

Elastic

Church

Developing a Different
Paradigm of Church for Nomads

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Nomads are proportionally less reached than sedentary people groups.¹ This is not necessarily because they are less open.² Our presentation of the Christian message has often inadvertently conflated Christianity with buildings and sedentary identity.³ In reaching out to nomads, we need to demonstrate to them that “church” fits on saddles and does not have to mean physical buildings.⁴ This means developing a non-sedentary paradigm of church. Adam Faranna refers to this as “elastic” church.⁵

1 Rome, Caleb. 2018 Paper presented at the Nomadic Peoples Network Conference, Central Asia, July, 2019. “Sheep in Need of a Shepherd.” In *Fruit to Harvest: Witness of God’s Great Work among Muslims*, Gene Daniels, et al., ed. Littleton, CO: William Carey Press, 217–229.

2 Day, Andrew. 2017 “The Nomad Challenge: Say Yes to Nomads.” *Mission Frontiers* 39:1, 23–25.

3 Ali, Aweis A. 2022 “Jesus as the Good Camel Herder: The Somali Nomads as the Final Frontier.” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 58: 1, 23–25. Phillips, David J. 2001 *Peoples on the Move: Introducing Nomads of the World*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

4 Ali, Aweis A. 2022 “Jesus as the Good Camel Herder: The Somali Nomads as the Final Frontier.” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 58: 1, 23. Hunter, Malcolm. 1997 “The Challenge of Reaching Nomadic Pastoralists.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 14:4, 189. Phillips, David J. 2001 *Peoples on the Move: Introducing Nomads of the World*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 125.

5 Faranna, Adam. 2017 “Nomads: Helping Them to Face the Growing Challenges.” *Mission Frontiers* 39:1, 32.

Understanding the Sedentary Paradigm of Church

Sedentary church and its institutions are in fixed physical locations. Sedentary Christians typically assume that church is associated with a physical building in a specific geographical location. Visiting church leaders always asked the nomads we worked with where their church building was and why they didn’t have one. Even when we loose ourselves from church buildings, we still tend to associate church with a community building or physical homes in specific physical places. This is a sedentary mindset.

In the New Testament, the organizing principle for the church is supra-locational, even though most of the church examples are linked to specific towns (e.g. Acts 11:22; 20:17). Jesus’ followers are reborn into an organic family network. Believers are committed to one another and bound to Jesus rather than to towns, cities, and regions. Christians are pilgrims with “no abiding city.”⁶ We are oriented to the heavenly Jerusalem, spending our lives journeying towards it.

6 Walls, Andrew F. 1996 *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 8.

After biblical times, the Church started organizing itself into an institution. The institution of the Church established hierarchies based on physical locations. These institutional developments were interpretations of how to be church. They were attempts to address specific contextual problems of the time. The sedentary institutional approach does not have to be normative. It is simply one way of being the Body of Christ.

Defining Elastic Church

If we uncouple church from location, the main feature of church is the people. Just as home is often a feeling related to wherever family members are at any particular point in time, so church is where the people of God are together. As Jesus said, *wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst* (Matt. 18:20). In this sense, church is a dynamic, communal relationship that constantly reconfigures as the members of Jesus' family move around.

Most people have little difficulty with the concept of church as described above. But, in practice, problems arise in relation to what we think should happen when people gather (e.g., preaching) and who has authority over those people (e.g., bishops overseeing a specific geographical region). Another example is how we do discipling. Usually, this involves a set of lessons delivered to new believers over a specific period of time, in a specific place. This is part of a sedentary mindset that is associated with content, times, people, and places that all are fixed.

Jesus' approach to discipleship was very different. It was mobile, reactive to life events, and responsive to context. Its focus was life-to-life. It was firmly embedded in community-based relationships. The relational interactions continually reconfigured as He moved around between homes, towns, and rural settings. This seemingly chaotic approach to teaching and learning is very different to that modeled in the well-controlled settings of sedentary church and theological institution. It more mirrors God's command to the Israelites to train their children as they walk along the road together (Deut. 11:19). Elastic church should therefore flexibly respond to changing configurations of the people of God. It should interact with the life nomads encounter in the contexts they pass through.

In contrast to the institutional approach, many of the New Testament leaders appeared to be heads of households (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:10–11). As is normal for households, believers ate together (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:20–34). Paul also implied that many people were baptizing others (1 Cor. 1:14–15). In elastic church, the sacraments are re-placed into the hands of God's people wherever and whenever they meet. Believers are released to baptize new believers and remember Jesus as they eat together, wherever they meet together as a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9).

Creating Elastic Church

Elastic church should be different from the pattern we are used to.⁷ It needs to be modeled as nomadic “to overcome the perception that the Gospel is only for settled people.”⁸

Some nomad believers in our context chose to make their camp together with a couple of other believing families. They found they shared similar values and appreciated fellowshipping together. These “camp churches” frequently met around a fire at night to sing, pray, and encourage each other from God's Word. In retrospect, we wished we had given as much attention to nurturing these “camp churches” as we did to promoting weekly gatherings where there was a high turnover due to people coming and going. Later, a sedentary church

⁷ Hunter, Malcolm. 2002 “Advancing Strategies of Closure: Counting the Cost to Closure or What About the Nomadic Peoples?” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 19:4, 9–11.

⁸ Phillips, David J. 2001 *Peoples on the Move: Introducing the Nomads of the World*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 47.



built a building for these nomads. But it stands unused as the nomads moved to another area to avoid armed conflict. Without any buildings or other infrastructure or equipment, the smaller more organic “camp churches” continue to be able to move with the families when they move, because the churches are the families.

In elastic church, the timeframe for discipling can stretch, and the pace adjust, to what disciples are encountering on their pathway through life. This gives more hope that the form of Christianity that emerges from elastic churches will be more authentic to the nomadic experience. Nomads with whom we worked continue to meet a few times each week to have “milk times.” The aim of these is to drink deeply from God’s Word and to seek answers to context-driven questions. An example of such a question was how to respond to the murder of a visitor. The culturally honorable response is for the host to avenge the victim through finding and killing the murderer. If the victim is not avenged, subsequent visitors become targets (which happened when a second guest also was killed). This culturally and contextually complex problem is not easily resolved. This nomadic church is still working through the issues to try and find a biblical solution.

Elastic church members need to be empowered to share however much they know of Jesus with others. The Bible does not require completion of a pre-set curriculum before people start passing on what they know to others. This more sustainable approach is easier to transfer on to new people. It goes with nomads, in the people themselves, wherever they are.

One new nomad believer had relatives among a remote and even more unreached neighboring people group. Soon after coming to Christ, he became keen to go and share the Good News with them. However, he was convinced that he didn’t know enough or wasn’t qualified to go. After much prayer and encouragement, he went. He returned with great joy at how they had listened to him and how God had answered his prayers.

To develop elastic church there are two main ways we need to change our thinking about church. First, we need to reorient our conception of the church away from location towards wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name. Second, we also need to accept the ebb and flow of changing configurations of gathering in different places and at different times.

To enable authentic nomadic forms to emerge from the nomads’ relationship with Jesus and His Word, missionaries need to hand over decision-making to nomad believers. We can trust the Holy Spirit for fruit from short encounters as nomads travel past us (e.g., Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26–39), as well as from longer interactions in multiple, constantly changing locations. This way of church is life-responsive, done together in normal nomadic life. It focuses on sharing in ways that can be easily passed on to others as they meet on the pilgrimage of life.

Conclusion

We need to recover a nomad mentality for the church generally. Nomads have much to teach sedentary Christians about how to be pilgrims on the Jesus Road.⁹ They remind us that we cannot comfortably settle in any context on this earth. We are all expected to be in a dynamic process of continually changing into Christ’s likeness, ready to respond to Jesus’ command to “go” (Matt. 28:19), unsettling our tendency to fix ourselves in any single state or location. Together, we share and model what it means to follow Jesus in all the specific contexts through which each of us wanders. ❏

⁹ Hibbert, Evelyn and Richard Yates Hibbert. 2018 *Walking Together on the Jesus Road: Discipling in Intercultural Contexts*. Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing.

