



# Iranian Christians in Leeds: Experiences of Church Membership

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## Introduction

‘Iranian Christians in Leeds’ is an empirical research project undertaken at University of Leeds between June 2017 and August 2018 by an undergraduate student awarded a Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Scholarship (Laidlaw Scholarship). The Laidlaw Scholarship scheme enables undergraduate students at leading academic institutions to develop their leadership skills and produce a meaningful contribution to modern academic research through intensive training and two six week periods of research work conducted under the close supervision of an established academic. Funded by the Laidlaw Scholarship scheme, this project was carried out as part of a Community Religions Project (CRP). In previous years a Laidlaw Scholar worked with the CRP researching African Churches, and a scholar in a previous scheme researched the location and context of Bibles in Leeds City Centre<sup>1</sup>. This project focusses on the experiences of Church membership among members of the Iranian Christian community in Leeds, which are an under researched group.

This report begins with the context outline which provides the reader with an understanding of the situation of Christians and Christian converts in Iran, followed by a brief history of Iranian migration to the UK and the responses of British governmental actors. A presentation of the main organisations working with Iranian Christians in the UK and worldwide concludes this section and is succeeded by an account of methodology, in which I discuss the choice of research methods together with their justification, as well as discuss limitations and challenges that arose during the project. The main body of the report focuses on research findings. Many themes emerged from interviews and are organised into four clusters: process of joining a church and reasons for joining a particular one, factors that comprised a positive experience in Church, challenges experienced by whole congregations and by Iranian congregants alone, and solutions that were applied by communities to ensure a safe and welcoming space of worship. This report also acknowledges the approaches of different groups working with migrant communities that could be applied in a

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<sup>1</sup> Community Religions Project (2018)



Christian setting. These points are complimented with transcribed passages from interviews in order to present a developed picture of experiences of Iranian Christians in Leeds.

Researching this subject proved itself to be equally challenging and rewarding. I immensely hope that this work will be of benefit to all individuals and organisations who are willing to engage in finding meaningful ways to support migrants in religious settings and beyond, and who tirelessly use their talents and energy to do so.

## Context

The Islamic Republic of Iran, the easternmost state of the Middle East, could pride itself on endorsing a variety of civil liberties due to ratification of seven out of eighteen International Human Rights Treaties<sup>2</sup> and upholding a reasonably tolerant and inclusive constitution. It could be expected that Iranian citizens are protected from torture and ill-treatment (Article 38 in Iranian Constitution and Article 7 in ICCPR), recognised religious minorities are able to assemble freely (Article 21 and 22 in ICCPR) as long as the assemblies are not ‘detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam’ (Article 26 of Iranian Constitution), and the press is able to exercise its freedom to expression (Article 24 of Iranian Constitution). Unfortunately, as has been increasingly visible in recent decades, violations of international human rights law and constitutional rights, especially for religious minorities, have been common in the entire territory of Iran.<sup>3</sup>

The main division made between Christians in Iran is between legally recognised “Ethnic Christians”, mainly Armenians and Assyrians, who have maintained a distinctive cultural and linguistic heritage<sup>4</sup>, and “Non-Ethnic Christians” who are mostly, although not always, converts from Islam.<sup>5</sup> After the revolution of 1979 Ethnic Christians were permitted to worship, granted 3 out of 290 parliamentary seats, and received certain autonomy in handling religious education and community affairs upon registration with the state, although with indisputable limitations and discrimination in both their religious practice and everyday life<sup>6</sup>. It has been also reported that Ethnic Churches were closed down whenever a suspicion arose that they

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<sup>2</sup> Including, but not limited to, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2014)

<sup>3</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of State (2017)

<sup>5</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013) This distinction as ‘ethnic’ or ‘non-ethnic’, although awkward, is common in the literature and will therefore be used throughout this report.

<sup>6</sup> Non-Muslims are reportedly assigned harsher punishment, inter-religious marriages are restricted, compensation for death of a family member (blood-money, the *diyeh*) for a religious minority is half of that of a Muslim man, worship time is restricted to Sunday (which is a working day), senior government, intelligence, and military positions are obtainable exclusively for Muslim Iranians [United States Department of State (2017), International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)]



are admitting new members, allowing unregistered Christians to participate in services, or preaching in Farsi, which is Iran's official language<sup>7</sup>. Due to holding services in Farsi, engaging in proselytisation and their foreign affiliations, Protestant communities are seen by the regime as a particular threat to national religious ideology, hence they are a subject of more belligerent government restrictions and human rights abuses.<sup>8</sup>

While the number of individuals inhabiting Iran quoted in most sources remains similar and amounts to approximately 82 million<sup>9</sup>, recognised religious minorities (Ethnic Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians) comprise less than 1% of the country's population. Estimated numbers differ tremendously and range from 117,704<sup>10</sup> Christians in Iran right up to 3 million<sup>11</sup> with approximately 75% being members of Ethnic Churches<sup>12</sup>. Due to the high risk of persecution many non-Ethnic Christians attend unofficial, illegal gatherings and practice their religion in secret. Open Doors<sup>13</sup> in 1990 calculated that there are around 15,000 Protestants in Iran, while in 1999 Iranian Christians International<sup>14</sup> reported that according to their estimates there are 25,000 Iranian converts to Christianity around the world.

As reported by International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013) one of the ways that Iranian authorities maintain the atmosphere of terror and insecurity among Christians is releasing Christians from arrests with heavy bails without closing investigations or dismissing charges, leading to a threat of more severe persecutions in case of another arrest. It has been reported that authorities deny detained Christians access to lawyers, but may also threaten them with not only apostasy charges, but with extrajudicial killings of the detainee or their family upon their release as well, if a detainee chooses to talk about torture that they have endured while in detention. There

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<sup>7</sup> United States Department of State (2017)

<sup>8</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (2018)

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Statistics Division (2011) in Home Office (2018) pg7

<sup>11</sup> United States Department of State (2017)

<sup>12</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>13</sup> In Spellman, K. (2004) pg.116

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

have been instances of direct persecution and murder of clergy or their family members in the past<sup>15</sup>. It is believed that the persecutions against Christians intensified throughout the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that started in 2005<sup>16</sup> and even the weakest links to Christianity, such as owning religious books or attending any kind of gathering, can trigger authorities' suspicion.<sup>17</sup>

It is a commonly encountered simplification that conversion from Islam is penalized by death in the Iranian law. While it is seen as apostasy and may be, and often is, seen as a 'criminal offense punishable by death'<sup>18</sup> by law enforcement actors in Iran, it is not in fact codified in Iran's penal code. If a charge of apostasy, or any other action without designated punishment is brought, Iranian courts are to rely on Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic legal sources<sup>19</sup>, interpretation of which differs greatly from cleric to cleric. Some high-ranking clerics, such as Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, hold a belief that converting to another state-recognised Abrahamic religion is not apostasy.<sup>20</sup> That said, Iranian judiciaries do rely heavily on conservative and rigorous teachings of other religious leaders such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Islamic Republic of Iran's founding father, hence the great risk of being sentenced to death penalty if one's conversion becomes known exists.<sup>21</sup>

Alongside tyrannizing individuals, Iranian authorities imposed a number of repressive policies to gain greater control of all Churches. The activity of Evangelical Churches continues to be closely monitored and Churches have to report to the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance<sup>22</sup> before admitting any new members. All members must carry a special ID that is checked at the Church entrance and are not permitted to enter otherwise. Bibles in Farsi are problematic to find and permissions for building of

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<sup>15</sup> Elling, R. C. (2013)

<sup>16</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>17</sup> Home Office (2018),

<sup>18</sup> Ibid pg.7

<sup>19</sup> Article 167 of the Iranian constitution; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>20</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Nazir-Ali, M. (2009)

new Churches are being denied<sup>23</sup> causing space limitations and creation of unofficial, illegal ‘home churches’ in private residences. Membership in home churches is seen as a criminal act and members are often accused of ‘acting against national security’<sup>24</sup>, ‘contact with a foreign enemy [or] anti-regime groups’<sup>25</sup> and ‘colluding with enemy foreigners’<sup>26</sup>. Using this terminology in allegations has been considered by Western researchers to be a tool to avoid international attention, as the international community is more limited in its ability to interfere with the Republic’s internal security matters, than in addressing the targeting of a specific religious community.<sup>27</sup>

Elam Ministries<sup>28</sup>, whose mission is to establish a strong Christian Church in Iran and beyond, believe that the number of converts within the Republic increased so significantly, that it became impossible for the authorities to control the new Christians. Elam recognises recent governmental actions as a strategy to intimidate Christians in Iran and coerce them into leaving the country. Regardless of this theory’s verity, as it has not been confirmed by other sources, this strategy may prove itself effective, as Protestant clergy and converts have been fleeing Iran searching for protection<sup>29</sup>. Specific data on Christian asylum seekers is unavailable and statistics on a number of Iranians escaping to the West through Turkey fluctuates from half a million to 1.5 million<sup>30</sup>. Fleeing to Turkey is the most prevalent route for both legal migration and undocumented border crossing (including human smuggling) due to the border’s character and visa exemption for Iranian citizens. Due to close cooperation between Turkey and UNHCR and the fact that the ‘Turkish government does not recognize Iranians and other asylum seekers from outside Europe as refugees, due to its geographical limitation in the 1951 UN Geneva Convention’<sup>31</sup>, many applicants

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013) pg.10

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> In Home Office (2018), pg.19

<sup>29</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013); Nazir-Ali, M. (2009)

<sup>30</sup> Zijlstra, J. (2014)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid pg. 188



have been resettled in Western countries and many consider Turkey to be a transit country in their journey to Europe or the United States.

### Iranian Christians in the UK

The Iranian diaspora started forming in the 1980s as a result of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the revolution of 1979 and war with Iraq (1980-1988). Religious intolerance in the newly formed Islamic Republic and persecutions of religious minorities have ensured the overrepresentation of Christian Iranians in the diaspora<sup>32</sup>. Exact numbers of Iranians currently living in the UK are not known, however according to the Iranian consulate in London in 2004 there were 75 thousand Iranians living in Britain, with roughly half of them residing in London.<sup>33</sup>

Complex numerical data on conversion is also unavailable. Anecdotal evidence suggests an increasing interest of Iranians in Church membership in the UK<sup>34</sup> and the Right Reverend Michael Nazir-Ali even talks about ‘an explosion in the growth of Farsi speaking churches (...) in the USA, UK and Australia’<sup>35</sup>. In 2017, 25% of confirmations carried out by one Bishop, were of Christians converting from Islam. The majority of those confirmands were Iranian and most were asylum seekers.<sup>36</sup>

Iranian Christian converts in Britain form three distinguishable groups depending on where they’ve converted:

1. Those who converted in Iran
2. Those who converted in transit (mostly Turkey)
3. Those who converted in Britain<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> McAuliffe, C. (2008)

<sup>33</sup> Spellman, K. (2004)

<sup>34</sup> Home Office (2018), pg.5

<sup>35</sup> Nazir-Ali, M. (2009) pg.38

<sup>36</sup> Home Office (2018)

<sup>37</sup> Spellman, K. (2004). Spellman researched specifically conversion of Iranians to Christian Pentecostalism, however some overlap may be assumed in the path of Iranians converting to different denominations.



Iranian Christians from the first two categories came mostly from lower- and middle-class background. Those who converted in Iran were likely to have been converted by Christian Missionaries right after the revolution. They enjoyed a certain level of social and economic independence, many of them were owners of small businesses, taxi drivers or skilled workers.<sup>38</sup> Those who converted in transit claim to have been forced to seek refuge in Europe due to falling victim to threats and harassment from the revolutionary guards. During their journey they benefited from emotional, and sometimes material, support from Christian groups. Some claim to have believed in Jesus Christ as they were overcoming the hardships of migration, others admit to attempt using Christianity as a mean of survival, but gradually growing into a legitimate faith. Spellman's research shows that those who converted in the UK have done so after having spent a number of years living in Britain. Many experienced a traumatic or extraordinary event in their lives that lead to conversion.<sup>39</sup>

A recurring question among church leaders and political actors in Britain is how to distinguish between someone who looks to convert for genuine reasons, and someone who does so in order to be granted political asylum. While safety measures taken by Churches vary, most Churches are welcoming and willing to support individuals whose faith seems genuine. The Home Office, on the other hand, takes a stricter stand. While they acknowledge that living feely as a Christian may be difficult in Iran, they only recognise converts who are likely to 'come to the attention of the authorities in Iran (including through evangelical or proselytising activities or having previously come to the adverse attention of the authorities for other reasons)' to be at 'real risk of persecution on return'.<sup>40</sup>

It is advised that officials making decisions on Iranian asylum seeker's immigration status should particularly investigate applicants who had applied for a UK visa prior to their application for asylum, as well as be mindful of how that person engaged in and practiced their religion during their stay in the UK. The Home Office agrees that

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Home Office (2018), pg.5

nobody should be forced to hide their religious identity, although if they choose to do so for ‘reasons other than for a fear of persecution’<sup>41</sup> they are not to be granted international protection. According to the Home Office if one practices their religion discreetly and considers their religious affiliation to be a personal matter, they can return to Iran safely. ‘Discreet religious practice’ often means not engaging in basic Christian activities such as worshipping, attending services, reading Christian literature or admitting to one’s religion.<sup>42</sup>

In the preliminary stage of this research project I had a chance to attend a conference on Anglican Ministry to the Persian Community in Britain during which it was brought up that the Home Office officials test applicants for asylum for their knowledge of the Bible and the Christian Doctrine. In the Home Office’s report<sup>43</sup> published in March 2018, lack of so called ‘head knowledge’ should not any longer be taken for a sign that an applicant is not a Christian. It has been recognised that the knowledge of someone coming from a Muslim background will be different to the knowledge of someone who was raised in a predominantly Christian country. One’s factual knowledge does not necessarily reflect on their faith or dedication to religion. The report suggests that genuine conversion shows through applicant’s life choices, which may take multiple months to be witnessed.<sup>44</sup>

### Prominent Iranian Christian organisations

Possibly the biggest, and definitely the best known, organisation assisting Iranian Christians in the UK is Elam Ministries whose mission is to establish a strong Christian Church in Iran and surrounding nations<sup>45</sup>. Elam Ministries tries to reach both Iranian Christians in the UK and in Iran. They send ‘Church planters’, translate and distribute Bibles in Farsi, provide satellite TV and Internet to those leading home churches, train pastors and lay leaders. Elam founded the first residential Iranian Bible

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid pg.7

<sup>42</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2013)

<sup>43</sup> Home Office (2018)

<sup>44</sup> Home Office (2018) pg.20

<sup>45</sup> Spellman, K. (2004); Elam Ministries (2018)

College in the UK where Farsi speakers from the Muslim World study for an Associate Arts Degree in Bible and Theology under a full scholarship. They organise conferences and visit Churches around Britain to hold services in Farsi and share their message<sup>46</sup>. In 2012 Elam established an advocacy department in order to conduct research, inform, and brief policy makers, NGO partners, and press.<sup>47</sup> Elam sees their mission as one of providing religious service and does not get involved with immigration matters.<sup>48</sup>

Iranian Christian International (ICI) is an organisation registered in Colorado, USA, that ‘ministers to the approximately 8 million Iranians and Afghans living outside their countries today’<sup>49</sup> with a network in over 30 countries, consisting of more than 300 member organisations, churches, and ministries. They run a bookshop, publish, reprint and distribute Christian literature in Persian and English and their own magazine ‘mojdeh’ (‘good news’) in its bilingual format. According to their 2002 newsletter<sup>50</sup> ICI provides assistance to Christian asylum seekers from Islamic countries, be it a referral, documentation, or sponsorship.

Iranian Christian Fellowship (ICF) is a Pentecostal association which teaches Iranians about Christianity, while maintaining a distance from doctrinal debates within the Pentecostal movement seeing them as potentially confusing to new converts.<sup>51</sup> ICF established the first Church for Iranians outside Iran after the organisation’s formation in 1986 in London It leads bilingual (English/Farsi) Sunday services and holds a Bible study in Farsi till this day.

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<sup>46</sup> Spellman, K. (2004),

<sup>47</sup> Elam Ministries (2018)

<sup>48</sup> Spellman, K. (2004)

<sup>49</sup> Iranian Christians International, Inc. (2007)

<sup>50</sup> In Spellman, K. (2004) pg.188

<sup>51</sup> Spellman, K. (2004)

## Methodology

### Preliminary Information Gathering

In order to provide context for my fieldwork, I spent the first weeks of the research project familiarising myself with prevailing theories, ethics, and research methodology in the field of religious studies. I engaged with a wide range of academic and non-academic, on-line and off-line resources on the socio-political situation and legal status of Christians in Iran, and investigated the limited studies on Iranian Christian communities outside Iran. I received training in interviewing, attended a conference on Anglican Ministry for the Persian Community and various research presentation sessions in related fields. During that time I carried out initiatory meetings with people who shared with me their expertise on Iran and Christianity in Leeds. This stage allowed for acquisition of ethical approval for the project, emergence of a clear research aim and recruitment of first interviewees. It was decided that before interviewing members of the Iranian community, interviews with clergy and laypeople involved in work with Iranian congregants would be collected. The reasoning behind this decision was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of people in leadership positions and an overview of congregations which Iranians join, as well as to gain access to the congregants.

### Fieldwork methodology

The primary research method used in this project was semi-structured interviews, however an oral history question was asked at the beginning of each interview with Iranian respondents. The method was selected because “people’s beliefs are diverse and multifaceted”<sup>52</sup> and quantitative methods would likely overlook nuances of interviewees’ experiences. All interviews were conducted in English, which was a foreign language to both Iranian congregants and the researcher. All respondents were

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<sup>52</sup> Davidsson-Bremborg, 2011, p.310



aware that they were in the situation of an interview and were informed that they were free to refuse to answer any questions. They were informed how their answers would be used and about the aim of the interview. All face to face interviews but one (which took place in religious leader's home) took place on Church grounds, and one interview was conducted over the telephone. Interviews with leaders conducted in summer one were transcribed and sent back to ensure understanding and allow for minor corrections and additional information to be added. Interviews from summer two were summarised and sent back to interviewees. None of the interviewees decided to amend any information and no one withdrew from the research after being interviewed.

Participants were recruited through existing networks at University of Leeds and by creating new links, often by following leads mentioned by other participants, contacting organisations working with refugees and asylum-seekers, organisations researching Iranian Christians, and asking people involved in various ways with researching religion. Posters advertising the research were posted in several spaces where Iranians access services, although they have not resulted in any interviews.

During the research five Church leaders and professionals working with the community and four Iranian congregants were interviewed. Theoretical sampling was applied throughout the project, which means that I did not have a set number of informants that I wished to interview and aimed instead to find enough data to reach theoretical saturation, which is a point in research when enough empirical data has been collected that no new significant information emerges from continuing interviews<sup>53</sup>. Due to time constraints of the project, initial difficulty with gaining access to the community, and language limitations the research has not reached theoretical saturation, neither is the group of interviewed Iranians representative. Nevertheless, enough data has been collected throughout the research to draw certain conclusions.

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<sup>53</sup> Glaser and Strauss, 1967 in Davidsson-Bremborg, 2011



Interviews were complemented by observations of spaces and events that Iranian Christians participate in. Observations were conducted to deepen the understanding of context in which Iranian Christians operate, and not to gather explicit data. Only once was my presence announced, but I did not disguise my intentions when approached by individuals at any time and gatekeeper's were aware of, and approved, my presence. The observation included church services, informal language-exchange meetings, service projects, and multi-faith, organised social activities.

### Limitations

Despite having anticipated certain difficulties in the project, many limitations occurred unexpectedly. One of the major drawbacks was time constraint in data collection and analysis. The research project was to run over twelve weeks evenly distributed between two summers. Gaining access to the community and permission to conduct interviews was more challenging and time-consuming than predicted. This, and the fact that research fell in the midst of holiday season, meant that I was not able to interview as many people as I would have liked or follow all leads that arose in the process. During the project I was also only able to interview those congregants whose knowledge of English allowed for communication, limiting scope of the research to mostly migrants who at the time of their interview have been living in the UK for a significant amount of time. It also posed an additional challenge in data analysis, as it occurred occasionally that informant's thoughts weren't expressed clearly due to language barrier. All Iranian respondents were men. At times, possibly due to my youth, gender, lack of experience in research, or certain personal character traits, I was under the impression that the project was being taken lightly and not treated as seriously as I had expected it to be. It also came to my attention that some Iranian congregants seemed over-interviewed and mentioned having participated in academic and journalistic research multiple times before. Those individuals seemed to expect me to inquire about oppression faced in Iran and their conversion, and at times maintaining the focus of the interview on my questions presented a challenge.



The sensitivity of issues that Iranian Christians face is recognised by leaders who engage in work with this community and while many of them agreed to speak to me, some did so only after I was referred to them by another contact, after they had contacted my supervisor, or ensured that strict ethical guidelines are followed. Arranging interviews with Iranian congregants proved more challenging and religious leaders seemed to be more cautious about allowing me to speak with those congregants. I was honest about the intentions behind this research project and upfront about collecting information about experiences of Church membership in Leeds and not stories of persecution, as was often assumed with unease. At times members of congregations warned me about the possible risks of publicising identifiable information about Iranians worshipping in their Church, on a different occasion a gatekeeper requested to see questions that I would be asking Iranian respondents. One non-religious organisation that I contacted through a link at University had a set of rules in place to prevent exploitation of their clients. As this project was not ethically approved to offer monetary compensation or gift vouchers to participants, that group remained beyond the scope of the research. In the process of collecting preliminary interviews and identifying points of connection to the Iranian Christian community I found that while there are numerous congregations and organisation working with Iranians, most exercise caution and scepticism against an outsider. All of those approaches are reasonable and implemented in order to protect the minority congregants. Despite those restrictions, sufficient data about Iranians' experience of Church membership and of approaches towards work with this community was gathered to allow for certain conclusions to be drawn.



## Findings

In this section I will discuss the principle findings from my project, which include determining incentives to join a particular Church and factors contributing to a positive experience of Church membership, as well as examining challenges that Iranian congregants and multinational congregations face and solutions to those challenges.

The Iranian Christian community in Leeds has been steadily growing over the past years. In some Churches in the city Iranians constitute the biggest minority, while in some there are only a few individuals worshipping. They are mostly, although not exclusively, young men. Some are single and some have left their families in Iran, a number have joined Churches with their families. The Iranian Christian community in Leeds is diverse, and individuals differ in the socioeconomic and educational background, previous inhabitation of urban centres or rural areas, duration of time that they have already spent in the UK, religious history (some converted in Iran, some in transit countries, some in the UK, some were born into Christianity), and reasons for migration.

### 1. Joining a church

According to interviewed leaders most Iranian congregants who join their Churches do not have a strong feeling of belonging to a certain denomination. Choice of a place of worship often relies on factors other than its affiliation. During the first stage of research I came across an opinion that the Church of England, which seems to gather the biggest number of Iranian Christians in Leeds, may be popular due to Iranians' lack of awareness of internal divisions within Christianity, which potentially lead to an assumption that if one is in England they should attend the Church of England. Some non-Iranian respondents suggested that the clear hierarchy and structure of the Church of England may be attracting members of this group, who come from a



country whose religious and social culture is quite hierarchical and structured, although all interviewed Anglican leaders whose congregation welcomed a significant number of Iranians asserted that their congregation is rather informal in comparison to the Anglican standard. An interviewed leader at a nondenominational congregation shared an observation:

*We had around 15 Farsi-speaking people, who just turned up one day. We later discovered that most of them had come from another Church in the city and initially what they were telling us was that they'd had difficulties in their previous Church along the lines (...) [that] they felt they were being told what to do, they felt things were very hierarchical, there were some issues around gender, so that's to say the role of women, and they... I suppose, the headline around that is that it felt very much like Islam, which they'd kind of broken with, in a way. So I think that was part of their struggle. They were trying to find an authentic expression of faith, where they didn't feel they were being controlled.*  
[leader 5]

The rationale behind joining a specific denomination is yet to be researched in detail, however as none of the Iranian respondents mentioned their congregation's denomination to be a factor that brought them to a specific Church, I am drawn to believe that it was not an essential element to be taken into account by new members.

All interviewed leaders and some Iranians mentioned that it is well known that a number of people seek church membership and conversion in order to support their asylum application and gain a right to remain in the UK. Respondents mentioned Iranian congregants who cease to attend Church gatherings when they receive a positive decision regarding their immigration status, or ones who, aspiring to be baptised as soon as possible, join various congregations looking for one where the process can be undertaken the soonest. Although definitely seen as a challenge to Church leadership, some respondents pointed out a chance that people seeking conversion for insincere reasons, may acquire genuine faith in the process. It was emphasised that being clear about one's motives is desired, nevertheless everyone is welcomed in the Church.

Despite some suspicion and mistrust spiritual needs should not be downplayed as a valid reason for Iranian asylum-seekers' church-joining. Several interviewed leaders mentioned their Iranian congregants going through powerful personal experiences of the divine, but it was also brought to my attention that certain people “*realise and recognise that there is something beyond themselves*” [leader 5] and have a need for spirituality or faith that was expressed throughout their lives. This need, often together with curiosity of local religious culture in England, draws them to Churches. One of the respondents, a man who became Christian having previously obtained British citizenship on the grounds of political involvement in Iran, said:

*For the first 5 years, still I knew myself Muslim. (...) It gathered...6, 7 years and I decided I don't like Islam anymore, at that time. But because of how I was brought up... I couldn't be without any religion (...), something was missing. I started to investigate about religion. (...) And it came to a point where I said-OK, first stage, I don't want that religion [Islam]. That's very rough. And the second stage, 'I have to find something to replace it'. And I start reading, I found that Christianity wasn't better than Islam. 500 years ago the Church used to do something the Iranian regime is doing. Maybe worse. But in renaissance people forced them to change and the religion of Christianity... I can't say I 100% agree with it, I 80% agree with it, it has some things in in which I don't like, but it is much better than Islam. [congregant 4]*

Throughout the research many respondents mentioned the joy seen during Christian services through music, singing, and laughter as one of the reasons that attracted them to Christianity and, for some, sparked their interest in this religion.

*What was really interesting was dancing and music and these kind of things. Like, woow, you know, woow. This is the religion? (...) Started all questioning and comparing, why other religion is always about... death and destruction and horrible God and this and that. And look at these people, you know, they just go to Church...music... So I took interest from there. And I thought you know, it's dancing, to be honest. The dancing, and music... In the*

*beginning, I imagine, at such a young age, come to England and you see these kinds of things and... wow. [congregant 3]*

Legal support, fulfilment of spiritual needs, and various levels of structure and jubilant enthusiasm can be found in most Churches in Leeds. The choice to attend a specific Church is sometimes a result of a coincidence, and sometimes an outcome of thorough research. When asked about reasons for choosing to join a particular congregation, respondents declared a combination of the following factors:

- a. An established Iranian community within the Church or lack of thereof

Across Leeds there are Churches with a significant Iranian minority, which accommodate for specific needs that this group may have offering, among other things, Bible study in Farsi, English-Farsi translation, or the support of an Iranian leader. Some respondents, particularly those whose knowledge of English was limited upon arrival, found themselves drawn to those congregations and invited to participate by other Iranians who had already been members, although others enjoyed joining services in English as it reportedly encouraged them to learn the language and made them feel like a part of the congregation. One respondent made a conscious decision to join a diverse congregation without an Iranian minority for reasons that he explained:

*First I wanted to go there, but I said 'no, I don't want to be near Iranian people. Because I want to be somewhere in peace, I don't want them to talk. 'oh, this person said this, that person is that'. I wanted to be some place without any connection with Iran. [congregant 4]*

It is important to note however that this choice wouldn't have been possible if this person did not have a high cultural capital and a command of English that allowed for unrestrained communication on their arrival in the UK.

b. Geographical location

Although many Iranians tend to join a Church that is located in their area of residence, location is often only an initial incentive. Many respondents reported that despite having moved away, they travel across the city to attend services and try to remain active in the Church community, rather than try to join a new Church near to their new home, as the initial congregation is where they feel they belong.

c. Welfare services

Some Iranians that were interviewed joined congregations after having been accessing their welfare services. A project run in one of the Churches aims at welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, providing support with completing forms and accessing facilities, offering English classes, hot food, clothing, and activities for children. While the project runs in a Church building, it is accessible to all those in need and proselyting is not its objective. A number of Iranians who have come to access those services have themselves become Christians and volunteers in the initiative, although they do not necessarily belong to the Church in which the project is run.

d. Openness

Two churches that I have visited during the research project are known as inclusive and quite radical, as described by the vicars. They are not particularly popular with Iranian migrants, however it is worth mentioning that one of them welcomed and joined in marriage a same-sex couple consisting of an Englishman and an Iranian refugee whose sexual orientation was seen as problematic in his previous congregation. Express support of LGBT+ rights was also one of the reasons why one of Iranian interviewees decided to join that particular congregation, despite not identifying with this community:

*And I saw this one and I saw the sign of... the flag, it was the rainbow flag. I'm not a... I am straight. But I thought 'this Church is a Church where a lot of*

*people can go in it. That's the thing I like. (...) I chose this one and I came and I loved it. [congregant 4]*

## 2. Positive experiences in Churches

All interviewed Iranian Christians spoke of their experience with Church membership very highly. Many themes that emerged when discussing what was helpful for new congregants when they joined their Churches were of receiving continuing support and acceptance, both in terms of personal matters and legal procedures, and being treated kindly and made to feel that they belong to the community.

*It is like family. You become a family to them, and they become like family to you. Especially for us, because our relatives, family, they are back home. And we see those kinds of people, this kind of community, open arms, and very welcoming... we join them, easily. We feel safe with them. [congregant 3]*

Throughout interviews it was impossible to avoid comparisons between respondents' experiences of Islam and those of Christianity. While respondents perception of Islam as a whole seem to, to a certain extent, be detached from their opinions on Iranian politics and governance, the experience of living under an oppressive theocratic regime has certainly influenced some attitudes towards the religion. One respondent described a situation that took part when he visited a local mosque in Leeds when he first arrived in Leeds as a Muslim man. After being questioned about his origin and religious affiliation he was advised to go to a mosque that matched his ethnicity and religious background, which made him feel unwelcomed. What attracted him to his Church was its commitment to welcome everyone, including non-Christians and non-believers.

*If it is a house of God, then the door should be open to everyone. You shouldn't ask me 'you are Shia, you have to go to that mosque'. That affected me badly. But then you go to a Church, they don't bother you are Christian, you are*



*Muslim, you are a Jew, you are without God. They hug you and they give you utmost hospitality. [congregant 4]*

Multiple projects run by Churches to help those in need are seen as an extension of this welcome, and a demonstration of what is considered to be model Christian behaviour. Many Iranians who become Christians have their first contact with Churches through receiving the offered support, and most of those I was able to interview were involved in some kind of unpaid work in those projects. Some see it as a way of giving back to the community that has helped them, reaching out to those in the position that they had previously found themselves, or simply living their religion.

*My flatmate brought me because of the [project]. And because I used to live in [the neighbourhood] as well, down there. So that's why I felt... That's how it started, for me to come to [this] Church. (...) [The project] has nothing to do with Church, but it has everything to do with Church, you know what I mean? It's like the Christian ethos. But everybody can come, visit, enjoy. Every religion, no matter what, as long as it is, you know, like a refugee, or asylum seeker, or destitute people. [congregant 3]*

*[a congregant] who helps in [an initiative], he's been regular for, I think, two years. Mostly in the [initiative], sometimes in the Sunday worship. But he, for about a year now, has had a leave to remain also. And he, partly, his presence in the [initiative] is a way of expressing thanks and gratitude and wanting to play a part in the life of the community in the Church. [leader 4]*

Those actions seem to be seen as an extension or a complement to the welcome that Churches provide. The same respondent who felt uninvited at a local mosque shared his impression of an imbalance between the amount of charity that his Church engages in, and that of a local mosque. The willingness to serve all that the interviewee witnessed in his congregation appeared to present a very powerful difference between those two religions in the eyes of this respondent and a pull factor to becoming a Christian.

*When in 2015 a lot of refugees came to Europe, and [the vicar] opened the door during the night and gave place to them to stay here. And that mosque... most of them were Muslim refugees (...), but that mosque didn't help! Only they did favour and only gave them one time food.<sup>54</sup> (...) It's different between Christianity and Muslims, really. When I came everyone was very, very, very friendly, and helped me, really. Especially the [previous] vicar, he used to come to my house once, maybe twice a week, and we used to talk about a lot of things.*  
[congregant 4]

Many Christians see the service and involvement in charitable initiatives as deepening their faith and helping them to grow spiritually. That religious growth is something that was mentioned by both the Church leaders who reported Iranian congregants often having a great hunger for knowledge and faith, but also by one of the congregants, who spoke proudly of his daughter's faith:

*I have a (...) daughter and she goes to Sunday School. And they teach her a lot of things. I remember, in the Christmas and the New Year, when the [inaudible] came in the primary school and asked the children, said 'Happy New Year, Marry Christmas, and what are you waiting for?' and everybody said 'we are waiting for Santa', somebody said for the gift, and my daughter said 'I am waiting for Jesus', because he is born in this time and we are waiting for him. So it was amazing, everything she learnt in Church.* [congregant 1]

This unconditional hospitality, strong sense of community, and living one's message seem to have played a major role in Iranian congregants' positive perception of their Church and sense of belonging but, although Iranians themselves were rather reluctant to talk about downsides of their experiences, certain challenges arose.

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<sup>54</sup>This quote may not be an accurate representation of charitable activities undertaken by mosques and Muslim communities in Leeds. Researching social involvement of those communities and religious groups lies beyond the scope of this research.





### 3. Challenges

The language barrier was mentioned as the biggest obstacle by all respondents. It hinders communication and leads to misunderstandings, but also impedes the ability to successfully teach the Gospel. It is one of the reasons why Iranians often choose to join congregations that provide certain services in Farsi and create an environment in which Iranians can meet and discuss the Bible in a language that they fully understand. One of the congregations that I visited during the research is popular among migrants from different linguistic groups. In order to accommodate for everyone's needs a Bible study for speakers of English as a foreign language is organised once a week. Creating Farsi groups in Churches presents its own challenges, and it is not one of successful integration or foreign-language acquisition, but of safety and trust. One respondent working with multi-faith, multicultural groups brought up a matter of passing the information back to Iran and possible safety hazards for families of Iranian Christians participating in such activities.

*I have heard from multiple people within the Iranian Christian community that there is a lot of fear. There's fear of... there being spies in the groups. There is a Farsi congregation that meets at [a local] Church and I know several Iranian Christians who will not go to that, because they believe that there are people in that group that are not actually Christians, but who are reporting information back to Iran. Now, whether or not that's true, I don't know. But that is the perception of people and, so... I have a couple of friends, who came to faith when they came to the UK, but are from Iran, and suffered some really horrible injustices before they came, and in a million years they would just never go to any of the Farsi speaking groups, because of this fear. Where it came from, where these rumours came from, I don't have any idea. But that is the only thing I know about the Farsi Christian groups at large, is that there is a fear that they aren't... that people may be gathering information on them and sending it back home. But I don't know that. It's hearsay. [leader 3]*

Another challenge that has to be considered by congregations is dealing with mental health problems and lack of trust of their Iranian congregants. Many are a



consequence of having undergone traumatic experiences in Iran, but also could emerge after facing systemic oppression in the United Kingdom, especially uncertainty of one's migration status which may lead to exploitation and prolonged stress.

*In my view, Iranian Christians, when they come here, they need people to have more trust in them. And... Because when they come here they're kinda, like, you know, with that background in their head, back of their minds, they all think... this is like back home, you know. Still, we have fear of police, and these kind of things around us. But as soon as we overcome these barriers, and the people get to understand us, it's very easy to deal with us, you know. We are not difficult. So we can be, same as you, normal people, very normal. [congregant 3]*

Interestingly the issues of mental health, trauma, and injustice were brought up mostly by church leaders, and had come up only in one of the interviews with an Iranian congregant who mentioned challenges that his family members faced, including living in the UK for almost a decade not being able to legally undertake any work, or even open a bank account. This man was clear in separating the kindness of British people that he has been experiencing from the government's foreign and internal policy, that he had a personal experience of not being unbiased.

*At first they refused me, and there was an organisation in London, they wrote a letter for me, 5 pages, and in the report that there was a sign of torture, they wrote a letter and I went to the court. 5 minutes in the court and the judge told the Home Office 'How could you refuse him?' The person, the agent from the Home Office was saying 'I don't know, I don't know, how they have refused him.' [congregant 4]*

This man was able to receive support from an external organisation and, it appears from my data, having that support is often critical for a migrant to receive refugee status and leave to remain. Congregations appear to be pushed to get involved with the Home Office more personally than just through writing letters of support or attending hearings.

*It feels as though if someone... If an asylum-seeker didn't have this Church family as a support network, and to back them up and to rant and rave at the Home Office, then actually they'd just be quietly put on an aeroplane and sent home, without any real consideration. So it does feel like we get to go and just kick up a lot of fuss every now and then and say 'hey, not on our watch, this is our friend, we care, so you shouldn't deport that person or deny this person a leave to remain or whatever it is.'* [leader 4]

One of the leaders shared that it is possible that some Iranians choose to join this Church because they know someone who has been successful in their migration case with their help however, according to the leader, nothing that this Church is engaging in is unusual and they do try to ensure that people who receive help are genuine believers.

Another challenge that was mentioned in interviews was dealing with cultural differences. While all respondents considered certain cultural behaviours helped them grow and to be a positive addition to the congregation, other presented challenges to the leadership and required high levels of cultural sensitivity. Both leaders and Iranian respondents mentioned different expectations of what it means to support or to be supported, of what belonging to Church looks like, as well as confusion between 'British culture' and 'Christian culture'. Two leaders working closely with significant groups of Iranian congregants described 'shame culture' and conflicting approaches to conflict resolution:

*What we found was if somebody falls out with somebody else, rather than going and addressing it with that person and sorting it out, getting it right, there was an issue of... as if other has been somehow insulted. And that seemed to be... that seemed to give people that permission to tell the world, and I'm talking about facebook and things like that, where people would start saying all kinds of ugly things about each other in public. And... so it became... when we talked about it, it became clear that it was something that they've imported, really, from their own culture, where there's the question of honour and not allowing for... space to be reconciled, really. Almost go to war with the other person. It's*

*so alien to the Christian understanding of how we carry out our relationships.*

*So that issue, about honour, and forgiveness, were things we had to tackle.*

[leader 5]

In discussions about cultural differences it is often the case that the migrant community is seen as the ‘other’, however almost all leaders that I spoke with seemed to be knowledgeable of their own cultural limitations, as well as recognising the need to learn and adjust on both sides, rather than advocating for full cultural assimilation. It seemed that cultural diversity within congregations is seen as a value and congregations on the whole express interest and willingness to learn and accommodate migrant groups.

#### 4. Solutions

Leaders’ and congregations’ awareness and understanding of challenges is a crucial step to adequately addressing them. Most leaders confessed to not having been prepared to work with Iranians and mostly having proposed various ways of supporting Iranian, or migrant, members of their congregation as they went along, mostly learning from their own mistakes. Some congregations found that organising special sessions for worship and bible study in Farsi, providing meetings where Bible teachings would be explained in simplified English, or recommending external courses that can be studied at one’s own pace (such as Alpha Course) to help Iranians to deepen their understand of Christianity. All Churches were involved in some kind of advocacy work, particularly writing letters of support and accompanying congregants to hearings. Some offered programmes in which food and/or material goods were offered. It was often emphasised that befriending and supporting individuals is essential, together with acknowledgment of each Iranian congregants’ individuality: they are not a homogenous group, come from very different backgrounds and may need to be supported in different ways. At the same time those congregants should not being treated as recipients of a service, but rather as full members of an already existing community.

Anglican Churches in Leeds that have an Iranian community seem to have established a certain level of cooperation. In summer 2017 a national conference on ‘Anglican Ministry to the Persian Community in Britain’ was held in Leeds and a mailing list was created to allow Church leaders to exchange opinions, seek support and share experiences. It is being actively used at the time of publication of this report. For some interviewed leaders it was the first meeting of this sort, but smaller ones were mentioned to have happened locally when the need arose:

*We also recognised that there were a couple of other congregations with Farsi speakers and what we did was we agreed to meet up together. Just to talk about some of the pastoral issues that were being presented, how we would approach those together, and in a case of... sometimes you get individuals who bounce from one congregation to another trying to get what they wanted, so we were able just to alert each other to look out for that kind. [leader 5]*

Respondents also mentioned being in touch with more experienced leaders from Churches outside of Leeds, some reported teaming up with various non-religious organisations or other religious groups to provide support to refugees and destitute people in Leeds. An organisation that was mentioned the most often was Elam Ministries, discussed above. One religious leader also mentioned receiving Elam’s support in finding guest speakers as well as receiving invitations to conduct additional workshops on Iranian culture.

A solution to many cultural misunderstandings, as suggested by one of the respondents, could be found by engaging a leader who is informed and conscious of cultural differences and ways to address them. Services aimed at non-native English speakers in some congregations are led by clergy with a missionary background, while other congregations hope to engage an Iranian leader in work with the Iranian community.

Migrants and asylum-seekers are often aided in technical aspects of legalising their stay. While tackling those issues is fundamental for Iranians’ security, it seems that implementing certain practices used in work with international students could benefit this group in terms of mental health. For this research I interviewed Anna, who serves

as an International Students Chaplain and runs International Students Club for students from all universities in Leeds. Many approaches adopted by the ISC are already practiced by congregations across Leeds, such as engaging people with personal experience of living cross-culturally to reach out to migrant congregants or providing space for Iranian members to share their culture and heritage with the whole congregation through, among other things, hosting Iranian New Year's party. While the experience of arriving and settling down in Leeds for Iranian migrants is quite distant from that of international students and differs not only in the unspecified time frame of their stay or access to support networks, but also in immigration status and motives for leaving their country of origin, I am certain that becoming aware of natural psychological phenomena that every person living in another culture goes through could provide comfort for Iranian migrants, just as it does for international students. In her interview, Anna asserted that understanding culture shock, the cultural adaptation curve, and the homesick circle has the biggest impact on students' ability to adapt to their new life.

## **Conclusion**

The Iranian Christian community in Leeds is growing in number and becoming increasingly visible. Iranian Christians attend various Churches across the city and arguments for joining a specific one are extremely diversified. Regardless of the type of Church, all interviewed Iranian members spoke highly of their congregation and seemed to have had a positive experience of Church membership, however future work should be undertaken to gain further insight into variety of Church membership experiences, especially among Iranian individuals who have left their Church community. Throughout the research it was reassuring to see that interviewed clergy in Leeds see diversity within congregations as something of value, that they are aware of challenges that Iranian congregants and multicultural congregations face and are ready not only to address them in their community, but also to get together at local and national level to network and exchange knowledge. The congregations which I



had a pleasure to work with, just like the city of Leeds itself, are vibrant, diverse, and welcoming. I strongly believe that they will continue their marvellous work with migrant communities and am intrigued to see how they will evolve and grow over the next years.

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