

The Elusive Nomad

Consider the Nomad: A Felt-Needs Approach

by Caleb Rome

The initial contact came when we visited an area where we knew a nomadic tribe camped for several weeks at that time of year. My colleague, a national who had been exiled for his faith fourteen years earlier by this same Muslim nomadic clan, advised me to drive the vehicle to a town some distance from this area while he searched from the passenger's seat for anyone from his boyhood fraternity of warriors. These would be the only safe clan members for him due to the lifelong covenant bond forged as young men. My job was to drive slowly and pray for the improbable. "Stop!" and with that he was out of the vehicle. I watched from the driver's side as longtime mates exchanged warm greetings and renewed their relationship. This was the beginning we had prayed for. Cell phone numbers were exchanged and we were on our way, eight hours driving for a five-minute meeting.

Two months later, our colleague received a call. Some sort of disease was decimating the clan's camel herds, and they asked if the foreigner could help. We were able to mobilize colleagues who had a veterinary program, who were mystified by the disease or virus, but prayerfully guessed what might help the herds. In the end, only 13 of the clan's camels died, whereas all over that region thousands of camels died. Ten years after being banished from the clan for his belief in Jesus, this colleague of mine (the first believer) had now become a hero. He was warmly welcomed to return with his foreign friend. God had opened the door. This wonderful breakthrough stands in even greater relief when one considers the history of ministry to the nomad.

A History of Nomads and Missions

Any mission to nomads in our globalized world is rare nowadays. Nomads almost seem anachronistic—vestiges of a long-forgotten era when blue-veiled men in camel trains crossed the Sahara carrying salt and gold for trade. Long ago, Europeans fanned out across the world colonizing huge swaths of land that had only ever been the domain of nomads, such as the North American Plains

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Indians or the New Zealand Maori. They fought wars for control of the land, fighting against vast nomadic societies who valued their land as a living resource which created and provided food for people and animals. As lands were seized, nomadic peoples fled to wherever they could until there was almost nowhere left to go. From the plains to the jungles, North and South America were no longer fertile places for hunter-gatherer nomads.

Those who survived were summarily contained. Children were rounded up by new governments and in some cases placed under the care of missionaries. Missionaries generally did their level best to transform pagans into Christians. They also helped ‘civilize’ them by placing nomadic children in boarding schools, dressing them smartly, and renaming them, all in an effort to educate young generations and to instill in them new values. The idea was to bring salvation to these peoples while at the same time saving them from their less useful nomadic ways. Nomadic lifestyles were demonized not only as backward but as against progress and antithetical to a (post-Industrial Revolution) Christian understanding of Genesis 1:28.

Eventually nomadic peoples were subdued and controlled. Many became Christians through the efforts of these and future generations of missionaries. They received the Gospel—but lost their cultures. Against this backdrop, ministry to these same peoples today (in Australia, New Zealand and in North America) has become a very sensitive issue. It’s quite natural for descendants of these nomadic peoples to view evangelistic efforts as an activity that will inherently destroy their cultures. They blame purveyors of Christianity as those who use the Bible to eliminate their customs and culture. There are those among them who blame the Bible and thus the Christian religion as a whole for this. Evangelists are perceived by many nomads as those who work hard to persuade their

people to sell their souls to western religion and to “settled culture,”—two sides of the coin in their minds.

This is the state of things today: where hunter-gatherers once roamed freely throughout the world’s most beautiful places, nowadays they are simply disparaged and misunderstood. Nomadic pastoralist cultures continue to exist, but now, for the most part, only in the world’s most remote and desolate places, places where today’s economic colonizers have a more difficult time displacing nomads.

The Threat of Missions to the Nomad

Most nomads instinctively know their way of life is under threat and



they know from where these threats emanate. The colonial mercantile companies of the past are today’s international developers. Wealthy developers dangle huge sums of money before needy governments so that they can gain legal access to remote lands. As a result, nomadic lands are under threat from mammoth mineral extraction projects and water diversion schemes for irrigation and power generation. More often than not, today’s missionaries come from the very same countries as today’s developers, and nomads naturally consider missionaries part and parcel of this wider threat. They fear those from a settled world who devalue their lifestyle and who

would attempt to convert them to a new religion.

Before men and women of God set foot in any nomadic setting they would do well to assume they will be viewed as enemies until proven otherwise. Because of this assumption, missionaries to nomads need to be careful to clearly identify themselves as ambassadors of the Light of Life rather than as ambassadors of the various dominant settled cultures who are bent on extracting riches from nomad lands. My thesis is that righteous missionaries to nomads are not developers, neither primarily nor secondarily. They are, instead, representatives of Jesus Christ, of His love, His salvation, His power, His truth and His body. They may, indeed, be involved with development, but not the kind that is primarily informed by today’s settled cultures.

Generally speaking, good missionaries are those who are scrupulously careful to allow the scriptures to challenge and inform their “settled” worldview. They learn to recognize not only where their own culture may be thoroughly unbiblical, but also where its values may be questionable or where it may appear to have overstepped its authority. They examine their own values and their culture’s values, constantly learning to compare and contrast these with scriptural values. This exercise in self-reflection is critical for those missionaries who would be effective in following God to nomadic peoples.

Loving or Pitying Nomads?

It is of paramount importance to recognize that nomadic societies have no desire or ambition whatsoever to create a “settled culture.” They know their lives are difficult, but from their point of view, the life of the nomad is a life of freedom. Perhaps this can best be explained by the western concept of camping. Many settled Westerners, whether urbanized or not, fancy the idea of camping. Although few people actually go camping in remote places,

the idea is somehow attractive to them. People will take a week or two or even three, drop everything and take up a life of 'suffering' on a mountainside or in a chain of lakes. They do it because they love it. They find peace in a canoe or on a trail or sitting on a rock at a remote campsite. It is not unreasonable to say that a nomad is a perpetual camper. The life that we might value in order to get away from it all is exactly the life that nomads love as their norm and they have no desire to give it up.

Nomads are raised from birth to live in a manner in which life and death impinge on almost every action. For them this is normal. Nomadic pastoralists find safety and security by relying on the land and the predictable changes of seasons to guide them from place to place. Their herds represent security in both the short and medium term. The long term is out of their control but in the hands of far greater powers, which they deeply revere. They may painfully watch their families struggle with issues of life and death, but this does not mean that they secretly desire the so-called securities of living in a house and a village.

Look closely. The weather-beaten face of a woman living in a yurt perched high in a mountain valley is a peaceful face. She may be marked by daily wind, rain, and even snow, but she loves her life so close to the land. To assume otherwise is to look down upon a society, and to project a longing for change when that longing simply is not there.

Missionaries need to take care not to confuse different lifestyles with ungodliness. To be sure, just as is true with every culture, so also every nomadic culture is laden with the ugliness that sin produces, but in no way does this make a nomadic lifestyle somehow sinful or destructive in and of itself. I cannot tell you how many times visitors to the desert where we worked have said, "How do these people live like this? It is so hard and they

They can only survive in the desert by herding camels, cattle and goats. There is no other way to live out there. They have adapted beautifully.

are so poor." The insinuation is palpable, even if they don't realize what they are saying. When we dig down to the core of our western Christianity, we often find a simplistic and flawed belief that wealth and comfort equate with God's blessing. Therefore, if a culture is wealthy, it is somehow the result of godliness. Conversely, this same logic leads to the conclusion that poverty and discomfort are primary signs Satan has been given authority to wreak havoc with a people group. Simply put, if you serve God, you will get health, wealth and comfort; but if you don't, you will get sickness, disease, poverty and stress.

With this flawed logic, the redemptive work of God through missions morphs into proclaiming the salvation of the Lord through programs meant to alleviate poverty. As a result, some organizations attempt to demonstrate godliness to nomads by building all manners of settlement infrastructure—as if this will somehow help the people see that "God's way of life" is the best way. By this they hope to save some. By teaching nomads to settle down, and thereby to gain wealth and comfort, they hope in this way to reveal God to them. This kind of missions is not found in Jesus' life, the Acts of the Apostles or in the letters of Paul. This kind of missions is little more than development, a spiritualized development, based on the value of settled life over nomadic life. And it is precisely this type of reasoning that has foolishly diverted vast amounts of funding from church planting missions into Christian development endeavors over the past fifty years.

We are naïve if we miss the similarities of these kinds of spiritually motivated endeavors with the endeavors of national governments. Sometimes

missionaries mistake the friendliness of these governments to be part of God's leading—"open doors," if you will. But, it may very well be that the will of God for some nomads will not at all please the national governments which intend to settle them. It is not easy to walk a road that reveals Christ to nomads in a country where a government might have ulterior motives behind its plans to settle and restrict nomads—and many governments do have those plans.

There is no need to list all the nomadic peoples in the Bible to demonstrate just how much God loved them and blessed them just as they were. Others have done that work.¹ From a strictly spiritual perspective, there is absolutely no need to settle nomads. There may be cultural reasons, political reasons or economic reasons, but there are no good spiritual reasons even when people are sick and dying.

If we look at desert-dwelling nomadic pastoralists, the truth is that these people can only survive in the desert by herding camels, cattle and goats. There is no other way to live out there. They have adapted beautifully, guaranteeing survival for decades through the size and health of their herds. They don't see themselves as poor, but as having that which is sufficient to survive. Some even see themselves as wealthy because they have such large herds. Take a second and closer look and you will find that they are at peace. They even enjoy life.

Accepting the Nomadic Otherness

Jesus helps us here. The story of the Good Samaritan has a clear message that many have missed. A priest, a Levite and a Samaritan all come across

a Jewish man who has been beaten and robbed. Only the Samaritan helps him. We know the unfortunate soul is Jewish because Jesus purposefully locates the parable on the main road that skirts Samaria, the road Jews used to avoid setting foot in Samaria. Samaritans and Jews despised one another, yet this Samaritan lovingly cares for this particular Jew. Besides this, he makes sure he is well cared for until he has fully recovered. We know the story well.

This parable comes on the heels of a botched test of Jesus by a Jewish legal expert. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he had asked. Jesus had responded with a question of his own, “What is written in the Law . . . How do you read it?” Forced to answer his own question, he had replied,

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

Jesus commended the man and called him to live out these words. The legal expert had failed to test Jesus even slightly, so to save face, he then followed with a new question, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered with this parable of the Samaritan and then followed with one last question for the expert. “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The answer was obvious to this Jew. The neighbor was the loathed Samaritan, but the only words he could extricate from his mouth were “The one who had mercy on him.” The story vexed him. Jesus had created a story with a Samaritan as the hero. That was untenable. But Jesus wasn’t finished with him. “Go and do likewise,” he commanded.² Jesus had made it clear to this Jew that the neighbor he was to love as he loved himself was in fact his own enemy. That is the point of this parable.

I’m suggesting we have the same problem as this Jewish expert. We don’t

like certain peoples and we look down upon them. If we are honest, people from settled cultures don’t easily value nomadic peoples. Sure, we may find documentaries of them fascinating, and we might even pity their plight, but we accept the inevitability of their absorption into the mainstream of the global economy. If, as missionaries, that is the way we work with nomads, then we will remain their enemies even though we are lovingly focused on alleviating what we perceive their needs to be. Loving a people goes far beyond doctoring or developing a people. It means accepting a people for who they are. It means lifting them up. It means submitting to them and serving them in ways that they perceive



will truly bless them, not in ways that fulfill us or our development ideals.

The missionary who arrives on the scene of an unreached nomadic people group with an “I can help you” or an “I can fix you” posture actually stands in judgment of that people group. He has judged them and found them wanting. That missionary thinks he loves the nomads, perhaps comparing himself to the Good Samaritan who loved that Jew, but he is actually not focused on the nomads’ real problems like the Samaritan was focused on the man’s real injuries. He only pities their condition and therefore wants to alleviate that which makes them so pitiful to him. It is as if he has pulled out a comb and

a new set of clothes and is focused on tidying up the poor Jew who had been beaten and robbed. The end result of his actions might be a neat and tidy people who are left suffering, lost and certainly not loved. This is reflected in what has happened to the nomadic peoples of North and South America and Austral-Asia.

Learning to “Love in Motion”

If the compassionate love of missionaries is lost on nomads (when we assume that God calls us to help develop or settle them), then it is important to rethink and clarify our task in missions. Consider the mission statement we operate under:

By demonstrating the love, the truth and the power of Jesus, we desire to locate, evangelize and disciple (name of people group) who will grow and lead the indigenous (name of people group) Church of Jesus Christ.

God sends missionaries to peoples who have not heard the truth of the Gospel. He sends them to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ, to love the people with the love of the Father and to introduce people to the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The vision is to see people transformed into the image of God as His church is birthed and grows. A missionary is never sent by God primarily to economically develop an unengaged people group as his first priority. A Christian development worker may have that role, but not a missionary.

So what does it look like when a mission worker really loves nomads? After all, dealing with people that are constantly moving about is not easy business. Some might be in the camp one week but off in a completely different location the next, while the others stay in the camp. This presents all kinds of problems. Nomads can easily frustrate us because we cannot find the same people in the same place with any regularity. That does not mean we give up. It means we find how the function

of regular meetings in a settled culture might be matched in a different way in a nomadic community.

We have already stated that it is best to value nomadic culture in its own right. If we miss this, then we will most likely struggle to be valued by the nomads we are trying to reach with the Gospel. Our appreciation of them grows the more we learn. Therefore, education is key, and we need to read all we can about the culture and then enter the culture as a continual learner. We know that learning language goes hand in hand with learning culture. We must ask questions and seek to understand. The posture of an eager learner quickly endears people to the learner.

Seek earnestly those ‘Aha!’ moments of discovery. Allow the Lord to fascinate you with what He has revealed of Himself in their culture. It is easy for the Christian to point a finger at the myriad number of godless and sinful customs in a culture. While a strong working theology of the desperate condition of mankind before God (Romans 1:18-32) is foundational in ministry, it is all too easy to point a finger of judgment at any culture not our own. If we do, we pass judgment on ourselves.³ It is much more useful to look for the marks of God in the culture. Find out what they believe and why they believe it. Watch for customs that reflect the image of God.

A Personal Experience

We were living in a large city in East Africa, waiting for the day that God would open up contacts with certain nomads in a desert region. Our primary work until then had been radio. I was learning the culture of these nomads through the radio staff, who were from that nomadic culture. The dominant culture of the city came from different people groups and was marked by systemic begging. People respond to incessant begging in various ways and I had become aware that many of these beggars were tied to

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handlers who took a cut of the generosity. More than this, the city seemed to exude a beggar mentality. To me everybody had his or her hands out, including the government. I felt that I was little more than a bank with legs to many people. As a result, I closed my wallet to multitudes of needs all around us in that city.

Sometime later, I was travelling into the desert with my friend who was one of the radio staff. As we came into town, this excellent fellow asked if I could give him some money. My own concept of the private ownership of money and property, (my wallet and its contents in this case), influenced by the constant begging in the city, caused me to hesitate just slightly. I gave him the money but I had betrayed my concern.

A short while later, my friend took it upon himself to teach me his nomadic ways with finance. He explained that in a clan of extended family members, individuals hold all property on behalf of the clan. One man’s herds might grow very large and his family might become influential in the clan, but if one of his relatives has need of a few dollars or a goat or even a camel, he would give him whatever he needs. It wouldn’t be a loan; he would give it outright. Later on, the man who gave that gift might find himself in need of a few dollars when he goes to town. He would go to any one of his relatives, ask for what he needs and he would receive it with no expectation of repayment.

Then my friend turned to me and reminded me of the way I had handed him money a short while before. I felt ashamed, because he is my brother, my spiritual brother. Two things were exposed that day: the tight grip I had on my wallet, learned as it was from my culture; and the godliness and generosity of his culture with respect to

needs and gifts.⁴ I am still fascinated with the way these people handle possessions and property for the benefit of all.

When we learn to seek out that which is good in a society, even in the worst of societies, we will find it. In the act of seeking, we demonstrate care, which to a lot of people in that culture will look like real love. This kind of care and attention builds credit with nomads. When we first come to them, they are severely suspicious, and rightly so. As we respect them and show our desire to learn from them, we demonstrate love and begin to look and act less like the enemies they first expected us to be.

Two Simultaneous Approaches

Long before we ever made contact with nomads in the desert, we had determined to follow two approaches that we believed would help us learn to love the people. For the first, I am indebted to Roland Muller, who compares and contrasts Friendship Evangelism with what he calls Teacher-based Evangelism.⁵

Rather than making friends with Muslims, while holding onto an ulterior motive of someday exposing them to the Gospel, Muller espoused something he believed was more honest and loving. He claimed that of all the practitioners he had interviewed, every

successful evangelist had the reputation of being spiritual men and women of God in their own communities.⁶

[They] all played the role of teacher, imparting spiritual knowledge and truth.⁷

The advantage these evangelists had was that it immediately became clear to the Muslim that he was sitting at the feet of a man of God, who could speak with authority and communicate effectively.⁸

Having learned this, we determined that upon our first encounter with any nomadic Muslims they should immediately learn that we were worshippers of God who followed Jesus Christ and who taught with His same authority. This meant that our first agenda would be to share Jesus with these highly resistant and fierce nomads and then to continue with a program of evangelism and discipleship.

Secondly, we determined that we would allow the felt needs of these particular nomads to serve as a pathway of discovery for God to meet their ultimate needs. A felt need approach is not new,⁹ but for nomads especially it is a good approach. As described above, nomads are leery of outsiders and their grandiose ideas of societal development. If we can encourage them to voice their own needs, even if only their immediate physical needs, and then faithfully work to address those needs with them, in so doing we will demonstrate God's great love to them.

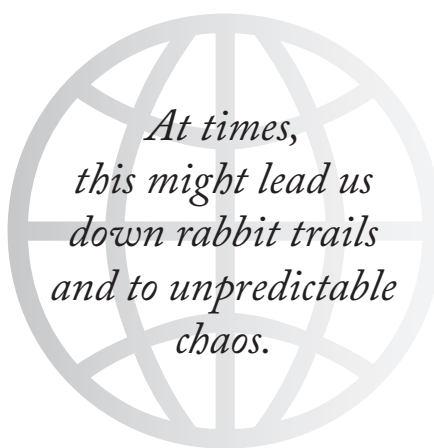
We learned that the key was to listen well at the front end so that we could head in the right direction with the right needs. As we developed ideas to alleviate or address any need, we worked closely with the people, carefully incorporating our ideas with their plans. This is very difficult for an educated missionary, but absolutely essential, especially in the context of nomads who may have little or no formal education. On the contrary, if we work to incorporate their ideas into our own, ready-made plans, we could accidentally be responsible for assisting nomads in becoming settled people, for that is what we settled people naturally do. Instead, we must resist the urges to create the best solutions ourselves, and allow nomads to direct their own development with our assistance.

The Tension Between Teacher-Based Evangelism and a Felt-Need Approach

When we combine these two ideas of teacher-based evangelism and a felt

need approach, a tension arises. The missionary with the reputation of being an authoritative spiritual teacher will become someone to whom the Holy Spirit will draw men and women for guidance into all truth. That missionary will rightly take responsibility for putting forward a teaching agenda as God directs him or her. On the other hand, a felt need approach puts the ball in the nomad's court. They pitch their needs and the missionary responds. How can these two strategies coexist?

In matters of discipleship, we can have a fair idea of what we want to present and when, but if people have an urgent need to solve a basic human problem, then we need to give our immediate attention to that need. If



we have planned to teach from the Lord's Prayer, but one of the people we wanted to teach has been called away because his brother is dying a few kilometers away, then maybe we ought to make the journey with the man. At the very least, we must dedicate those days to prayer for the brother and look to find what our responsibility should be in ministering to him.

At times, this might lead us down rabbit trails and bring a certain amount of unpredictable chaos into our days, but Jesus had many days like this. After the deliverance of the man with a legion of demons, Jesus purposed to go back across the lake and continue teaching. In

those days, he was busy laying a foundation of truth in the region of Galilee that would later serve the early church well in that region. As soon as he docked, he was swarmed by crowds of people. According to Luke, Jesus may have been headed for the synagogue, but the synagogue ruler's 12-year-old daughter was dying, so he immediately started towards the house where she lay. People pressed in from all sides. In the midst of the mêlée, one woman reached out and managed to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak and she was healed. Jesus stopped and ministered to her before continuing on to the young girl.¹⁰

Jesus spoke as one with authority. He had strong agendas and strategies, but he followed his Father's guidance, ministering to needs that presented themselves. In this case he may have been headed for the synagogue but a felt need changed his course. Then, while on the way, yet another felt need delayed him. Love for the people created his agenda and love for the people changed that agenda. We need to be just as willing to live in this tension.

A mission to nomads ultimately needs to be a mission of God's love. That love will drive us to learn the culture, value the culture and search for godliness already preexistent in the culture. That love will put the Gospel in front of the people early and regularly as missionaries build up a reputation of being captivated by God and speaking authoritatively in their teaching. That love will make us available to the myriad number of felt needs with which people confront us. Some of these needs will mobilize projects, which will create the development that the nomads are asking for and want. That love will allow the people themselves to shape and direct appropriate nomadic development.

A Case Study of Nomadic Ministry

Fourteen years earlier the leaders of a certain clan almost murdered the first from their midst to encounter believers

from a neighboring ‘Christian’ tribe. They brought a 15-year-old lad to a river, tortured him by drowning, and then left him for dead, unconscious and abandoned. When he regained consciousness, he was forced to flee as an outcast. He wandered around in the desert for ten years, slowly deepening in his faith. Soon he began to testify of Christ. That led to imprisonments and ultimately to banishment from the entire people group of two million. God led him to a city hundreds of kilometers away where he met several of us and was recruited to become the producer of a very effective radio broadcast to his own people.

For three years we focused on prayer, research, and the development of a ministry strategy. We learned to pray in faith that a clan leader would be the first to come to Christ. Through discipleship and prayer, God prepared us to return to the clan who had kicked our colleague out in the first place.

When we felt it was time, we prayerfully visited an area to which his people sometimes migrate, an area where another people group had settled. As I shared earlier, there we had found one of his boyhood friends, and had been warmly welcomed. God used that renewed relationship as the means to cure a large herd of camels. Our dear brother instantly became a hero to his people. Two weeks later we learned that his clan leader, Mohammad (psuedonym), the one who had ordered my colleague’s drowning years earlier, was sick and in need of help. We provided a way for him to come to the city and go to the hospital. It turned out to be a severe case of giardia (intestinal parasites). God then decided a miracle was in order and healed him instantaneously after he had seen the doctor. Days later, we showed him the Jesus film and read him Isaiah 53. This Muslim man was in awe of Jesus and proclaimed, “A great light is coming into the darkness of our people.” Then he formally

In the evening the elders would gather—we trusted that God would use the clan leader to open the door at that meeting.

invited us to visit his people. God had dramatically answered our prayer.

The following is an account of our first twenty-four hours (and some general results) of what turned out to be a long-term encounter with this clan of Muslim nomadic pastoralists. That first day we determined to do two things. First, we knew that in the evening the elders would gather for their nightly meeting. We trusted that God would use the clan leader to open the door at that meeting. Then I planned to share with them my deep heart for God and begin to introduce them to Jesus. We believed that God intended for us to go way beyond friendship evangelism, just as Roland Muller had espoused.

These nomads suspected that national evangelical Christians gain cultural dominance by doing good works. They believed the agenda of Christians is to commandeer all other cultures in order to take over their land. This is not true, but it is a perception that must be recognized and reckoned with especially where Christians are the dominant culture. For that reason, we had decided to use the Muslim name for God (Allah), because the only other option was the name from the language of the dominant Christian culture. My friend was originally from the Muslim nomadic clan and I was a foreigner. Neither of us was from the people group (of national Christians) with whom the nomads associated all “Christians.” Simply using that “other” name for God would instantly render us “the enemy” in the nomads’ minds. We wanted to present ourselves simply as surrendered worshippers of God who followed and loved Jesus Christ, avoiding links to any peripheral issues that would put up a barrier to the Gospel.

Secondly, we desired to meet the entire clan in order to learn from them what

their biggest challenges might be. We had prepared ourselves for many of the felt needs they might mention.

After many hours of driving to this extremely remote place, we arrived at the main camp and asked for Mohammad. It turned out that we had driven right on past him. He was twenty kilometers back, staying with his daughter in a small town. We thought it wise that I turn around and drive back there and pick him up, while my friend stayed in the camp to rekindle relationships.

An hour later, I arrived in the little town and located Mohammad. He was excited to see me. God was working. We ate together and then I prepared to take him to the camp. We were on task, but Mohammed had something he wanted me to do before we drove off. His daughter’s husband was very sick, so sick, in fact, that he was confined to the local clinic. Mohammad wanted me to visit him because he had seen the Jesus film and knew that he could be healed. I, on the other hand, figured that they probably wanted money to transport this man to the hospital 300 kilometers away.

We walked over to the clinic. I soon found myself at the bedside of an emaciated figure. The doctor on duty said that the man had AIDS and would soon die. It turned out that my surmise had been correct, and the rest of the family did indeed ask me for money. Foolishly, I had not brought extra funds with me on that inaugural trip, but suddenly I heard Acts 3:6 in my mind, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”

“Oh no, God!” I thought. “I cannot try this. This is my first trip into this territory. We are at the beginning of our ministry. I cannot ruin my reputation

with a failed healing attempt. This is asking too much!”

But the same verse kept running through my mind. My attempts to argue with God were futile, so I finally relented. I explained that I did not have nearly enough cash on hand, but I would pray that God would raise this man up and give him health. Before I prayed, I told him that I was about to pray in the name of Jesus Christ and that Jesus himself would be responsible for any healing that occurred. Then I asked for permission to pray. The sick man agreed. I put my hand on his chest and prayed that God would heal him. The man lay there just as sick as the moment I had arrived. I didn't know what to think. I had been faithful, but he was still sick.

I took that as my cue to drive back to the camp with Mohammad. I wondered what he was thinking. Soon we were onto other matters and then we arrived at the main camp. The welcome was hearty. They fed us well, and even slaughtered a goat. After nightfall, the elders gathered for their meeting. My heart pounded with exhilaration. I knew we were on the very frontlines of reaching the unreached, but I was also keenly aware that what I had prepared to say might not be accepted. My friend had warned me that these men would likely want to know why we had come to visit them. The answer to this question had eluded me as I prepared ahead of time. Nothing seemed like a good answer.

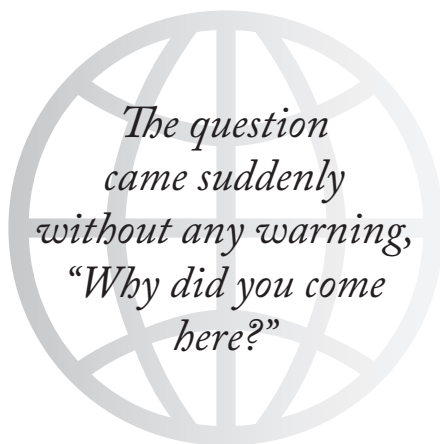
After no more than a few minutes, the question came suddenly without any warning. “Why did you come here?” they asked. I could have flippantly answered that Mohammad had invited me, but I knew they wanted to know why I was interested in Mohammad in the first place. Nobody is permitted to visit these nomads without an invitation and a vetted purpose. I was suddenly on trial. I had the very real sense that my reply would either bring persecution or blessing. I needed the

words of the Holy Spirit and I needed them at that very moment.¹¹

I took a deep breath and the Holy Spirit put the words in my mouth. I said,

God placed such a great love in my heart and in my family's hearts for your people that we had to leave our country and come to you. Secondly, we have come to be agents of God's blessing to you. Thirdly, we are here to give you the light of God's truth. May I tell you a story that Jesus once told?

Looking back at that answer, I marvel at what God led me to say. In no uncertain terms I had expressed not only our love for them but, more



importantly, God's love for them. I had also affirmed them by expressing God's desire to bless them and I had introduced Jesus as the light of God's truth.

Some might think that introducing ourselves as agents of God's blessing is dangerous, but most nomads are not thinking of riches and comfort when they speak of blessings. In the desert, blessings are usually associated with the coming of the rains: they think of fat, healthy animals that produce lots of babies and milk; they think of a household at peace without sickness; and they think of children growing strong because they have enough to eat.

I was exhilarated and found it difficult to sleep that night. God had not only opened an opportunity for us to come to these people but he had clearly spoken

to them. Now we had a wide open path before us. Those three statements are still remembered by the people. I have heard them quoted back to me. From the beginning, they knew why we were there.

The next morning, about one hundred people gathered under a tree to hear what we had to say. It was time to begin a felt need approach and we left nothing to chance. After introductions, I was given the floor. News had spread throughout the clan. They had all heard why I said we had come to them. I gave them greetings and expressed how blessed we felt to be permitted to be with them that day. I told the people that God loved them and loved to bless them. I said enough so that they could see our hearts. Then I decided to be just as clear with them as they had been with me. I have since found that during the daytime, nomads don't tolerate much in the way of long conversations. That is for the nighttime. I simply asked them, “What are your challenges?”

One of the men said, “Something in our water is making us and our animals sick.” I was not happy to hear that. Water work is expensive. Selfishly, I had expressly decided ahead of time not to do water development if asked. Once again, I was forced to reconsider the ways we would minister to these people.

Another man followed with, “We want our children to learn how to read and write in our own language.” The most outstanding challenge of doing any education amongst nomads is the fact that the students keep moving with their families. At that time, less than 1.5% of the entire people group could read and that figure included nobody in that particular clan.

I think it was an older woman who spoke up next, “We need a hospital or a clinic.”

I replied immediately to that one.

In this country, it is the government that is responsible for clinics and they are building them, but people still

suffer. What we would be prepared to do is to train your women to handle up to 90% of all your sicknesses.

They liked that idea.

Finally, a fourth person spoke up. “We would like help to start up small businesses,” he said. That one surprised us. I looked around. All I could see in any direction was camels, goats and a relatively desolate landscape. My friend and I smiled at each other. We would certainly be looking to the people on that one.

The meeting was adjourned and we were off to the water source, a large stream, to collect samples to learn what was wrong. Later that day we drove away by another route. It had been a day of beginnings.

Before long we left the country for home assignment. Upon our return three months later, one of our radio workers came to me with a story he thought I should know about. “Do you remember the man you visited in the clinic who was very ill?” It took me a moment to recall but then I remembered, so he continued, “Two hours after you drove away he got out of that bed, packed up his belongings and left the hospital.”

My skepticism was noticeable. “Was he well?” I asked.

“Perfectly well and he has not been back to the hospital since,” he replied, adding, “and he says that you are a holy man.”

With as much clarity as I could muster I said,

You go back and remind him that I told him any healing that occurred would be accomplished by Jesus Christ, not me.

It was then that I learned that although this man was the clan leader’s son-in-law, he was a notorious figure who had murdered many men and abused many women. I believe that God healed him that day in order to

*R*ather than blindly obey the government and build another failed school, we tried to accommodate their nomadic ways.

reveal his glory and accomplish his will in that man and his family.

Ever since that eventful first day with the clan, we have been working by day with these dear people to address their major felt needs and by night, reciting Bible stories. Eight years later many developments have taken place.

First, their felt needs. The problem with the water turned out to be one of extreme fluorosis. For two years we scratched our heads, researching the situation with the government until we finally came upon a little known fact. The entire area was a gravel pit with a massive reservoir of water only 30 meters below the surface. The people welcomed this news. Today there are four solar powered camel watering centers, which they located, helped design and continue to manage.

Literacy was the need that we could begin work on from the outset. There were two constraints we had to deal with. The first is that the government insisted on classrooms with desks and they demanded that schools be in session when all the other schools across the country were in session. That schedule did not coincide with the best times of year to teach these nomadic children. The second dilemma was that these particular nomads travel an annual circuit with three stops.

Rather than blindly obey the government and build another failed school among these people or clandestinely work around the government rules, we worked to adapt to the variables with which we were presented. We asked the people to form a school committee and then put an idea before them. We proposed to build two identical campuses located at their two major encampments. This would allow the students to go to school when the government

mandated—as required—despite moving with their families. The teachers would live at whichever campus the students could access. To save money and keep the classrooms cool, we would build adobe-like structures instead of the usual concrete block buildings.

They could see that we were wrestling with and trying to accommodate their nomadic ways. This pleased them greatly. Eight years later this ‘mobile’ school has several students who have reached Grade 7. These are the first seventh graders in the region. The local government looks to the school as the model for others and relies on us to influence all the schools in the whole area.

Life at the school has not been smooth. Many children would rather be out herding the goats. Parents are sympathetic to children who do not want to go to school. With the direction of the school committee, we have tried to stagger daily start times. We have also worked to provide other options to help the community deal with the stresses that education brings into the lives of both the children and the parents. Success with the children in literacy has attracted adults who want to read. So now they attend night classes with the aid of simple solar powered lighting.

Perhaps the most difficult of the needs to address have been the health issues. These people have the worst levels of health in the country. The average lifespan is 42 years. More than 125 live births per 1,000 end in death before the age of 5. The women are the gatekeepers of treatment and medication. Their ideas of treatment often equate with what we believe would be the very worst things to do. For instance, when a woman is in her third trimester of pregnancy, they believe it best that she not drink water and that she

cut back on food intake. This results in widespread anemia and malnutrition in mothers and newborns.

Health is a very spiritual topic for these women. People equate health with blessings and sicknesses with demonic curses. In that respect they are not very different from some Christians

The program we adapted established small groups of women for training and discussion. These women have held on fiercely to their tightly gripped, long held views about sickness and health, so we proceeded gently and lovingly even though that meant more sickness and even deaths at the outset. The work is slow, but we are seeing progress, especially as we allow these women to wrestle over time with new ideas of care. This kind of approach builds the trust required to enable effective change.

The most surprising development from an expressed felt need has been the creation of small businesses. Today, a women's cooperative operates a storehouse. Before the existence of this store, all the women used to traipse to the nearest market twenty kilometers away. One-by-one, each would go with her baby, her donkey, and a few goats. At the market they would trade the goats for flour, oil and sugar. Then they would make their way back home. The two-day journey would force them to sleep under the stars with their babies.

The women were tired of this arduous routine, so they came to us with a business proposal. For \$300, they would stock a storehouse, then sell the goods for a small profit. When the need would arise to buy more goods, they would round up the goats that they were owed, herd them to market and restock supplies. It has worked beautifully. Women in the community no longer need to leave their families, the cooperative gets better prices at the market because of bulk buying and the women don't mind paying a little extra because they no longer have the

added burden and expenses associated with the market trips. This produces a healthy profit. Remarkably, the cooperative now manages a socialized healthcare program with these profits. Anyone who uses the store is eligible for free medications and hospital treatment. (In case you were wondering, these women paid the \$300 back in full only three months later.)

Meanwhile the men in a nearby clan run a similar store. With their profits, they buy young animals from the market and strengthen the clan's herds. Now these same men want to start a livestock market in order to create economy in the desert. Until now, these people have only ever purchased camels from distant markets, but have never sold camels to



them because outsiders run the markets. Little did we know what would transpire when they expressed their need for business development.

At the very same time, we have been revealing Jesus and his Gospel to the people. We began in secret with the clan leader. At first, much of the teaching took place at night because the night is when nomads have time on their hands. The night is when they gather to reminisce and tell stories. Surprisingly, these people consistently wanted stories of Jesus in the beginning. Our training had predisposed us to use the Old Testament to prepare Muslims for the Gospel, but these people wanted more and more stories

of Jesus. This addressed their felt needs best. Today, stories from the Old Testament abound. Scriptural discussions now happen in public settings. A few believers have now become more than a dozen. Two elders have been chosen from among them to care for this burgeoning church. Those elders are linked to other elders who oversee more than a hundred believers elsewhere among this vast group of desert nomadic pastoralists.

We have endeavored with all that we are to come to these people with the Father's great love. That love has caused us to proclaim the Good News with hearts full of love and it has caused us to address felt needs in ways that the people believe are appropriate. I sat down with Mohammed and my friend not long ago. Muhammad stroked his beard and said,

What you have done with the camel watering centers is very good for us, but that is not the best thing that is happening here. The best thing is that my people are beginning to follow Jesus, the Light of the World. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See David J. Phillips, *People On the Move*, 2001, Piquant, Carlisle, UK.

² Luke 10:25-37.

³ See Romans 2:1.

⁴ Compare what I have described with Acts 2:44, 45.

⁵ Roland Muller, *Tools for Muslim Evangelism* (Belleville, CA: Essence Publishing, 2000), chapter 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹ See Tim Matheny, *Reaching the Arabs: A felt need approach* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981) pp. 140-155.

¹⁰ See Luke 8:40-56.

¹¹ See Mk. 13:11.