

Among the last traces of voices fading in the distance was the occasional gleeful shout of discovery. Had the spy been closer, he would have heard some of the people marvelling at the 'creation' around them. Again he would have been puzzled. His experience with politically correct textbooks and media had led him to believe that the whole English-speaking world could only relate to a godless 'nature'.

Just on dusk, the spy was roused by returning voices; he was able to see by the clusters that there was still no distillation of the group into expected social categories. As people eagerly gathered around a small cool box at the rear of one of the vehicles, the spy raised his binoculars again. At last – something to report! What illicit substance were they getting out of it that led to such cries of delight? Disappointingly, however, the box just contained chilled, damp facecloths, that brought great refreshment to the hot and weary hikers.

Waiting until after the last of the group climbed back into their vehicles and drove away, the spy finally unfolded his cramped limbs, grimacing in discomfort as he did so. He was puzzled by what he had observed, and suspicious of the unusual camaraderie and acceptance he'd witnessed within the group... but also strangely drawn to it. There was no other option: he would return. ☞



NEW WAYS...

The Middle East is a region of great contrasts. In some parts, there are established churches with history and traditions going back well before anything we can relate to in the West. In other countries, there is barely a handful of national believers, and none meeting together.

Levels of acceptance and persecution can vary greatly as well. In one country, the local international schools can hold a Christmas Carol Service that will be well attended by parents of all faiths, yet there could be great repercussions if you passed out invitations in a local mall for the same service.

In many Middle Eastern countries, churches are tolerated in carefully established compounds (only one or two do not permit any buildings related to the Christian faith). Tolerance is always combined with a degree

of surveillance, though; some is quite obvious, such as taxis that sit near churches but never take passengers, while other monitoring is done electronically or through a network of informers.

In the permitted buildings, there is generally good freedom to express the full range of Christian faith, and even evangelism is allowed – but only within the church walls and only towards non-Muslims. So a difficult situation exists for people who want to introduce Muslims to the Christian faith.

On the one hand, we would like to say, with Paul, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” On the other hand, we also have to say, “Sorry, but you can’t come to church with us as you will immediately be marked and could get us into a whole bunch of trouble!”

All over the Middle East, people are having to learn, and perhaps relearn, what the essential elements of spiritual life together are, and how they can be experienced outside a church building. The ‘from house to house’ of the New Testament is taking on a renewed meaning for many believers. As we learn to make do without a ten-piece worship band or a six-point sermon from the pulpit, we’re discovering that personal testimonies of the work of God in our daily lives are coming more to the centre.

And when the physical door into a church building (or even a house church) is not available for new or potential believers, we have to construct new doors. We have to find neutral ground where people of all backgrounds can get together without having to learn the rules of one culture or another; places where aspects of Christian life in community can be seen without a religious context.

The spy on the hilltop is fictitious (we hope!) but the events he could have seen are actually repeated every week in this part of the Middle East. We’ve also tried art exhibitions, coffee tastings, exercise groups, marriage enrichment courses, parenting courses, craft groups, music quiz nights

and a myriad of other activities that don’t have a ‘church’ label but do involve a keen core of Christians wanting to make their life accessible to others. In some of these, communities are forming that include people from the local culture, and, as relationships are built, invitations are then offered to other activities.

It is difficult to rate progress or results. It would be fair to say, however, that there are now quite a few local people comfortable with an alternative community in some part of their week: people who feel they belong enough to bring along friends, or who are comfortable enough with the moral tone they observe that they now bring along wives and daughters. Many have heard or observed Christian perspectives on various world and local issues. Yes, it is fragments and pieces rather than a full meal, but some can still taste the Kingdom of God in these events: one of our new friends speaks of these times as a dream that he does not want to wake up from.

In this style of ‘church’, there are no altar calls or challenges for intellectual commitment and conversion. We cannot count any fruit that would make statisticians happy. In fact, it seems back to front compared with the traditions

of our evangelical upbringing, where belief (making a commitment to Christ) leads to community (joining the church). However, in the New Testament, Jesus often called people to follow (to join community) before He called them to believe... and we take comfort in that as we continue to build communities that honour Him. ☺

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Muslims engaged in ritual daily prayer.

