

NEW DOORS IN THE

MIDDLE EAST

The spy on the hilltop stirred into alertness in the late-afternoon heat. That dust cloud in the distance... was it them? Binoculars confirmed his suspicions.

The convoy of four-wheel-drive vehicles was coming his way. Amazingly, it was almost exactly to the minute that he had sighted them the previous week. They were making towards one of the wadi valleys at the foot of the mountain range behind him. As luck would have it, the last fork in the track took them to the wadi right below him. He was in the perfect position to observe their activity.

Drawing to a stop at a point in the track where only the reckless would drive further, the group began to emerge from their air-conditioned cocoons. The sound of closing doors and distant voices drifted up to the spy's hilltop shelter. Greetings were exchanged; some folk were clearly old friends while a few others, passed around in a circle of introductions, were obviously new. The whole process was almost obscenely rapid by local standards. But, even in the late afternoon, the sun still had considerable power and people were restless to move up into the shaded steeper parts of the valley.

It was the first time the spy had seen them this close. He was confused. He had thought he would be able to categorise them immediately into one of the expected social strata he was accustomed to in his country. Instead, the variety staggered him. Wishing he had a camera, he quickly scabbled for a

notebook to capture the details: Arab, Asian, African and European. Almost a third were his own countrymen, cheerfully removing national garments to reveal shorts and T-shirts. There were even a couple of national women in modest clothing suitable for hiking. His keen eye, used to supervision of his sister's social activities, appreciated that they came in cars with other women.

Amongst the others there was a wide range of nationalities – many he would not expect to see together. In the fragments of speech that rose up to him, he could detect British, American and South African accents, along with various Asian ones, and some others he could not identify. The wide range in ages, too, was perplexing: some people were clearly of retirement age, others were in their thirties, and there were even some teenagers and children.

After tightening bootlaces and adjusting day packs, the group seemed ready to go. One voice rose over the others; the spy observed the speaker point generally up the wadi and, after just a couple of sentences of instruction, the group moved off. How he wished his own briefings could be so quick. The spy realised that, from his vantage point, he would have them in sight for some time. This allowed him time for some deeper reflection. What on earth could bring such a disparate group of people together like this? There was certainly no militaristic discipline to the march. Some leaped ahead like gazelles over the rocks (he was pleased to note that the majority

with this skill were his own countrymen), but others were clearly struggling with the difficult terrain and were being guided by more experienced members.

As the people wove their own tracks up the wadi valley, he noticed that conversational groups seemed to form and reform without regard to nationality, gender or age. It

was a sharp contrast to the strict gender segregation he had been brought up with. However, he felt strangely undisturbed by the sight. Even at this distance he could observe the body language of respect and deference among the group. Hands that would probably never join together in any other situation were held out in offer – or receipt – of help over difficult parts of the

track. The spy wondered why he could not summon any moral outrage at the sight. Even the contrasts of the wider scene began to speak to him. Here among the ancient fossilised rocks was a trickle of happy human life. Was this a new form of community emerging from the hard and rigid traditions he and his people had lived with for centuries? What were the possibilities?



Among the last traces of voices fading in the distance was the occasional gleeful shout of discovery. Had the spy been closer, he would have heard some of the people marvelling at the 'creation' around them. Again he would have been puzzled. His experience with politically correct textbooks and media had led him to believe that the whole English-speaking world could only relate to a godless 'nature'.

Just on dusk, the spy was roused by returning voices; he was able to see by the clusters that there was still no distillation of the group into expected social categories. As people eagerly gathered around a small cool box at the rear of one of the vehicles, the spy raised his binoculars again. At last – something to report! What illicit substance were they getting out of it that led to such cries of delight? Disappointingly, however, the box just contained chilled, damp facecloths, that brought great refreshment to the hot and weary hikers.

Waiting until after the last of the group climbed back into their vehicles and drove away, the spy finally unfolded his cramped limbs, grimacing in discomfort as he did so. He was puzzled by what he had observed, and suspicious of the unusual camaraderie and acceptance he'd witnessed within the group... but also strangely drawn to it. There was no other option: he would return. ☞



NEW WAYS...

The Middle East is a region of great contrasts. In some parts, there are established churches with history and traditions going back well before anything we can relate to in the West. In other countries, there is barely a handful of national believers, and none meeting together.

Levels of acceptance and persecution can vary greatly as well. In one country, the local international schools can hold a Christmas Carol Service that will be well attended by parents of all faiths, yet there could be great repercussions if you passed out invitations in a local mall for the same service.

In many Middle Eastern countries, churches are tolerated in carefully established compounds (only one or two do not permit any buildings related to the Christian faith). Tolerance is always combined with a degree

of surveillance, though; some is quite obvious, such as taxis that sit near churches but never take passengers, while other monitoring is done electronically or through a network of informers.

In the permitted buildings, there is generally good freedom to express the full range of Christian faith, and even evangelism is allowed – but only within the church walls and only towards non-Muslims. So a difficult situation exists for people who want to introduce Muslims to the Christian faith.

On the one hand, we would like to say, with Paul, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” On the other hand, we also have to say, “Sorry, but you can’t come to church with us as you will immediately be marked and could get us into a whole bunch of trouble!”

All over the Middle East, people are having to learn, and perhaps relearn, what the essential elements of spiritual life together are, and how they can be experienced outside a church building. The ‘from house to house’ of the New Testament is taking on a renewed meaning for many believers. As we learn to make do without a ten-piece worship band or a six-point sermon from the pulpit, we’re discovering that personal testimonies of the work of God in our daily lives are coming more to the centre.

And when the physical door into a church building (or even a house church) is not available for new or potential believers, we have to construct new doors. We have to find neutral ground where people of all backgrounds can get together without having to learn the rules of one culture or another; places where aspects of Christian life in community can be seen without a religious context.

The spy on the hilltop is fictitious (we hope!) but the events he could have seen are actually repeated every week in this part of the Middle East. We’ve also tried art exhibitions, coffee tastings, exercise groups, marriage enrichment courses, parenting courses, craft groups, music quiz nights

and a myriad of other activities that don’t have a ‘church’ label but do involve a keen core of Christians wanting to make their life accessible to others. In some of these, communities are forming that include people from the local culture, and, as relationships are built, invitations are then offered to other activities.

It is difficult to rate progress or results. It would be fair to say, however, that there are now quite a few local people comfortable with an alternative community in some part of their week: people who feel they belong enough to bring along friends, or who are comfortable enough with the moral tone they observe that they now bring along wives and daughters. Many have heard or observed Christian perspectives on various world and local issues. Yes, it is fragments and pieces rather than a full meal, but some can still taste the Kingdom of God in these events: one of our new friends speaks of these times as a dream that he does not want to wake up from.

In this style of ‘church’, there are no altar calls or challenges for intellectual commitment and conversion. We cannot count any fruit that would make statisticians happy. In fact, it seems back to front compared with the traditions

of our evangelical upbringing, where belief (making a commitment to Christ) leads to community (joining the church). However, in the New Testament, Jesus often called people to follow (to join community) before He called them to believe... and we take comfort in that as we continue to build communities that honour Him. ☺

Ben and his wife, Alice, are NZ Partners who have been serving in the Middle East for over twenty years.

Muslims engaged in ritual daily prayer.

