**How the Lord is using a brave pastor in the midst of persecution and difficulties**

Robert Karemi is an Assyrian from the city of Orumieh who came to faith in the year 2000 when he was aged 17. From the beginning of his conversion, he took the Christian life very seriously and decided to commit himself to study God's Word and the principles of Christian living so that he could become a servant of the Lord. The pastor of the AOG Church in Orumieh at that time named Harmik Noruzi, recognised that the anointing of the Lord for ministry was upon him and began to prepare him for such a ministry and provided practical opportunities for ministry. In 2004, the pastor's time in Orumieh came to an end and he was transferred to Tehran and Robert as the Church worker continued in the ministry along with the Church elders. On the 9th March 2012 he was officially ordained as the Pastor of the Church.

At this time some Persians, Azeri Turks and Kurds were coming to the Church and a burden and vision to save those from Muslim background was lit in his heart. He decided on the occasion of the Iranian New Year, No-Ruz, to organise a special celebration for the benefit of the believers from Muslim background. However, from this time persecution commenced and he was told by the security officials "You have no right to have a No Ruz celebration in your Church and furthermore, as your Church is evangelistic, you have no right to accept Muslims and certainly not to baptise them or accept them into membership and should only work among Assyrians and Armenians. Also, as your ordination took place without our approval we do not accept you as the Pastor of this Church". Robert did not pay any attention to what they were saying but the only change that he made was to separate those from Muslim background from the congregation that met in the building and organise a separate house Church for them so that they would not be seen and face persecution.

After a while the person responsible for security told Robert "You can only meet on Sundays and you need to close the other activities such as the meetings for prayer and Bible Study". Robert told him "You have no right to decide when the people of God can meet for worship and when they cannot meet! We can have meetings every day if we want to as the door of house of God should always be open just like the mosques". This security official became very angry and was close to hitting Robert. He started to use very bad language and began to swear about the martyrs saying "we need to send you to the same place that we sent the martyrs!" Robert responded "It is good that eventually you accept and are confirming that the killing of the Church martyrs was your work!"

Then Robert tried to show him from the Constitution that Christians are free according to the law to meet in their buildings for worship without any barriers. But the security official who was the Government official responsible for all the churches told Robert "I am the law and you must do whatever I tell you to do". Robert responded "I cannot obey you because you are forcing me to do this!"

A report of his disobedience was sent to Tehran and the security forces ordered him to come to Tehran and meet with them along with the superintendent of the AOG Churches. The security official, who had a higher position than the one in Orumieh, spoke very harshly to Robert and told him in no uncertain terms that he must obey whatever they say. Robert said "We, like the apostles of Christ, say 'We must obey God more than man'. Furthermore, what you are saying is illegal, for Christians according to the law can meet for worship whenever they want to".

Robert returned to Orumieh and then a new order was given by the security official there that they should not speak in Farsi in the Church. Robert explained that Persian speakers are no longer attending the services but as the congregation is a mixed group of Armenians and Assyrians they need to preach in Farsi so that all can understand. They were then told "You are recording the preaching and distributing the tapes/CDs to Muslims so that they can hear. Also, there is another matter: the leaders of the church should not be chosen by the members but we should first approve them and then it be announced that they are the elders". This is very similar to what happens in Communist countries.

When Robert refused to accept any of these measures he then found out that when he went to the university to continue his studies in a Master's degree in Psychology he was expelled from the university and was told that the powers that be had decided that he was not being allowed to study. In this way he was deprived of university studies. The next pressure was that he was then told that he and his wife should leave Orumieh within 15 days. Robert told them "I am the Pastor of about 100 members and all of them want me to be their pastor. So what will happen to the Church?" They responded by saying that this was not their business and insisted that he needed to leave within 15 days. After 15 days they telephoned and asked him for his decision. Robert responded "I was born here and as an Iranian citizen and according to the law you cannot expel me from my city. If I am guilty of a crime then arrest me, take me to court and imprison me". The security official began to swear and told them that they would give him another 15 days and if he has not gone by that time then it would be very bad for him and his wife. Robert invited the Church to be in prayer and fasting during this second period of 15 days.

On the night of the 14th day he had a dream which he realised was from the Lord. In the dream he saw that this security official was in a very worried state and upset. Robert asked him why he was upset and worried? He told Robert that he had a family problem. When asked what the problem was he responded by saying that his mother was very ill, was in much pain and that the doctors were saying that there was no hope. Robert then told the Church leaders to be in prayer about this situation so that through a healing God might speak to his heart. The next morning the security officer picked up Robert in his car and again told him that he must leave the city and if there is no minister who meets their approval then they need to close the Church. Robert responded by saying that he would not close the Church and neither would be leave the city. He then added that there was no way that he would tell the Church members not to come to the meetings. "If you dare, you come yourself and tell this to the Church and we will film and record it so that all will know how you are dealing with us in an illegal manner".

The security official angrily then said to Robert "You are at war with us. So wait and beware of the consequences of your obedience". In a disrespectful way along with swearing he began to push him out of the car. Robert, before getting out of the car said "I do not want to see you again as you are in a bad situation and are fighting against God. I am afraid for your future as the curse and punishment of God will come upon you, your wife and your children. He then said to Robert "How are these matters connected to my wife and children?" Robert responded "I will pray that no calamity or curse will come upon your family. Therefore no longer fight against God so that no harm will come to you". The security official with fear and feeling upset said to Robert "Do not speak anymore and get out of the car!"

As Robert was getting out of the car he remembered the dream that he had had. As the car began to move he knocked on the door and told him to stop the car. The official said "What do you want with me now?" Robert answered "I wanted to ask how is your mother? He responded "How do you know my mother?" Robert said "I do not know her but I saw you in a dream and that you were very upset and were requesting me to pray for your mother as she was very unwell". Suddenly the eyes of this hard and rude official were filled with tears and as he was crying and broken hearted he said respectfully "Please pray for my mother as she is very unwell and the doctors have told me that there is nothing that they can do for her".

After this, the man's behaviour changed towards Robert. This man who would regularly see Robert and threaten him using bad language did nothing against Robert and the Church for a long time. After a year he telephoned Robert and with respect said to him "Mr Robert, I ask you to forgive me for my bad behaviour, swearing and bad language and all the threats I made against you. My superiors are not very happy with me over the relationship I have had with you and your Church because I supported you before them and for this reason they want to transfer me to another city. But it is not important and I am just happy that the truth about me has been made clear to you. You are an honourable and a respectful person. Pray for me and by the way I am very thankful for your prayers for my mother as she is much better". Robert had witnessed to him on numerous occasions and is certain that something has happened in his heart even if he is unaware of exactly what has happened.

In place of him another security official was sent who told Robert that if he was willing to cooperate with him and obey whatever he told him to do he would be allowed to stay in the city and continue with his university studies. However, in response Robert told him that concerning matters that were against the Word of God he would not be able to obey. The official then showed him the minutes from the AOG Leadership Board in Tehran where it indicated that they had decided to de-frock him from his position as Pastor and that this order would soon be sent to him. Robert's reaction was that he felt very upset that the Leadership Board instead of supporting him and out of fear of the security forces were compromising with the Government which is the enemy of the Church. This Government is even upset that they are baptising new believers among the Armenians and Assyrians and have told them that you have no right to grow and expand in membership because in an evangelistic Church everyone who comes a member is taught to evangelise Muslims! Therefore the Government is against Armenian and Assyrian Churches who reach out to those from other people groups. Their goal is to weaken the Protestant congregations meeting in buildings and even destroy such Churches and only protect the traditional Churches who are only nominally Christian.

After two days, the letter from the Leadership Board reached Robert where it stated that he was no longer the Pastor of the Church, did not have the right to preach and that in his place someone else would be sent and become the Pastor. Now this time persecution had begun from inside the Church and instead of encouraging and supporting Robert for his stand and bravery over 13 years but out of fear of the security forces and cooperating with them, they were following their order and dismissing their brother and colleague. Then the Superintendent and his deputy along with the new Pastor came to Orumieh and spoke to the Church leaders. These leaders were against their decision and would not accept the new Pastor. The matter was then brought to the Church membership and the Church members rose up in support of Robert. The new Pastor, who was previously a Church treasurer and who did not have any divine calling to be a pastor was rejected by the membership and as a result changed his mind about ministry in the Church.

Following this, the Leadership Board decided to send visiting preachers twice a month, but the Church members were broken hearted over this saga and the majority of them no longer attend the Church as they feel that what the Leadership Board did was against the Word of God and played into the hands of the enemies by dismissing the Church Pastor without their approval. It seemed that what was important for the Church Leadership Board was obedience to the Government rather than the Church continuing with its ministry. Robert's salary was then cut from September 2017. All these signs show that in view of the present circumstances in Iran the period of the Churches meeting in their buildings has come to an end and that beyond the buildings God wants to do a new work in individual lives and their families through the house churches. He has allowed us to be set free from the limitations and restrictions of the buildings so that we can work wider through new methods and new workers to build the Church of Christ on a new foundation.

The last pressure brought on Robert, even though now he is not a church pastor, is that not only should be leave Orumieh but that he should leave Iran altogether! However, he along with his sacrificial wife have remained in Orumieh in order to meet privately with the Church members and also to secretly pastor the believers from Muslim background.

After I heard about these event I invited Robert and his wife to meet me in Istanbul. I met them for three days and had a time of strengthening and comforting them which was very uplifting and profitable for them. I have passed on financial help for the next few months. It was a privilege to realise that there are still faithful and brave people like Robert and his wife Sharvakieh who are ready to stand for Christ and the truths of God's Word and are even ready to go to prison and put up with more persecution. On the other hand, I felt ashamed that there are other persons in Iran who are older and more experienced workers but who have been gripped by fear and who have lost the vision and are no longer faithful to their brethren and other Church members. We prayed for Robert and his wife that they will understand the will of the Lord for their future and ministry.

They will try and stay in Iran as long as they can unless they are forced to leave the country. Under our supervision, they will continue in personal secret ministries in evangelism, discipleship and pastoral work. Praise the Lord for couples like these dear ones.

**How a MS sufferer was healed after 17 years at a workers conference**

In November 2017 in Turkey it was necessary for me to meet for the first time an important group of house church leaders along with their director. I knew the director of this group very well. He became a believer 30 years ago. I got to know him through his newly born daughter. When this daughter was born her left arm was paralysed and she could not move it at all. The doctors had told him and his wife that as she was born with this condition there was nothing that from a medical point of view that could be done and they just needed to accept the situation. The first time that the mother brought this new born child to the Church in Tehran she was crying very loudly and put the child, who was in a small cot, on the platform at the front of the Church and asked God to heal her child. That evening this lady came to faith and after, we prayed for the healing of the child, with trust in the Lord the child's mother accepted that the Lord would heal her with peace and assurance.

She began to grow in her faith and after ten days she again brought the child to Church and she told me that during the past ten days she had read the NT eagerly until the book of James and had noticed that in chapter five it states that the Church elders should anoint her child with oil for healing. She then said "You have not anointed my child with oil. I have brought her so that you can anoint her and I am certain that the healing will take place".

That very night when the mother and the child went home, the father, who is now one of our house church directors, went into the room of his child to pick something up, he noticed that the child was scratching her head with the very left arm that up until that point had been paralysed. From that night onwards movement returned to that arm. It was through this healing that we got know her husband. After his salvation this couple began to grow and serve in the Church in various ways and it is about 18 years that they have been involved in leading house churches. It is about five months that they have directly come under my supervision in order to continue their ministry and are accountable to me. For this reason he brought three couples to Turkey from among their key leaders so that we could spend several days getting to know each other better and be able to support them in their ministries.

Of the six people that this director had brought, four of them were unwell and the director himself had a heart problem. Before the trip to Turkey the director had said to them "God has led me to tell you that you should come on this trip to Turkey with the goal and purpose of being healed". He then also told them "Brother Edward has the gift of healing as he had prayed for my daughter 30 years ago and she was healed. He will pray for you and you should accept by faith that you will also be healed". I then said to this director "Why did you say such a thing about me!? If the Lord through my praying has healed a few it does not mean that I have the gift of healing. I have prayed for some who have not been healed and in fact actually passed away. So why did you give this assurance that on this trip we will pray for them and they will be healed?" He replied "With the guidance of the Lord and the leading of the Holy Spirit I said this and I myself have come here with the same purpose". I then reminded him that we had agreed that the main purpose of this trip was to discuss the house church work in Iran. He responded by saying that the Lord wants to first bring healing so that with good health we can serve him better. I then realised that I was put in an impossible situation and so on the first evening we allocated time to talk about healing and I began by asking them "In your opinion why is healing important? What does the Word of God say about healing?" The answers that were given that evening helped strengthen our faith.

One of those there that evening was a lady who was the wife of the director's deputy of the house churches. She could not walk very well and her husband had with great difficulty arranged for her to be brought from Tehran to Istanbul. For 17 years she had been suffering from the effects of MS. Due to the strong medicine that she was using she needed to go to the toilet every half an hour. In her home the bed had to be placed near to a toilet. Because her body was paralysed she had great difficulty in walking and spent most of the time bedridden. However, despite being in this condition with the motivation of being healed and with faith she had made this trip. Aroused to action I said " Lord, you know that I am facing an impossible situation. Please do not allow this lady to go back empty handed but in accordance with her purpose and faith in coming on this trip let healing flow. That night the healing presence of the Lord filled the small conference room with the seven people. His healing hand and the anointing oil, which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, allowed the power of healing to flow on all present and in particular this lady. She raised up a loud cry of joy and very simply received the faith of healing and not only did she not need to lean on her husband anymore but began to run around the room. Instead of us having to serve her, she began to serve us tea and cakes using her own hands!

The next day the husband came alone for breakfast and told me that his wife was taking a shower. She had told him to go alone to breakfast as she did not need his help anymore. During the rest of our meetings she did not get tired or feel weak and took part in all the classes, prayer and worship times and her going to the bathroom became normal. Her colour and facial features became clear and beautiful and over the four days that we were together her health became better than the day before. On the last evening with tears she came to me and knelt and said "Brother Edward I should kiss your hand that you placed on my head." I did not allow her to do this and told her not to kneel before me but give all the praise and glory to Christ. He is the true healer. It is interesting that the others including the director also felt the healing hand of God on their bodies and the power of healing changed the conference to a conference of healing. According to the faith and purpose that these dear ones had concerning their own healing, the Lord did his work. Joy filled all our hearts and the Lord once more revived healing faith in me that to some extent had become weak. Praise God that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever and has not changed.

**How Christians are showing love to the earthquake victims in Kermanshah Province**

The Lord often speaks to the hearts of people through unpleasant and terrible events especially those events where many people are brought face to face with the reality of death and finality of life. It provides a good background to be able to speak about eternal truths to those who have suffered and in a practical way show Christian love. I well remember how the large earthquake that took place in Armenia before the collapse of the Communist era brought about a great revival among the Armenians. Also in Iran, I was a witness to how through the large earthquakes that took place 27 years ago in Rudbar and 13 years ago in Bam those who had an opportunity to hear the Gospel gave their lives to Christ. At that time, the Church with help from Churches outside the country and international organisations were responsible for the rebuilding of two schools. Furthermore, for two months some of the believers visited the earthquake region and by providing blankets, mattresses and clothes etc showed practical Christian love.

I am certain that these type of ministries enable God to sow the love of Christ in many hearts. The earthquake that took place in November 2017 in the Province of Kermanshah was not as large as the ones that took place in Bam or Rudbar but nevertheless 600 people died, many were injured and homes were destroyed. Unlike years gone by, the Evangelical Church buildings are closed, most of the ministers from these congregations are no longer present and security restrictions prevent outside organisations having direct contact with Christians inside the country. However Christians who are part of the house churches in Iran, like their compatriots, felt a responsibility to use the opportunity to show practical Christian love and in places where the Lord provided such an opportunity, cautiously share the good news of Christ to those suffering in the region.

We have house churches in Kermanshah and surrounding towns and with the guidance of the Lord and sacrificial giving, despite their own needs, the house churches had special collections for both money and useful goods and along with pocket NTs hidden away in the goods made their way to the earthquake region. From our own budget we sent £4,000 and with £3,000 from local gifts, four vans filled with preserved food travelled to the region. Of course there were many others trying to help in the region and the Government forces would not allow those wanting to help to have direct contact with the injured. They had ordered all the gifts and goods to be given to them so that they could directly distribute them to the needy. However some of our Christian believers who were Kurds and who had family members in the earthquake region said with tears to the authorities "We have come to see our own families and relatives and sympathise with them in their pain and comfort them. Furthermore we would love to support them directly". When the authorities saw their tears and also the same reaction from their families, they showed compassion and allowed the vans to travel towards their tents.

The reports from Iran indicate that the meeting of the believers with their suffering relatives who had lost loved ones and also meeting some of the injured brought great encouragement and was very effective. They cried much together and then there were opportunities when on their own they could talk to some of them quietly about Christ and the comfort and peace he can give in the midst of these calamities. They prayed for many of them and it is reported that eight of them were ready to pray the prayer of repentance for salvation.

 The NTs were put inside the blankets and clothes and they told the people to try and keep them in a secret place so that the authorities should not see them. One family member of the worker in Kermanshah told them that when the earthquake occurred they were watching a Christian programme on satellite TV and all they could do was call out to Jesus ask him to help them. They told them that the ceiling of the house which was built with brick collapsed but did not harm them. In fact there were two metal girders that came down, the vertical one landing near their feet and the other one landing on top of it in a horizontal position making the shape of a cross. "If we were sitting forward by one metre both girders would have fallen on me and the children. The Lord revealed to me until the time arrives when he wants to take us from the world we are protected by the cross. 'I have saved you from the danger of death and give you back your lives so that you can live for me'". This middle aged man was shouting out with a loud voice that Jesus Christ has saved him and his family.

Unfortunately, the Government authorities would not allow the evangelists to stay more than three hours but they promised to come and see them again. Before departing, those who were related directly to those helping them, or who were close friends, were very much touched by the love being shown to them and with tears said "We want to thank Christ and his followers who have loved us in this way; were thinking about us and sent us all these gifts. The Lord bless you all and give you a special reward. We will never forget the love of you Christians".

Two of the Christian Kurdish ladies from Kermanshah who work among the small children and who have an open, kind heart for children found an opportunity to establish a loving relationship with some of the children who had lost their parents or who were injured. They told the children how people of faith trust in the Lord in the midst of difficulties and problems and how he comforts those who have suffered and after, brings positive results from the difficulties and takes them to a higher level. They also passed on nice clothes and suitable gifts that made them very happy.

The workers from Tehran, Isfahan and Kermanshah were saying that this trip was so useful and fruitful for them that they have decided to return after a while, stay longer and even be more useful in their ministry. Those involved in the ministry were saying the people they met were in a state of shock and confusion and are still coming to terms with the speed in which these unpleasant terrible events happened to them. Therefore when they were talking to them about the Lord most of them were completely struck dumb and in a state of astonishment and showed no reaction. The evangelists are waiting for the next trip when people will be in more normal circumstances and they can focus more on the Gospel message and look for a more positive response to the Gospel. I am certain that this visit combined with the sowing of the seed, the loving gifts from the believers and then our heartfelt prayers for these dear ones will not prove fruitless.