

Indonesia: Ex-jihadist starts 1200 Jesus communities

Raharjo (not his real name) was a school drop-out on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi looking for work, when he was recruited by a jihadist organization. Like many young Muslim men, he was paid to attack Christian villages with the aim to force the Christians out of the area. However, as a result of the increased 'war on terror' by the United States after the 9-11 attack, his group fell apart and he lost his job. Raharjo returned to Jakarta, traumatized and depressed. There he joined a punk group and started to use heroin.

One night Raharjo had a dream. A person who introduced himself as Jesus (Isa) spoke to him in "bright and strong language" and told him to "Follow me!" In the dream Raharjo decided to follow this person. When he woke up, he found himself healthy, sober and without any desire to use drugs.

'I want to follow Jesus, but I'm not a Christian'

Looking for someone to explain his dream Raharjo turned to Samiton, the pastor of a large Christian community in Jakarta, who had done a great deal for Muslims facing social difficulties. "I want to follow Jesus, but I'm not a Christian," Raharjo told him. Pastor Samiton did not really know how to deal with this request, and turned to his friend Wira (not his real name). Wira developed a relationship with Raharjo, spent a lot of time with him and introduced him to the teachings of Jesus.

His newfound faith struck deep roots in Raharjo and changed him over time. He introduced all his gang members to his new Christian friends, and one after another began to take an interest in Jesus. Wira noticed that the young men needed a meeting place and also a decent place to live. So he bought a house and called it 'Father's House'. Here they met regularly and discovered more about Jesus and his teachings.



Raharjo's gang back in the early days

The method they used to 'discover' Jesus was simple: they followed the instructions of the Quran to read the Gospels and also parts of the Old Testament. Questions that arose were answered cautiously. In this way the young men were able to discover their faith by themselves, which is very important for Muslims.

Because the small discovery groups were mixed - men and women together - this quickly attracted new young Muslims. In contrast to everyday life in Indonesia, in the mosques the sexes are separated. But in the Jesus groups an obvious equal cooperation was practiced from the very beginning.

'With micro-loans he helped people develop small businesses'

Raharjo married and started a family. He wanted not only to pass on his faith, but also serve the poor. Together with an advisor he developed business models - funded with micro-loans of \$100 - to help the people around him to develop small businesses. They started producing T-shirts and also tried a large number of other business ideas.

In the years that followed many of the young men in the community returned to their families in the countryside and shared their faith in Jesus. They had learned: "As soon as you begin to discover Jesus, invite your family and friends to dinner and tell them of your faith." Most parents were happy that their sons had not been lost in the big city, but had found a good new life.

This way more and more small communities started to emerge in Jakarta and throughout the country, and these communities multiplied quite easily - always through personal contacts and along family lines. Like in the gospels it is common for new Jesus followers to be baptized in the context of their family.

To date, through the life and witness of Raharjo alone, around 1,200 Jesus groups have been started among Muslims across the country.

Source: Withheld for security reasons, interviewed by Reinhold Scharnowski