

Editorial: Reaching the Last Frontier

These are days of exhilarating prospects for the missionary enterprise. As plans and serious commitments are in place for a countdown and closure it seems that Joel's prophecy of his "afterward" has arrived—when old men dream dreams and young men see visions. If indeed these are the days when God pours out His Spirit on *all peoples* then who would want to miss them?

It may seem unkind to say anything that will detract from the excitement, however, we do seriously need to look at another side to the coin of closure. For instance, what is it going to mean in practical terms to get the job done? It seems clear that the people who are still unreached are unreached because they happen to live in the wrong sort of places. Either the climate is not very congenial, the religious or political opposition is too strong, the mail service is too far away, or the cultural barriers are so difficult that no missionary has yet been able to find a way to cross them, or they are under our feet and unnoticed, at the roadside, in the markets, and perhaps not counted as people by the dominant culture and therefore ignored by us. Whatever their difficulty, they are the people who are lost by chance and not by choice. The stark reality of the situation is that the remaining task of world evangelization has been left to the most delicate bunch of disciples that the Church has ever produced, and that task is going to be tough! Perhaps this is the reason why 92% of new missionary workers from the West and 97% of those from the Third World are going to "heavily Christianized populations" working in "predominately Christian lands," and not going to the frontier peoples of the world.

Reaching Nomadic Peoples

If we look carefully at the unreached people we will find that there are certain segments of homogeneous social groups who appear to be uniformly unresponsive. The first reaction is to classify them as resistant to the Gospel, or to consider their culture as hostile to our proclamation, and therefore move to a more responsive segment. The fact is, however, that it may be our proclamation that is hostile to their culture, or put more politely, our witness may be inappropriate and therefore ineffective.

One such sociologically and geographically distant or unnoticed nearby bloc of ethnic entities are the nomadic peoples. These include the nomadic pastoralists. The nomadic people as a whole make up some of the most authentic and ancient societies on the face of the earth. For instance, the nomadic pastoralists have established such a dependent relationship on their domesticated animals that their identity is inseparable from their stock. It may be cattle, camels, goats, sheep, llamas, yaks, horses or reindeer. Part of their amazing adaptation to their environment is that they know which types of animals will best suit their situation. The relationship with their animals is not just an economic one, nor an easy way to carry your food supply, it rather is a deep psychological and sociological necessity.

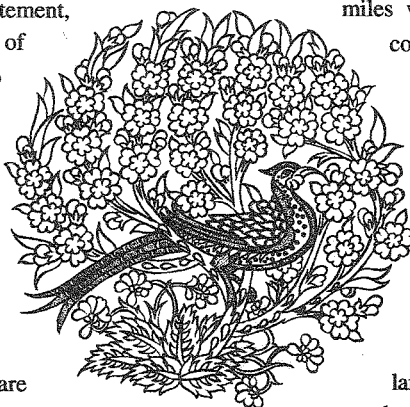
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Most of us are familiar with some of the more colorful desert dwellers, such as the Tuareg of the Sahara or the Bedouin of the Middle East. A few may have heard of the Fulani, more than 10 millions of them ranging for thousands of miles with their huge uniformly colored herds right across West Africa all the way to the borders of Ethiopia. But who has heard of the hundreds of smaller groups of pastoralists or semi nomadic peoples who cover approximately one third of the earth's land area, not just in Africa but also in South America

and probably most of all in Central Asia. They may be considered semi-nomadic or seasonal migrants. They may well engage in a little cultivation when and where the rains allow, but their real dependence for food, status, marriage, burial and all other cultural values and practices rests in their herds. When conditions are favourable they may live for periods ranging from a few weeks to a few years in one location, but their essential values are so firmly orientated to their animals that in times of drought or intertribal warfare, and even political upheaval, they can usually survive by moving on with their livestock.

Then there are the commercial nomads or the peripatetics, the Gypsy-like people. They have maintained their identity within but not with the larger surrounding society. Like the nomadic pastoralists, they exploit marginal economic opportunities and resources with a craft or skill rather than exploiting marginal land resources like the pastoralists.

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What Makes Nomads so Different?

It is this fundamental orientation to mobility, an irrepressible readiness to move if and when necessary, that makes a nomad essentially different from other people who want to own land or property which cannot be moved around. Nomads pose a uniquely different challenge to the Christian missionary movement as the Gospel is communicated and the Church is started among them. If the Church is to be effectively established among nomads it will have to be very different from the usual pattern we expect—it will have to be radically different from what we have presented and practised in the past.

As one old Somali camel herder said, "When you can put your church on the back of a camel then I will believe that Christianity is for us." All he had ever seen were some very concrete and permanent Roman Catholic Institutions and a mud-walled, tin-roofed building where a few Protestant government workers met on Sunday mornings at 10 o'clock. Until we can show nomads that the Christian faith has nothing to do with buildings, organizational structures and dressing up in special clothes

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on Sunday mornings, it is fair to say that they have never had a relevant and appropriate chance to hear and see the Gospel. Most of us would also agree that we could benefit considerably from rediscovering this truth ourselves for our Western Churches.

It seems that the problem is ours in our concept and communication of what is the Gospel and the Christian Church. God obviously has no problem in communicating with nomadic peoples. The first men He ever chose to be His special people, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Israel as a whole. They all were very definitely nomadic pastoralists. (See articles by David Phillips which follow "The Need of a Nomadic Theology." It is my conviction that we could learn some great lessons about spiritual and physical survival and fitness from these successors to Abraham's profession.

Reason for Thinking Specifically Nomadic

Much will be said about why and how we should think nomadically in the articles which follow in this first special IJFM edition focused on nomadic peoples. But here at this point we want to outline some of the main reasons why we should focus our mission efforts on them. For instance, and in the first place, a strong case can be made that the nomads are probably the last major bloc of unreached peoples left on earth that still needs to be reached. They may be relatively few in number, certainly in population density they are the least of all, but in the number of ethnic groups without any viable church they must be the largest homogeneous socio-economic bloc of unreached people. The collective total may be between 100 and 200 million, depending not just on definition but also on prevailing political and climatological conditions, as in Sudan.

Second, nomadic peoples are often classified as "typical Muslims" and therefore considered to be unresponsive. It is true that most of them do claim to be Muslims but it seems that this may be due mostly to the sort of Christian witness that they have seen—institutions, mission stations and famine relief camps. In contrast, to be a Muslim all you need is a prayer mat, and every one has an animal skin that will serve that purpose. To be a Christian it appears that one has to settle down and be somewhere at a particular place on a certain day. Very few of them know when Sunday is, let alone 10 o'clock, and as for dressing up in special clothes, no thanks! To be a nomad, especially a nomadic pastoralist, is not synonymous with being a Muslim. There are plenty of animistic and Buddhist pastoralists, even some who have rejected Islam, to return to monotheistic traditional religion.

Third, we need to recognize that what makes nomadic people, especially nomadic pastoralists, distinctly different and requiring specific approaches and strategies. The traveler or peripatetic nomads see themselves as different, even superior from settled people. For Gypsies a house with separate rooms with doors is like a prison. For the nomadic pastoralist it is their relationship with their animals. For most of the latter, managing their family herds is an essential part of their identity. Cultivation is not just a secondary occupation left to women or slaves. It is an admission of failure and social disgrace. So if we give the impression that you have to settle down to be a Christian then our witness is defective and inappropriate and will fall on deaf ears.

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Fourth, it has been found that attempts to evangelize nomadic pastoralists by Christians from neighboring sedentary ethnic groups have been largely counter productive. There are significant psychological differences and often deep historic animosities between the cultivators and the herdsman, between the settled society and travelers (seen also in American history in the long animosity and the frequent violent eruptions between buffalo herding Indians and the ever increasing number of settled ranchers). From one perspective, it should be easier for a non-cultivating, non-land owning, highly-mobile Western urbanite, to understand the values of nomadic people. This could be especially true of the younger generation of missionary recruits who have followed the pattern of so many students in North America, moving from school to school several times in the process of their college education joining whatever lively church or fellowship is nearby.

Fifth and lastly, to minister effectively to nomadic pastoralists would seem to require not just specific fresh missionary strategies, it also needs a broader, more specialized training. It needs a combination of technical skills, anthropological awareness and sound biblical theology that is not usually found in the traditional Bible Colleges and Seminaries. Perhaps more than anything else it is going to take a level of long-term commitment, of old fashioned (dare I use the word!) sacrifice that is not very popular on the contemporary Christian scene. In an age when more than three quarters of those "going into missions" think in terms of less than two years, and when almost half of those signing on for longer term give up before they get to the fourth year, the size of the potential task-force for reaching those culturally and

geographically remote nomadic peoples is very small indeed. In fact, it is pathetically small if viewed in the light of the vast army of saints at home all singing heroically about marching on to victory and claiming the kingdom from the Devil.

The stark reality of the world missionary scene today is that we have unprecedented hordes of "Christian cavalry" ready and willing to rush off to build orphanages in Mexico or take Bibles into China. These are very worthy endeavors and will presumably help to expand the horizons of some of those who take part in such a short-term "charge of the light brigade." However, if they do not produce any long-term "heavy infantry" or none is produced and trained elsewhere, what has been well described as "God's fox-hole missionaries", then the modern mania for cross-cultural experiences becomes yet another extravagant indulgence for sensation-hungry saints in our Western churches. What we need is spiritual specialized forces (like the US Navy Seals or the British SAS or SBS) who have multi-missiological skills, who are willing and able to work independent for extended periods of time without the comforts and backup support that modern missions are now accustomed to.

It should become perfectly clear in this Special Edition of the IJFM that to focus specifically upon such distant and difficult people is not just an exotic whimsy or anthropological adventurism. It is a missiological imperative! If God is to be taken seriously about His declaration that there are going to be representatives in heaven from every tribe, tongue, people and nation then we have got to be a lot more intelligent in our deployment of missionary allocation and effort. Putting it very bluntly, the devil does not really mind how many more churches we plant in the already well-Christianized people groups and nations in the world, especially if they largely remain inactive. He is positively delighted when another denomination comes in to add yet another flavour to the "Ecclesiastical Basken-Robbins" menu, in any particular area as this is likely the surest way to weaken the unity and diminish the potential of a well disciplined indigenous national church task force.

However, what does disturb the Devil, and invites his guaranteed hostility, is the penetration of the Gospel and the establishing of the Church in any of the unreached people groups of the world—He knows that each one won for the Lord Jesus is "another nail in his coffin". The fury and violent opposition which he hurls at any attempt made to challenge his usurped territory and to establish the Kingdom of God in any unreached people group where there was/is no Christian viable church is a clear indication that he understands better than most modern day believers and even better than many Bible scholars, namely, what each new penetration means and where his end truly lies. If reaching the unreached peoples of the world is the last item on the agenda of history then let us take the promises and purposes of God at least as seriously and prepare to tackle the most distant and difficult challenges remaining. Let's reach the last frontier!

Malcolm Hunter and David Phillips
Guest Editors
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The Turkish design on page 1 is a bird motif from the "Rhodian" period circa 1600.