



Tentmakers in the Arabian Gulf

A family of laypeople explore the role Adventist professionals can play in penetrating closed Islamic societies.

by Headley King

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH CAN BE SERVED by laity—"tentmakers" traveling to "closed" countries, working in the employ of non-church organizations: the diplomatic service, multinational corporations, foreign companies needing expertise, and international voluntary organizations. With an overseas posting will come a number of opportunities, challenges and conflicts. What is one's objective in moving away from home? Is it primarily to serve God or one's self? Will a person integrate with whatever local Christian community there may be, or remain segregated? How will a person, particularly in Muslim countries, continue to keep the Sabbath? Will a lay person try to "make a difference," or blend into the background? Will the lay expatriate presence have a lasting impact, or disappear as quickly as a footprint in a sand dune?

An assessment of the United Nations

Headley King is a pseudonym for an Adventist professional layperson employed in the Arabian Gulf.

country program through 1991 for one Arabian (Persian) Gulf nation concludes that "... the country program . . . too often lacked essential energy, focus and *lasting impact*." *Sustainability* is one of the current buzz words guiding services the U.N. provides. Sustainability is equally important for the church. Under the "Global Mission" program, the General Conference is seeking to establish a durable and meaningful Adventist presence in many more parts of the world.

It should be remembered that Seventh-day Adventist work is not considered to be established in an area or country because of the presence of a few members there, but when one of three criteria is met: an organized church meets there regularly; a mission station, health-care facility or school is functioning regularly; or a regular full-time denominational worker is based in the country, carrying on outreach or soul-winning activities through such units as Sabbath school, an organized company, or a language school.

Come Over Into Macedonia, and Help Us

After spending 10 years working as a lecturer in a polytechnic in England, my wife and I decided that the time had come for a change. An overcrowded timetable left little time for more important family and other responsibilities. I started looking around for possibilities—at first with little success. Replies to letters of inquiry telling me that I had “too many children” (high education costs), or asking if I was a Jew, tended to discourage. However, I was selected for a position in a United Nations specialized agency. After one year, in September 1983, I found myself on a flight to the Arabian Gulf. I was taking a year of absence from the polytechnic, to work as chief technical adviser to a program funded by the Arab League, with around 300 trainees each year coming from 14 Arab countries.

The first challenge was, of course, the Sabbath. My new college worked a five-and-a-half day week, as do most companies in the gulf states, with the Thursday afternoon and Friday free. However, God works in mysterious ways. I discovered the staff of the college were debating the change to a five-day week. Should we take Thursday and Friday or Friday and Saturday off? I was, needless to say, very concerned over the decision and gave the director a note listing six reasons in favor of closing on the sixth and seventh days. He went to the staff meeting, at which the staff had already decided on a Thursday/Friday week-

end, and, praise God, told them that *he* had decided to close the academy on Friday and Saturday instead. So it remained for the five years I had the privilege of helping to train and qualify many of the Arab world's best and brightest young men.

The first year in the Arabian Gulf was a time for learning and, to some extent, isolation. Before leaving England, we asked the denomination about other Adventists in our new country. In essence, the reply was “Good luck.” In a country that had no Adventist work at the time, and no other Adventists as far as we were aware, we had to rely on our own resources for

worship each Sabbath. With our two pre-school children (the elder two were in boarding school in Europe), we organized services at home.

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After the first year, we were invited to remain working in the Arabian Gulf and our two elder children joined us. It was a further year before we discovered that there were other Adventists living 15 kilometers away. We began to get together for services in the flat of an Indian lady. A company of some 30 members in time became a church. New members were baptized by an Adventist minister in a neighboring country. Over five years

several other small Adventist companies were established in the country where I was employed. When the Adventist companies were able to get together, this formed (for us) a large gathering. Those attending were mainly expatriates, but we have also been very happy to welcome "local" businessmen, members of the security forces, and others who would not be expected to enter a regular church. Many opportunities were available for Adventists to meet with other groups, in our home, in the interdenominational church, or at Christmas and Easter events. The small Adventist Filipino singing group was able to witness in song at many of these ecumenical gatherings.

As with most overseas work, contracts eventually come to an end. However, in 1988 I was given a contract to continue my technical training in another Arab state. As had been the case five years before, we arrived in a country that, as far as we could determine, had no other Adventists. Initially, only 100 or so "Western" expatriates lived in the country, although with the discovery of oil reserves in the 1990s, this number grew substantially. As before, we conducted family worship, developed new friendships, built an essential web of social activities, all of which led naturally to introducing and sharing with others the Christian message. What started as our family's Friday evening worship has become a meeting regularly attended by a dozen or more employees of oil companies and other international organizations. It is a heart-warming surprise to meet with Christians from distant parts of the country, or even from outside the country, who tell you that they've heard positive reports of these meetings. While I have been establishing a training program for the whole country, my wife has organized an elementary school.

Keeping the Sabbath still remains a challenge. In this second Arabian Gulf country, people work from Saturday to Wednesday. However, this has not, so far, proved to be an insurmountable problem. One of the senior U.N.

staff commented during a recent post-Sabbath meeting that he "did not want to disturb me" on Saturday, as he knew that I do not work that day.

There is still, at present, no formal Adventist presence in the country. However, we have been able to help ADRA visit governmental ministries. We have also assisted other Christians who are working or wish to work in the area. For example, we are helping Anglicans to reclaim a church from the government for interdenominational worship. We have also given advice to Pentecostal-run English language programs and work closely with a Baptist hospital. Their minister was recently able to conduct two Remembrance Day services here at our invitation.

What "general principles" can be gleaned from our family's nine years of "secular" work in the Middle East? Of course one should remember that, in most cases, a Western tentmaker will be working in a situation where initial interactions will be with other Christians in the country. Support from them will come *in advance* of any witness beyond the Christian community. In picking out principles that may assist the Adventist Church in reviewing its program, I have chosen those approaches that have been most important to me and my family.

O Taste and See That the Lord Is Good

Fortunately for all of us, God can see the end from the beginning. We cannot, so we must trust him to lead us. At the end of my first year overseas, I had to make up my mind whether to stay in the United Kingdom or resign from my permanent job with my English polytechnic. My contract with an international organization assigning me to the Arabian Gulf came to an end in August, with no guarantee of a renewal. The crunch came when I was told by the polytechnic that they

wanted my decision by 9:00 a.m. on Monday, September 10. I awoke at 5:00 a.m., with still no news from the organization, and discussed the decision, again, with my wife. The letter of resignation was ready, and she said to “go ahead in faith.” I handed in the letter at 9:00 a.m. and, returning home at 9:40 a.m., was met by our son, telling me that my office had called saying that a telex had arrived confirming my new contract for another four months. I’d been unemployed for 40 minutes, and subsequently continued in the Arabian Gulf for nine more years.

In 1988, we had to choose between service in Malawi and the Arabian Gulf. Malawi had been described as “the Switzerland of Africa” and we were quite excited over the thought of going there. After two weeks waiting for confirmation of my Malawi contract, I called my international headquarters. They said, “We heard that you are not interested in Malawi.” I asked for an explanation. A call came, not from the African section, but from the executive for the Middle East. He told me that he wanted me to remain in the Arab world, and that he had arranged for me to go to a second country there. My appointment had already been approved by all the relevant government officials. The choice, between an “easy” country (Malawi) and a difficult one was ours. The factor that decided us was that Christian, and particularly Adventist, work in the Arab states was meager or nonexistent, and we knew that Christian friends had, for many years, been praying for the work there. As a result of this decision, we have helped strengthen Christian outreach in a very isolated non-Christian country.

As a Vesture Shalt Thou Change Them, and They Shall Be Changed

Sometimes one has the opportunity of speaking up for what one believes to be right,

others listen, and changes are made. This needs to be done tactfully, and I have made several mistakes because I was so certain that I was right. However, under his guidance, God can work through us if we take positive action at the right time. For example, in offices of two very strict Muslim countries, I enjoyed Sabbath privileges. An interdenominational church in the gulf decided to use non-alcoholic wine for communion services. A young British Adventist, who explained why he wanted to keep Sabbath to his company office, influenced the management to decide that all 200 employees could take Friday and Saturday as their weekend. A French school in Aden where my wife was asked to work part-time for a year agreed to work from Sunday to Thursday instead of Saturday to Wednesday. Several embassies, and now the U.N. offices in the present country, now take the last two days of the week as the weekend, instead of Thursday and Friday.

Tentmakers all need to pray for Sabbath privileges, for themselves *and for others*. In Arab countries these privileges are *far* from being the norm, and as all one’s colleagues leave for work at 8:00 a.m. each Saturday morning, one can certainly feel the difference.

In Whom Ye Also Are Builded Together for an Habitation of God Through the Spirit

Tentmakers should be prepared to be involved with other Christians and in community service, as opportunities for service come in many forms and from many areas. It is *normal*, if one is willing and able to join other Christians for worship, to find oneself asked to lead Bible classes, participate in fellowship and all-night prayer groups, and preach in churches and house meetings. Many people know little or nothing about Adventists, and what little

they may know is generally negative. One can have a great work by simply showing that one is a (fairly) normal Christian who actually believes in the deity of Christ and the other major Christian doctrines that they share.

Community service is a means of demonstrating that one cares for more than a salary check at the end of the month. With the situation in many countries deteriorating as time goes on and the increase in refugees around the world, there are more than enough ways to help. Joining community-service programs involves Adventist tentmakers with people of other religions, with obvious opportunities for witness to Muslims. Involving ADRA in this can, of course, be very beneficial. Lines of communication with ADRA should be kept open.

Because the King's Business Required Haste

Tentmakers should look for opportunities, not wait around for them. I initially misused a lot of time while in the Arabian Gulf by not finding out more about other Adventists in the country at an early stage. It finally came together, after some two years, when a minister visited us, with the news that other Adventists lived in our end of the gulf. The church now appreciates the need for better data on isolated members in closed countries. It can only assemble this data when members inform the church of their whereabouts.

Creating openings for Christian witness can be a challenge, something you either tackle positively or leave dormant, but full of possibilities for exciting results. In the second country (in which we still live), we suggested that we could organize a Christmas service at the British embassy. That resulted in a group of 80 persons gathering in the residence garden, with three ambassadors, most of the

expatriate community and a number of local friends who met to sing carols and listen to readings. Last year, we held a New Year's Eve worship service for a mainly Dutch group, attended by a number of our friends. Ninety people came to the United Nations compound to enjoy the 1991 Christmas play put on by the school children and there are plans for the expatriate community here to put on a "Christmas Message" play and program at the end of 1992. Creating these openings may not lead to immediate baptisms, but our task, as always, is to sow.

Then Abram Went Forth

We assume that Abram had, to the extent possible in his day, undertaken "contingency planning" prior to his departure. Modern tentmakers should do the same. Sources of information on the country you plan to work in are available in such places as company or organization briefing papers, reports in annual publications, and in journals such as the *Economist*. Pre-departure preparations should include a "what if" exercise. To quote an Arab proverb, "Trust in God, but first tie up your camel."

Tentmakers need a committed source of help "at home": friends in the church who will pray for you, keep you up-to-date with local church news, get information, arrange for magazines to be sent out, and inform you about the condition of your house. On the other hand, tentmakers need to take time to communicate with friends and family at home, sending them news of what they are doing. A positive witness can result from non-Christian members of your family wondering why you're so keen to live in places that others would carefully avoid.

It is worth considering "different" educa-

tional opportunities for children of tentmakers. While they are overseas, there are normally four methods of educating children: an “international” school in the country; using distance learning materials or correspondence courses; a church school in your home country or in a third country; or a non-church, private school in your home country. We have used a mix of all four, and based on this experience, believe that church members, in general, make far too little use of the educational facilities available through the church in other countries. We have sent our children to church schools in Collonges, Lausanne, Bogenhofen, and Sagunto, where they have benefited tremendously from the friendships developed with Adventists in other countries. There is perhaps little point in belonging to a church that states that it works and educates in around 600 languages if we are determined to learn only one.

We have found that distance learning materials, presented by my wife, a teacher, give us a highly effective—and low cost—means of providing our children with a very satisfactory education. Holiday periods at church-run children’s camps in Europe, and the time spent at European church schools, have given them language skills far better than those they would be likely to have developed in any school “at home.”

But if Thou Canst Do Any Thing, Have Compassion On Us, and, Help Us

As a tentmaker, you carry the responsibility of representing Christ in a foreign country. You may be working there on a temporary assignment, on a fixed-term contract, or as a consultant for a voluntary organization. Whatever position you find yourself in, always remember that you are working for God, not man. Working within a different culture and

work ethic, slow rates of progress, inability to make decisions—all are frustrating. Demonstrating very clearly that you have the best interests of your host country at heart, not only in a religious sense but also in a secular sense, will make its mark on those with whom you work. Identifying closely with the country and its people is important: “*We* need to solve this problem,” not “*You* have to.”

In doing so, you will inevitably have opportunities to explain why you are so interested in your hosts’ welfare. Why are you so keen to work hard, to try and improve their situation, to find other sources of help for the country? Because the love of Christ so constrains you. Otherwise, better to stay at home.

Giving No Offence in Any Thing, That the Ministry Be Not Blamed

Highly public witness to Muslims in most Muslim countries could well result in the closing of the church and the eviction of the minister; if, of course, they were allowed to work there at all.

In our time, we are developing unprecedented opportunities for radio witness, and satellite TV is a fast-growing potential means for evangelism. Satellite dishes are an interesting amendment to local architecture, setting rather strangely on mud-brick houses. However, to back up the electronic ministry, some “live” evidence of what Adventists are all about, on the ground, is a great asset.

There are many barriers between non-Adventist Christians and Muslims (alcohol, food, general life-style, etc.), and we should use—to the full—the tremendous advantages we have as Adventists in witnessing to Muslims. It is difficult for Muslims to believe that some Christians do not drink, as a matter of principle; do not eat pork, because they

understand this prohibition *from the Bible*, and do not smoke, because of the principle of caring for the body that God has given us prevents this practice. An appreciation of these points puts the Muslim and the Christian on a much more equal footing, in contrast to the normal mind-set in which Islam, because of its “superior” teachings, is so clearly better than Christianity.

Having established this base-line, and after building a relationship of trust and friendship, inviting Muslims to one’s home, and being invited to theirs in return, is not difficult. Inviting Muslims to Christian meetings, even to take an active part in them, also becomes possible. Very profitable discussions on religion can result. One should, of course, develop a good understanding of the Koran and of the difficulties facing Muslims who try to understand Christian beliefs—and let no one underestimate these. Many publications are available to help you and them. Remember, always, that one’s standards of behavior are constantly under review, by both Christians and Muslims, and one should be careful “not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (NIV).

In Muslim countries, we need to be circumspect in our witnessing. There are certainly, on occasions, opportunities of speaking to contacts after a very short period of time, to influence an individual for Christ. However, tentmakers are not tourists and the longer term view is important. One cannot push “foreign” ideas down a brother’s throat, and getting thrown out of the country does not help one’s witness there.

Some organizations will enter an area and immediately distribute tracts, New Testaments,

and other publications in Arabic around the countryside. Talking to other Christians who have worked, for many hard years, in the same countries, one quickly discovers that they are definitely not in favor of this approach. Far better to be known and accepted by the society and to have its members want to know why you are able to relate to them in ways that show that you care.

Respect for local customs is critical. Certain things are simply “not done.” Eating with the left hand, keeping shoes on in a host’s house, sitting with the bottom of a foot toward the host, being too interested in female members of the family, will not be well received. However, being completely dominated by local customs is also not necessary. Some careful “abnormalities” from you as a foreigner can be accepted. Working as a couple or a family can only be considered a tremendous advantage in “breaking the ice” within the structure of society.

For I Will Work a Work in Your Days, Which Ye Will Not Believe, Though It Be Told You

The past nine years have brought us some of the most rewarding events of our lives. The benefits from spending time in such fascinating and different lands have been beyond all expectations. And again, returning “home” each year, the fellowship of church members takes on a new value. Tentmaking may be a difficult trade to train for, but none comes so close to reassuring us that our footprints will endure the shuffling of the sands.