

Mission to Nomads: The Need for a Better Strategy

Problems involved in reaching the unreached nomadic peoples with the Gospel loom large, but are not insurmountable. Problems range from simple ignorance in understanding the complexity of the task to using outmoded strategies that have never worked well anywhere, even in the West, much less in our mission to reach the nomadic peoples of the world. A better strategy is needed to reach them with the Gospel and establish the Church among them.

by Malcolm J. Hunter

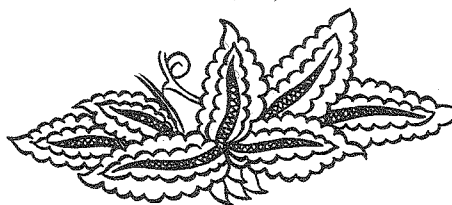
What are the problems involved in reaching the nomadic peoples of the world? Most common are: failure to recognize that a real difference in approach is needed; a seeming reluctance to take seriously the implications of the Great Commission; misunderstanding as to the value and viability of nomads and their way of life. Added to the above is the difficulty for Western missionaries to live among people who usually are severely impoverished, which then creates the problem of how to deal with the inevitable consequences of dependency. Another problem is the use of the outmoded mission strategies and goals to build mission stations among the nomads—especially building immobile structures for them as their churches. These are some of the main problems and challenges facing missions to the unreached nomadic peoples of the world. A brief description of each problem and how to overcome them follows.

Recognizing the Complexity of the Task

The need to recognize the existence and complexity of the problem is crucial. Ministry to Nomadic Peoples (hereafter referred to as NPs) is quite different from ministry to settled rural or urban people. It is generally assumed that the same strategies that have proved effective in nearby areas with settled and cultivating people will be effective among NPs. Both Western and national missionaries from non-nomadic cultures seem to have difficulty understanding the worldview and values of people whose primary orientation is nomadic, or even semi-nomadic.

Little serious missionary effort has been directed towards NPs as they are generally considered to be resistant to the Gospel, difficult to get to and to live among. Most missions have preferred to concentrate their limited resources on more accessible and apparently more responsive people. However, this strategy misses the missiological point that they are an essential part of the Great Commission—many hundreds of distinctly different and authentic ethnic groups who are all part of the agenda God has given to the Church to be reached before it will and can be completed. If indeed it is true that they are “among the most difficult to reach peoples” then there is little point in leaving them until last. We need to address this challenge more urgently and intelligently. As to the charge that they are resistant to the Gospel, it may be more

correct to say that it is our presentation of the Gospel which has been resistant to the nomadic value system and way of life. Much of current missionary work among NPs may have been a negative communication to them as it gives the impression that Christianity is for settled people, while Islam is the best religion for nomads.



A Serious Misconception

There has been a general misconception by outside agencies, both secular and missionary, that nomadic pastoralism is a “primitive, inefficient and unsustainable socio-economic system that is dying out”. However, in actual fact several recent studies have shown that nomadism is considerably more efficient than ranching or any other agricultural system in making use of land which is marginally productive because of inadequate or unpredictable rainfall. It is quite true that many of the children of traditional NPs are leaving that life style to look for work elsewhere but that is often seen as an opportunity to diversify the economic options for the nomadic family. The most competent herd managers stay

with the animals while those who find work in settled areas usually start to collect money or animals to send back to help rebuild the herd.

A related aspect is that there are often immense material needs that missionaries cannot avoid addressing if they are living among them. The people make him appear uncomfortably rich at the best of times. In the inevitable drought and famine periods he will be overwhelmed with the demands of human suffering and starvation. When he does try to respond with famine relief help it is usually in a situation of an "unplanned crisis" which makes it almost impossible to maintain a realistic balance of spiritual and physical ministry. In this scenario, it can be even more difficult to make the transition from short term relief to long term development and rehabilitation.

Attracting Society's "Dropouts"

Most missionaries want to have a house somewhere to call home. If he chooses to build it "as close to the people as possible", meaning somewhere in the middle of the grazing lands, he will

*The missionary will
need to make
deliberate and
determined efforts
to direct his main
communication
towards the elders and
respected herd
owners who are still in
the bush or in the
main settlements.*

soon find that he will attract an assortment of the most desperately needy people around him. At first he may encourage them to come to live around him if he needs their manual help in clearing land or collecting local materials. However, what he will find, sooner or later, is that he has attracted the poorest, laziest, or most incompetent herd managers who have lost all their animals, usually the most destitute and disenfranchised members of the nomadic pastoral community.

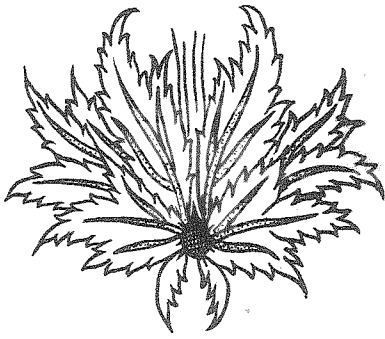
The missionary will probably be happy at first to find a ready audience for his message from these pastoralists gathered around him for whatever he can give them. He may even be able to write home after a surprisingly short time and tell exciting stories of numbers coming to his services as often as he wants to hold them and professing to accept his faith. There may well be some who truly do believe his message and become Christians but unfortunately their dependence on the missionary devalues their profession in the larger nomadic community. It is the same lack of credibility accorded to any new convert who is dependent for physical help on his mentor or master. "How much is he paid to believe this new religion? His faith is worth as much as his wages, when the income or assistance stops so will his religion".

In a pastoral society this lack of credibility is magnified if these first professing believers all happen to be from the destitute families who have lost all their animals. In such societies, to lose the herd you inherited from your father is the ultimate disaster and disgrace. Loss of the animals means serious loss of self esteem and usually loss of the respect of the other pastoralists who manage to keep their herd, even if much diminished.

It is not hard to see why the missionary is doing his cause no great service by concentrating his efforts on the poorest dependent and "dropout" people who gather around his "dwelling in the desert". If he does choose to live as "close as possible to the people" he will need to make deliberate and determined efforts to direct his main communication towards the elders and respected herd owners who are still in the bush or in the main settlements if they are semi-nomadic.

The alternative to this settled missionary approach described above as the "dwelling in the desert", is to take the approach of being as nomadic as possible himself. This implies that he and his family, if he has one, will need to find a house in a suitable urban location as near as possible to the pastoral area but far enough outside it so that he can get adequate rest when he comes back to home base. This should probably be located in a large enough town or village so that he can hope to assume a lower profile without facing the constant demands of ministry to the local community.

From this home base the missionary and his family sometimes are able to move out to the true pastoralist heart land—the grazing areas of their target people. He does not need to follow them around in the bush as is often imagined, and feared by most missionary recruits. When pastoralists are watching their animals in the bush it is not the best time to try to talk with them. They are usually then preoccupied at least periodically in keeping track of the animals. This is not only to keep them from straying too far away but also in some areas to guard against attacks from wild animals and raiding parties from other cattle-herding neighboring ethnic groups.



Precisely here is where the real opportunities for the "nomadic missionary" begin. He will find that soon after dark, when all the animals have been secured for the night, and milked as appropriate, the people are delighted to spend all the time the missionary wants to talk with them.

Turkish design on pages 45, 47 and 49 are border plant motifs from the "Rhodian" period, circa 1600.

In practice it has proved much easier for a "nomadic missionary" to make short visits to a well or water source, especially if he has contacts who will give him some leads and introduce him to some of the other herdsmen who come to water their animals. If the missionary is willing to do this he will find that all the active pastoralists will come to him very regularly, in good times every day, or in drought, at the most every third day. These contacts at the watering points will often lead to invitations to go back to the camps in the evening to spend the night back where the people are staying in clusters or extended family groups in the grazing areas away from the water holes. Precisely here is where the real opportunities for the "nomadic missionary" begin. He will find that soon after dark, when all the animals have been secured for the night and milked as appropriate, the people are delighted to spend all the time the missionary wants to give to talk with them.

There is a question that is pertinent in nearly all of the Third World rural areas, "What do you plant after the sun goes down?" Answer: "The Church." This is never more relevant than among the nomadic pastoralists. They may or may not plant a crop but the missionary has his finest opportunity to plant the seeds of the Church in those long evening sessions. He may choose to travel by foot, camel, horse or donkey but it is often quite possible and acceptable to travel by a 4-wheel-drive vehicle. This allows him to carry a few people as guides and also to haul enough water back to the camp to make him very welcomed. If he cares to boil a large pot of tea for the people at the camp he will be doubly welcome and will probably assure himself of an invitation to join the people in whatever evening meal they will eat much later on.

The possibilities and positive opportunities in this approach are obvious, even though there is a negative side. How long can he live that sort of nomadic missionary life? It is undeniably exhausting in the heat, with dust and flies that come with the cattle to the watering places all day and at certain seasons all night. Few people can appreciate the isolation and sheer monotony of spending night after night in remote and often noisy camps—the animals regularly stirring around, bellowing or bleating with the herdsmen jumping up to quiet them or to drive off the hyenas. It is little wonder that few missionaries care to take this approach. It is certainly more convenient and attractive for missionary families to take the option of building his "dwelling in the desert" and to be as "close to the people as possible". The problem with this strategy is that it has been proven over and over again not to be effective if the goal is to plant an attractive indigenous church among people whose primary orientation is nomadic.

The Difficulty of Keeping Life Simple

The other frequently demonstrated problem with the mission station approach among nomadic peoples is that however simply the missionary may have initially planned to live, but it is uncanny that things never seem to stay that way. He may have begun with a simple prefabricated and supposedly portable building but soon he finds that a store is needed to keep the food supplies essential for feeding the needy people gathering around him.

Frequently the missionary and/or the spouse cannot avoid getting involved in medical work whether they are medically trained or not. It will often and innocently begin with the occasional visitor to the back door desperate for a malaria tablet or "something for diarrhoea". The missionary can hardly deny that he has the medicine on hand as he needs it for himself and his family, and of course Christian compassion compels him to give what he has in a time of obvious need. Once that back door has been opened the trickle inexorably grows in numbers and complexity. It is almost inevitable that a separate clinic building will come, if only for hygienic reasons to keep the diarrhoea off his doorstep. Usually some sort of shelter comes next to allow the sick children and families to sleep over night when they come long distances to get the only help within walking distance.

Sooner or later the inevitable demand for medical attention will require a full-time worker—either another missionary or a trained national. In either case a proper separate dwelling will be needed. Usually by this time a pumped water supply has been installed which may begin with a wind driven pump but will lead before long to electrical power. In the past this used to mean a diesel generator but now we have the considerably more efficient but more expensive solar equipment. Not just the array of panels but deep cycle batteries, special fluorescent lights, fans, pumps and solar refrigerators. It is true that they are cheap to operate but the time and money spent procuring and installing this high tech equipment are all investments which will tie the missionary more and more to his permanent buildings.

Whatever the original intention may have been in the mind of the missionary and agency not to build a permanent church building on the mission station, it seems an almost inevitable development to put up such a structure. Some times it is said that the local Christians insist that they want one but in reality it is more often pressure from support-

*How ironic that we
have kept on placing
such impediments in
the way of a whole
strata of very
authentic ethnic
groups all the while
understanding that
the Christian Gospel
is perfectly suited to
their way of life.*

ing churches back in the missionary's home country who send the money to build one. Visitors from overseas who like to come to see their missionary in action usually express surprise if there is no "proper church" among all the other buildings that have sprung up. To the visitors it seems such a good cause to present to the fellowship back home for a "worthy project". Maybe they subconsciously think that the building of a "proper church" will make their missionary's work easier and even more spiritual. Alas, how often money is allowed to determine the missionary strategy! It would be a very strong man who could resist the pressure to build a "proper church" when the supporters back home are so keen to send the funds. In his heart he should have grave misgivings about the consequences of this church building project. It must be noted that all the problems of the missions station church are greatly magnified in a nomadic community, almost certainly hindering the emergence of a truly indigenous church—one truly attractive to nomadic people.

Building Church Buildings for Nomads— A Seeming Inevitable Development

Well what is wrong with wanting to build a proper church on the mission station among nomads? First and foremost it shows to the local community that the church belongs to the missionary, whether or not the local people are supposed to have shared in the construction costs or not. Everyone knows that whatever the local professing Christian community gave is as nothing compared with the amount that the missionary provided, however much their local labor is said to have contributed. Everybody also knows that it was the missionary's plan and project as they had no idea what a Christian church building looks like. The missionary is bound to make the church building of solid construction to show that it is at least as important as any other building on his station but unfortunately the more permanent he makes it the more he demonstrates that this is a church for settled people—not for nomads. This strategy definitely confirms what the nomadic pastoralists had been thinking all along—that Christianity is not for them. It is OK for people like farmers and town dwellers who can stay in one place and go to the services each Sunday wearing their best clothes. Many pastoralists in the bush have little idea which day Sunday is and they certainly cannot plan to stay near to the new church building every week. For most of them in Africa, Islam seems a much more attractive and appropriate religion. It allows them to pray anywhere and really anytime that is convenient, as long as they try to do it 5 times a day. All they need is a prayer mat and everyone has something that will serve that purpose, even an old goat skin if nothing else is available.

The only surprising part of this frequently repeated scenario is that virtually every Christian, missionary or not, will strongly agree that the Church is of course not a building, but people. It is not dependent on real estate but on relationships, especially among nomadic rural peoples who have nothing besides their animals and each other's relationships. Why then do we continue to build not only these burgeoning mission stations but also the permanent church buildings which more than anything else frustrate the emergence of what the missionary really wants—the emergence of a truly indigenous nomadic church?

Every building, especially "proper churches", gives a negative communication to nomadic people that Christianity is not for them, unless they are prepared to give up their traditional culture and orientation. How sad and ironic that we have kept on placing such impediments in the way of a whole strata of very authentic ethnic

groups all the while understanding that the Christian Gospel is perfectly suited to their way of life.

Appropriate Community Development

The other commonly repeated misunderstanding demonstrated by the few Westerners who have tried to grapple with the problems of how to help nomads with their material needs is how difficult it is for us to do just that in an effective and sustainable way. This is not just a problem for Christian missionaries but perhaps even more so a failing of the large international or national government attempts to "do good". This is not the place to begin to document the catalogue of disasters and the "comedy of errors" that most intervention have produced—however well planned and resourced it was with foreign expertise and external inputs. The fact that missionaries in general have not made such big mistakes and costly failures in their attempts at development work can probably be attributed to the relative paucity of resources that Christians have to throw at the problems they see and try to solve.

The subject of Appropriate Development for Nomadic Pastoralists is the topic of a Ph.D. thesis which I completed in Oxford in 1995. In this paper it is probably enough to emphasize that appropriate development must include the indigenous believers as the transformed and liberated Body of Christ in their society. This is true anywhere but never more relevant than among the nomadic pastoralists. The best that we in the West seem capable of achieving through all our present well-intentioned efforts is to minimize the problems of giving the wrong impression of what Christianity and the Church will mean when effectively and attractively established among nomadic pastoralists.

For those who want to pursue this subject further by asking which development interventions appear to be the most appropriate for nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists, the following lessons have been learned and are based upon experience and research in both West and East Africa.

1. Large scale irrigation projects and resettlement schemes have generally been the most common and costly intervention attempted but the least helpful if dependent on outside technology such as water pumps. Where seasonal surface water or sufficient rainfall has allowed small scale cultivation to be introduced using crops which require minimum rain to yield a harvest, then it may be appropriate to use this level of indigenous agriculture to supplement the traditional dependence on animal husbandry.
2. Animal and human medicine are the next inputs most commonly appreciated by nomadic pastoralists. Where these are dependent on the services of trained professionals from non-pastoralist peoples nearly all programs seem to fail because of the unwillingness of the government or project-employed personnel to serve in remote areas where their help is most needed. The only hope of supplying effective if basic medical services to pastoral peoples will probably be through what is usually termed "bare foot primary health care workers".
3. Veterinary medicine is particularly vulnerable to the reluctance of "trained professionals" from non-pastoralist backgrounds. The demand and need for their skills and the value of the medicine they control is often so high among herd owners at times



of outbreaks of disease that the professionals in this field unfortunately usually demonstrate their susceptibility to corruption.

4. Education is usually the last component of development options that nomadic pastoralist care about as in most cases it is seen as taking away the young people who are needed in meeting their perennial labor shortage. Only in a few relatively sophisticated situations is education seen as a worthwhile alternative that could bring benefits to the pastoralists—salaried employment, training for their own veterinary or medical assistants, chiefs, administrators, or even members of Parliament. In the few situations where education has been welcomed it appears that there has been an NGO who was able to sponsor the few brighter students who survived the local rudimentary primary education, to make it through the remote boarding secondary schools to the even more remote higher levels of education. The advantages of sending their children through a long process of education are seen not just as the potential for remittances from future salaries but also for acquiring influence in government departments and policy making that can be expected to yield benefits not only and primarily to the family but to all of his pastoral people.
5. It is easy to see the negative effects of most development interventions attempted among nomadic pastoralists but one rather more hopeful option may be mentioned—Animal Restocking. There are several examples where this has been tried, normally on a small

scale. The results have proven to be surprisingly positive, in spite of mistakes and mis-management.

The most significant discovery observed in several situations in both East and West Africa is that traditional practices of restocking within the pastoralists society have special relevance to Christian values. In each case there was a requirement for those who had animals to share them with those who were without. For instance, among the Borana of northern Kenya it was stated over and over again during field research that if a man lost all his animals through a disaster such as an outbreak of disease or due to enemy raids he does not have to ask others for help. His fellow clansmen will gather together and decide how many the unfortunate man needs to support his family and how many they individually are going to give to him.

This tradition is so strong with each herd owner proudly stating how often they had given such help to less fortunate clan members that it was only surprising to find that none of the several restocking projects that had been undertaken independently had utilized this culturally well-established procedure. In each situation the project manager, a Western expert had taken responsibility for deciding who should be given animals and how many they should receive. He may have formed a committee of a few employees, or local government officials, but none of them even consulted the traditional community leaders or the elders regarding any of these projects.

It would be very interesting for a long term, well integrated development worker or missionary, who knew his pastoralists community well, to see how a matching offer of restocking within the clan system would be received. All the evidence acquired during field research indicates that it might well be a great incentive in reviewing the traditional restocking methods by "priming the pump".

Dr. Malcolm Hunter and his wife Jean recently left Ethiopia where they began their missionary work in 1963. They have served with SIM in East and West Africa and as consultant for ministry to Nomadic Peoples, in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Niger, Benin and Burkina Faso. The Hunters will continue to seek the Lord as to how best to serve His purposes for the unreached Nomadic Peoples of the World.

PROFESSIONALS IN MISSION



Use your marketplace skills to serve
Hindus, Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists

*If God has called you,
InterServe can get you there.*

InterServe

InterServe/USA
P.O. Box 418
Upper Merion, PA 19082
(800) 809-4440
Fax (610) 352-4394
CompuServe 72400,2234



InterServe Canada
10 Huntingdale Blvd.
Scarborough, Ontario M1W 2S5
(416) 499-7511
Fax (416) 499-4477