

Fleeing persecution, Christian converts find safe houses in England

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) As a 17-year-old convert to Christianity living in Pakistan, Ali (not his real name) was stabbed in the chest and left for dead by Muslims upset he had rejected their faith.

When he fled to England, his assailants tracked him down and threatened him.

A chance meeting with an Anglican priest led to temporary lodgings with a Christian family interested in offering refuge to Christian converts from Islam.

"I can't tell you where I live—not the town, not even which part of the country," Ali said. "I want friends but am nervous about forming friendships in case, at a moment's notice, I have to move house again."

Ali, 23, works part-time at a supermarket. He is among dozens of ex-Muslims living in safe houses, most of them created by the nonprofit Christian Concern, a London-based organization that wants to infuse British society with a biblical worldview.

There are over 2.8 million Muslims in England and conversions are few. But Christian Concern hopes British families will open their homes as well as their hearts to ex-Muslims whose lives may be at risk.

"Today, we face the same sort of problem that gay men and women faced some time ago," said Mohammad Fiaz, a convert to Christianity.

Recalling how his family and friends ostracized him after his conversion, Fiaz said, "They'd rather see me dead."

He added that women are at particular risk of violence from members of the community if they attempt to leave Islam.

He said Muslims who want to convert often face the terrible problem of finding somewhere to live: “That is why we welcome the initiative of Christian Concern, which is helping converts rebuild their lives in ‘safe’ homes owned or rented by members of the Christian community.”

Christian Concern believes thousands of Muslims are anxious to convert and in need of housing so they can get back onto their feet after suffering verbal—and sometimes physical—attacks from families, friends and co-workers.

“We are motivated by a deep sense of love and compassion for those that feel trapped in a situation from which they cannot escape,” said Andrea Williams, the group’s chief executive.

“The penalty for converts at best is to be cut off from their family; at worst they face death,” she added. “This is happening not just in Sudan and Nigeria but in East London. The government has failed to deal with the rise in anti-Christian sentiment.”

In the 19th century, East London provided shelter to tens of thousands of Jews fleeing Tsarist Russia. Today, it’s a refuge for Indians and Pakistanis seeking new homes in Britain.

Shokit Ali Sadiq, a 46-year old father of five, said that when he converted to Christianity a member of the church he attends gave him a home. He asked that his church not be identified so as to avoid harassment from the Muslim community.

“There are hundreds of people out there who want to leave Islam,” Sadiq said. “But they’re frightened of making their desire known.”

Sadiq was born in England but grew up in Pakistan. At age 6, he returned to England and rejoined his strict Muslim family.

“One day in the mosque I prayed to Isa, Jesus in the Quran, and asked him to send me a woman who really loved me. Soon afterwards, I was offered a job in (the British territory of) Jersey where I met my wife to be, Carla, a Roman Catholic from Portugal. . . . When I converted to Christianity, I was beaten by men with baseball bats. I was in a coma for several days but today I am all right and Jesus is now using me to convert Muslims to Christianity.”

Church leaders in several different parts of Yorkshire say they are opening up church halls—even parts of churches—and installing showers and beds to make welcome

Muslims who convert.

A woman who left Islam to become a Christian said that she is living in a small flat made available by a retired man who had a spare room in a large Victorian house near Bradford.

"I will stay here for the time being," she said, "hoping and praying to Jesus that one day my own family will have me back," she said, asking that she not be identified because she had been physically attacked by other women.

While most Muslims have no problems with conversion, it's not uncommon for Muslims in the Middle East to insist on punishment for apostasy, sometimes even execution.

Ali, the 23-year-old Pakistani native, hopes it never comes to that.

He said he wants one day to return to Pakistan.

"My life's ambition," he said, "is to return and start a charity that would provide safe houses for Muslims who convert to Christianity."