

Mahabba Network: Linking Agencies and Churches in partnership to reach Muslims.

Over the last few years, Christians across the UK have been confronted with a sudden escalation of media accounts of the actions of extremist Muslims, with stories of terrible atrocities and bloodshed in Iraq and Syria. What has shocked them even more is that British Muslims in their hundreds have gone out to these war zones to give their support to ISIS and other extremist groups.

A BBC poll of 1,000 Muslims in Britain found in February 2015 that a quarter have some sympathy for the motives behind the Charlie Hebdo attacks the previous month, and a similar proportion feel that acts of violence could be justified against people who mock the Prophet. Even more disturbing, they found that 45% of UK Muslims believe that Muslim clerics are justified when they preach violence as a response to the West's interference in Muslim nations. ¹

On the other hand, we are seeing that this violence is actually discrediting Islam in the eyes of millions of Muslims world-wide. It is a major factor in many of them turning to Christ, as Muslims begin to question their Islamic identity. Thus at the same time as presenting a real threat, it also presents one of the greatest opportunities of our time: to unveil Jesus to Muslim people in the Western world and bring them to Christ.

Mahabba network

In this context a new phenomenon networking both agencies and churches has proved to be a catalyst to unity and prayer. This prayer-based relational network is called *Mahabba Network* ('Love' in Arabic); and it has flourished over the last 7 years, mainly because of the unprecedented opportunity in the UK. Its emphasis is on motivating and mobilizing 'ordinary' Christians rather than just 'specialists' to reach their Muslim neighbours. All the main mission agencies working with Muslims are now part of this relational network.

Many Christians have focused on the effects of 'Islamization' and on the 'persecuted church', responding with fear and alienating themselves from face-to-face interaction with their Muslim neighbours. So this new network is helping thousands of people (in *Mahabba's* words) to '*Face the Facts not Fuel the Fear...but Find a Friend*'; and this often leads not only to Muslims coming to Christ, but also to improved social cohesion through joint activities in those cities with a major Muslim presence. This is not just an inter-faith exercise – it has so far led to growing numbers of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus Christ and being disciplined.

The testimony of all the networks is that the old model of 'specialists' reaching Muslims was frustrating and unproductive, but that since mobilizing ordinary Christians into prayer communities, the conversions have increased significantly². What is even more interesting, however, is the testimony of just one of these *Mahabba* prayer groups in Oxford that, over a five year period, 25 of the prayer group were so impacted with a love for Muslims, that they signed up to become full-time missionaries with those mission agencies.

'Ordinary Christians'

This network was started as a partnership of many churches and agencies in Oxford which were seeking opportunities to introduce local Muslims to the Good News about Jesus. *Mahabba*, as a movement, seeks to be a catalyst in networking together 'ordinary Christians', resourced by agency 'specialists' and championed by church leaders, to love their Muslim neighbours. So *Mahabba* is not seen as a mission agency (which are often viewed cautiously by pastors): the model is a prayer-based relational network

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31293196>

² See: www.mahabbanetwork.com, and 'Mahabba UK' on YouTube

which equips local churches with mentoring and training materials, and which helps church leaders to train ordinary members of their churches to relate to Muslims in love and be able to explain the Gospel clearly³.

Mahabba believes that this should not be the domain of experts in Islam, and has shown that the most successful means of reaching Muslims is through mobilizing thousands of 'ordinary believers' into united persistent prayer. By expanding the network they have seen Christians across the UK motivated to reach out in love to the thousands of Muslim people who are now living among them.

The *Mahabba* model normally consists of a partnership between groups of churches. It creates a learning environment in which Christians can participate in one of the greatest mission opportunities in present times. Perhaps *Mahabba* could be the equivalent, in the realm of ministry to Muslims, to what *Alpha* has been: a carefully defined, replicable concept enabling ordinary believers to make a significant positive difference on behalf of Christ among Muslims.

The need and opportunity

The number of people identifying themselves as Muslim in the UK has grown by almost 70% in ten years, from 1.6 million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2011. It is estimated to grow to 5.5 million by 2020. Across Europe, there are already 47 million Muslims. By the year 2030, there will be 58 million Muslims in Europe, 8% of the population. Islam has found a home in Europe.

Too often churches are ill-equipped to assist people who wish to convert, whether they come from atheistic or other faith backgrounds. The new *Joining the Family* DVD course is a unique training tool to help church leaders integrate Muslim-background believers (MBBs) into local churches. It is also important to hear the voice of these MBBs and ensure that they are not 'over-extracted' from their faith background. Remaining in their community will enable their witness to touch others of their faith background. This has led to some excellent cooperation between those who love working with the local churches, and those who hold strong to Church Planting Movement/Disciple Making Movement principles.

United Prayer

All these networks are built on unity and prayer – two key factors that release faith and love for Muslims, as well as an increase of the supernatural ministry of dreams and visions, and physical healing. In Oxford, it took two years to break through in prayer, but then about 40 Muslim people came to Christ over the next five years. Numbers have been difficult to record as Oxford is such a transitional place. However, there has been a regular flow of people coming to Christ, especially among the Iranian fellowship.

They were joined by an Imam Sheikh from Uganda who was an expert in Sharia law: he had a radical conversion experience, and now spends hours witnessing to Arabic speaking Muslims studying in Oxford. A Turkish Imam's daughter came to Christ outside of Oxford and has inspired many by personally leading over 100 Muslims to Christ.

Most of the networks are witnessing Muslims coming to Christ. As a ministry they are spurred on by regular stories from around the other networks. In Manchester, in just a few days, a young man from Pakistan walked into the Cathedral asking to convert; a Saudi woman walked into a church and asked to become a Christian; and a Somali man shared with his Christian friend that he wanted to become a Christian. Also in the north of England, one city has four medical clinics, which regularly pray for the local Muslim community: they are now discipling many of these Muslims who have experienced physical healing.

³ Examples include *Friendship First*, *Come Follow Me* and *Joining the Family*. See www.kitab.org.uk

Expansion nationally and internationally

In the Western world there have been many organizations which network 'specialists' in Islamic ministry. *Mahabba* as a relational network has links to all of these, and is seeking to serve them as the pastors and churches in Western nations are responding to the presence of many precious Muslim people who are now living among us. *Mahabba* also networks with similar organizations which are springing up in other nations.

It seems that God is on the move! *Mahabba* networks have been now been launched in over 60 cities across the UK, as well as spreading across to France, Belgium, Norway, Austria, Denmark and even to South Africa. They have been asked to help establish networks in Singapore, India and Korea. One couple moved across to Chicago (home to over 400,000 Muslims) and another to help set up in Australia.

Implications and our response

There has been a shift globally in terms of Muslims coming to Christ in recent years. David Garrison, in his book *Wind in the House of Islam*, makes it clear that there has been a sudden increase in the number movements to Christ around the world. Similarly, through the rapid growth and spread of movements like *Mahabba*, we can see that creating a prayer-based relational network, with 'starfish' rather than 'spider' characteristics, can enable the basic concepts and DNA of *Mahabba* to be replicable anywhere.

The essence is ordinary Christians being resourced by specialists, championed by local leaders in unity, committed to persistent prayer, and compelled by God's love for Muslim people to unveil Jesus to them and help them grow in Christ. This is often described as the '*Mahabba Virus*' or '*Love Virus*'. Surely, this is the most contagious part of our faith.

If you would like help in setting up a *Mahabba* network, contact: office@mahabbanetwork.com



Gordon Hickson was an Officer in the British Army, coming to Christ during a revival in Cambridge University in October 1975 along with many like Nicky Gumbel of Alpha. He became the International Campaign Director for Reinhard Bonnke from 1986- 1990 during the exciting years of growth from the Big Tent to massive Campaigns with hundreds of thousands of people. On returning to UK, he became an Assemblies of God Minister, and the AOG Missions Director for the Muslim World. With his wife's ministry of Heartcry for Change, they set up the London Prayernet as a 24/7 prayer shield over London in 1997. For several years he also travelled with Bro Yun, the Heavenly Man, establishing the Back to Jerusalem Foundation in UK. In 2005 he was ordained in the Anglican Church, and served as Parish Vicar of St Aldates Church in Oxford. Since 2012 he has been working fulltime outside of pastoral ministry, in setting up Mahabba nationally, motivating and mobilizing ordinary Christians to unveil Jesus to Muslims.