

Households in Focus

# Muslim Insider Christ Followers: General Observations on Movements

by Jan Hendrik Prenger

*Editor's Note: This article has been excerpted from Chapter 5 of Jan Hendrik Prenger's Muslim Insider Christ Followers: Their Theological and Missional Frames, (William Carey Library, 2017). Used by permission. Missionbooks.org. At ISFM 2017 (September 15–17), Prenger synthesized an analysis of his extensive interviews with 26 leaders from a cross-section of movements across Asia and parts of Africa. During three sessions, Prenger walked us through his Missio-M-Framework, a continuum distilling the theological views of these insiders. Extensive, often candid, quotes and vivid case studies—all taken from his interviews—illustrated each “frame.” The following excerpt is only “indirectly relevant” (Prenger’s words) to his focus on theological profiles. Directly relevant to our theme are Prenger’s observations on certain structural realities of these movements and the way a more natural kind of ecclesial life emerges. His research seems to confirm the fundamental role of household-based (oikos) fellowships. In an era that makes hearing directly from insiders exceedingly difficult, the methodology used in this long overdue study yields great detail, while protecting the identities of these leaders. Anyone engaged in ministry to Muslims today should read this landmark research in its entirety. We hope others can and will build on what Prenger has done.*

**T**his study is narrowly focused with regard to topic but wide in respect to region. I did not study one movement in detail but several movements, and then exclusively focused on *theology proper*. These general observations on insider movements (IM) are in themselves not the focus of my research, but they are of interest because they allow for some comparison of different movements and set the stage for further study of my research topic. I limited myself to only documenting general observations that were indirectly relevant to my main research question.

The 26 interviewed IM leaders came from the seven regions depicted in figure 1, p. 68. Some of the 26 IM leaders are fairly closely associated with each other in the same region, whereas others are from distinctly different areas within a given region. This reality creates 15 IM groupings, as shown in figure 2, p. 69. Even within these 15 groupings, each IM leader represents a unique movement in which he is involved, which means that this research looked at 26 different insider movements, all at different stages and of different sizes. Figure 3, p. 70, shows where the five alongsiders link within the seven overall regions.

Each of these IM leaders has personal testimonies and many stories to tell, and each of these IMs has a history and a distinct beginning. My research is not to investigate the *why* of IM, as I take it as a given that these movements exist,

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but to the extent that the personal stories told by the interviewees relate to their theological and missional motivations and convictions, I share here a mere sample of their many stories. The main catalyst for IMs was, for many, the desire to share Isa al Masih with their own communities and to bless those communities. Mitch shared his amazing testimony with me one evening, telling me how he, as a Muslim teenager, was seeking some answers from his imam on the identity of the Qur'an as the Word of Allah and on Isa being called the Word of Allah as well. Over the years this led to him talking with Christian missionaries, putting his faith in Christ, being baptized, and needing to leave his family and community. He got involved in church ministries as a respected teacher and lived on a church compound. He had a burden to reach Muslims with the gospel, but over time his idiom and vocabulary had christianized, and Muslims rejected him outright. One day a missionary sent a group of young men to Mitch for him to check their faith. They had come to the missionary to be baptized. The missionary told Mitch that he would be ready to baptize them if Mitch approved. Mitch recalled this time.

I found that they believe the same things that I do. They are believers. They are not Christians [as public identity] because we had not baptized them yet, but they believe. At the end of our week together I told them that my advice to them was not to become Christians. I told them what happened to me, why I am sitting there and who I am, and how the Muslim villages and people are rejecting me because of what I did. They see me as a betrayer. They say that I brought shame to the whole *ummah*, the whole community. So I said, "Go back home and don't try to become a Christian, but remain in your faith quietly, pray to Jesus, worship him, and tell him your problems. If you openly pronounce that you are Christian, you are going to get killed or rejected by your family, and you will end up here on the compound. This is maybe thirty acres of land. How many people can come and live here? If we want our whole country, then this compound is not ours. Remain there. Your parents will notice the change in your life. If there is no change, your faith is not active. But there will be change and they will ask you what happened. Then you can share and tell them what happened. At the same time, if you are burning

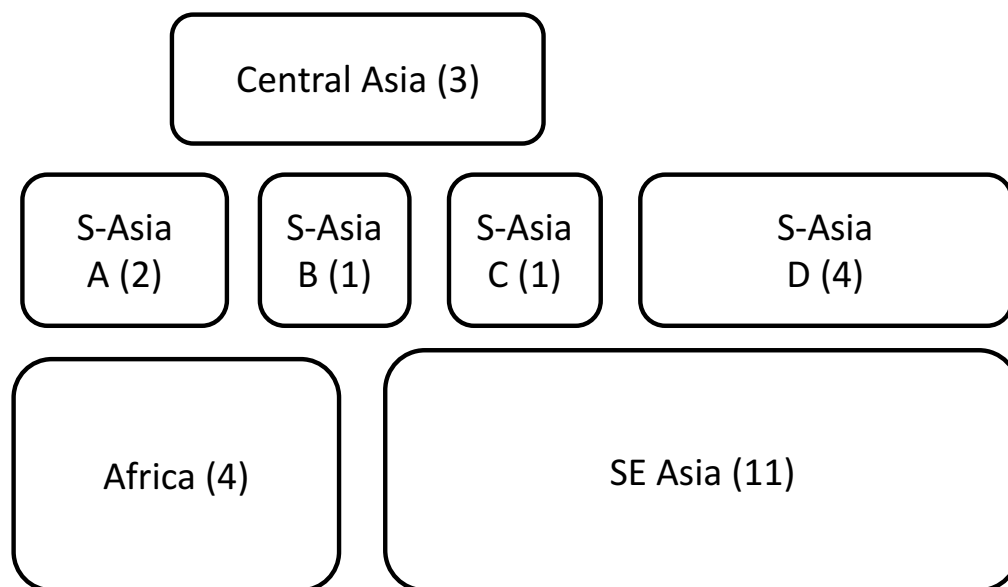
inside to tell someone, go to a very close friend who will not betray you and tell him." Everybody was happy. We prayed and they left.

The missionary was upset and told Mitch that he had probably lost his last chance to bring Muslims to faith. A month later these young men came back to Mitch together with sixteen older men who were heads of families. The young men told Mitch that they had followed his advice, praying every day and sharing with trusted family members, and now these sixteen men had accepted Isa and had come to be taught. This went on, month after month for several years, as groups of Muslim men came to be taught. Mitch shared with me,

The missionaries were noticing all these things and said, "Maybe we should not include these people in the church, because the church will not be able to accept this. By now they are already bigger in number than the church itself."

This small local church did, however, support the training of these groups of Muslim followers of Jesus. Mitch reflected and said, "This way it continued for several years, and this has become a

Figure 1. The 26 IM leaders came from seven regions.



movement now. It started on its own. It was not intentional.”

Each IM leader I interviewed had a story to tell. Table 1, p. 71, shares a portion of five more stories that indicate how IMs come from the missional conviction of followers of Jesus to make a difference in their own communities.

I close this brief look at the *why* of IM with an observation from Paxton. He finds IM completely natural and nothing new, as he recalled how the first Jewish believers had to find a way to talk about Jesus and the only language available to them was the Old Testament and rabbinical theology, which is what they used to express their faith.

So it was an insider movement. It always has been an insider movement. This insider movement is actually a movement of those people who take their religion very seriously, and who want to express their faith in a way they express any other experience in their lives, in their own language and within their context.

### Structure and Growth

#### SE Asia

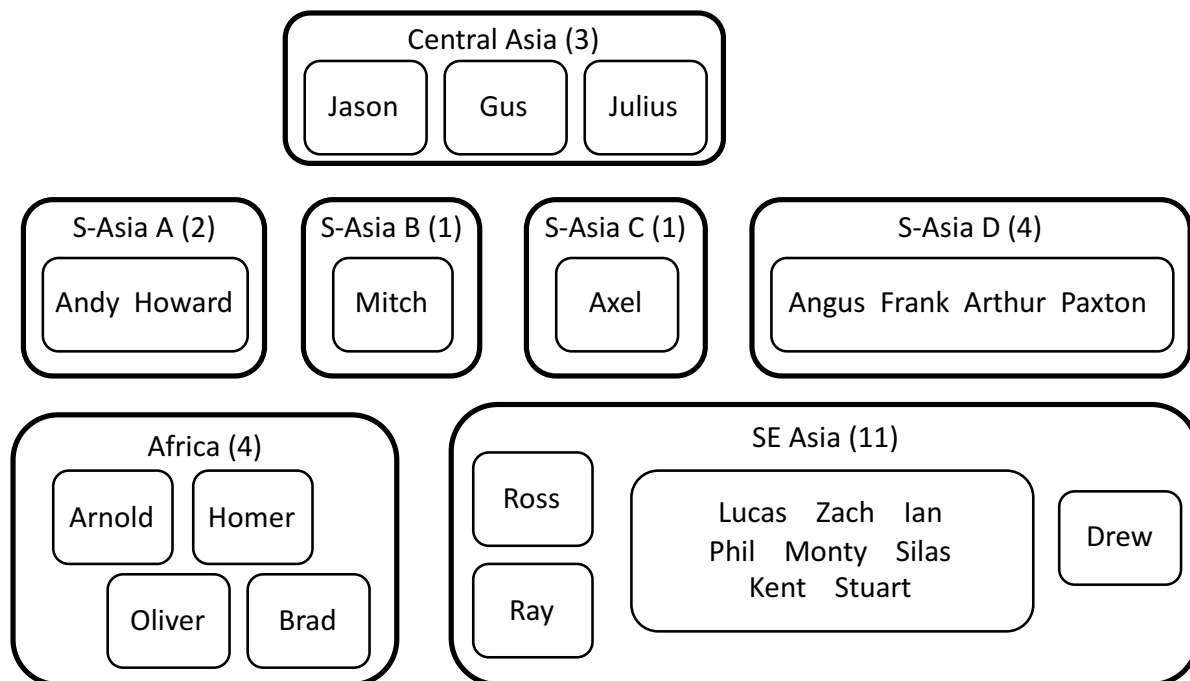
The main structure for the IMs in SE Asia is the *jamaat*, or fellowship. Alongsider Josh commented on the high level of commitment he has noticed members having to attend weekly jamaat meetings. These gatherings are modeled after a type of meeting generally held in homes, where they read or chant Holy Scripture in segregated groups between men and women. The jamaat gatherings are also social in nature. They eat something together and pray for each other. Alongsider Tyler mentioned that most of the jamaats he is familiar with are fairly small in size, with anywhere between four and six members. “This creates a bit more safety for people that are used to being beaten down,” he said. IM leaders from SE Asia confirmed the use of the jamaat structure in their movements. These groups meet in homes or more public places. For example, Ray regularly meets with a group of students at the university where he is studying for his PhD.

The jamaat structure does not replace the existing macro structure but fits within it. Normal mosque life continues as a macrocultural community structure. Monty said that they do not want to change the existing macro structure because it would trigger disorder.

We want to build a believer community inside the mosque. We want to build a Bible college within the Islamic boarding house.

Monty’s personal ministry is within an Islamic boarding school. He said that their jamaats in this school were relatively hidden in the first five years of meeting and learning together, but after that the students and leaders in these jamaats were ready to be more open about the fact that they were studying the Gospels and Jesus. This school is now known in the community for doing so, and the jamaat members have their answers ready to questions about why they study the Injil and Isa, from a qur’anic viewpoint. As Muslims they can explain these studies and continue their jamaat movement. The

Figure 2. The 26 IM leaders came from 15 groupings.



macro structure forms the setting for ministry. Monty mentioned, “Insider movements are moving so quickly because there are no walls as obstacles keeping it from happening.” They are using the former ways to make new changes. He did admit that sometimes these old structures need some modification if part of them is in conflict with the Word of God.

IMs have multiple so-called generations, which are clusters of spiritual offspring. A first-generation insider is someone who was led to faith in Christ by an outsider. A second-generation insider is someone who came to faith through a first-generation insider, etc. The jamaats within a movement are associated with a certain generation. You have second-generation jamaats, third-generation jamaats, and so forth. Each jamaat has a formal or informal leader, which means that there is a structure of IM

leaders within an IM that is used as a venue for communication and training. In SE Asia there is a quarterly multi-day meeting of the top 20 leaders in the various movements in the region. Much of this time is spent in Bible study. There is also a biannual gathering of multiple leaders from various national organizations who are involved in contextual Muslim work, to share best practices and to encourage one another. The formats of these top-level leadership meetings are duplicated among the leaders down into the lower-level generations. As such, the connections between the leaders in an IM are part of the IM structure.

A leader of a jamaat emerges naturally within a group setting, but there is always consensus building. Phil said,

It could be a younger person. It is a consensus discussion. It will take some time, but there always is one person who is chosen to be the most senior.

A group of leaders within a certain area follows the same process to choose leaders among themselves. Monty shared that they are planning to send out 500 leaders within the next five years, to start movements in unreached areas. He explained the reason for the five-year time frame. “The idea of five years is that there have to be children and grandchildren leaders behind them, prior to them being sent.” He was referring to IM generations.

Growth in the IMs in SE Asia happens through social networks. These are existing networks of contacts within the existing macro structure. Phil recalled his change in approach towards natural networks.

At the beginning when I started doing evangelism I worked from a map, and my thoughts and plans were mostly based on areas I wanted to go. As time went by, and especially after I started meeting with others

Figure 3. Five alongsiders in seven regions

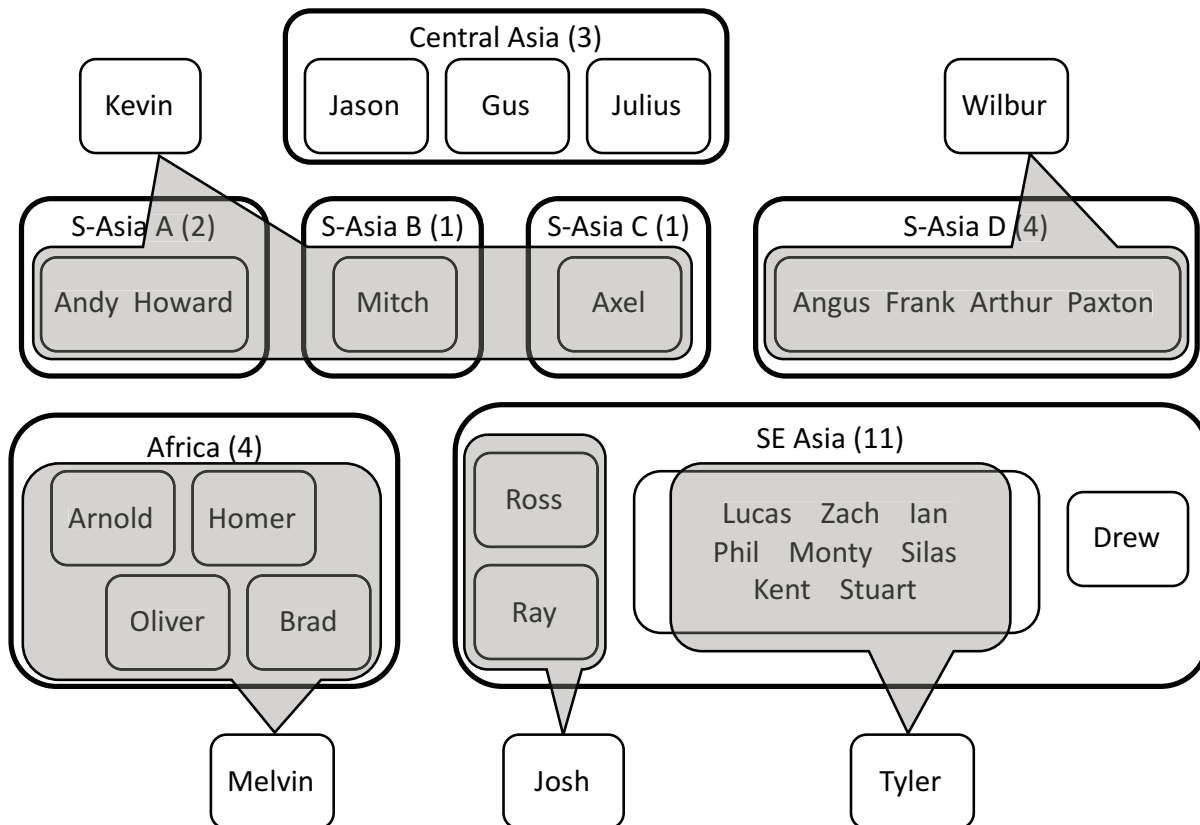


Table 1. Why insider movements?

IM Leader	Direct Quote
S-Asia-C\Axel	I was thinking and thinking, I had been praying for a long time for my family. I can go there. If I say that I'm a Muslim, nothing is wrong. I can go and reach my people. It was like a vision for me. I want to be an insider. I don't want to be an outsider. I will put myself in the place of my family and friends, to come to them. If at that time some Christian will come, I will hide him. Who will talk to my friends and family?
C-Asia\Julius	Just two years ago, after getting married, I made a decision to return to live among my family, which I had left six years ago, to live close to them and my extended family. I came to a clear condition that I needed to share the gospel with my people. I started from the beginning to share the gospel with my family and friends. I would call this a calling that I believe I received from God. As I did this, I naturally started to learn some of the principles about insider movements. I considered Islamic culture and the way my people think.
Africa\Arnold	It took me 10 years to finally catch that vision and to understand what it really means to remain in one's context, to be able to reach out to others. From then on, I began to reach out to my own people. I went back to my people. They accepted me back, but they saw many changes in me that made them say, "He has something to offer." Once a believer takes a Christian identity, I know that this will not help. Perhaps it will help the church, but it will not help the community and society as a whole.
SE Asia\Drew	When I got baptized in 2006 I did not consider myself a Christian. I simply considered myself to be a Muslim who had accepted Jesus. I had a desire to bring Jesus to my Muslim friends, and I had never heard about insider movements. After I got baptized and got home from church, I did the regular <i>salat</i> , as my expression of thankfulness to God. My mother [a Christian] was very angry with me. "What are you doing that for? God will be very confused with you!" This is what my mother said, and I still remember it until now. I told her that I had accepted Jesus, but that I was still a Muslim, and that I wanted to bring Jesus to my Muslim friends. Yes, there are some Muslims who convert to Christianity and who hate Mohammed, but for me, I want to serve my friends and I want to respect their beliefs, and a central figure of Islam is Mohammed. I don't find that this goes against the teachings of Jesus.
SE Asia\Ray	As a Muslim it is easy for me to share the gospel, because when I talk about Isa as a Muslim with other Muslims they know that I am not trying to convert them. That is not a problem. It is a very different story when a Christian talks to a Muslim about Jesus. He would say, "Be careful, you cannot convert me." When I initially discussed this idea with my wife she told me that I could do it, but that she could not, since she is from a Christian background. Over time she saw and understood what was happening in the ministry, and she decided to become a Muslim convert to Islam. I did not force her, but she personally understood that this was needed for the kingdom of God.

with the same passion some seven years ago, there is more of a principle of following the Spirit. What are the natural flows of relationships of a person? He has friends over there, so that is how faith spreads. This is more a natural style away from the command-center approach. It is much

cheaper and more efficient to follow whatever God opens.

Lucas mentioned that within his movement they encourage individuals who come to faith in Jesus to stay in their own context so that they can invite others from that same context and

background to form a community or jamaat. Silas also stressed using a network of personal contacts that already exists and infusing the gospel into that network rather than trying to create a new network around the gospel that is not natural.

Several of the IM leaders in SE Asia mentioned that growth indeed happens through existing social networks, but that the *engine* behind the growth is a transformed life. People observe changed lives. Silas mentioned that growth is a heart thing and not based on thoughts but actions. “Faith spreads from community to community in a very similar way, from the heart,” he said. Stuart also stressed the need for followers of Isa al Masih to be involved in social action in the community, for the sake of the community and the growth of the movement.

### South and Central Asia

The IMs in S-Asia region A are structured around small fellowships or jamaats, but alongside Kevin mentioned that there are all kinds of variety in terms of how often a group meets, where they meet, and what they do when people meet.

There’s much more variety in it than what people are probably looking for or hoping for in the West, when we talk about movements.

Kevin also shared that Howard likes structure and is intentionally organizing the movement into jamaat clusters with leaders for each jamaat and cluster. Leadership training events played a big role in seeing a movement start, and these events are still the fundamental core structure, according to Kevin. There could be anywhere between 10 to 70 people at any given event. Howard and Andy also designed a four-year leadership training program in which they function as the teachers. The program has a cycle of one-week training followed by forty days back into the community. This discipleship program includes the study of much of the New Testament, parts of the Old Testament, and topics such as spiritual warfare, building bridges between Muslim and Christian worldviews, comparative studies between the Qur’an and the Bible, Christ through the prophets, and church planting.

The jamaat members select their own leaders, with some involvement by Andy or Howard. Andy said,

We pray for someone who looks like a leader according to 1 Timothy and Philippians, and then we try to encourage him and ask others to pray for him, if he can be their leader.

The growth of the movements in S-Asia region A happens via existing relationships. Howard shared, “Friend to friend, brother to brother. This is how it goes, like a river; it keeps going that way, tribe to tribe.” He also said that by now he does not know the exact size of the movement anymore. The movement expands over into other language communities based on the cultural rules of intermarrying,



which are natural bridges that assist the spread of the gospel.

In S-Asia region B there is a fair bit of interest in *organizing the work* by the main alongside, according to Kevin, even though the start of the movement was very unintentional per Mitch’s testimony. The leaders of the overall movement in the region have organized it around geographical districts, intentionally establishing jamaats in districts that still need fellowships and following up and establishing local leadership in districts where jamaats have been established.

Axel is involved in some jamaats in region C, but the movement he is connected with is still in its infancy. He reaches out to friends and family

members in the mosque communities in this region. His background as imam helps to give him credibility and makes him uniquely suited to introducing the gospel from the inside of a Muslim’s frame of mind.

Frank shared that in S-Asia region D the jamaats typically meet on Friday afternoons. A usual place would be the special guest sitting room in a house, where it is very cultural for male guests to gather. These meetings are not closed, and groups come together along general exposure lines in families and neighborhoods. These jamaats may recite the Tawrat, Zabur, and Injil in the Arabic version, but they study and interpret the text in the vernacular language. The structure of this movement is built around these semi-open jamaat meetings as well as around fully public and open events. The insiders hold open events in the courtyards of a mosque or other public places. These events could be a one-on-one conversation or a larger gathering of maybe 100 people. The topic of these open events is evangelistic and apocalyptic, proclaiming that the return of Christ is imminent. Alongside Wilbur explained that these are the entry-level broad appeal events, encouraging people to attach themselves to Isa and to repent and believe in him. The Qur’an has an equal place at the table in these fully open events that engage with the broadest section of society.

Angus and Frank are involved in the selection of jamaat leaders. They look for someone who is well respected, married, and a good husband and father. “The two of us, in consultation with the group in question, we’ll talk and pray and decide,” Frank said. Interestingly, they also look for leaders who are literate. Jamaat leaders have a teaching role. Angus commented,

These are people who can read and write, and we give them the responsibility to teach their children and people in the neighborhood. We have several books.

In Central Asia, Julius, Gus, and Jason are all three in very different settings, but each one is involved in the very beginnings of an IM. Julius has moved back into his own community as an insider and is meeting contacts one-on-one at this time. They study the Qur'an and the earlier books together, and he is already planning on bringing these contacts together in jamaats when they are stronger in their faith.

Gus mentioned that in his setting the movement is still small but that it is growing through relationships. "Nothing happens without relationships," he said. In describing the general jamaat system, Gus interestingly mentioned freedom and made a reference to communism. "A leader gives much freedom to people. We function more like a Soviet society: no bosses."

Jason is on staff with a fairly large local traditional church. He tries to introduce more contextualized ministries and new initiatives but encounters much resistance from the church elders. For now he is trying to stay connected to this church and make some changes from within. Jason organizes insider home groups following local cultural norms, using the local language, and being sensitive to everyone's Muslim background.

### Africa

In the Africa region Arnold, Oliver, Homer, and Brad represent four different IMs. Arnold forms groups or jamaats, but he first meets with people whom he would like to place in a group on an individual basis to talk and study with them, "lest they cause some disturbance in a group," Arnold said. "There are some people that have really advanced and have come to understand that Isa al Masih is not just a prophet." Arnold groups these people together. He also shared that when they connect with a new family, one of the leaders of the movement approaches the head of the family first to see if there is openness and support on his part. Arnold avoids open gather-

**T**he structure of this movement is built around these semi-open jamaat meetings as well as around fully public and open events.

ings with a group of people. "In groups everyone wants to ask questions, and then they will be stronger than you and they unite against you," he said.

Arnold referred to himself as an overseer within the IM for a certain territory, and within that area he appoints the leaders for each jamaat. He is controlling the structure and direction of growth of the movement quite directly in his personal realm of influence, but this overall movement has grown to over 1,000 insiders, which means that much growth is happening without his direct involvement. He added,

Once someone gets to understand this he gets so excited, and because he's remaining in context, he is not afraid of anything. This makes a kind of network, and it goes very fast and smoothly, without much opposition. This is how it grows.

Oliver is connected to a large movement across a wide region in Africa, but in his own setting the movement is still in its infancy. He had several visions of Isa several years ago when he was a teenager, and he is still very much part of his Muslim community and people. Melvin explained that in this large movement the structure of the groupings is the *oikos*, or household. The leader of a jamaat is the head of the household. He explained that the patron-client system is the way movements form and grow, from households to tribes. "Those with the most patronage become bigger and bigger leaders within the movement."

Homer is a leader in a large movement. He is still very much involved at the grassroots as well and loves to meet with people one-on-one, "until they are ready to consider that the Bible is not corrupted," Homer said. He starts with the Qur'an and shows them how it confirms and points to these other

books. "You don't reveal that you have a Bible in the initial meeting," he noted. When they get deeper and deeper into the Scriptures, "then they come into the light from the darkness, and then I can introduce him to other believers," Homer shared. Within this movement the jamaats are grouped along the mosque structure, which forms natural communities. Homer said that a jamaat leader is chosen democratically by the group members. He was clearly excited during the interview when he explained how the movement is growing. He gave an example of an insider with whom they had lost contact for a while since he had moved closer to where his extended family was living. When Homer met up again with this man, he learned that the latter had been sharing with his family members and that 40 people now are ready for baptism. Homer mentioned other examples of people moving within their wider language tribe but across country borders and spreading the movement that way.

It is spreading just as you see with the trees. When the wind comes the seeds spread, and wherever they fall they start germinating. This work is growing that way.

Brad's situation is somewhat unique in that he is the national leader for his church denomination for the ministry of IMs. He employs several so-called change agents who guide the local outreach ministries. Brad shared how they are encouraging believers to reach out to others, and to study the Scriptures with someone initially one-on-one before putting this person in contact with a jamaat or cell group. They are keeping these groups as small as possible to avoid exposure. Most jamaats have five to ten people, according to Brad. He explained:

When a new person reaches a certain level of understanding and interest,

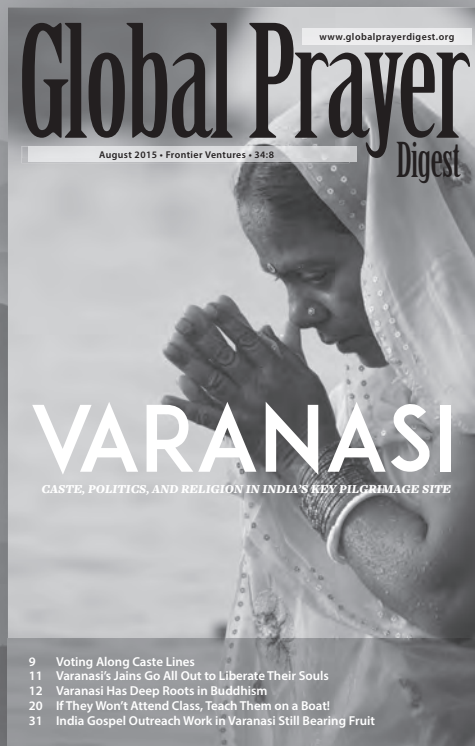
one of the change agents will do more in-depth Bible studies with him.

One change agent may service anywhere between one to three jamaats. In areas where the movement is growing in numbers they establish a committee led by someone who volunteers for that role. The local change agent is part of this committee as well, and the committee leader reports plans and progress to Brad.

### Observations

Small local fellowships, or jamaats, are the building blocks of all IMs represented by the 26 interviewed IM leaders. These groups form naturally within family, tribal, and mosque communities. The movements grow via existing relationships, as people share with friends, colleagues, and family members. The movements move from one area to another when believers move around.

Leaders in a movement either appoint new leaders or guide a community process of selecting new leaders as new jamaats form. In some cases the jamaat leader role falls naturally to the community leader, such as in a family or tribe, if this person has become a believer. The generations of believers within an IM seem to create levels of isolation and protection in that most believers only know other believers from their own jamaat, and the jamaat leader only knows his leader one generation up from his own. This creates a very flexible IM structure and also makes the network between IM leaders a vital part of an IM's support and learning structure. IMs use leadership training programs rather than hierarchical leadership structures to enable and empower all believers and jamaat leaders within the movement. **IJFM**



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