

# Factors in Training Workers for Nomadic Peoples

*God's transcendence and his trinitarian character form a basis for partnership with nomadic peoples. There are steps missionaries can take to think nomadically. Doing so will lead to the rise of nomadic missionary churches.*

by David J. Phillips

Those who have experience among nomads see a clear need for orientation courses beyond the training provided by most missionary college courses and mission orientation periods. Many feel the need for an internship that tailors missionary training to the nomadic situation, including testing of candidates' practical commitment to nomadic people. Such courses would involve learning something about the ethos of nomads, how to relate the message to their ethos, strategy or method, practical skills and appropriate development, and formation of a balanced team.

In preparing to join a nomadic people for Christ's and that people's sake, potential workers need:

1. To possess a clear call from God to work with a culture and language not yet analyzed by other workers, without a proper home, and without the company of other workers or national Christian structures. They need a conviction that God will the salvation of at least some of a perhaps elusive, uncooperative, and evasive people living often in unhygienic conditions—conditions which they must share!
2. To undertake nomadic ethos training. They must understand nomadism worldwide and the local people group's pastoral or peripatetic methods and the implications these have for the people's worldview and for our method and message. They must empathize with what is important to the people and overcome their own cultural blindness.

## Rediscovery of the Nomadic Bible

3. To acquire biblical and theological training that equips them to look at the Bible's themes on providence and the environment, appropriate models of discipling and the form of the church, and economic activity and a multitude of moral issues in new ways that correlate with nomads' ethos and felt needs. The Old Testament should become more relevant than in many ministries. This is not a new "contextualization," but a rediscovery of the Bible's own nomadic message.
4. To develop skills in storytelling and oral communication. These are important to nomadic societies. This is the way they maintain their own traditions and identity, and decisions are made by searching the memory rather than by reasoning! Ethnic music and poetry skills are also important with some nomads.

5. To gain experience in camping, hill-walking, and horse riding. Basic medical knowledge and first aid are obviously useful. Some experience with animals and crafts is vital. A pastoralist who cannot at least ride a horse is an oddity. Desert camps similar to Wycliffe Bible Translators' jungle camps and "adventure" treks into the Sahara have been suggested. Physical fitness is needed perhaps more than in most other work, since nomads often live out of reach of medical facilities. One should consider paravet and para-medical preparation.

## Moving into Camp

6. To consider their strategy or probable methods. To win nomads' confidence and fulfill Kraemer's Golden Rule, there is no substitute for traveling with a group for a month or a season, or perhaps by regular arrangement for a week or more at regular intervals. Only in this way can one be seen to share something of the nomads' life, be party to their joys and problems, and after time share their hopes and thoughts. In the market or at the watering hole, in the presence of others of different ethnic origins and way of life, they are on

their guard, perhaps not even speaking their own language.

7. To find a sponsor. Seek to be introduced to a family or camp by someone who has their confidence and knows the hierarchy of authority. Some are offended by tourists, etc. You may simply be invited by the headman of the camp. He will be concerned for the visitor's welfare, who is in some sense under his authority while in camp. He can be criticized for having an "infidel" in the camp! Hospitality will be extended to you; this may cause hidden economic hardship, but you can reciprocate with discreet help.
8. To be flexible. Since both pastoralists and peripatetics have a routine system of migrations, it is possible to stay with them at regular places and periods of time. But flexibility is needed for a life conditioned to the environment. Religious festivals or market days may give a more predictable timetable.
9. To live simply themselves. Having too elaborate living quarters or vehicles may be counterproductive. One must be available to the people most of the time, but some privacy is necessary for

---

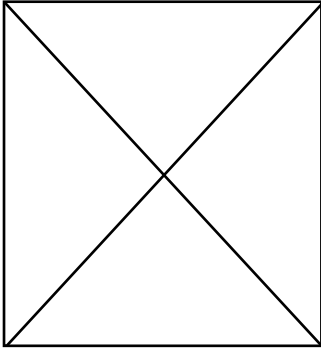
Each people group  
is a gift of God  
to which we must  
respond with  
concern and  
Christian love.  
Doing so furthers  
God's purpose for  
us as bearers of  
his image.

times in the day. There is no model of a lifestyle nearby, as there is in urban or village ministry, that forms part of the culture into which the expatriate can fit to have a more comfortable lifestyle for health and privacy. Still, workers among nomads have achieved successful family lives, including home schooling. Two-way radios or satellite phones are essential so as to maintain daily contact with the rest of the team.

10. To choose an out-of-area base. Nomads would neither expect nor even welcome a Christian worker constantly travelling with the camp; they are far too busy sometimes. An out-of-area-base or home is necessary to recuperate spiritual and physical health, have a more normal family life, and consolidate language study and other subjects, as well do administration and have fellowship with other workers.
11. To be amateur anthropologists, because much about nomadic peoples is still unknown. The Christian has a very different vision from the secular researcher. The nomads may not take your interest seriously at first, and a reason for it needs to be thought out. Pre-field library research can be maligned as theoretical, out of date, or irrelevant, but at least it gives a framework and basic knowledge to prompt questions and one's own observation.
12. To become learners. When working with pastoralists, it can be useful to develop a mission herd or flock and to employ local people to tend it. Being their student, one is taken seriously; they will willingly show you how to milk, to herd, or to ride. A willingness to learn is more important than professional experience, which may be of limited use in developing countries. A nomad already believes himself to be superior to the outsider, and one's ignorance and poverty in not understanding and owning animals just proves this! To trust them to teach us honors their culture.
13. To add value. The outsider will be valued ultimately for knowing things the nomad does not know; medical and veterinary training and equipment, however basic, are useful. In many nomadic environments, one is faced with a dilemma of either fitting into the role of being a religious teacher or being involved in development work.
14. To possess a legitimate role. All development projects must be appropriate in scale and relevance to be successful and require the active support and knowledge of the people. The aim is to maintain a viable nomadism for a significant section of the people's group which is necessary for the people's sense of identity. They are more concerned about ecology and animal welfare than we are; it catastrophically affects their survival! This point is vital to get visas in most places, or at least having some professionally qualified personnel gives credibility to a whole team.

### Nomadic Missionary Church

15. To understand discipleship training and have a creative view of the church and worship. It cannot be assumed that an expatriate's experience of joyful fellowship with Christians crowded together in a room, singing and expressing their emotions in worship, can be reproduced among nomads. The nomad is already used to a social life that may consist of close contact with no more than a few dozen people for most of the time, and long lonely periods with only two or three companions. The nomadic church will consist of small groups that come together less frequently than other churches. One possibility is packs of discipleship cassettes to minister to small groups, perhaps with a nomad version of something like the Chronological Method.



The new nomadic pattern of the church is already taking place. Nomadic Christians meet together at a well without any church building, and read and pray wherever they travel. No missionary can claim to have started this work.

16. To develop a nomadic missionary church outlook. A church that is “nomadic” in its attitudes will be a missionary church. Vincent Donovan expresses this by saying that the gospel may be preached and the church may well result, but it might not be the church the missionary had in mind (*Christianity Rediscovered*, pp. 81, 83). While this is significant as coming from a Catholic, it is also necessary for evangelicals, whose emphasis on the gathered church still smuggles in Western ideas of organization and social structures, ideas which have their origins in the 17th century. Nomadism is a life of relationships in a small society, whose trust is fulfilled in isolation or in small groups, in which maintaining and developing personal relationships is more important than organization. The implication of Christ’s ministry is that the church is a company of people who do not need special places or buildings for worship, other than the convenience of secular places.

This new nomadic pattern of the church is already taking place. The Christians of a particular nomadic people meet together at a well without any church building, and read and pray wherever they travel. No missionary can claim to have started this work. The gospel has spread among them by audiocassettes being played over and over. Two brothers, under a God-given conviction of sin, came to a market looking for the Messiah, a man called Jesus, who could forgive their sin. They came across a short-term worker who, with a limited knowledge of their second language, was able to tell them how to find him. The result is that the few Christians spread the witness not only to their families, but also to many more people than if they had been concentrated in one place. For them the church consists of a web of personal commitments through which the love of Christ is communicated and shared.

17. To be constantly aware that a nomad makes an excellent evangelist. He or she has the experience of constant personal interaction with a small social group and of depending on circumstances beyond human control. Learning to manage uncertainty leads a Christian to a life of dependence on God. The nomad has learned to live with few personal possessions, is accustomed to being mobile, and has experienced pov-

erty, hunger, and long periods of hard unpaid work. He or she has also known despair and fatalism and what it is to be despised. Such a Christian would be able to reach the largest sectors of the Two Thirds World.

One wonders how the modern missionary movement has gotten so far without a special effort to reach nomadic peoples, and equally without the participation of Christian nomads!

*Dr. David J. Phillips is a member of the Nomadic Peoples Network and has worked in the International Research Office, WEC International, for 11 years. After a number of years working with WEC in mission research specializing in nomadic peoples, Dr. Phillips has moved to the Latin American Missionary Training College in Brazil. His address there is MTC Latino Americano. Caixa Postal 289, CEP 39400.970 Montes Claros, MG, Brazil.*

Nomadism is a life of relationships in a small society, whose trust is fulfilled in isolation or in small groups, in which maintaining and developing personal relationships is more important than organization.

Full page ad  
here