

Nomadic Ministries Gathering Called for April 2006

by Malcolm Hunter

Nomads for Christ! Are you serious? Surely there are hardly any left in this day and age. Why bother with them, they will all be gone in a few years?

These are some of the typical responses when the average Joe or Sue sitting in church hears anyone suggest that nomads are probably the largest number of unreached peoples with the same world view remaining to be won for Jesus. They may only number 200 million individuals, but they include well over 150 separate ethnic entities. In none of them are viable Christian churches established. We don't use the term "planted" amongst nomads for obvious reasons.

Almost without exception it is government policy to pressure them to settle down and be sensible. In communist countries such as the former Soviet Union, China and of course Tibet this is done ruthlessly. Even in Africa where two thirds of the continent is usable only by nomadic pastoralists, the ruling powers, usually being from urban settings, see them as backward and uncontrollable, so often aggressively force them to give up that traditional life style, even to the extent of bombing their camps and herds as in Sudan.

They may call themselves Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or animists but the real obstacle that has to be overcome is their perception that Christianity is a religion for settled people. If they have ever seen a church it will be in a building to which people go on a certain day wearing special clothes. Hence the view of a Somali camel herder, "When you can put your church on the back of my camel then I will think that Christianity is meant for us Somalis!"

As the Kingdom of God makes great advances across this world this is the one stratum of human society that has been left behind. This is not because nomadic people are resistant to the gospel; more often it is the approach of Christians from settled societies that is

insensitive and offensive to them. The strength of their social relationships and traditions of hospitality is much closer to Biblical standards. Any true nomad will welcome a traveler to his home or tent, and if we have a story to tell they are eager to listen. In that sense nomadic peoples are some of the easiest societies to enter and be given the opportunity to tell stories from the Bible that are much more relevant to them than they are to 20th Century urban sophisticates. The other great advantage is that nomads are probably the most God-conscious people on earth. They nearly all share a high view of a God who sends the rain that provides the all-important grazing and water for their animals.

These are the positive points in ministry to nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples. The negative aspects are nearly all due to our western obsession with sedentary church buildings, programmed Bible studies, literate leaders, but above all, nice homes for ourselves and our families to which we retreat every evening. After the sun goes down is when nearly all rural teaching is done, especially amongst nomadic pastoralists, after the cows come home and/or sheep, camels, goats, horses or yaks. This is where we most need help, and the whole family has to be involved in that level of sacrifice.

These are some of the issues that make ministry to nomads a very specialized type of work. There is a remarkable degree of similarity in the approach needed amongst nomads in Africa, Asia or the Middle East—more convergence between them than between settled and nomadic peoples in the same country.

It is for this reason that over the last 15 years several gatherings have met in the UK and the USA for those engaged in this type of work. These have been helpful in getting a few practitioners acquainted and talking to each other. This loose network has been broadened in the last five years since Malcolm Hunter retired from

Africa after working most of 40 years amongst nomadic peoples in the West and East there. He has been able to visit nearly all the areas in Asia and the Middle East where nomads are found and met most of the serious practitioners who are grappling with the question about how to communicate the gospel most effectively amongst them. Even more intriguing is the issue of how to disciple individuals who begin to follow the Good Shepherd and help them form into "wall-less" churches.

The next major gathering has been called for late April 2006 in the most central and culturally appropriate location, which also happens to offer the cheapest accommodation and airfares. This will be on a branch of the Red Sea, in the heart of Bedouin country. In fact we hope to spend at least one night in Bedouin tents. For more information, contact Malcolm Hunter at nomad@sti.net.

This gathering is strictly for practitioners only so that we will not need to go over the basic principles of nomadic world view and ministry issues. The content and agenda will consist largely of real life case studies given by participants from their field experience, with ample time allowed for smaller shared interest groups arising out of the case study discussions.

The expected outcome is a growth in awareness of the shared common problems in this specialized type of ministry and a better understanding of how God wants us to overcome those problems as we listen to Him and each other. We are aware that nobody knows all the answers so there will be no lectures from experts, but collectively we believe we can learn from each other what the Great Shepherd of those other sheep wants us to do to bring them into His fold. He said it best, "Them also I MUST bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd." John 10: 16 **IJFM**