

INTRODUCTION

The Persian Ministry Development project started in August 2021, whilst the covid pandemic was still impacting church and other activities. Evolving plans for the project had already been discussed with stakeholders for some time. This report summarises progress to date against the originally planned programme of activities and sets out priorities for the coming year. It also recaps the five year objectives of the project, and gives an early indication of progress towards these.

Some progress of this work has been slower than originally expected. This has in part been due to changes in personnel and circumstances for the churches and circuits involved. This includes the congregation (including its Farsi speaking members) in Hexthorpe, Doncaster, having left the Methodist Connexion. Notwithstanding this complication, Iranian Christians continue to relate across denominational divides. The Doncaster congregation are now paying Methodism in full for 12.5 hours per week of Arman's time. This report for Methodist stakeholders therefore speaks primarily to work being undertaken in Hull and Sheffield, but recognising there are some aspects where we work across denominational boundaries.

Not all of the people this work reaches out to are asylum seekers, but many are. Our ability to engage with people continues to be subject to restrictions on accessing the places where they are housed and their being relocated around the UK at short notice. We will often find that we are getting to know people and then they are moved elsewhere in the UK at no notice. Or that once they have been granted asylum they must quickly take up work wherever in the UK they can find it because government support with housing and other living costs is minimal. Hospitality is important in Iranian cultures, and so living in hotels without basic resources is limiting.

We are operating across cultural differences with people fleeing oppression, who have endured further multiple traumas during their journeys to the UK. These people may fear that the Iranian state will discover their location or relationship with us, and that this can put family in Iran at risk.

We also ministering in a context where Iranian asylum seekers having or exploring Christian faith has been a recurring focus of political "culture wars". The legal framework and Home Office ways of working have changed multiple times in recent years, with none of these changes being designed to make it easier for asylum seekers to feel welcome or build relationships in the neighbourhoods in which they are living.

ACTIVITIES

Focus	Planned actions	Progress	Next steps
TRUSTED ORGANISATION <i>improve networking/signposting</i>	Build relationships with governmental/third sector organisations, demonstrating our cultural understanding/track record/integrity/provision of supportive host church and Persian community.	In Sheffield Arman has some ongoing dealings with City of Sanctuary Sheffield (co-ordinating charity of asylum support), and his activities are based at 35 Chapel Walk (part of the Victoria Hall church premises) next door to CoSS. Arman attends Open Doors drop in sessions at Princes Avenue Methodist Church in Hull most weeks, offering translation support.	

Focus	Planned actions	Progress	Next steps
	Enabling them to signpost people expressing interest in joining a church group towards us	Bible studies follow on from this. Open Doors is a Methodist birthed charity, still working in close partnership with Princes Avenue.	
HONEST IMMIGRATION SUPPORT <i>increase effectiveness, efficiency of support</i>	<p>Respond pro-actively with support for asylum claims/appeals, often including confirmation of risk due to Christian faith. Provide letters and attend court cases as necessary.</p> <p>We have learnt what UK Visa & Immigration need to know, but take care not to make unverifiable claims about faith, stating only what we have observed.</p> <p>Only offer baptism on completion of baptism courses (own language/translated), regular attendance/participation.</p>	<p>Arman is now responsible for providing letters of support for asylum applications, with Rev Helen Hickson providing additional letters confirming the baptisms she has conducted. Previously letters of support relied on ordained ministers' time to write.</p> <p>There has been some Home Office acceleration of dealing with the backlog of applications this year. The Rwanda deportations policy is causing great anxiety amongst asylum seekers. Our ability to engage with and support asylum seekers will continue to be at risk from changes in government policy.</p> <p>We have always taken great care to ensure that baptism classes and conversations in all locations are not rushed and that applicants have an appreciation of the faith they wish to be baptised into. Most of those who have been baptised through the project have remained engaged with us afterwards. A greater challenge to ongoing discipleship development comes from people being required to relocate in search of work once they have been granted refugee status.</p>	It is likely that the asylum system will change again in the coming year, and we may need to respond to this.
ONGOING LEARNING & DISCIPLESHIP <i>allow regular teaching in Farsi, by staff, then Persian local preachers</i>	<p>Weekly study sessions, recognising that people may be keen to explore/have a strong faith, but lack inherited knowledge of Bible/Christian theology.</p> <p>Teaching has generally been from English-speaking ministers/preachers with translation</p>	<p>Bible studies in Hull have recovered from very small numbers after covid. We have provided Farsi Bible study plus a separate baptism and membership classes as required in both Doncaster and Hull. The majority of those attending are exploring Christianity.</p> <p>The Bible study started in central Sheffield has continued with a small but growing core membership.</p> <p>Translation into English of Farsi baptism course developed by Arman has started.</p>	<p>Develop and share English-Farsi teaching resources.</p> <p>We will focus on the Bible study group in Hull, and how we can make this more owned and shaped by its participants. From this we hope it will</p>

Focus	Planned actions	Progress	Next steps
			encourage greater depth of engagement for both longstanding and new members.
DISTINCTIVE INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP <i>develop lay leadership, Methodist Way of Life as tool for ongoing discipleship</i>	<p>Through instruction, worship, modelled behaviour we teach Methodist understanding of Christian leadership.</p> <p>e.g. importance of consultative decision-making & lay leadership, equality of women</p> <p>Often requires taking great care not to inadvertently reinforce models of religious leadership previously subjected to under repressive regimes</p>	<p>In Hull we have had some Iranians starting to take on roles within the life of the church, and with gifts and willingness to do more. Some of these people have had to move away from Hull in search of employment. This remains a key challenge to developing lay Iranian leadership.</p> <p>The Sheffield group is still small and only started in December 2022. Regular attendees have been confident to invite new people and to record conversations and share these with distant family members.</p>	<p>To continue to be alert to potential emerging Iranian leaders in Hull, and to prioritise creating bespoke opportunities for people to grow as leaders.</p> <p>To explore whether Methodist Way of Life is a relevant framework for this ministry.</p>
OWN LANGUAGE WORSHIP <i>facilitate sharing of worship resources, Persian worship leaders/preachers</i>	<p>Weekly opportunities for people to worship in their own language.</p> <p>Could be a separate Farsi/other language or truly multi-lingual worship</p> <p>Already built resource bank of Farsi-language worship songs</p>	<p>In Hull Arman is now involved in leading worship approximately twice per month, attending worship planning on these weeks. Worship generally includes one Farsi song each week. Some Iranians take part in leading of worship.</p>	<p>Produce and share translations of key Methodist liturgies – Holy Communion, baptism, reception into membership etc.</p>
HOST CHURCH <i>support host churches in being even better hosts, understanding cultural differences</i>	<p>Persian Methodists have own identity, but are attached to host church.</p> <p>Provides stability/practical support, also opportunities for cross-cultural sharing, welcome, integration.</p>	<p>Arman is becoming more widely known within Hull and Sheffield circuits.</p> <p>In Sheffield, the Sunday morning congregation at Victoria Hall is growing and becoming increasingly international. They have been recently awarded Church of Sanctuary status.</p>	<p>Sheffield – build links with Victoria Hall Sunday congregation and explore possibilities for partnership with Highfield Trinity where several settled Iranians worship.</p>

Focus	Planned actions	Progress	Next steps
GATHERING & CELEBRATION <i>create regional/national Methodist gathering</i>	<p>Local social gatherings, travelling for regional/national conferences/celebrations are important features of Persian culture.</p> <p>Congregations hold periodic social/fellowship gatherings, often attended by community beyond the regular congregation/who have left the immediate area</p>	<p>“Iranian Nights” social gatherings are being held in Sheffield and Doncaster and engage people beyond those who attend the Bible study group.</p> <p>Occasional social events have been held in Hull. Keeness has been expressed to hold these more often, but volunteer capacity has been a limiting factor.</p>	<p>Work with national Methodist network to arrange national residential conference for Iranian Methodists. As a precursor to these we will host periodic ecumenical regional Sunday celebration gatherings.</p>
INFECTIOUS INVITATION	<p>Members are keen to share faith they have discovered.</p> <p>Some have developed secure methods of secretly relaying recording of services to friends and family in Iran.</p>	<p>Most people have joined our new Sheffield group have been through invitation from those who attend.</p> <p>In Hull invitation from existing study group members/ worshippers has been a key route by which new people join us.</p>	
PASTORAL SUPPORT <i>improve pastoral systems</i>	<p>Complex pastoral/mental health needs inherent in communities built largely of refugees</p> <p>Congregations and local ministers provide pastoral support as required.</p>	<p>In Hull in particular Arman has emphasised that he is available to provide 1:1 pastoral support, but this is not regularly taken up, potentially due to cultural sensitivities.</p> <p>In Sheffield the new group has been more relational.</p>	
CONNEXION & NETWORK <i>create systems/networks to link people into a new church, including launching new Methodist Persian congregations</i> <i>create recognised network of Methodist</i>	<p>Members of our congregations often relocate within the UK, breaking links to supportive Christian community (involuntary moves by Home Office/ in search of work)</p>	<p>We have started a national network of Methodists ministering with Iranians (including people from 13 circuits), which has now met twice, with plans to meet regularly. Some Methodists in London are looking at the work we are undertaking as a potential template for how they might grow their work with Iranians.</p> <p>We have also met with Rachel Lampard as part of her mapping of Methodist work with refugees.</p> <p>Arman continues to develop networks with other Farsi-speaking church leaders of different denominations across the UK. This helps put people</p>	<p>Regular meetings of national network, effective sharing of resources.</p> <p>Sufficient presence for Methodists starting to work with Iranians to know of and access our support</p>

Focus	Planned actions	Progress	Next steps
<i>Persian congregations able to support each other with preaching, common challenges; but also each relating to supportive local geographical circuits.</i>		<p>who are relocated in touch with churches in their new towns. Across denominations this work is often reliant on key individuals, and so fluctuates unpredictably in location and scope.</p> <p>In Sheffield Arman maintains links with other churches reaching out to Iranians (currently primarily Cemetery Road Baptists and Christ Church Central).</p> <p>In Hull there is now more ecumenical networking, led by Helen. Some other churches are providing excellent Farsi language activities, so it will be important for us to clearly identify what we offer that is most distinctive in this ecumenical context.</p>	

OUTCOMES

Through these activities we set out to achieve the following long term outcomes over a five year period:

Nurturing disciples Persian Methodists equipped to take up self-renewing leadership of congregations: hence better equipped to speak of Christ to others in their communities, continue to grow as disciples.

Outcome	Progress
Discipling Persian Christians/enquirers, through culturally-informed own-language studies	Studies are delivered weekly, but still reliant on Enabler and/or ministerial team
Identify/train/mentor leaders from within Persian fellowships	Most potential leaders we have identified have left due to relocation
Pathways to be in Connexion with wider Methodism	Not yet developed – currently largely ad hoc networks
Create trusted networks of churches to assist relocation within UK	Arman has links to increasing numbers of churches.

Equipping hosts English-speaking Methodists become excellent hosts to Persian and other new language-specific communities of believers, supporting nurturing of disciples

Outcome	Progress
Preachers, ministers, leaderships of English-speaking churches trained to respond to those whose prior experience of region is imposition by oppressive fundamentalist organisations/nation states	Not yet started beyond those directly involved
Churches equipped to better support claimants through asylum processes	Not yet started beyond those directly involved

Churches/circuits supported in starting new outreach to asylum-seeking communities	Not yet started beyond those directly involved
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Integrated kingdom work Methodism better able to support Persian Christians within/beyond our congregations, bring Methodist insights as historically lay-led marginal movement to ecumenical conversations

Outcome	Progress
Starting national Methodist Persian fellowship/network	Network for church leaders started. Not yet involving Iranian Methodists as a national network.
Create culturally appropriate/robust/pragmatic governance structures for Persian congregations/communities, compatible with Methodist ecclesiology	Governance primarily still led by Enabler and/or host churches
Bring strong authentic Methodist voice to ecumenical conversations	Informal ecumenical conversations with other churches engaged in ministry with Iranians maintained in Hull & Sheffield

Birthing new communities Impact: increased access to gospel for people that our experience tells will be keen to hear

Outcome	Progress
New Persian Methodist communities launched, with supportive host churches, most likely initially in Sheffield	New community in Sheffield starting to become established, but not yet with established relationship with circuit/ host church council.

Preparing for sustainable growth long term benefit from fixed term investment

Outcome	Progress
Lessons learned from this project transferable to other local migrant communities, e.g. Roma	Not yet applicable
Fixed-term role strengthens & equips local English-speaking and Iranian Methodists to continue to develop	Not yet becoming self-reliant

STEERING GROUP

The Persian Ministry Development Steering Group currently comprises Rev Leslie Newton (Chair of Yorkshire North & East District), Neil Harland (Mission Enabler, Sheffield District), Rev Helen Hickson (Hull Centre & West Circuit), Peter Vince (Hull Centre & West Circuit), Deacon Jackie Wright (Sheffield Circuit).

FINANCES

The table below shows only confirmed funding towards the project. Whilst we anticipated from the start that the project would likely need five years to embed change, different bodies are able to commit funding for different periods of time. The steering group remain grateful for the essential support of all financial contributors and will be holding conversations about funding for the remainder of the initially planned five year period with all partners this year.

Persian Ministry Development Enabler							
Financial summary							
31 May 2024	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	Total
	Actual	Actual	Actual	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
CONFIRMED FUNDING							
Yorkshire North & East District		15,333	15,333	15,334			46,000
Sheffield District		12,000	12,000	12,000	12,000	12,000	60,000
Sheffield Circuit	14,000						14,000
Princes Avenue Methodist Church		3,333	3,333	3,333			9,999
Hull (Centre & West) Circuit		3,333	3,333	3,333			9,999
Doncaster Circuit		10,546	10,000				20,546
TKCC&J (Doncaster)				11,580	15,111	15,716	42,407
TMCP	15,000						15,000
Other funders	1,000		0	0			1,000
	30,000	44,545	43,999	45,580	27,111	27,716	218,951
EXPENDITURE							
Salary	2,050	31,299	33,089	34,604	36,958	38,436	
NIC		3,480	3,359	3,520	3,844	3,998	
Pension		1,539	1,925	2,076	2,217	2,306	
Travel		3,940	4,555	6,400	6,400	6,400	
Other event costs			40	1,000	1,000	1,000	
Other		671	49	2,077	1,537	2,537	
	2,050	40,929	43,017	49,677	51,956	54,677	
Surplus/ (deficit)	27,950	3,616	982	-4,097	-24,845	-26,961	
Balance carried forward	27,950	31,566	32,548	28,451	3,606	-23,355	

Notes:

- TKCC&J funding pays 100% of costs for time Arman spends working in Doncaster
- Sheffield Circuit contribution is lower than Hull because at the start of the project there were no regular Farsi language activities happening in Sheffield