

Before the Language Arrived

Peoples of Faith, Missionary Medicine, and the Making of Coexistence in Al Ain

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The Puzzle



Dr. Pat Kennedy inside Oasis Hospital, 1965. A biblical verse is visibly displayed behind him.

In 1960, Christian missionaries Pat and Marian Kennedy established Oasis Hospital in Al Ain with the support of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Their Christianity was not hidden behind their medical work. They prayed, displayed Christian scripture, shared their beliefs, and hoped to convert patients. Yet Emirati families continued to seek treatment while remaining Muslim.

How did a visibly Christian missionary hospital become trusted within Muslim Al Ain while religious boundaries remained?

Historical Context

Healthcare scene the Missionary doctors entered in the Shiekhdom of Abu Dhabi in the 1960's:

50% Reported Infant Mortality Rate

35% Reported Maternal Mortality Rate

Diseases such as malaria, TB, smallpox, parasites, severe eye infections due to the dry and sandy weather of the disearth were all treatable in other areas of the world. However, in the UAE, they were common causes of deaths.

Medical need created contact, but need alone cannot explain trust.

Methodology & Historical Rigor

Qualitative Historical Approach

Oral History

- Emirati accounts and family memories
- Bedouin experiences
- Maternity and medical encounters
- Memories of Sheikh Zayed's role

Archival & Visual Evidence

- Kanad Hospital Museum photographs
- Hospital records
- Historical newspapers

Written Sources

- Academic scholarship
- Missionary writings and memoirs

Limitations

Missionary and institutional sources reflect their producers' perspectives; oral histories may contain retrospective or inherited memory.

Analytical Approach

- Triangulated written, visual, and oral evidence
- Treated photographs as historical evidence, not illustration
- Distinguished direct testimony from inherited memory
- Considered who produced and preserved each source

Transferred Trust

Sheikh Zayed did more than permit the Kennedys to work. He provided his majlis, resources, transport, protection, and visible political support.

His existing relationship with the people of Al Ain gave unfamiliar missionaries an initial basis for acceptance.

Zayed's Trust



Zayed opened the door. Repeated encounters kept it open.

Christian Presence Across Generations

Missionary outreach continued across generations, but took different forms.

1 Children

Introduction

Children were offered shkar (candy) and encouraged to ask al-Masih (Jesus Christ) for it. **Christian ideas are introduced through simple interactions.**

2 Adults

Participation

Adults encountered Christianity through prayer, conversation, medical care, and relationships with missionary staff.

Christian practice became increasingly familiar.

3 Elders

Long-term Familiarity

Years of treatment and everyday contact created sustained relationships with missionaries who remained visibly Christian.

Familiarity endured without widespread conversion.

Research Contribution

- Temporal shift:** Moves the history of UAE coexistence backward, before the contemporary tolerance policy.
- Perspective shift:** Places Emirati oral histories alongside missionary accounts.
- Analytical shift:** Treats acceptance as negotiated practice rather than assuming either harmony or hostility.
- Conceptual contribution:** Distinguishes religious acceptance from religious adoption and identifies transferred trust as a mechanism through which unfamiliar outsiders became socially legible.

Conclusion

Oasis Hospital shows that coexistence in Al Ain developed before tolerance became an official political language. Trust grew through Sheikh Zayed's support, repeated medical encounters, and local participation, while religious boundaries remained.

Christian presence became familiar without requiring Christian adoption.

How Trust Evolved



House Calls

The missionaries' care reached Emirati homes before they established a clinic.



Maternity

Medicine entered women's spaces and family memory.

Local Participation

Local men helped construct the earliest palm-frond rooms. Then they incorporated it into Emirati customs, family milestones, and social relationships became part of hospital life.

Boundary of Acceptance

“Salathum” / “Salatna” Their prayer/ Our Pariam

An oral history captures how religious participation could coexist with a clear boundary of belonging:

*“khalasna **salathum**, alheen wagt **salatna**”*

*“We have finished their **prayer**; now it is time for our **prayer**.”*

ACCEPTED	BOUNDARY REMAINED
Medical treatment	Religious belonging
Christian presence	Conversion
Christian prayer	Islamic identity
Personal relationships	Social & gender norms

Closeness without sameness.

Explore the Research

Scan to access the complete paper, qualitative ethods including archival evidence, oral histories, and references.



“To treat every person, no matter what his creed or race, as a special soul, is a mark of Islam.”

**Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan,
The Late Founding Father of the UAE**

