

# Nomads to the Rescue!

## A Response to Ralph Winter

by *Malcolm Hunter*

**W**ith his characteristic incisive perception and typically tongue-in-cheek hyperbole, Ralph Winter goes right to the heart of the difference between ministry to Nomadic peoples and Church planting amongst settled or sedentary societies.

### *What Ralph Winter Said*

Dear Reader,

Your church may be able to gain a great deal of new vitality from a strange place—the nomads. How? Simply by drinking in some of the insight which pops out of the puzzling missionary challenge of outreach to nomads.

Nomads come in many radically different flavors. But they are all coherent populations which don't have fixed residence, which don't stay put. For that very reason missions have found it difficult to "plant churches" among such moving targets.

Obviously, missionaries can't run after nomads and construct a new church building every time they pull up stakes and seek new pastures to feed their flocks. But nomads do have extended families.

Amazingly, serious consideration of populations that don't stay put immediately forces us to the New Testament to rediscover what a "church in your house" back then actually was. There we find, on second glance, a worshipping household, an extended family-based unit of accountability and faith.

We can marvel that in the New Testament spiritual accountability and worship take place primarily at the family level, as with Cornelius' household, Lydia's household and Crispus' household. And we note that these household fellowships are referred to as *ecclesias*.

However, our modern translations make the huge mistake of translating the word *ecclesia* as church.

Yet, the only "church" buildings in the New Testament were Jewish synagogues, whose membership was composed of a minimum of ten extended families, and whose family elders then led the synagogue. Those ancient synagogues were a bit more like what we call "church" today, except that today we do not pay that much attention to family structure.

Something is curious and, in fact, ominous. I was born into a devout, Evangelical family. I have attended Evangelical churches all my long life. But I have never heard a sermon suggesting a weekly, home, family worship service—either how to have one, or why to have one.

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Yet in the New Testament the most basic unit was apparently the household fellowship. Many current books tell us this. See the superb new book, *Houses that Change the World* by Wolfgang Simson, which you can get by calling 1-800-MISSION, or *The Church Comes Home*, by Robert J. Banks, or Del Birkey's *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church*. (You can get the latter two from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).)

Probably the largest church in the world is the one in Korea with 800,000 members. Sure, with 21 auditoriums and services all day Saturday and Sunday they really do pack them all in. But the reality is that behind this weekend extravaganza are 52,000 neighborhood accountability groups! And that is where the rubber meets the road.

Again, the majority of Bible believers in China are within the huge and growing house church movement, not the 15,000 standard churches. In India, reports indicate that household-based units among caste Hindus encompass millions of Bible believers.

Thus, whether a society is nomadic or not, the real *ecclesia*, then, is the face-to-face fellowship involving accountability among extended family or close neighbor relations.

This is exactly what outreach to nomads provides. And what it requires. Nomadic societies are not the strange ones in this sense. The American society is the strange one, with "churches" which are far removed from the Biblical reality, often no more than a tenuous gathering up of fragments of real families, often a relatively thin and merely formal relation between people who do not usually see each other except on Sunday.

Thus, I can hope that as you read through this issue of *Mission Frontiers* you will not only see the immediate challenge of nomads—which is one of the major challenges in mission circles today—but that you will be able to look with new eyes at the

church life you are experiencing. Colossal changes in American life would be necessary, however, if multigenerational families were to reappear.

A recent story in *Newsweek* (March 22) speaks of "Adultolescents" who have gotten through college and return to live at home as though this were something bizarre and questionable. It does seem to violate the American "family fly apart" pattern. This, more than anything else, explains the adjustments churches have made in appealing to the resulting family fragments which huddle together in the artificial family the local church often turns out to be.

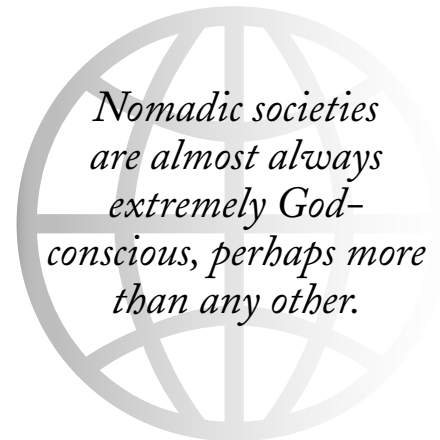
Okay, nomads to the rescue! They are forcing us back to the Bible. How Christian faith can be meaningful to them is how our faith can become more meaningful to us. Okay, nomads to the rescue! They are forcing us back to the Bible. How Christian faith can be meaningful to them is how our faith can become more meaningful to us.

*Ralph Winter's editorial in Mission Frontiers, March–April 2002.*

### **Malcolm Hunter's Response**

I have been saying for many years—since I first began to understand nomadic peoples—that they would have much to teach us about what the Church of Jesus Christ was always meant to be, once His Church takes off amongst them. Ralph Winter goes one step further as usual and declares that they can rescue the contemporary expression of what is called the Church from the absurdly distorted monstrosity that it has all too often become.

Another thought that has encouraged me not to give up on the western Church is the realization that God graciously allows the incredible variety of manifestations of His Church so that nobody on earth can reasonably say that they cannot find one that suits them. The whole ecclesiastical "Baskin Robbins", with far more than 31 fla-



vors lies before us to lick to our hearts content and still many people say they cannot find one that suits them. From the highest "smells and bells" ancient cathedral to the loudest, loosest and most froth-filled tin tabernacle God seems to be willing to accept the praises of His people, as long as they come from the heart.

And therein lies a good part of the problem. The more bells and whistles, robes and rituals, special numbers and inspiring entertainment appear on the program the easier it is to be distracted from the simple worship of the hungry heart. There is clearly nothing inherently wrong with these contemporary "aids to Worship", anymore than there is in the piling up of Ph.Ds to help the multiplicity of Pastors be more competent and qualified, but if these human gifts and achievements get in the way of God's desire to meet with His people, or cause us to trust in human effort and attainments then something is wrong, and this is where the Church amongst nomads could and should be able to help.

Nomadic societies are almost always extremely God-conscious, perhaps more than any other. Those who live with and off their animals have a particularly high view of God as the One who sends the rain needed for their survival. They often call Him by such names as the SkyGod and have certain ceremonies and holy men whose chief function is to bring the rain and the grass that comes with it. They do not understand how anyone cannot believe in God, leading to some very interesting discussions when sophisticated aid

experts come along to give them advice on development and do not include God in their planning.

The other great lesson to be learned from nomadic societies is their social strengths in caring for their own people, especially the elderly. It is rare to find abused or abandoned children amongst them, even in the most difficult times. There are some situations where the old people may chose to wander off into the bush to die so as not to be a burden on the younger members of the family at times of extreme drought. That is the last and highest form of social responsibility.

Yes, they may well be described as technologically backward, even though in their own environment and economy they are exceedingly knowledgeable and world leaders in survival in terrain that would kill most of us in a few days. For example some of the cattle herding pastoralists have 1,000 different words to describe a cow. I have watched the look on faces of many people when I ask the question "Which society is primitive if not one that allows babies to be aborted by the millions, the elderly to be dumped into institutions to

*Which society is primitive, if not one that allows babies to be aborted by the millions, the elderly to be dumped into institutions to rot, uncared for by their families, and children in those families to be tossed around and torn apart by the whim of their parents to divorce when they have had enough of that marriage?*

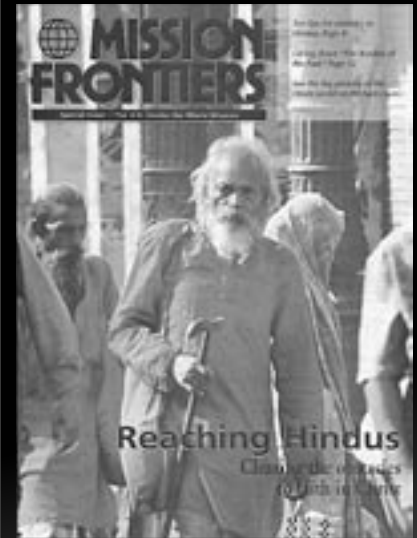
rot, uncared for by their families, and children in those families to be tossed around and torn apart by the whim of their parents to divorce when they have had enough of that marriage?"

There are many aspects of nomadic societies that could be salutary to twenty-first century modern man, not just Christians. The last one I will mention is the gift of hospitality offered by all of them I have encountered and enjoyed, especially legendary amongst the Bedouin and the Mongolians. However little they have in their tents or Gers they gladly share it with any passing visitor.

The reasoning behind this is easy to understand. They might be passing by your tent next year and will be grateful for your hospitality in their hour of need. This is taken to the extreme on the Mongolian grazing lands where there might be 20 or 30 miles between one Ger and the next. If the Ger owner sees a stranger in the distance they will often go out of their way to invite him in to "drink tea". This will provide a chance to catch up on the news and usually lead to prolonged tea-drinking and talking until it is too late for the stranger to go on his way that night. Three days is quite acceptable for a visitor to enjoy hospitality in a Mongolian Ger and three weeks in a Bedouin tent before he will begin to overstay his welcome.

It takes quite a time for someone who has experienced that sort of hospitality to adjust to the rather different interpretation of the word found in the typical western Church. There will be effusive welcome at the door and "We missed you last week" if you do what nomads are supposed to do and go to visit other people and places but when you have still not been invited to anyone's home after a year you begin to wonder whether these dear brothers and sisters of yours have read their Bibles on this topic and tried to implement it. Yes, nomads have much to teach us about what the Church was always meant to be! **IJFM**

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