Ministering to Muslims

Part 2 of 2: 3 Simple Ways to Minister to Muslims & Immigrants
with Darrell L. Bock and Dwight Ekholm
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Darrell Bock: Now I would say that in the States, generally speaking, the way in which people come into contact with someone from a Muslim background is they're either working in a situation where they're working next to someone like that, or oftentimes – and I know a lot of churches do this – they're engaged in ministry to students who are on an international exchange who are in universities, and there are programs that are developed to try and just help them acclimate, very similar to the type of thing that you're doing in Athens. What advice would you give to people who – I mean you've been doing this for years now – who are trying to build these relationships with people who are just trying to get culturally located in many ways. And then what advice would you give them, and how would you help them think through how to get to know where the person is on a religious level as well?

Dwight Ekholm: I mean I suppose obviously one of the things that I would really emphasize is just invite them into your home. Have them come over and have a meal. I mean I've met an awful lot of people who come to America and they don't get invited anywhere. So just have them come and be a part of a family. I mean they're very, very family-oriented.

Darrell Bock: And that means a lot culturally to them.

Dwight Ekholm: Yeah, that's huge. You know, just come and be a part of your family and meet your kids, and you know, find ways to introduce them, say, to Christian students who are their age, and just kind of expose them to different aspects of American culture. And I would say we have to be careful not to be too preachy at the beginning, you know. Ask questions, basically do what Jesus did and ask a lot of questions and get them talking. And, you know, I would generally find that they will be open to talk if they sense that you're willing to listen and not pounce on everything they say.

Darrell Bock: So you're saying there's terrific value initially in just letting them kind of tell their story about where they're from and who they are. And I find that actually helps someone get located in terms of knowing – you know, maybe there's an experience or something to relate to or something like that that can open up the door for a more meaningful conversation.
Dwight Ekholm: Sure. And, you know, there's just a million practical things. If you come from another culture and you're living here, and you just don't know how things work, where to find this, that, and the other. You know, people need a lot of practical help, whether it's taking the wife shopping and just explain to her how you decide which of these 50 varieties of potato chips to buy.

You come from anywhere else to America and it's just overwhelming. How do you make the phones work? I mean I generally find that most of these guys that I work with are technically so far ahead of me. You know, if I can't make my phone work, I'll grab one of those guys and say, "I'm an idiot. Just show me how this works."

Many, many, many of these people are highly educated, they're very intelligent people. So for them to sense that you're treating them with respect and, you know, you're not looking down on them because they come from somewhere else, you know, I think they'll pick that up pretty fast.

Darrell Bock: So tell us – you're obviously traveling through the States now and I imagine just telling people about what you're doing in part. When you go back, will you be doing more of the same?

Dwight Ekholm: When I go back to Athens?

Darrell Bock: Yeah, to Athens.

Dwight Ekholm: We're going to actually head back towards the end of this month. So I'll continue to meet with this group that I'm working with in Athens. I will be traveling into one of the Middle Eastern countries in November again to meet with a number of people.

So I'm wearing several different hats, and one of the hats that I'm wearing right now with this ministry I'm with called Entrust. And just to kind of back it up historically, we were called BEE for years, Biblical Education by Extension.

Darrell Bock: And that was primarily into the Iron Curtain.
**Dwight Ekholm:** Yeah, exactly. We started in '79; and at that time, Sandi and I were with what was called Campus Crusade at the time — we're CRU now. But we had come over to work behind the Iron Curtain with Crusade, and then in the late '70s, Crusade and the Navigators, and a bunch of other groups got together and formed this cooperative called BEE. And the whole idea was, they couldn't come to us, but we could go to them. So we would travel across the border. And then eventually when the wall came down, we kind of diversified into different areas. We're not doing extension education anymore. We're able to let go and live and work where people are living. So we eventually changed our name to Entrust. So from 2 Timothy 2:2, just the idea of entrusting what we've learned to others who train others.

And so my new hat with them is mission mobilization. So basically, I'm here at Dallas Seminary right now meeting students, met with a couple last night who are very interested in joining with us. So basically, we've got I think a great concept of leadership training. We've got open doors, we've got invitations, but we don't have enough people. And a lot of us that are with us have been around a long time, you know. There's a lot of miles on our tires. I mean I'm 66 years old. You know, I can maybe do this for another 20 years, but at some point, you know.

A lot of us have been around a while. So one of Sandi's — my wife and I — one of our goals is to try to reproduce ourselves and to raise up some younger people who can go off to places like China or India or the Middle East. So I'm here on campus right now doing recruiting. And got a chance to speak in chapel yesterday, and we did a seminar on non-formal education.

I mean that's kind of our whole bag is to be able to go to a place like India and help develop a training program that's run by locals and something that is meeting their needs, not just coming in and taking the same approach, say, that would work in the West but that may not work all that well in here or China.

**Darrell Bock:** One of the things that makes a seminary so special is this ability to draw on people who are literally ministering around the world — have them come and talk about what they're doing, and alongside the students who come from all around the world. And so you get a global feel for what's going on in the church that some churches pursue, but many churches don't. And so from that aspect, it's something that seminaries are able to do.
Now one final question. When you have someone, and let's assume they're staying in Athens for a while, are these Muslim believers going into churches or are they forming their own churches? What's happening with them if they stay long-term?

*Dwight Ekholm:* Good question. There's a variety of different things that happen. And for the most part, I have tried to encourage refugees to get involved in a Greek church, and there's been a lot of reasons for that. Just kind of to get integrated into the culture. It can also help with getting jobs because they get to know some Greek believers who can maybe help them. And there are a number of churches where there are quite a number of refugees who attend there.

There's a place called Second Evangelical Church that is doing a ministry to people from different parts of the Middle East. And there's a staff person who that's his whole outreach is basically trying to get Greeks involved in reaching out to refugees, and not to see them as the enemy who's come and invaded their territory like a trojan horse, but to get Greeks involved in ministering to them.

The other side of that coin is there are a number of these refugee centers that call themselves a church on Sunday. So then the believers end up in kind of this little refugee ghetto. That's all they know is other people from their country. And I think that's kind of a dead end street, but there are an awful lot of those situations where they don't know anybody else. And the average Greek person doesn't want to have anything to do with foreigners, but I mean a number of believers are starting to reach out.

But there's a lot a right-wing backlash right now. I mean there's this party called Golden Dawn, which is sort of a neo-Nazi group. And these guys are going around beating people up. One of the dangers for refugees in like even going to church in certain locations, they're afraid because they don't have the right documents, if they venture into this neighborhood to go to church, the police might want to see their documents, and they end up getting arrested and thrown in jail for a while. So they live with a lot of fears that someone in America has a hard time relating to.

And one of the guys that I've worked with really closely has been heavily involved in First Evangelical Church, which is a really solid Bible-teaching church. So there are a number of these Greek churches that they're involved in. And some of them come to international churches that are English-speaking churches, and there's actually quite a few of those.
Like one of the guys that I've worked with who is just a dear brother and a committed evangelist really wants to go to an international church, because ultimately, he wants to go to Vancouver or somewhere, and so speaking English and learning English is to his advantage and he wants to have fellowship with international people. So there's kind of all different options.

_Darrell Bock:_ Well I take it that you’ve found this work fascinating and encouraging in a lot of ways. I imagine it's quite something to either be involved in helping to lead someone to the Lord who comes out of Islamic background, or to take someone who's just come to the Lord and watch them grow in the faith.

_Dwight Ekholm:_ It has been – you know, interesting would be a good word, and a lot of encouragement, and a lot of discouragement along the way. I mean there have been times when – you know, it seems like there's sort of a cycle. Every three or four years, there's some kind of a major blowup that happens, and it's usually some personality conflict. Something happens where things are going really well, and all of a sudden, it's just like somebody pulls a rug out from under the ministry and then you're starting over again. It's a little bit like being a basketball coach, and you're just getting going well, and then your top guys graduate or they get drafted in the NBA, so then you're starting over again. So, you know, there have been frustrations and challenges.

But one of the analogies that I use is I feel I'm a little bit like Nick Bollettieri who runs this tennis academy in Florida. Now Nick Bollettieri never won Wimbledon, never won the US Open, but he trained Agassi and Sampras and Jim Courier and a bunch of those guys. And, to me, there's a joy in working with some of these guys, and teaching and training and mentoring them. And they can go on and do stuff that I can't do. I mean they're evangelizing their countrymen in a way that I'm just not gifted to do.

Basically, I'm a Bible teacher and a mentor, and I get to coach these guys, and they get to go on and do stuff that's beyond what I can do. And then to see them go on to other places and start up ministries there, that's fun. And like a few years ago, I had a guy that I was working with really closely, his name was Mohammed. And I just thought it was always cool to be able to read the Bible and pray to Jesus with a guy named Mohammed.
Darrell Bock: You know, we've heard about your ministry and we even did a little bit of a signoff, and then you shared with me some statistics about the Muslim make-up of countries in Europe and surrounding Europe, which I thought were just so fascinating that people ought to hear this, because I don't think they're aware of kind of where we are and where we may be going. So, Dwight, I'll ask you to just read off some of the statistical information you have about the percentage of Muslim population in Europe and in some of the surrounding countries.

Dwight Ekholm: Okay, yeah. I've just been doing some reading online recently and come across a number of statistics; and, obviously, people are going to have different projections. But one of them that I read just recently is saying that currently, about 5 percent of the population in the European Union identifies themselves as Muslims. And then they said the UN estimates that Europe will be 55 percent Muslim by the Year 2040.

Darrell Bock: Now that's because Europeans tend not to have very many children, whereas Muslims do?

Dwight Ekholm: Yeah. I'd say maybe the average Western European has about two-thirds of a child, I think, per marriage.

Darrell Bock: That's interesting. I don't know quite how you do that, but I'll let you figure that out for me.

Dwight Ekholm: Well, you know, they can do a lot in Europe. So the population, I think, in probably every Western European country of the ethnic people from that country is going down, it's getting smaller and smaller. And, of course, you know, the people coming up from the Middle East and North Africa, particularly places like France – they have a very high birthrate, and you've got more and more people just pouring in.

Darrell Bock: Right. So you've got the combination of immigration and birth.

Dwight Ekholm: Right. So like, you know, when I lived in Vienna in the '70s, I didn't see anyone from the Middle East. But now when I'm back in Vienna, I mean just there are areas where – you just – everyone you see is either from the Middle East or from Pakistan or from North Africa. So there's this migration that is coming there. Like Germany right now is just under four percent.
I was surprised to see that Switzerland is about four percent Muslim. And then you've got a few of these countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania that have a much higher percentage. But like France, they're saying it's ten percent right now. And, of course, growing at a fairly rapid rate.

Darrell Bock: In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, and Albania, how large is the population there of the percentage of Muslims?

Dwight Ekholm: The percentage in Albania is 70 percent Muslim, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is 40 percent right now.

Darrell Bock: So it's quite a range. It can go from a very small minority to a very, almost a plurality or something like that.

Dwight Ekholm: Oh, yeah, yeah. In Bosnia, it was – I'm sorry – Kosovo was almost 90 percent.

Darrell Bock: Well, of course, anyone who's familiar with the history there knows what's going on. Well, I think that's an interesting backdrop to put into what's going on and why this kind of ministry that you're engaged in is so potentially important; because there is going to be an increasing presence of Islamic people in Europe, and that certainly is going to impact the international scene in a significant way, and it's worth knowing about. So I'm glad you're willing to come back and give us this little postscript.

Dwight Ekholm: Little footnote.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, footnote to our podcast. Thank you, Dwight.

Dwight Ekholm: Yeah, sure. And I'll just mention too that there are organizations that are working all over Western Europe, you know, ministering to refugees. And there is somewhat of a network of people who are connected together. So like let's say somebody meets the Lord in Athens and we know they're going to Frankfurt. We'll try to find ways to connect them to people who are ministering up there. There's been a thing called the Refugee Highway Partnership where the goal has been to try to link different organizations like that, and that's functioning to some degree.
Darrell Bock: Hmm, that's interesting. So it isn't just Entrust.

Dwight Ekholm: Oh, yeah. There's international teams, quite a number of other organizations are focusing on it. I mean Entrust is a very small organization, and we just have a really, really small niche. But we have contact with friends in a lot of other places. They're all just, you know, a lot of different organizations that are either run by people from the Middle East or run by Westerners, but who are reaching out to refugees.

Darrell Bock: Well, again, thank you for coming in, and the information's been, I'm sure, informative; and it pulls back a window on what's going on in a part of the world that oftentimes we don't think about, and it raises the question about, you know, "What is God doing in the midst of these migratory moves that are changing the make-up of the way we think about the world and certain parts of the world?"

We want to thank you, Dwight, for coming in and talking with us about what your ministry to Islamic believers – I don't know what other phrase to use – has been like, and we just thank you that you're doing what you're doing. And we pray that your ministry would bear fruit, and that those who you are training will turn out to be able to encourage others to come into the faith. Thank you for coming in with us today.

Dwight Ekholm: Thank you.

Darrell Bock: And we thank you for joining us at The Table, where God and culture meet, and we hope to see you again next time.