For most Christians, our first “imprint” of learning about Jesus is centered on His sacrifice, His death on the cross, where He paid for our sins.

However, for Muslims, because of their past culture, God often gets their attention more effectively by the power of the resurrection and the ascension. This is also true about the presence of the Holy Spirit. This challenge is not about changing your theology. It’s about the unique culture and background of Muslims (and also Hindus). This reflects a mindset that, *at first*, the initial starting point for many Muslims is often the power and presence of the resurrected and ascended Christ, and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. This is called a cultural “entry point.”

Later, of course, you—and your church—will teach the “whole counsel of God,” everything in the Scriptures. At that point, Muslims will be much more receptive to hearing about Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross to pay for their sins. This may even happen by the time they show interest in baptism, and it will likely occur before they become members of your Christian community, your church. The most effective missionaries are culturally sensitive.

Praise God!

Can you thank God for Muslims? Can you change your worldview, your perspective? Can you think like Jesus? Can you thank God for the ministry and mission of POBLO International? Can you pray for POBLO? Can you financially support POBLO? If you’re surrounded by Muslims, can you consider an International Friendship Center?

I pray you can! I pray that you will. This could be your greatest spiritual adventure, and you get to go home to your own bed. What a blessing! It’s your choice: fret about the Muslims coming to our country, or look at it like an opportunity for mission. How do you think Jesus sees it?