

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING THE ERITREANS

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

12/1/04

PROFILE OF THE ERITREANS

General Background

Eritrea is a semi-desert, mountainous country in the northeastern part of Africa bounded by the nations of Sudan, Djibouti, and Ethiopia. It is a little larger than Pennsylvania and has a thousand miles of shore along the Red Sea. Because of its history of invasions and foreign occupations, Middle Eastern and European influences can be seen throughout this Africa country. Italy made Eritrea a colony and was responsible for its industrialization and modernization.

Eritrea joined with other African colonies in pursuing the right of self-determination. However, from the early 1960's on, the Eritreans wanted independence but Ethiopia insisted that Eritrea be federated with it. When the Eritreans' democratic rights were suppressed under the governance of Ethiopia, the Eritrean people expressed their hope for independence through armed resistance.

Their war for independence lasted for 30 years and economically devastated the country. Yet despite incredible odds, this country now with a population of four million people defeated Ethiopia's army, one of Africa's largest, winning their independence in 1993.

Eritrea is kaleidoscopic with a rich tapestry of ethnic and linguistic diversity. It is composed of nine nationalities (Afar, Bilen, Hadareb, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, Tigre, Tigrinya) speaking nine different languages. What makes Eritrea different and unique is the fact that these nationalities, through 30 years of war, have been able to forge the kind of unity of purpose that many countries with similar ethnic and linguistic composition can only envy.

The two working languages in Eritrea are Tigrinya and Arabic. The former is considered one of the Afro-Semitic languages widely spoken in the region. They derive from Ge'ez, a language no longer spoken but is still widely used in the Orthodox churches of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Immigration Patterns

Many Eritreans came to the United States as refugees during the difficult wartime years. Statistical assessments usually pool Ethiopians with Eritreans as many immigrants and refugees were once part of a single country. Around 250,000 have been calculated as the combined group total in the U.S. and around 10,000 Eritreans have settled in Canada. Many of the Eritreans have come as refugees having spent considerable time in refugee camps in the Sudan or in Ethiopia, and bring the concerns of disrupted family life, transient living and economic insecurities with them. On the other hand, national and Christian agencies have often provided the transitional support structures for adjustment into the new cultures.

Religious Heritage

Christianity came to this part of the world as early as the third century. Its official introduction, however, is recognized to be in the early fourth century with the work of Frumentius. Consequently, close to half of the Eritrean population are members of the Eritrean Tewahdo Orthodox Church, one of the anti-Chalcedonian churches of Egypt, Armenia, Syria, India, and Ethiopia with its own bishopric established since independence. The Roman Catholic Church, although a small minority, has had a presence in the country. Of the Protestant churches, though small, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the oldest. Twentieth-century American evangelicalism, still at its nascent stage, is having increasing influence in doctrine and worship.

There are equal numbers of Moslems in the country as there are Christians. While historically Christians and Moslems have coexisted peacefully, Islamic fundamentalism, supported by the Islamic regime in the Sudan, is rearing its head. Animism is also present in Eritrea, although it is disappearing fast.

The Church of the Nazarene developed its first Eritrean ministry in Columbus, Ohio, with leaders from the Besserat Evangelical Society, a ministry dedicated to reaching Eritreans and Ethiopians for Christ. Currently there are organized Eritrean congregations in Indianapolis and Nashville.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Eritreans

General Suggestions:

Develop, as necessary, ESL services, with particular awareness of the Tigrinya language association.

Recognize that most Eritreans in the United States come with a long heritage of Christian traditions, either derived from the Eritrean Tewahdo Orthodox Church or the Roman Catholic. Acknowledge of their tenets, contact points with evangelical faith and discrete differences can help build bonds and clean communication.

Understand the context of “refugee” issues, to identify particular resources that are available from the government and those that are no longer available. Because the influx of Eritreans to North America has slowed down since the establishment of national independence, those that arrive currently, do so, not as refugees, but rather as extended families or as students.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR DISTRICTS IS TO:

- Develop a mission strategy that encompasses the Eritrean homeland, seeking connections and mission support that will both honor the Christian religious past and seek evangelistic opportunities for the future in that nation itself, i.e. a Work and Witness team.
- Pray for Eritrean leadership and those who work with Eritreans.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO:

- Develop friendships with Eritrean neighbors
- Identify and respond to needs within the Eritrean community
- Seek out international students and respond with hospitality, offering community
- Where Eritreans indicate responsiveness to the Gospel and the Church of the Nazarene, provide space in the local church for gatherings, including religious, educational and cultural. Engage Eritrean Christians in evangelistic strategies, public worship services, Sunday School and Bible study opportunities.
- Develop ministries and services to the Eritrean young people.
- Commemorate important Eritrean holidays or hold cultural events open to the public.