

A Jesus Movement Among Muslims: Research from Eastern Africa

by Ben Naja

Editor's note: In the following short account, the author briefly presents how a Jesus movement in eastern Africa began and then grew over a thirty-year period. He also shares the preliminary findings of an in-depth study that shows how these Muslim followers of Jesus spread their faith in evangelism, meet for fellowship, and relate to the wider Muslim community.

Sheikh Ali was a leader in a very remote rural area of eastern Africa, a man respected throughout the region. One Friday afternoon some thirty years ago, Sheikh Ali was in the mosque with many of his disciples when suddenly he heard a voice say: "You are in darkness and you lead all your people into darkness. I am *Ruh Allah*, follow me." He looked around. Where did this voice come from? It was not a human voice. Where did this light come from? It was afternoon. What about the message? According to the Qur'an, the very book he was teaching to his disciples, *Ruh Allah* (Spirit of God) was one of the titles for Jesus. Was Jesus calling him to become his disciple?

Over the next twenty-five years and to his best knowledge, Ali taught about Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah). However, he did not have a Bible, he had never met a Christian, and he had never seen a church. After some twenty-five years, Jesus came to him a second time and said the exact same thing: "You are in darkness and you lead all your people into darkness. I am *Ruh Allah*, follow me." However, this time, the voice continued and said: "Send some of your disciples to the Christians so that you may learn the full truth about me." After this vision, he sent seven of his disciples to an evangelical church in a nearby town to ask for teaching.

Ben Naja has served among unreached Muslim people groups in different countries in northern, western and eastern Africa for the last 20 years. In partnership with local ministries, he has trained, facilitated and coached numerous church planting tentmakers for cross-cultural pioneer ministry in several African and Asian countries. He is currently also involved in training disciples and developing leaders in two emerging movements from a Muslim background. Together with his wife and children, he currently lives and ministers in eastern Africa. He is not a native English speaker.

Ted was general secretary of that church's denomination, a new role for him at the time. He had received a call to work with Muslims in the mid-seventies, and for almost thirty years he had been "pregnant" with this vision, praying and waiting for God to open the door for him to fulfill this calling. The Sheik's seven disciples were led to a local church of Ted's denomination. The leaders of that church called Ted and said, "Some Muslims came and knocked at our door." Ted asked, "Did they come for trouble or for salvation?" "For salvation," they said. Recognizing that this was God's answer to thirty

years of prayer, Ted jumped into his car and rushed to that town to meet the seven disciples.

This was in 2006. Ted then began to give these seven disciples biblical teaching about Isa Al-Masih. Later, the Sheikh chose ten of his disciples and over a period of two years several expatriate workers partnered with Ted to regularly gather these ten for discipleship. After this first round of training, more than forty others were trained over another two-year period. In 2010, a similar training took place with fifty additional disciples. Many of these trainees are currently leaders of believers' groups in their respective villages.

Over the last seven years, much has happened. Many have come to faith, several hundred have been baptized, and dozens of home-based fellowships have been started. In two instances, Jesus mosques have been built and are being used for gatherings of Jesus followers. And this movement is still growing. The trainees of the discipleship gatherings are taking the gospel back to their villages where people are coming to Jesus and new fellowships are being formed.

Ted is my closest friend and partner. I meet regularly with him and the leaders of the movement for mutual learning, coaching, discipling, teaching, training, and leadership development.

Survey Results: Some Preliminary Findings

In December 2011, we conducted an in-depth survey of disciples in the rural areas. I present here some initial findings; a more thorough analysis will be forthcoming. This data is based on 322 interviews with believers from a Muslim background from 64 different villages and *ekklesias* (fellowship groups) in several districts. I intentionally show the data with minimal commentary. [In this article, my working definition of the term *ekklesia* is "the regular gathering of those who follow Jesus."]

1. How long have you been following Jesus?

Less than 5 years	82%
Between 5 and 10 years	15%
More than 10 years	3%

2. Are you the only one in your family who follows Jesus?

No	65%
Yes	35%

Comment: Although the movement started around thirty years ago with a sovereign act of God, it is still growing. Most disciples have been following Jesus for less than five years. The gospel is mainly moving through family lines.

3. Why did you decide to follow Jesus?

Verses about Jesus in the Qur'an	64%
The love and witness of other followers of Jesus	57%
Some supernatural experience (dream, vision, healing, deliverance)	41%
The Bible	30%

Comment: Most disciples decided to follow Jesus through a combination of different factors, the most important factor being verses about Jesus in the Qur'an.

4. Beliefs

I believe that Jesus died on the Cross.	95%
I believe that Jesus is the Son of God.	96%
I believe that God forgives people through faith in Jesus the Messiah and his atoning death	96%
I believe that it is important to know the Bible.	98%
I turn to Jesus for the forgiveness of my sins.	99%
I am saved because of Muhammad's intercession on my behalf.	7%

Comment: The data shows that these believers clearly understand that their salvation is in Jesus alone. Although they primarily came to faith through verses in the Qur'an, they have now plainly reached a biblical understanding of Jesus and salvation. Only a tiny minority still holds to the folk Islamic belief that Muhammad's intercession can save them.

5. Identity

a. When Muslims ask me, I identify myself as follows:

A Muslim who follows Isa al-Masih	80%
A Muslim	13%
A Christian	4%
Other	3%

Conclusion

The findings in these ten areas (see *Survey Results: Some Preliminary Findings* below) open an important window on key aspects of this movement. Most striking is the high degree of faithfulness to biblical beliefs and practices and the high percentage of members who regularly meet in *ekklesia* gatherings, and who share their faith. Also remarkable is the high percentage of people in the movement who see themselves in their context as a type of Muslim and that almost two-thirds of the members feel that they are accepted as full members within the Muslim community despite the fact that they hold non-Islamic beliefs.

b. Although I follow Isa al-Masih, I feel that I am still part of the Muslim community:

True	59%
Not true	41%

Comment: Although 95% or more of the disciples hold beliefs not generally accepted by the Muslim community, almost two-thirds still feel that they are part of the Ummah. When asked, most would maintain that they are Muslims, but in a qualified sense, namely, a Muslim who follows Isa al-Masih. Still 93% do identify themselves as "Muslim" in some sense of the word.

6. Practices

Participate in <i>ekklesia</i> (fellowship group) meetings	93%
Read or listen to the Injil at least once a week	88%
Of the leaders read or listen to the Injil every day	85%
Read or listen to the Qur'an every day	12%
Are baptized	81%

*Comment: Compared to the Qur'an, the Bible plays a much more prominent role in their lives. Almost all members of the movement are part of *ekklesia* gatherings, and most are baptized.*

7. Where does your fellowship meet?

In homes	78%
In a church building	11%
Other (outdoors, in the mosque, etc.)	11%

Sheikh Ali and many of these believers are perceived by their wider community as Muslims; however, they have joined us in the wider family of God by truly trusting in Jesus for their salvation and following him as their Lord. **IJFM**

8. How many meet in your fellowship?

Less than 10 adults	63.0%
Between 10 and 20 adults	28.5%
More than 20 adults	8.5%

Comment: This is clearly a home-based movement of relatively small fellowships with generally less than 20 members per group.

9. Have you suffered persecution for your faith?

No	53%
Yes	47%

Comment: Although they are inside the Muslim community, about half of the disciples have suffered for their faith. Being part of the Muslim community has not eliminated persecution.

10. How do you share your faith with fellow Muslims?

By using verses from the Qur'an	77%
By using the Bible	46%
By giving my personal testimony	30%
By praying for healing for the sick	27%
I have not shared	7%

Comment: Most disciples share their faith within their Muslim community. The Bible, the Qur'an, healing prayer and the witness of other Jesus-followers have been key elements in the growth of this movement. In most cases, a combination of several approaches is used in evangelism.