

# **Nomads of the Seven Seas**

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Seafarers--they are essential to our global economy, but we rarely think of them. For most of us Christians they are truly a 'hidden' people. We are more aware of distant tribes and remote villages than we are of sailors who pass us on the streets of our port cities. We can locate most peoples on our maps, but these nomads of the seas are here today and gone tomorrow. Ever since the Israelites settled down in Egypt, the God's people have been sedentary people. The church, too, has grown in sedentary societies, and developed a residential mentality. It knows how to minister to people who live for years in fixed places, but not to individuals who are always on the move, and who form no cohesive communities.

Nomadic people are a significant and growing part of our world. In missions, the hardest people to reach have been the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, the Aborigines of the Australian Outback, the nomads of the Tibetan plateau, and the traders along the silk, salt, and spice trails. Today the population of urban, refugee, traveler and seaman nomads is growing rapidly. How can the Church minister to people constantly on the move, and what can these people contribute to the global outreach of the Church?

### Ministering to Seafarers

We need to rethink our traditional assumptions about ministry when we reach out to seafarers. First, we cannot work with them from cradle to grave. At best we are with them for brief periods of time in their lives. Consequently we must know immediately where they are in their spiritual pilgrimages, and help them take the next step in their lives. For many this means presenting Christ in ways meaningful to them. Others, however, are Christians and need discipling in spiritual growth, ministry capabilities and leadership skills. We have only a short time with them, and we must begin immediately where they are and help them grow in faith and

witness. Their spiritual growth is based on many brief, often dissociated encounters with Christians around the world rather than on the continuous ministry of one church.

Second, we cannot assume that sailors will be part of stable congregations that provide them nurture and support. We need to help them develop spiritual skills that enable them to stand and grow even when they stand alone in hostile environments. Periodic contacts by mail, radio phone and e-mail can help break their loneliness and show them that there is a larger church of which they are an essential part. and supporting them with prayer and materials for Bible study and spiritual nurture.

Third, we must not forget the sailors' families and homes. We need to be aware of and minister to the families of sailors who face special problems with the long absences of their husbands and fathers. These families need understanding, ministry and strong support from churches nearby.

How can we carry out relevant and effective ministries to these nomads of the seas? One means is to provide places of rest, witness and nurture at ports where they stop for brief periods of time. These are strange ports, and sailors have no one to welcome them and offer fellowship and spiritual support. Church in port cities and special ministry centers for sailors are essential to any ministry to seafarers. These centers can also have important ministries to the wives and children of sailors who are often alone, and desperately in need of supporting communities.

Another means is to encourage personal devotions, small group Bible studies, and nurturing cell groups on board ships at sea. Here responsibilities rest on Christian sailors. We on shore must support them by praying for them, encouraging them, providing relevant resources and maintaining communications with them to encourage them in what are often difficult and lonely circumstances.

In ministry to seafarers, it is important that we develop materials directly relevant to their nomadic lifestyle. Most of our current evangelistic and discipling materials assume long term, residential ministries. We need port ministries that accept sailors wherever they are, and that encourage them in Christian life. This involves calling some to salvation, others to grow in spiritual maturity and still others into ministry in their settings. We need to develop modular materials that do not build on assumed bodies of information, and ones that rely heavily on self-direction.

### Seafarers as Ministers

Too often we see the church as ministering to seafarers, and fail to see the seafaring Christians as key ministers in the global outreach of the church. Nomads have been effective missionaries down through the centuries. Nestorian Christians spread the gospel along the silk trails to China. Sea traders took Islam to the west coast of India, Indonesia and the Philippines, and nomadic Tuareg salt traders took it across the Sahara to west Africa. Today laboring Christian nomads are taking Christ to parts of the world closed to all other types of ministry.

How can we help sailors play a key role in the evangelization of the world, and in ministering to Christians scattered around the globe? First, we must recognize the place and importance of nomadic ministries in God's work in proclaiming the Good News of salvation to all people. Maritime ministries and the sailors involved can reach places with the Gospel that no others can reach. Second, we need to support maritime ministries with encouragement, financial support and, above all, prayer and participation. These ministries are so foreign to us that we need to learn new mind sets, but in doing so we can learn much about ministry in an increasingly nomadic world.