

The Iranian Diaspora Church: A Case Study

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Iranians may well be the largest ethnic group coming out of an Islamic background that has responded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ since the Javanese Indonesians in the 1960-1970s. Spellman's research indicates that there are at least "forty-five (above ground) Iranian churches that have developed around the world since the 1979 revolution" (Spellman 2004, 169). Iranian Christians International (ICI) reports that "by 2002, ICI estimated the number of Iranian Christians worldwide to be over 60,000, half being Muslim converts and the other half from various religious minorities."¹ Operation World indicates,

From only 500 Muslim-background believers in 1979, conservative estimates now suggest over 100,000 MBBs in Iran, a number rapidly increasing. Some, more optimistic, place this number as high as a million. Never since the 7th Century has the Church in Persia grown so fast as post-1979, and the most recent years are the most fruitful (Mandryk 2010, 465).

Mohabat News,² an Iranian Christian News Agency reported,

The rapid growth of the Christian faith in Iran seems to have caused significant concern and even fear in the hearts of the leadership of the Islamic regime which has sparked increased suppression of Christians especially in the last year. After the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's speech regarding the need to oppose and silence the home-based churches, a brutal and inhumane crackdown along with numerous arrests of Christians inside Iran has been witnessed.³

Iranian believers from a Muslim background (BMBs) carry with them their cultural heritage, patterns of behavior, and values that are uniquely shaped by their religion, culture and

¹ <http://www.iranchristians.org/whoarethey2.shtml> (accessed April 6, 2012) Iranian Christians International, Inc. (ICI) endeavors to fulfill the Great Commission by carrying out ministries of evangelism and discipleship to Iranians, Afghans and other Persian speaking peoples through intercessory prayer, one-to-one evangelism, literature development and distribution, networking with Christians and organizations, establishing and nurturing local Bible study groups, fellowships and churches, sponsoring conferences, assisting refugees and equipping the church at large to reach Muslims with the Gospel.

² The about us tab on the Mohabat New Agency website states, Mohabat News Agency, the news agency of Iranian Christians, is NOT affiliated with any Christian or non-Christian organizations. We are a team of professionals who have accumulated years of experience in the gathering, interpreting, and dissemination of news. Our experience arises from years of experience in the field of Christian news and other topics of interest to our Farsi-speaking peoples. Mohabat News will continue to act as a cultural and social bridge between the world community and the peoples of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan and to better inform the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ and Christian ministries around the world about the life and the welfare of Christian minorities in these Farsi-speaking countries.

³ http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3102:iranian-religious-authorities-acknowledge-the-spread-of-gospels-in-iran&catid=36:iranian-christians (accessed April 6, 2012)

family. As is common with most first generation churches, the Iranian church is very active in evangelism and the worship experience is passionate and enthusiastic. The church exhibits the deep Iranian cultural traits of loyalty, pride, and cohesiveness towards family. They are altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others expressed in their commitment to hospitality (Dastmalchain, Javidan, Alam 2001, 540-541). Fellowship reflects the deep core value of family and friendship found within traditional Iranian culture. BMBs often interact with each other more than once a week, as members are intensely involved in the lives of each other throughout the week.

Iranian Christians have developed a Worldwide Directory of Iranian/Persian Christian Churches at: <http://www.farsinet.com/icc/>.⁴ Elam Ministries (n.d.c), however, claims on its website that the number of clandestine house congregations has increased steadily, but that the exact number of secret Christians remains unknown, even though at least ten networks are in operation. It is further reported that most of these house congregations grow because the Gospel is spread through extended families, and that there is evidence of secret followers all over Iran. The website describes how a house church is established in Iran, by speaking of Jesus to family and friends, by gathering new believers to weekly studies of the Bible and Christian community, and encouraging them to share their faith with friends and family members (Landinfo 2011, 12).

The Iranian church is in many places the United States: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Washington, D.C. The Iranian church is in a constant state of flux, making it difficult to have an exact number and location of Iranian churches. For instance, the first Iranian church in California no longer exists, and at the time of this writing, the founding pastor has started an English-speaking house church of Americans. To my knowledge four Iranian churches have been started and four have failed in Illinois. A church in Atlanta lasted only five years before it folded. My contact in California wrote, "All I know is that there are 8-9 churches in OC [Orange County] and about the same in L.A."⁵

Methodology

I have limited my research to the English-speaking countries of England, Canada, and the United States. The research question that was investigated was: What are the sources of disharmony in Iranian churches or fellowships in the Diaspora? This research paper is qualitative field research based upon fifty interviews of primarily second-wave BMB Iranians. It used open-ended questions in guided conversations based on key areas that explore the relationships that led up to disharmony and the results of that disharmony. I have applied honor and shame theory, conflict and resolution theory, in this cross-cultural research. The purpose for using these theories is based on two factors. First, Iran is not high on the individualism-collectivism scale as Middle Eastern countries (Hofstede 1980). Second, there is little if any knowledge of fieldwork done on post-conversion life in community (Miller 2012).

Thirty-one of the respondents were male and nineteen were female. The age ranges were (a) 15-25 (4); (b) 25-35 (6); (c) 35-45 (10); (d) 45-65 (29); (e) 65+ (1). Forty-two or 82 percent came from a Muslim background; seven or 14 percent came from a Christian background. Three

⁴ For the month of 2/11 this website served 4,407,290 requests, with 990,137 pages viewed, and had 403,075 unique visits to the site.

⁵ Based on an e-mail received Saturday, April 7, 2012.

of the Christians are second generation Iranians whose parents became Christians from a Muslim background, and they were raised in the Farsi-speaking BMB church. Three of the Christians are pastors of Farsi-speaking churches and give significant leadership in the BMB churches. Only one of the pastors is American by nationality, but he grew up in Afghanistan. The seventh Christian came from an Orthodox Christian background in Iran, became a believing Christian in Iraq, and currently attends a BMB Farsi-speaking church. The range of those who left Iran is as follows: 1960s (1); 1970s (9); 1980s (16); 1990s (11); 2000s (10). These numbers do not reflect the actual number of people attending Farsi-speaking churches.

Iranian Identity

The Persian Empire has a rich history, with the world's most ancient contemporary monarchy which stretched over 2,500 years, that ended with the fall of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1979. Iran has a history of invasions; they were invaded by Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. Deeply embedded into the Iranian collective psyche is the threat of outsiders who have often plundered and debilitated Iran (Mackey 1996, 71). During times of foreign rule, Persians retained their culture and succeeded in turning their conquerors into Persians. Possibly the most important invasion was the Arab conquest in the seventh century, which Islamized the Persian Empire in a relatively short period of time. However, the Arabs were unable to Arabize the Persian Empire. The history of the Persian Empire reveals three key characteristics: first, the Persian Empire and culture was rich, which created a great national pride; second, there is a history of invasions which has indelibly left its mark on the psychic of the people; third, Persians have a remarkable ability to retain their autonomy and Persian identity.

Religion plays an important part in the identity of Iran. Prior to the Islamic invasion in the seventh century A.D., Zoroastrianism was the religion of Persia, which has shaped part of the Iranian cultural identity. The Zoroastrian understanding of vengeance for the unjust death of the Iranian king is one element that shapes the Iranian perception and reaction to injustice.

Shi'a Islam mirrors the national story of Iran (Bradley 2008, 8). Karbala stands as a tragic moment when piety sacrificed itself for justice. Shi'a religion is not the only religious expression. The mystical expression of Sufism is entrenched in Iranian religious identity. The poetic writings of Sufi mystics Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafiz (1310-1325) are memorized by Iranians. Hafiz's poetry is popular in the way "he somehow manages to sum up what it means to be a true Iranian (Bradley 2008, 18). Even the Ayatollah Khomeini was a Sufi who wrote "fine mystical love poetry" (Bradley 2008, 18). Iran has a dual religious identity, Shi'a and Sufi.

In modern times, religion was relegated to a lesser position during the Pahlavi dynasty (1924-1979), in which Reza Shah implemented modernization along with secularization, which "required religion to be practiced at home" (Spellman 2004, 18). An adjustment to a double life of public secularism and private religiosity ensued. Both the secularization of Iranian society and the manipulation of religious symbols are key that influence the worldview of the modern Iranian.

Many Iranians soon realized the demise of their country in post-Khomeini Iran. Ebadi describes that day,

That day, a feeling of pride washed over me that in hindsight makes me laugh. I felt that I too had won, alongside this victorious revolution. It took scarcely a month for me to

realize that, in fact, I had willingly and enthusiastically participated in my own demise. I was a woman, and this revolution's victory demanded my defeat. (2007, 38)

A strong sense of Persian identity is a source of much pride, and Iranians are nostalgically tied to the past. For many Iranians, the loss of Persian identity is shameful. The Persian identity was put in jeopardy under the Pahlavi dynasty's Westoxification. Behjati-Sabet and Chambers believe this strong national pride has implications concerning losing face. "This strong sense of uniqueness and pride makes for a people who dislike admitting their smallest mistakes for fear of losing face" (Behjati-Sabet and Chambers 2005, 134). They also believe this great sense of national pride may lay behind the strong commitment of sending media back into Iran.

Good, Good, and Moradi note that, "In Iranian culture, the self is frequently conceptualized as consisting of an inner core and a public self" (1985, 385). Therefore, the outer expressions do not always match the inner self since one's emotional reaction will be monitored and evaluated by others. This dual behavior has been enhanced through the Islamic Revolution. The external restrictions are so severe in the public space that people in their private life seek to have the freedom that is denied them elsewhere.

Forbis describes the priorities in most Iranian minds as: first, self; second, family; third, the nation (Forbis 1981, 92). Ghahremani in her article *Yeki Bood Yeki Nabood* (one was and one wasn't) notes "that such a phrase [one] being hammered into us from childhood may well be the reason why we choose to be alone, always "yeki" and never a team ... we Iranians are a nation that adores number one." (Feb 23, 2011)⁶ A stubborn person is called "yekdadeh."

Mobasher argues that "the Iranian community in exile suffers from a major identity crisis and lacks a unified sense of national identity that binds Iranians together" (Mobasher 2006, 100). He draws his insights from Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Semelser, and Sztompka's 2004 cultural trauma theory. He proposes "that the trauma of the hostage crisis and Iranian Revolution was the impetus for the birth and popularity of a set of new ethnic labels including Persian, Persian American, and Iranian American among Iranians in the United States" (Mobasher 2006, 107). Iranian nationalists are proud to be affiliated with the Persian culture and heritage but are ashamed and embarrassed to be identified with the Iranian national government. Many have lost their sense of pride in or commitment to their religious tradition and identity (Mobasher 2006, 101). Iranian community organizers tend to promote public celebration of Persian cultural festivals and criticize or condemn participation in Islamic rituals. Iranian media in the West reflects this anti-regime and religious bias:

Iranian television and radio programs produced in Los Angeles have been the chief purveyors of the non-Islamic Iranian national identity. ... Therefore, discussions about the social and political conditions of Iran, treatment of political dissidents, and loss of national dignity and international respect under the Islamic government have been a central feature of the Iranian media in exile. (Mobasher 2006, 111)

⁶ Zohreh Khazai Ghahremani is a dentist and a featured writer for the website, www.iranian.com, which is an on-line English community site for the Iranian diaspora. Launched in 1995, Iranian.com is a vibrant community site for Iranians worldwide who care deeply about all things Iranian--identity, culture, music, history, politics, literature, and one another.

The cultural trauma and nonreligious practice of Iranians may be a factor in “a rise in the number of Iranian-born Muslims who have converted to Christianity or openly condemn Islamic faith as a fanatic religion that is inconsistent with modernity and progress” (Mobasher 2006, 104).

Trust

Among Iranians, a culture of fear and distrust is endemic. The culture of fear and distrust appears to be an underlying reason for the disharmony and conflict so prevalent in Iranian fellowships. Cultural anthropologist Patai states that discord in the Arab world has always been present since pre-Islamic days. At the slightest provocation, violent verbal abuse and threats erupt, which easily degenerate into physical violence.

The topic of trust is considered a foundational element that the church struggles with. Trust has been broken on multiple levels among Iranians. “We don’t trust each other. I’m 100% sure on that” (C4M). “We had issues with ... mistrust of each other; in terms of character, integrity, motivation, were huge” (U22M). “It’s very hard to develop trust among Persians, in relationships” (U1F). “Number one is that people started to not trust one another on a family level” (U7M). “Iranians are not a very trusting people; they always have doubts; they want to be sure everything is OK, even if they come to search for Christ, they always have doubts” (U16F). “They can’t trust each other. They can’t even trust me. It’s very difficult. I think it needs another couple of generations” (U19M). “There is baggage that comes with Muslim-background, especially in the area of dishonesty. It’s not a big thing to be dishonest; if you’re dishonest towards a non-Muslim, it’s a good thing. That baggage comes along with an MBB that has to be dealt with care” (U6M).

Boundaries

A part of Middle Eastern societies are boundaries. Anyone who ventures outside the prescribed boundaries is viewed as bringing chaos not only to themselves, but to the community, the nation, and even the religion. Mernissi understands the foundation of Islamic societies from the eighth century onward through boundaries or hudud (limit or restrictions). She argues that in the Muslim collective mind, community is built around boundaries, walls, and separations. Wilson, in writing about unhealthy families, describes how people are taught to be numb to violations of personal boundaries. The tendency is “to think and live in extremes, we express our overdependency with either nonexistent or fortresslike boundaries” (2002, 129). Conversion into the freedom of Christianity where the oppressive boundaries are removed causes confusion; Kraft states, “this loss of structure leads to a degree of anomie” (Kraft 2007, 189).

Reconstructing how boundaries should be set in the church causes tension and disharmony. Some pastors are too strict and act like moral police.⁷ One of the reasons people leave churches is because they feel that pastoral leadership is inappropriately strict when they set boundaries. “Most of the time it was rules of the pastor. Everybody talked to the pastors, had secret talks with him, pastors decided what to do. ... That’s why most of the time when the church gets up to fifty to eighty, they split. There are no rules, just the pastor decides” (C9M). “Iranian pastors are very legalistic and they have a set way of looking at Christianity. For example, they are extremely against dancing, against kids being Americanized. ... He’s not a pastor; he’s a policeman, who wants to check into everything in your life” (U3M).

⁷ I will give more detail of this consequence and its repercussions in the section dealing with leadership.

Either our churches, especially as Protestants, become legalistic; the Iranians say these are just like mullahs, but now in suits. We wanted to escape from Iran because we wanted to escape from mullahs and now we have Christian mullahs. So we have a lot of Iranian church attendees who complain about the church being legalistic or we don't talk about rules or behavior, but the behavior just goes nuts. (U22M)

Boundaries are a concern in interpersonal relationships. "Iranians don't have any boundaries. ... We are quick to express our feelings to each other, even if we've only met twice. Some don't know their limits" (E19M).

We Iranians are not like [Westerners]. ... We always try to see what is happening to our neighbors. What is going on there? [We are] always trying to show interest in their business. It is a problem. It is not our business. We have not learned that this is not our business. (E9M)

Nevertheless, there is another side to the aversion to strict control from church leadership.

When they [Iranians] leave an Eastern culture and move to a Western culture, they are taken aback by anything that reminds them of their past. Their boundaries between space of men and women, older and younger generations, they really bristle. They think I'm living in Paris or America ... you can't hold me to those old things. Some of those things might be biblical, but they don't realize that as Christians we are still your parents, those are people in authority; you need to be respectful of older people, if they try to give you counsel ... there may be a naivety, you don't shake it off, if you're starting over as a Christian. (U1F)

Part of the confusion over boundaries can be the visceral overreaction to any boundaries which remind the person of the past oppressive control from which they have escaped (E10F, U1F, U6M, U17F, C5M). "It's more how they react when they see legalism, which was definitely practiced in the prior church, being very, very legalistic. ... There was this legalism that shackled people and they really felt burdened by that" (U6M). "The pastor gives us a lot of room to do many things, but they [those that leave] want total freedom" (U15F).

You know how many times I heard the comment—"You know what? When I became a Christian, I was so in love with the Lord and with the church, but since being here I feel like I'm back in Iran under the leadership of mullahs who are trying to control my life and everything I do. I can't take it anymore." (U6M)

The lack of boundaries is also a concern when the pastor is not strict enough.⁸

I felt like the leadership was too soft, not strong; that people really had no boundaries, they could do and say whatever. Some people don't know their limits. ... There was a lot of conflict between the members. The leadership was not strong enough. Our leader was very loving and kind, he taught the Word really well, was very supportive, but I don't think he was a strong leader—there were no boundaries ... I wasn't happy after church. You go to church to get strength and peace, but I would go home drained, angry, no protection. (U13F)

⁸ There is no indication in the interview that this person has a problem with authority.

Shame

Shame is a cultural value that deeply shapes Iranians; it may give insight into some of the common reactions indicated in interviews concerning personal interaction of Iranians in the Farsi-speaking church in the Diaspora. Shame cultures are structured around shame, honor, and esteem. They promote social conformity by external sanctions for good behavior. “The emphasis is upon appearance and conformity in response to an external social view” (Pattison 2000, 54). Offenses are perceived as against social mores and punishable through public shame, ostracization, and rejection by their social reference group. Pattison contrasts guilt cultures as those where the individual has an internalized sense of wrongdoing and a sense of conscience. Punishment is forensic and not dependent upon the loss of honor or of global stigmatization of the person.

Pattison makes a distinction between acute, reactive shame, which is temporary and limited in its effects and are by no means all negative. Chronic shame that is extended in time and influence and “can cast a permanent shadow over a person’s life, character, and personality” (Pattison 2000, 83). Competition, envy, and rivalry are on the dark side of the honor and shame value system (Mischke 2010, 8).

Shame is often associated with morality. Chronic shame may create a strong reaction to other people’s opinions and may cause the individual to be supersensitive about the effect of other people’s attitudes and actions upon themselves (Pattison 2000, 124). He indicates that a general problem for shame-prone people is that they may radically over or underestimate their place in relationships and events. “A person may be as mortified over a small or trivial offence as they are over a major offence” (Pattison 2000, 128).

In the moral dimension, Pattison believes shame is a more primitive, a-social condition than guilt. He even states that, “Chronically shamed people are pre-social and pre-moral” (Pattison 2000, 124). The majority of Iranians I interviewed remarked that “Iranians are sensitive.” This sensitivity expressed itself in “dramas” over seemingly everything, such as getting offended if they believe that someone didn’t greet them in a proper way. A glance, a raised eyebrow, or the intonation of the voice all become major signals of communication that can be easily misread. Chronic shame theory seems to give meaning to the hypersensitivity over perceived offenses that were often overlooked in Western churches.

Pattison concludes that shame needs to be superseded by guilt if people are to live together in a way that enhances mutual life and well-being. “What is required for society to be more moral, in the sense of being more respectful and other-regarding, is more guilt and less shame” (Pattison 2000, 129). He goes on to suggest that self-preoccupying chronic shame might be minimized so that other-regarding guilt might have a more prominent place (Pattison 2000, 129).

The topic of sensitivity or how easily Iranians get offended was raised throughout the interviews, although the questions did not deal specifically with that topic. But sensitivity was talked about in questions dealing with communication (IQ2:2), getting along with one another (IQ2:3), criticism (IQ2:4), forgiveness (IQ2:5), gossip (IQ2:6), and conflict (IQ2:7). Seventeen people or 34 percent of the respondents talked extensively about the hypersensitivity of Iranians or easily being offended. Sensitivity appears to be a normative response in an honor and shame society. This is a particular area of concern, for when individuals are easily offended, it results in people leaving church.

When asked if Iranians are easily offended, the responses varied. “It’s their background. It’s an emotional-based culture” (U18M). “You can talk to them and you can preach, but they will say, you know something about my life and you’re preaching [that] to me. You say something in regard to something, anything, and they feel offended” (U10F).

Sensitivity within the Iranian community is complex and has many contributing factors.

We are people that carry a lot of hurts and probably a lot of wounds with us. As you carry these wounds, as soon as people get anywhere close to you, you start hurting. Let along they touch you. Even though it might be just a casual touch not even meaning to hurt you, but still they touch you and you still hurt. That’s why people are sensitive, because they have a lot of wounds that are not healed. (U9M)

We, as ex-Muslims, have all this baggage of insecurity, and come to Christ. So we wouldn’t lose this baggage of insecurity overnight. It’s like an iceberg. It takes time, it takes prayer, it takes God’s grace, it takes good teaching. ... The more insecure they are about the basics and their tomorrow’s, the more insecure they will be about their faith as well. I think it impacts them very, very, very greatly. (E2M)

“Disagreeing with someone in an Iranian context is like you are personally attacking them. People get offended when you say you disagree. ... It’s very hard for them to disagree and still be friends” (U22M). “If the pastor tries to tell them that what they are doing is wrong, they get offended and leave the church” (U2M).

Christian Identity

Iranians I have interacted with desire to have a Christian identity. Though Iranians desire to have a Christian identity, many I interviewed expressed the lack of a collective memory of the Christian faith, which is viewed as a great weakness. “The weakness is that when we came to Jesus Christ, we thought the whole thing will change, people will change, Christian brothers and sisters is the way the Bible says” (U7M). “Persian church is not even in its youth—not grown up; it grows in number. ... Iranian church has not even come to its youth yet. There are many other mature ethnic churches with better background. But not the Persian church” (U11M).

Weakness would be coming from non-Christian backgrounds, like Muslims, and even Armenians in a dead church; they bring some of that baggage with them—dishonesty, control, feeling like the only way to get someone to do something is to get control over them, rather than realizing you can empower them and get them to buy in. So that control aspect, that dishonesty, the tendency for gossip, even more than other cultures, and that’s closely linked to the dishonesty aspect. ... It feels good to talk about other people. Especially in the leadership, the aspect of being unwilling to share the leadership. (U6M)

The weaknesses are more—because we are coming from Muslim background, even though you become Christian, you still have that Muslim background in you. Sometimes you do the things in superstitious ways. Questions come even if you are Christian. Sometimes you doubt—where is God? Where do all these problems come from? Why did these problems happen to me? When you are in a problem, you don’t see that many faith-strong people. They are not good encouragers. ... Another weakness is they don’t accept criticism—they think they are always right. We are stuck, even with church and with our history, we are stuck in the past. (U17F)

We adopt some ideas, but we need to restructure it based on our culture and the way that we approach that subject. And we haven't done that yet. So that's why I really cannot see any strength or weakness because we don't know what we're talking about, what is church, what is a Persian church, not an American church, because we do American church, but then everything is in Farsi. And we were the first American church in the United States who just didn't use the translated hymns and songs from the American church. We used our own music and our own style of poetry and introduced these new songs and we were criticized badly. (U19M)

Interaction with Other Christians

Middle Eastern cultures are context dependent cultures, meaning relationships are important factors in any institution (Weir 2001, 14). Business models found in the Middle East are based on relationships; "All is directed towards the long-term accumulation of position, prestige, standing, relationship and respect" (Weir 2001, 16). The family and their roles in wider social networks are important factors in business, which may also be assumed to exist within the nascent church. Both Kraft and Little mention the importance of relationships and the breakdown in relationships as the new disciple works through living the Christian life. When cultural patterns of kin relationships are no longer found within the BMB community, the natural culturally acceptable patterns for relationships enter into disarray.

Well-organized and collective societies count heavily on interpersonal trust in order to function. Iranian society is described as a nation of self-interested individualists with a tinge of mistrust. Forbis describes this mistrust as, "Businessmen mistrust their partners; parents mistrust their children; professors mistrust their peers; fellow employees mistrust one another" (Forbis 1981, 92).

The interpersonal relationship between members is viewed as one of the greatest weaknesses of the Iranian church. "The weakest point is too late to forgive each other, for what they have done to each other. That's what comes to my mind right now" (C5M). "The weakness is sensitivity, gossip, and distrust; they are major, major issues that we talked about" (U21M). "The greatest weakness is those things that I [re]counted for you—communicate. Those steps that I [re]counted for you, and top—communication" (C2M). "Iranians [have] hard trouble [to] humble himself" (C3M).

Relationship and community is number one, by far. We do not do well as a group. Not just a Christian problem—I don't think our mosques or governments are any better. Working as a group in our community, we are not good at that. Community, lack of knowing how to be in a community, the compromise it takes, give and take, interpersonal relationships. Those are my two top themes on weakness. (U22M)

Tension between the believers from a Muslim background and those from another religious background played a major role in the conflict. Thirteen interviewees or 26 percent confirmed that ethnic tension is a problem.

We come from very different cultural backgrounds; socio-economic, educational, and religious backgrounds. ... We all come under one roof because we don't have a lot of options—we don't have ten churches in each city to choose from. So that creates a lot of tensions and clashes. (U22M)

Often the various ethnic groups will separate into BMBs and Christian-background believers (CBBs). “There was a lot of contempt and arrogance towards ex-Muslims from the Armenians and Assyrians. Some of them even called our church ‘the church of the Muslims.’ We were kind of Negroes” (E2M). U3M thought that Assyrian and Armenian background pastors “just coming out of Iran are trained to beat people over the head into submission, by shaming them, by getting them to do what the pastor thinks is the right thing to do.” This person believes that Christ must be allowed to change the culture, not imposing Christ on culture. “All of the Armenians in the church left with them [the pastors]” (U6M). “They [Assyrians] think of us [Persians] as second rated Christians, because we weren’t born in a Christian family” (U18M).

I talked to an Armenian lady, but she talked to me in Armenian. I told her I didn’t speak Armenian; I am Iranian. She saw the cross I was wearing and asked why I was wearing it. I told her I was a Christian. She said, “No way, if you are not Armenian, you can’t be a Christian!” I felt rejected. I was a new Christian. Now if someone told me that, I could give them lots of answers. She just shook her finger and hand at me and walked away. (E14F)

Understanding the Iranian Church

The first Iranian church in all three areas studied was organized in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Many more have been started and most are in an infant stage. When Iranians enter the Christian life, they bring their own cultural and religious values, which were referred to as “baggage” in the interviews. This study is particularly unique from other ethnic immigrant groups because there is not a large pool of mature Christians or pastors in the country of origin from which to draw upon. The few Christian background believers from Iran are ethnically Assyrian and Armenian, and there are deep racial prejudices between Persians (Muslim background) and the others. Therefore, the new Farsi-speaking churches are being formed with new converts who have little or no collective memory of a Persian church or of living examples of how the Christian life is lived out in community, all of which contribute to the current disharmony.

The first impressions of church for Iranians in the Diaspora are of the love, care, and attention they received in the church. This was by far the element that drew many Iranians to Christ. For others who are coming from the chaotic confusion as asylum seekers or refugees, the peace and serenity of a holy place impressed them. For Muslims who are told that they are not to question religious convention but accept what they have been told, church became a place where they could get answers to questions they had not been allowed to ask, making an important first impression. Some who knew nothing about church and sought to use the church for their own advantage found Christ. Even negative experiences could not dissuade the new inquirer from the touch of God they experienced in a relationship with Christ.

It is clear that the church plays an important role in the life of the Iranian from a Muslim background. The most common expression is viewing the church in familial terms, expressing a deep emotional attachment and identity to the family of God. Worship, fellowship with people who are like-minded, and the teaching from the Word of God are primordial to the understanding of church. In addition, the Christian community and church is the refuge of peace in a hostile world. The understanding of church extends beyond the person to its role in the

greater immigrant community as a great conduit, a host, and a receiving station for refugees who have had to leave family, culture, and country they love.

The average size of an Iranian church in the Diaspora is between twenty-five to fifty attendees. Every church experiences splits or major exoduses, and happens when the church is between eighteen months to five years old. The ebb and flow of attendees is partly due to the unstable situation of refugees, attendance of non-Christians at Iranians gatherings with no intension of seeking God, and the volatility of interpersonal problems. Some of these problems come from the leadership and others are between members. Few churches are stable in their attendance and even fewer have been able to sustain membership beyond one hundred. Disgruntled members feel like they can do better than what they experience at a church, so they branch off and start a home Bible study. The new churches are not exempt from the same problems found in the old churches and soon they experience a split.

The greatest strengths of the Iranian church center on the Iranians' passion, hospitality, and fellowship. Spiritually, Iranians come with a worldview in which the supernatural is real, so expectations are that God will demonstrate His power when they call upon Him. Hospitality is one of the greatest values of Iranian culture, which expresses itself in the church. Loyalty and fidelity to other Iranians are found in the Persian church when individuals or church leaders go the extra mile to help someone and time or finances are not a consideration. Fellowship is a strong mark of the Iranian Christian community in which church services are long and people linger long after the service is over. Their desire to meet throughout the week and to visit each other in their homes is an aspect that makes the Iranian church appealing and so effective in its outreach to a hurting community.

The major weaknesses expressed in this section are lack of leadership, training, and maturity of the church; and problems of interpersonal relationships. Leadership is mentioned because leaders are seen as people who should be taking the church in a correct direction. Lack of training is connected to the leadership. The need for maturity is a consequence of coming from little or no understanding of the church and the Christian life, which causes confusion. Muslims coming to Christ bring the baggage from their earlier life without Christ, so interpersonal relationships are strained.

Growth of the Iranian Church

A significant note for voluntary church organizations is “that Iranians had very little, if any, experience of participation in voluntary organizations in Iran, which could be carried over to the United States” (Min and Bozorgmehr 2000, 720).

Compared to other new immigrant groups, Iranians have very few ethnic associations or organizations. The main explanation for this pattern is cultural. Voluntary associations were uncommon in Iran, and as such Iranians do not have the requisite experience to establish them. Even when they are formed, many of these associations fail in their infancy. (Bozorgmehr 1998, 24)

Ebadi affirms this inclination of Iranian organizations to fail. “As has been the tendency of organized Iranian political groups from the beginning of time, is to splinter, and then its splinters splintered” (2007, 155). Iran ranked twentieth from the lowest in the GLOBE sample, indicating that planning, investing, and future oriented behaviors are not highly emphasized (Dastmalchian, Javidan, and Alam 2001, 541).

A comparison study was conducted between the Korean and Iranian community in Los Angeles. Organizationally there is a significant difference. The Korean community has more than 150 active alumni associations in Los Angeles, whereas Iranians have few alumni associations, which are mostly dormant. A significant note for voluntary church organizations is, “that Iranians had very little, if any, experience of participation in voluntary organizations in Iran, which could be carried over to the United States” (Min and Bozorgmehr 2000, 720).

This study will give us a glimpse into the history of new Iranian churches in the Diaspora and the disharmony found within the churches. Twenty-five individuals or 50 percent of those interviewed are mentioned in this section. I framed the question on church growth by asking: How did your church grow? Was there a split? Did the attendance go up and down? Did people come and then leave? Did the church grow and then level off in attendance? However, most of the interviewees went into stories of the splits in the church, rather than giving a history of the church’s growth.⁹ This section was useful in introducing many other subjects concerning causes of church growth, splits, or pastoral changes.

“We were 70-100 people. But we are not now this many.” (U17F) The attendance at the church that C4M attends is between ten and twenty people. At special occasions, such as a party for Noruz, they sometimes have over 100 (C4M).

We started with five couples and me.¹⁰ ... We had a lot of ups and downs with attendance. ... A huge chunk of our church were refugees—maybe 90 percent recent refugees. ... Life was difficult for many in our congregation—a lot of broken marriages, single parents, issues with raising their children in the new culture, adjusting to life in America. It was a heavy burden to have so many refugees for our little congregation, and to be involved in meeting needs in crisis, so often. ... The highest attendance was seventy and lowest was twelve in our five years.¹¹ For the biggest part of those five years, our average was twenty-five to thirty adults.¹² (U22M)

E9M’s church is approximately seven years old. It began with twelve people. After seven years attendance is 110 members. E9M shared that between 3,000 to 5,000 Iranians have come and left the mother church in London.¹³ This mother church has written more than 800-

⁹ I was not able to determine and group together the various stories about Iranian churches. The Iranian church is small in number and with the transient nature of Iranians moving from one church to another, it is possible that some of the stories of church growth cover the same church.

¹⁰ The core group of five couples that started the church was gone within the first year of the church’s existence.

¹¹ The reason for the high numbers was a major influx of Iranian refugees during that time.

¹² This church lasted five years before it folded.

¹³ These figures are impossible to verify, but they do indicate the large transient nature of the Iranian community. Most church attendees interviewed for this research made reference to the high number of Iranians who attend church, usually until they get their official paperwork, or until their needs are met, and then they leave. A lot of time, energy, and money are spent on these new arrivals, but these churches are unable to retain the majority of new attendees. Those churches which pursue these new arrivals usually have someone on staff whose ministry is to attend to the needs of these new arrivals. Such churches have an increase in attendance. When the church no longer pursues the new attendees, church attendance decreases, and the church’s reputation as a place which helps diminishes. The new arrivals require a lot of time, which takes away from pastoral care of regular attendees, thus causing disharmony. Some church leaders acknowledged that it is impossible to determine the spiritual condition of

900 letters to the government for official papers. “But about 700 of them disappear when they get their papers” (E9M).

The history of another church is that it was part of a large American church. A small group from Iran came with a particular theological perspective that eventually broke away and started a church in another state. A second group from Iran came and “they couldn’t get along, so they split. ... It was a certain minister who wanted to keep the church to himself, so he excluded others; he wanted to keep the church to himself” (U11M). The result was two more splits and then the pastor of the church gave up on the church and went to another country to start a church. The current size of that church is between fifty to seventy members and can be as high as 150 for a Christmas dinner.

I asked U12M for a history of the growth of his church and his response was, “All of the above” (U12M).¹⁴ He continued with why he believed there are problems, putting the blame on the Islamic domination in Iran for fourteen centuries. Attendance at the church is around thirty.

C9M has been involved in the leadership of five different churches in a span of eight years. The first church he attended split because two leaders were fighting over the seventy people who attended. In the second church, the pastor kicked out a few families, which precipitated an exodus of forty to forty-five people. The third church split because the untrained pastor’s preaching was the problem; he wanted a salary and he refused to get an education to lead the church. The fourth church got a good pastor, but he needed a salary. Another denomination promised him a salary if he had a minimum of thirty members, but he would have to move to their facility, so he left and took thirty-five people with him to their building in another city. That church split again. The fifth church that C9M now attends started with six or seven people and now they are up to seventy people.

I think it goes to late 1980s that one church was started there, and that one same church ... that split to a second church, and split to a third church, and split to a fourth church, and then a couple of other churches popped up from other places, so that’s six, then that one split, seven. This one lately split, eight. The half [church] is the guy with three to five people at his home. So it all started with one church. ... Lots of hurt, everybody; nobody wanted to be accountable to each other. ... They [Iranians] come, they stay, they don’t like it, move to the next church—itinerant. ... Suddenly as it has recently happened, five women from one church decided they are starting a church.¹⁵ (C2M)

The average size of an Iranian church in the Diaspora is between twenty-five to fifty attendees. Every church experiences splits or major exoduses, and happens when the church is between eighteen months to five years old. The ebb and flow of attendees is partly due to the unstable situation of refugees, attendance of non-Christians at Iranians gatherings with no

those who leave, but resign to the fact that the gospel was clearly presented while they attended church. There were those who retained a positive outlook, believing that those Iranians who said they accepted Christ but left are attending a church somewhere else. There is no way to determine where this large number of Iranians currently lives or if they are following Christ. The parable of the soils in Matt 13 may explain what is happening among these Iranians.

¹⁴ This means the church has split, the attendance has gone up and down, and Iranians come and then leave.

¹⁵ The last church meets in a home.

intension of seeking God, and the volatility of interpersonal problems. Some of these problems come from the leadership and others are between members. Few churches are stable in their attendance and even fewer have been able to sustain membership beyond one hundred. Disgruntled members feel like they can do better than what they experience at a church, so they branch off and start a home Bible study. The new churches are not exempt from the same problems found in the old churches and soon they experience a split.

Reasons for Leaving the Iranian Church

The Iranian church experiences a high turnover rate of people leaving the church. In gathering data on the church background, I asked if they had been in another Farsi-speaking church. If so, what were the reasons they left the church? Thirty-seven people or 74 percent gave various reasons why they or someone they knew left the church. Thirty responses or 60 percent were used in this section. Several people gave multiple examples of people leaving church. The purpose of this question was to see if there is a pattern of behavior or circumstances that emerges which precipitates the exodus from the church. I have categorized the various responses into nine different categories.

The reasons Iranians state for leaving the church are varied. (1) It can be geographical, in that the church is too far away. (2) The transitional nature of refugees creates unstable living situations which affect church attendance. (3) Many Iranians see the church as an Iranian community to help them transition, much like a cultural center. Once their needs are met, they leave. (4) There are those who leave to better integrate into the host culture. (5) Personal problems with the leadership or members cause some to leave. (6) In other cases, it is the dysfunction of the church itself, such as poor biblical teaching or personal offenses. (7) Negative experiences, such as being mistreated, young people leaving, or fights were reasons given for leaving the church. (8) There was tension between new arrivals and those who had been out of Iran for some time. (9) Sometimes it is not possible to determine why people leave. Those that leave the church come from every segment of the church, from those who have not accepted Christ, to new believers, to mature believers. Sadly, some who leave in bitterness try to cause damage to the church. The worst case scenario is when all the members leave the church. A positive perspective of the high turnover rate of people in the Iranian church in the Diaspora is that people have several occasions to hear the Gospel.

Relationship and community is number one, by far. We do not do well as a group. Not just a Christian problem—I don't think our mosques or governments are any better. Working as a group in our community, we are not good at that. Community, lack of knowing how to be in a community, the compromise it takes, give and take, interpersonal relationships. Those are my two top themes on weakness. (U22M)

I don't get excited when I hear an Iranian has accepted Jesus into his heart. That doesn't create an iota of happy emotions in me; I have become deeply suspicious of the motivations of an Iranian who comes to church. I get excited when I see growth in the process of Christian life; when lights come on; when there is a new maturity and commitments that are observable over a period of time. That's what gets me excited. (U22M)

Pastoral Calling and Leadership

The standards for clergy within Islam, particularly as experienced in Iran, are fluid. Anyone could put on the mantle of a religious cleric. This self-appointment to the position of cleric may help explain the phenomenon found within the BMB Iranian Christian community of self-appointed pastors. Taheri explains that,

Islam in general, has never had an organized “church” with an easily recognizable clerical hierarchy. Almost anybody could grow a beard, don a turban and flowing robes, and claim to be a mullah. A survey by the Iranian Endowments Office in 1977 revealed that over 250,000 men claimed to be mullahs at the time. An astonishing 20 percent were categorized by the survey as “illiterate” or “semiliterate.” Moreover, men could switch from a clerical career to other pursuits and back again at any time. (2008, 31)

Patron-client relationships and power structures of fellowships are another dimension in the power component. The Islamic view of power is often viewed as guardian leader (Beekun and Badawi 1999, 2). King recognizes that most of the literature on patron-client social structures emanates from within the Middle East. “Iran is clientelistic and is composed of many autonomous parallel groups formed in patron-client bounds” (Alamdari 2005, 1298). Clerics function as glorified social welfare agents who gather money and dispense it. This gives the cleric independent power (Mackey 1996, 118).

Despite the hierarchical nature of Iran, it is difficult to determine where a leader leads and the follower follows.

Lay men look to their leader for guidance and pattern their behavior accordingly. At the same time, the cleric from his position of authority seeks to understand the will of his followers and then to shape his policies to reflect that will. As a result, religious leadership, unlike kingship, is circular rather than vertical. The leader both leads and follows and the followers both follow and lead (Mackey 1996, 118).

Even in the Diaspora, new patron-client relationships are sought to replace the old ones. Patron-client relationships influence normative ideas about migration and resettlement processes (King 2005, 324). It is possible that this repositioning influences relationships in the church.

The road to becoming a pastor is not always through the conventional means found in a majority of churches in the West. One man floated between several churches before he “started his own church and became ordained on his own” (U22M).

They [Iranians] find an American church, and say, “I’m an ex-Muslim,” and the church says, “Hallelujah, we have found a jewel here.” And they make him a pastor. That’s it! You can lead a church. ... It’s sad to see such things happening. Westerners get so excited, but it doesn’t mean that he’s ready for leadership. He needs to go through training. They praise him, and he even thinks he’s something. Some take advantage of it. They think they don’t need anyone else. God talks to them, they can lead a church. (U2M)

That’s another thing that I’ve noticed—they come to Christ, they are full of enthusiasm and they love the Lord, people tell them, “Why don’t you become a pastor?” and they do, without the proper training. That can result in problems, not just theologically, but managing people and dealing with people in a Christ-like way. I’ve seen some of that. (U6M)

That's why after a few years of being a Christian, they become a pastor, because that title makes them important. "I'm the pastor; you have to listen to me." I guess it's worse in Iran. They started giving titles—bishops. I'm not a bishop. We are all brothers. Those titles—they started giving new ones, but what about the others? So they had to give more/new titles. In Shiism, it's just like the Catholic Church. (U2M)

I am deeply critical of the pastoral leadership of the Iranian church. For the most part, our pastors are not educated, do not grow, or gain new skills. That is also a problem with the house church movement in Iran. The pastors try to rule. I put a lot of the blame on the pastors in terms of many of our struggles in our Iranian church. (U22M)

"But Iranian leaders, yesterday they became Christians, and today they want to be leaders; they need to be fed by the Scriptures" (C7M). "Everyone wants to be pastor or teach" (U17F).

The religious memory of Persians is Shiite Islam, along with its religious institutions and expressions in Iran. Leadership styles reflect the history of totalitarian control. Leadership in the newly formed churches, and in particular the pastoral leaders, have not taken the conventional training that North American pastors have received. There is very little time for the new converts to mature in their new life in Christ before they are placed into leadership. Individuals interviewed expressed that many resort to cultural and religious patterns of leadership in Iran to guide the new church. Most find this type of totalitarian leadership undesirable and culturally they seek a more egalitarian ecclesiastical expression. The church experiences conflict, clashes over leadership and leadership styles, and hyper-sensitivity over perceived offenses with an inability to resolve conflicts, which all contribute to disharmony.

Second generation

The perspective of the one and a half or second generation is important to understand how the young people view church. There is a generation gap that is exasperated with the first and second generations living in two different worlds; the first generation lives with the history of Iran and the second generation looks to the future in the West. Spiritually, the Iranian church seems unable to meet the emerging needs of the second generation. Socially, there are few Iranian young people who desire to be with their Iranian peers. Language is also a concern since the cognitive growth in the educational system is in English, not in Farsi. The second generation finds the disharmony of interpersonal relationships exhibited by lack of forgiveness and repentance, being stuck in the past, and unable to move forward the most frustrating. Suggestions from the second generation are not meant to be critical, but instructive in helping the Persian church become relevant to the next generation being raised in the West.

Many of the second generation are no longer in the Farsi-speaking first generational church because of the disharmony they have experienced.

I felt more at home there [in the British church]; I could be myself, just not pretending anything. These people know us and where we are coming from, even though they didn't have a clue of our background. There was a sense of being comfortable and at peace; I love the worship and the music there, and I could connect to it more than when I went to the Iranian church. (E15F)

In general, I felt like the Iranian leaders were never anyone I could talk to. The community was kind of judgmental. If I ever had a problem, I would never ask them to

discuss it or talk to them. ... I felt like I would not get good advice or a good way of thinking that I could use. ... They didn't take the young people seriously; none of them could relate to young people. (C6F)

“They [Iranians] have a narrow-mindedness of young people and how they should act. It's not something I would want to be involved in. I like to stay back, and not judge others” (C6F).

Their spiritual needs are different than the first generation. In the following case, the young woman feels like she is part of a community in the national church, but in the Persian church she feels like she is an individual and not connected to a community.

[The English church] is where I'm fed. I am spiritually fed, mostly not by the speaker, but by the people there and by the friendships that I have in church there. ... Whereas, I probably just spend too much time criticizing what's going on [in the Persian church]. ... I'm not receiving anything from what's been said, from the style of worship, from this and that. (E5F)

There are cultural gaps between myself and the majority of the Iranians [in my church]. Because of the cultural and religious gap, I do feel like the kind of things that I needed out of church differed maybe from the kind of things the Iranians ... needed out of church. (E5F)

It (the Iranian church) was a good place to begin your spiritual journey, but over time they outgrew it and they were curious to try something different. Over time they wanted to go into a more blended church where they could blend in. ... They might go to the Persian Bible study on Thurs. night for their connection and prayer group. But they wanted to be with the whole body of Christ for worship. (U1F)

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to help the reader better understand what is taking place in the Iranian church. Religion is a powerful force within Iranian society, which shapes values and worldview. Iranians have a deep-rooted cultural belief in faith. Although Iranians may have rejected Islam theologically, Islam has permeated common cultural expressions culturally. Interpersonal communication, trust, power structures, and conflict resolution characteristics and values found in Iran and Islamic societies comprise the collective memory of the Iranian community in the Diaspora and gives understanding to the sources of disharmony in Iranian churches in the Diaspora.

The relatively new genesis of the Iranian church in the Diaspora has a unique set of strengths and challenges.

I think the strength of the Iranian church is that people come into it with a supernatural presupposition, meaning it's less of an intellectual leap for them to believe that God is who He says He is. That He has the power to heal. That He has the power to save. That He has the power to provide. It's ingrained within Iranians for the most part. ... For the most part the Eastern worldview is very much believing in a monotheistic God and as a result of that, it's a highly spiritually charged environment that they come out of. ... They come into the Christian faith with just this wonderful openness to the thing of God and to the move of the Holy Spirit and a lot of faith. Some of the most faith-filled people I know are Iranians. ... I love watching Iranians worship and I love hearing Iranians recite

poetry that they have written for Jesus; it's so sweet and so endearing and it's such a childlike faith. Sometimes we miss out on it in the American church. (U4F)

Iranian churches have a great potential in being a great strong church, should they be disciplined properly, should they be taught properly, educated properly. Their love, their kindness, hospitality—these are great value points, in my opinion, which you don't see in some of the Christian churches in North America—the kindness, taking the extra step. They will go a thousand extra steps for you, if need be. But they have to be taught also. Iranians usually do those things, but not within the concept of Church. (C2M)

Twenty-five individuals or 50 percent of the interviewees prioritized that the top weaknesses are lack of mature leadership, membership training, and maturity of members; and the struggle with interpersonal relationships. The lack of quality training for leaders is foundational in these weaknesses. One Iranian said it best: “But Iranian leaders, yesterday they became Christians, and today they want to be leaders; they need to be fed by the Scriptures” (C7M).

The second area of greatest weakness is the lack of a collective memory of the Christian faith. The lack of understanding of the Christian faith and practice influences how money is perceived, what freedom in Christ means, how to trust others in Christian community, and where boundaries are to be placed. Iranians expressed this weakness as, “We don't have any background what church should look like.” (U7M) “It's like you're dealing with your children, just playing nice with each other. Be nice to each other.” (U19M) “Dramas go on, judgments are past, and gossip happens and things like that happened. ... Yes, these are weaknesses of the Iranian church.” (E5F)

The third area of weakness is explained by shame theory. Mischke reveals that competition, envy, and rivalry are on the dark side of the honor and shame value system (Mischke 2010, 8). Avoidance or withdrawal was the most common reason mentioned in my interviews. Pattison indicates that sensitivity is a characteristic of chronic shame. Iranians stated that: “We are people that carry a lot of hurts and probably a lot of wounds with us. As you carry these wounds, as soon as people get anywhere close to you, you start hurting.” (U9M) “People are so sensitive, very thin skin. You have to be very careful how you treat them, how you talk to them, how you teach the Word of God to them, so they are not offended.” (U18M)

The fourth area of weakness is interpersonal relationships. Iranians stated that, “The weakness is sensitivity, gossip, and distrust; they are major, major issues that we talked about.” (U21M) Many of these weaknesses result from unclear communication styles. “Top issue, in my opinion, we don't know how to communicate.” (C2M) “Really there is no communication—in all the churches I've been to, I've worked with many leaders, there isn't a lot of communication.” (U13F)

The fifth area of weakness is conflict resolution. Iranians do not have a collective memory of handling conflict in a constructive manner. Iranians avoid conflict or they run from conflict, which results in church splits, people leaving church, and many wounded people. One Iranian explains his frustration:

I actually tried everything by the book about the cycle [of conflict], but it never worked for some reason. I think a major part of managing any conflict is communication,

honesty, and forgiveness. When you have issues, I mean serious issues now, none of the techniques are working. They don't want to sit and talk. (U19M)

The unstable and transient nature of recent arrivals is reflected in the high turnover rate in churches expressed in the interviews. The spiritual depth and maturity of the national church are attractive to the Iranians whose own spiritual development has grown beyond their church leaders, but some Iranians find the cultural differences confusing. Many of the second generation expressed that they live in a cultural gap, because they live more in the host's world than the older generation that still remembers their home country. Though the second generation loves the Farsi-speaking church, their message to them is to move beyond its weekly personal dramas and mature to become a forward-looking church with broader experience than the small ethnic church it is today.

Understanding the church and the individual's role in the kingdom of God is important in changing the perspective and giving hope. Understanding the multiple dimension of the church in light of the spiritual, social, and economic needs is also foundational. The unique church community is to be understood as a community and individuals "are not free to reject one another" (Hiebert 2008, 281), but are to be committed to each other. The church will become more stable and healthier when individuals learn how to live in community.

God is calling many Iranians to Himself. The Iranian church plays an important role in particular for the first generation with limited language skills and those wanting to reconnect with their culture and heritage. The church is in its infant stage, and this is a great learning time.

Spiritually, I would say what makes the church strong is if the true love of Christ is there. ... I think Iranian believers are capable, once these problems are under control, can create a truly loving, attractive community that people feel very welcome, a place of healing, a place of acceptance. They are capable of doing that. (U21M)

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