

Engineers in the Middle East

Roy, a mechanical engineer and ex-president of a large IVCF chapter in a southern university, was excited when he landed a job with a world class firm in an Arab city. Although a young graduate, he did his work so well, the firm even sent him to troubleshoot in India, where an off-shore oil well platform was listing.

On his first short paid leave in the U.S., he recruited several graduates from his university, including chemical engineer Carol, whom he married. She was promptly hired by the same firm. The couple, with two generous salaries, quickly saved enough to finance a year of Arabic studies in a second country, and to have the first of their four children. Then they began their long-term ministry in a third Middle East country.

In Roy's freshman year, God had used Urbana to give him a burden for Muslims. Since most Islamic countries do not allow missionaries, but hire foreign technical experts, Roy majored in engineering. It would prove to be as appropriate for earning a living and witnessing in our 20th century Arab world as the Apostle Paul's making of tents had been in first century Arabia.

In their host country, Roy worked for a local factory, learning much about how to do business in the Arab world. He tried to make his daily work pleasing to Jesus Christ, and had opportunities to speak about him.

Carol did not seek a position, but cared for her family and befriended her neighbors. At first it was not easy, although Carol is an outgoing person. But then she helped adjust their sewing machines and they taught her how to make their typical long dresses.

The real breakthrough came when her second child was born. The women felt solicitous for this young American mother whose own mother was so far away. After that she could go to the open air market with the women, keeping every hair of her head covered with a big scarf, just like the women.

Carol wrote later that they barely made it to the hospital in time for the slightly premature birth of their fourth child. For days afterward, Muslim women visitors streamed into the house. She had a little gift for each. The birth made it easy for Carol to turn each conversation to Jesus Christ.

But Roy's Arab employers never seemed happy with him. (It is how they exert control.) The bosses often lied to each other and Roy would be caught in the middle. At one point, when Carol and the children were ill and Roy had been injured in an accident, they were so discouraged that they asked for thirty days vacation leave in the U.S.

They did not tell the bosses that they wanted to reconsider whether God really intended for them to remain in such a difficult situation. But the bosses were alarmed. They said, "If you are away for 30 days, the whole factory will come to a stop!" This is how Roy discovered how much his work was appreciated after all.

Before the couple left, one Muslim boss came privately to ask Roy for books about Jesus! Tentmakers can bring only a few religious books into this country, and giving them out can result in prison or expulsion. Roy suspected the boss might be trying to entrap him. But he gave him an Arabic New Testament and a children's Bible story.

It turned out that the man was sincere, having been made hungry for the gospel by short-wave Christian radio and then by the way this couple lived out their faith in spite of illness and problems. (Our testimony is usually strongest in a context of suffering because anyone can do right when all goes well. The question is how do we act when everything goes wrong?)

The boss's newly expressed interest in the gospel was a factor in the couple's decision to return – a breakthrough of sorts.

Now several years later, in the same country, Roy has his own small business along with several tentmaker colleagues. It provides for their support and serves as a ministry context for their church planting.

GLOBAL Opportunities