

9-23-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Canisius, A., & Bonham, G. S. (2021). Sharing Jesus with Muslims: A Survey of Church Leaders in Africa. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 13(2), 37-48. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol13/iss2/3>

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# Sharing Jesus with Muslims: A Survey of Church Leaders in Africa

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## **Abstract**

*A web survey of 34 pastors and other church leaders in 2020 who had met during graduate studies at Africa International University (AIU) was conducted to understand what is being done in Muslim evangelism in their home churches, primarily in East Africa. They generally characterized Muslims positively, as being made in the image of God, and as needing salvation through Jesus. They identified what they considered to be key differences between Muslims and Christians. Half of their churches made general evangelistic efforts, but most of these made no specific attempt to share the gospel with Muslims. Sharing the gospel with Muslims presents different challenges than sharing the gospel with people of other faiths. Their church members need a deeper understanding of the basic doctrines of the Trinity and salvation through Christ, along with training and tools on how to present the gospel to Muslims in a way they can hear, understand, and accept.*

*He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."*

*(Mark 16:15, NIV)*

The word of God - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit - makes it clear that Christians are called to share the gospel with everyone. The Bible says: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV). Sometimes African Christians may forget that this mandate given to them applies to Muslims also. They claim, perhaps by ignorance, perhaps by experience, that Muslims are hard to preach to. Instead of going to them, Christians may complain about how Muslim hate Christians.

The gospel has been, and is being, preached to many people in Africa. Many disciples are made but few disciples are made among Muslims in East Africa. Why? This was the central question for a group of students from the Center for Islamic Studies at the Africa International University (AIU) who traveled from Nairobi, Kenya, to the Babati District, Manyara Region, Tanzania in the Spring of 2018. One of the authors (Akimana Canisius) was part of this student group and wrote to the other author (Gordon Bonham) soon afterward:

*Muslims are very cooperative and love visitors. They welcome you to their houses, give you a seat, and listen to your message. It was amazing. Muslims are peaceful people and have a hunger for the gospel. In ten days, 30 Muslims gave their lives to Christ and others were calling us to stay another week. Only some challenges:*

*Churches there are very weak and have no program to reach Muslims. (We found Muslims 500 meters from the church, but never been visited by a single Christian.)*

*People speak only the Kiswahili language. No English there.*

*Pastors are not trained to win people, even non-Muslims.*

*People (Christians also) are very poor and non-educated.*

The lack of evangelism among Muslims may be due to the lack of training available to pastors and church members. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14 NIV).

Rev. Canisius decided to study the situation more deeply and to write his master's thesis on his findings (Canisius, 2020). Often using a translator, he conducted personal interviews with fifty leaders, ten from each of five Free Pentecostal Churches of Tanzania (FPCT) in Babati. After completing his thesis, he extended his research to other churches in East

Africa and across the world to have a clearer image of current practices concerning the evangelism of Muslims in African churches. Information from the pastors and other church leaders he knew during his studies at AIU, a melting-pot of students from more than thirty-four countries, could provide a broader image of what is being done in Muslim evangelism in their respective churches, most of which are in East Africa. Dr. Bonham had guided him on the interview design, sample procedure, and data analysis for his thesis. He suggested that using a web version of the original survey could be done even with the COVID-19 pandemic limiting interpersonal interviews. This paper presents findings from that web survey.

## **Methods**

The web survey used Lime Survey software. Questions were in English, a language known to the 113 people invited to complete the survey. All except two of those invited to participate attended AIU. All were involved in ministry. Thirty-four of them (30%) responded to the survey between March 25 and April 10, 2020, with 28 providing useful information.

The home churches of 54% of the participants were in Kenya, 32% in other countries of East Africa (Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia) and 14% in other countries (Canada, India, Ukraine, and the United States). Over half (57%) of their churches were in the major city of their country; 50% were pastors, 36% were other church leaders and members, and 14% had ministries not associated with a specific church (evangelist, missionary, or ministry coordinator). Most (79%) of the respondents were men, half (50%) were younger than 35 years of age, and 64% had been in their churches for more than ten years. Those from outside Africa were older and likely to be in ministries not associated with a specific church. Those with home churches in East Africa apart from Kenya tended to be from smaller places than those from Kenya or outside Africa and to have been in their home churches for longer periods.

## **Results**

### **Attitudes toward Muslims**

When asked what they thought about Muslims living in their communities, respondents gave answers that were classified into one or two of five underlying themes (Table 1).

Theme	Examples	Frequency
Muslims' need of salvation	“wrong faith” “how to reach them”	15
Positive characteristics	“good” “friendly” “strong beliefs”	12
Muslim's humanity	“image of God” “brothers and sisters”	9
Neutral characteristics	“size” “part of the community”	6
Negative characteristics	“enemies” “religious conflict”	4

**Table 1:** *Participants' Descriptions of Muslims*

The respondents were apparently thinking about Muslim's needs, characteristics, and humanity. None of them mentioned personal involvement with them nor the role of the Holy Spirit in engaging Muslims for Christ, indicating that Spirit-led interactions with Muslims were not salient in their thinking.

It appears that personal, regular interaction with Muslims influenced the participants' responses. Most of the respondents from villages and rural areas (80%) and small cities (57%) mentioned positive characteristics of Muslims, such as being friendly and good people who faithfully followed their religious beliefs, whereas only 19% of those whose churches are in the major city of the country did so. Conversely, those whose churches are in the major city are most likely (63%) to mention Muslims' need for salvation, compared to those from smaller cities (14%) and villages or rural areas (20%). Perhaps associated with personal relationships, women are more likely (67%) to mention positive characteristics of Muslims than men (27%). Most (59%) men mentioned Muslims' need for salvation in their responses, but none of the six women did. Half (50%) of the pastors and 16% of the non-pastoral church members said Muslims need salvation.

Respondents most often described the difference between Christians and Muslims in terms of their beliefs about the nature of God and Allah (14 respondents) and of Jesus and Mohamad (14 respondents). Often,

these two went together. The good news about the Christian life and its benefits contrasted to the Muslim life (e.g., *true life and freedom, relationship with Jesus, assurance of eternal life*) was mentioned by nine respondents, frequently after they mentioned the nature of God or Jesus. Five respondents mentioned differences in beliefs without describing what the differences were. The remaining five respondents indicated that Muslims generally had a better lifestyle, better behavior, and a greater devotion to their religion than Christians.

## **Evangelism of Muslims**

**Evangelism Promoted by the Church.** Although Christians may be trained in various forms of evangelism, what they practice may be quite different. Even if they are trained to share the gospel with Muslims, some may still simply reject the possibility that any Muslim would respond positively to the gospel.

This is in marked contrast to Jesus' attitude when he said that the harvest is plentiful, but the harvesters are few (Matt. 9:37). If Christians understand that Muslims do not know the gospel, it is their responsibility to explain it to them, to be a living witness of Jesus Christ and to fulfill the Great Commission.

Only five of the 34 respondents said their churches reach out specifically to the Muslim community: two through radio and TV broadcasts, two with specific ministries to Muslims, and one with specific training on Muslim evangelism. Four of these churches are the home churches of respondents under 35 and are in the major city of their country.

Ten respondents, however, were unaware of any effort in their church to share the gospel with Muslims. The remaining 19 respondents noted that their church encouraged interaction with Muslims through regular church activities which do not specifically target Muslims. These include door-to-door outreach, developing relationships with Muslims, praying and passing out tracts at events, and service ministries such as visiting patients in hospitals and aiding refugees.

**Personal Evangelism.** When asked about their personal involvement in Muslim evangelism, 12 respondents said they are personally involved in sharing Jesus with Muslims through a specific ministry or their work. At the other extreme, nine respondents said they are not involved in sharing the gospel. The remaining 12 indicated a desire to share the gospel with Muslims in the future and were more likely to share the gospel through personal relationships (7) than through specific program of evangelism (5). There was no clear relationship between the respondents' involvement in sharing Jesus with Muslims and whether their churches reached out to Muslims.

When asked how sharing Jesus with Muslims challenged them, respondents were challenged by Muslims' response to their evangelistic efforts and by finding an appropriate approach to the share the gospel with them. Some of the themes are found in Table 2.

Theme	Examples	Frequency
Doctrine and beliefs	"Which God is more powerful?" "They like disputes." "They don't accept Jesus as the Son of God."	7
Fear	"They run away." "Fear of their family if they convert" "Think Christians are their enemies"	5
Threats	"Killing and closing the church" "Taken to jail and court"	2
Knowledge	"Understand their worldview" "What I believe"	11
Strategy	"Only tell them about Jesus and wait for Jesus to show himself."	11

**Table 2:** *Challenges Faced when Sharing the Gospel with Muslims*

**Hindrances to Muslim Evangelism.** A question about what hinders a Muslim from following Jesus and a question about the factors that cause these hindrances identified both hindrances on the side of the Muslims and hindrances on the side of Christians. The primary hindrances for Muslims are the beliefs they have been taught from childhood, mentioned 11 times. Six respondents mentioned the importance of family relationships and that following Jesus would hurt the relationships. Six also mentioned the very real danger of persecution by the community or the state that could lead to imprisonment and death. Other hindrances mentioned include Muslim pride and a lack of knowledge about Christianity. Specific Christian theology that is contrary to Muslim beliefs was mentioned by 10 respondents, primarily the theology of the Trinity that identifies Jesus as part of the Godhead, and the doctrine of salvation through Jesus alone. The resurrection, the authority of the Bible, and its truthfulness were also among the theological hindrances.

Respondents also mentioned hindrances and limitations that Christians face when sharing their faith with Muslims, including their limited knowledge about the gospel, about Islam, and about how to share the gospel with a Muslim. Mentioned less frequently, but still, a major hindrance was the lifestyle practices of Christians—the divisions among them, the incongruence between their words and behavior, their denigration of Muslim culture, and Christians' lack of love. Three respondents mentioned the need to let the Holy Spirit work in Muslim hearts and focus on prayer rather than on strategies to bridge the vast differences between the two faiths. Other hindrances include Christians fearing Muslims, lack of follow-up if a Muslim shows interest and starts following Jesus, and Christianity being so strongly identified as a foreign (Western) religion.

All six of the female respondents indicated hindrances on the part of Muslims, with four of them saying it was their beliefs; none suggested persecution as a hindrance. Only two females (33%) suggested Christian knowledge and lack of seeking the Spirit's involvement as hindrances. More than half of male respondents (59%) indicated hindrances on the part of Muslims and many of them noted the persecution that a Muslim who indicated an interest in Jesus would face. Unlike females, most (86%) of the males also indicated hindrances associated with Christians' lack of theological knowledge, particularly about the Trinity.

**Means Used to Evangelize Muslims.** Most of the respondents (28) had experience sharing Jesus or talking about the gospel with Muslims. Participants were asked to identify the tools they used when evangelizing Muslims. The Bible was used by 21 of them, with 9 using it as their only tool and 12 used the Bible along with other material (e.g., tracts, pamphlets, materials about their church, and the Qur'an). A few used other methods that included sports, prayer during hospital visitations, drama, and singing.

Another question asked about the ways that the participants prepared for sharing the gospel with Muslims. The responses included preparing material to distribute and preparing oneself through prayer, Bible reading, fasting, discussing issues with others, and reading material used by Muslims. In general, those who listed more tools also listed more ways of preparing for the sharing the gospel.

## **Responsibilities of Churches**

Participants were asked what they believed that their churches should do to evangelize Muslims. The answers respondents gave to this question clustered into four goals, from motivation to action. Respondents often

included multiple ideas in their responses. The main themes are presented in Table 3.

Goal	Theme	Examples	Frequency
Motivation	Inspiration	“Awareness and mobilization of Muslim evangelism” “Reach out to Muslims; they are our brothers.”	3
	Relationships	“Invite them to a private place.” “Practice unconditional love to them.”	9
Learning	Studying	“Understanding the Trinity very well” “in-depth study of the Bible”	8
	Training	“Equip and teach church more on Muslim evangelism.” “How to handle a Muslim mind conditioned since childhood”	13
Planning		“Prepare well.” “Decide to visit them.”	6
Action	Prayer	“Invest more in praying.”	5
	Support	“Support human needs.” “Schools to attract students”	3

**Table 3:** *Challenges Faced when Sharing the Gospel with Muslims*

The characteristics of the respondents were not related to whether they thought their church needed to inspire members to share the gospel.

Those from Kenya and outside Africa reported less need for studying and training than those from other East Africa countries (89% vs. 36%), and pastors were more likely than church members to think the church needed to teach and train members for sharing the gospel (79% vs. 30%). Men were the only ones to mention planning, and those whose home church is in the major city of the country mentioned planning much more frequently than those from smaller places (31% vs 6%).

### **Costs Associated with Muslim Evangelism**

Because there can be negative consequences associated with sharing the gospel with Muslims, the survey ended with a question about the cost of sharing the gospel with Muslims. The respondents recorded costs that we classified into two categories: Preparation Costs, which occur before one shares the gospel with Muslims, and Resulting Costs, which occur after.

The most frequently reported Preparation Cost was Time, identified by ten respondents - the time it took to prepare, to make contacts, and develop relationships that would be necessary to share the gospel. The financial cost of training for Muslim evangelism and the financial cost due to time taken away from salaried work or to pay for transportation were identified by six respondents. Mentioned by a few where the social costs of having their purposes misunderstood, having to assume responsibility for sharing, and having to demonstrate their good intentions by good deeds, such as visiting people in the hospital or meeting physical needs.

The most frequently mentioned Resulting Cost was death, either for the Christian for having tried to proselytize Muslims or for the Muslim if the Muslim accepted the gospel. Sharing the gospel might also cost time and money for following up with an open person, perhaps even including the responsibility to house him or her if the Muslim community rejects the convert. The psychological costs of suffering and discouragement due to being insulted or rejected in their efforts to share the gospel were also mentioned, especially in light of the biblical responsibility to endure. One participant also mentioned that a Christian may risk rejection from other Christians who do not support his or her efforts to reach Muslims.

### **Discussion**

Muslims need salvation. Created in God's image, they need to know God to experience true and everlasting life. If African churches are not ready to reach out to Muslims in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how can we fulfill the Great Commission in our lifetime? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news" (Romans 10:15, NIV). But how can they bring

the good news if they are not sent out and prepared to bring it in a way that Muslims can hear, understand, and accept? Evangelizing Muslims should be viewed as sharing the good news of Christ to the lost rather than an attempt to present a better or alternative religion. The gospel “is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16, NIV).

The responses of the 34 Africans surveyed were characterized by common themes about sharing the gospel with Muslims, even though they reflected experiences in many countries, in different sized communities with various denominational affiliations, and of people with differing church responsibilities. They generally identified Muslims as having positive human characteristics, made in the image of God, and needing salvation through Jesus. Only four mentioned negative characteristics of Muslims, so prejudice or fear does not seem to be a major barrier. Most said their churches had general evangelistic efforts but made few attempts to share the gospel specifically with Muslims. They could generally identify key differences between Muslims and Christians in beliefs about the nature of God, Allah, Jesus, and Muhammad.

These church leaders identified challenges and hindrances in sharing the gospel, some coming from the Muslims’ background and community and others due to basic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and salvation through Christ alone. Church members’ understanding of these doctrines and how to present them were hindrances, often not helped by the behavior and divisions among Christians. The Bible was the primary tool used in sharing the gospel, although there was little or no recognition that Muslims may not view the Bible as being relevant. Some used tracts or pamphlets that might help Muslims better hear the gospel message.

Churches need to motivate and train their members to share the gospel with Muslims, plan Muslim evangelism, and then take concrete steps to carry out the plans. Christians should conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ so that the non-believers will be drawn to Christ by the testimony of their changed lives.

Different churches may need to begin or focus on different steps in this progression. An earlier survey of ten leaders in five different churches in a specific urban area in Africa showed that each church was in a different place (Canisius and Bonham, 2020). Most of the leaders at two of the churches felt that training and planning were needed. Those at another church mainly said they needed to pray. One of the churches had tried Muslim evangelism unsuccessfully and blamed Muslims rather than their lack of training or preparation. The importance of pastoral leadership was mentioned by a few of the leaders who felt that the senior pastor was hindering members from sharing the gospel with Muslims. In the present

study, one-third of the respondents indicated the need to motivate church members to interact with Muslims and develop relationships, and half indicated the need for church members to learn more about the gospel message and how to share it.

The results from of this present study speak loudly and reinforce the findings from previous research. Church leaders believe that Muslims need salvation. All Kenyan pastors in charge of local churches in this study clearly responded that Muslims need salvation, as did all the evangelists, missionaries, and area coordinators. In contrast, church members and those from smaller communities emphasized favorable aspects of the Muslims they knew rather than their need for salvation. This means that the church leaders know that they need to share the gospel with Muslims, but this may not be the priority of the typical church member.

The two studies have found that many African churches do not make Muslim evangelism a priority. This matters a lot for the evangelical church in East Africa, a region where so many Muslims are found, and in the world globally. None of the leaders in these two studies indicated that their churches were trained in Muslim evangelism. Many of these churches do general evangelism through social services, open worship services, and door-to-door visitation, but not with a focus on Muslims. This is a major drawback. Some churches and church members may not interact with Muslims at all. Church members need both motivation and training in Muslim evangelism, beginning with the leaders of these churches.

This current research used an online tool that did not allow direct interaction with the respondents but did permit a greater geographical representation than the earlier study, which was based on direct contact between the researcher and the interviewees. In the earlier research, Canisius was able to record information beyond that evoked by his initial interview questions. He was able to communicate with respondents face-to-face, probing their fears and doubts with clarifying questions and interpreting the expressions on their faces. However, both types of research show that many congregants are not aware of how to share the gospel with Muslims. They also show that different churches in different locations may need evangelism training with slightly different emphases based on the local Muslim environment and the local church's missional view.

We recommend additional research on how African churches train, or need to train, members to reach out to Muslims. This should take place in individual churches to best fit the need of the specific context. Such research also needs to be done in other countries and cultures, with churches of different denominations and different sizes to better

understand the preparedness of churches in reaching out to Muslims with the gospel. This would enable training to be contextualized to each location. Yet, churches cannot wait for more extensive research. Denominational and network leaders should look at their own churches and introduce training programs to teach church members how to evangelize Muslims. Church leaders must also remind their congregations of the need to interact with Muslims, develop relationships that will allow them to share the gospel, and be trained in ways that have proven to be effective.

The commitment of local churches around the globe, and of Christian organizations, to Muslim evangelism must become more visible than in the past. Our main purpose as Christians is to glorify God by fulfilling His mandate to reach out to unreached people, including Muslims. The church exists because God exists. An inactive state is not appropriate for a born-again Christian.

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