

people everywhere! From my vantage point at the very back of the bus, it seemed to be one mass of flesh. It was about midnight, and everyone seemed to be lying on each other trying to get into comfortable positions for the long night ahead. Suddenly, I heard a muffled “click”, strangely resembling the sound of the ‘play’ button on a tape player being activated. Seconds later, loud, chaotic, incoherent African music ripped through the putrid air. Our self-appointed DJ strikes again! “Oh, no,” I thought. “This will make sleep absolutely impossible. Lord, cause that thing to break!” If my deductions were accurate, he was on his

way home from having hired himself out to work and decided that his entrance back into his village would never be celebrated more than if he had an expensive, hard-to-get radio/tape player to show off when he got home. This tape player (the Chinese kind we wouldn’t even pick up at a yard sale) had small green and red lights that would go on and off

The vehicle lurched and I was suddenly jarred back out of my subconscious slumber as we hit another bump that sent pain shooting through my body. The low bench I was sitting on caused my legs to push up almost against my chest. I shifted my weight from one side to the other trying to get away from the hard, unrelenting bench I was sitting on. I desperately longed to be able to stretch my legs from the fetal position I was in. To my great frustration I found myself unable to move enough to get into any comfortable position. My legs felt like I would never be able to walk on them again. I tried standing up and found momentary relief for my legs, but then, being doubled over with my back smashed up against the metal roof offered little respite for my aching back. I sucked in my breath and held it for a long while. The air reeked with the smell of sweat and dust mingled together inside the 25-passenger minibus that was crammed with 35 people. The stench was impossible to get away from and got considerably more powerful in “higher altitudes” like now. There were





while playing. They threw weird reflections off the metal roof of the bus. He played his tapes almost non-stop, changing and re-changing them, night and day, until I was threatening to lose my mind. A wave of nausea, fatigue, and disgust hit me all at once, and for the hundredth time that night I recounted the reasons that had brought me here.

For years I have had a desire to serve the Lord on a foreign field. The cry of the unreached peoples had more than once gotten my attention and I wanted to make a difference for the Lord somewhere, somehow. For some reason the place that God seemed to lay on my heart time and again to make that difference had been Africa - especially North Africa. After my wife and I got married we immediately started praying as to where exactly God would have us serve. I remember getting some books about North Africa from the library, and as we looked through them and lifted our hearts in prayer, we seemed to continuously be drawn to what was then a completely unknown country to us - Niger. With my limited knowledge and experience of Africa, I knew that Niger would be a very needy and unreached country. Little did I know then just how needy a country we would discover it to be!

After praying about how to get there and when to do the initial “splashdown”, the Lord worked it out that Samuel Kauffman and I would be able to do this ‘first stage’ survey in January and February of

2008. After my commitments were completed with the SENT (Serving Every Nation Training) School in Ghana, I met up with Samuel in Accra, said goodbye to my wife for four and a half weeks, and we headed north. We got on the mini bus described above and headed for Niger. The entire trip, from Ghana to Niger, should have taken somewhere between 14-16 grueling hours. But, after having to deal with uncountable border stops and checkpoints, and breaking down in Burkina Faso with a frozen bearing on the rear axle, we finally arrived in Niamey, the capital of Niger, 36 hours later. We were exhausted, yet excited.

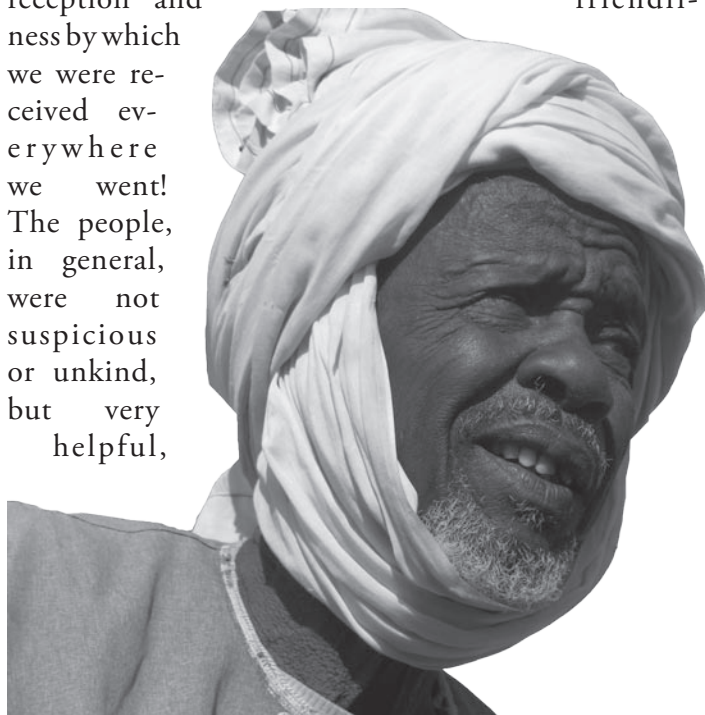
The first thing we needed to do was find a hotel, as it was very late already. Our bus pulled into the bus station and people starting clambering out windows and piling out the doors, pushing and grabbing for their baggage. We located ours and quickly hailed a taxi.

The taxi driver got out and started firing questions at us about where we wanted to go, which hotel, and how much it would cost to take us there. The problem was that Samuel could only speak a few words and phrases in French and mine was of no help, as it didn’t exist! Through signs and wonders we told him that we wanted to be taken to the nearest and cheapest hotel. We got there and our problems increased. The clerk immediately sensed we were new to the country and seemed to be charging us more than the going rate. After a lot of bartering and number writing, we agreed on a price. Now for supper... We headed outside the high fence surrounding the hotel and discovered that the food stands and the food itself looked nothing like you would find in Ghana, which we were very familiar with. The little stands around the hotel and beyond seemed to be shut down with no burning lamps on their tables or any food in sight. After looking around for a little bit we found a place that was selling sweet tea, bread and a few eggs. Needless to say, it was absolutely delicious after our arduous travels that day.

Once in Niamey, we got in touch with various missionaries from different organizations like SIM, SIL, etc. We were very blessed and encouraged with the willingness of these missionaries to help us in every way possible, even going out of their way to make sure that we got the information that we were looking for.

The climate was also something to get used to. We had heard from others that it gets very cold in Niger but didn't really know what that meant, so we didn't really take thick enough clothing along to shield ourselves against it. There were a few times where we were caught out in villages without warm clothing and/or blankets and ended up sleeping only a few winks due to the bitter cold nights. If you consider a temperature drop from 90 degrees and up, during the heat of the midday sun, to 50 or upper 40 degrees in just a couple of hours, it does make one feel rather chilly! One of the missionaries mentioned that if you set out a cupful of water out in the Sahara during the night, by morning time it would actually start getting slushy!

We didn't know how we would be accepted in Niger as white Americans or Christians (especially when you consider the war in Iraq), and were a bit apprehensive about it all once we got out further into the country. We were pleased to find no hostility towards us at all. Actually, the opposite was much more the truth. We were pleasantly surprised over and over again with the warm reception and friendliness by which we were received everywhere we went! The people, in general, were not suspicious or unkind, but very helpful,



courteous, and as hospitable as in Ghana. Government officials, police, and soldiers were also very sociable and pleasant to deal with. Praise God!

**NIGER GOVERNMENT:** In our discussions with one missionary couple presently working through the paperwork of establishing a Christian organization, we were much relieved to find that the government was very easy to work with. Furthermore, there does not seem to be a great amount of expectation or restrictions from the government placed upon a registering organization. The fact that 90% of the economy is carried on the shoulders of outside organizations seems to simplify the process! I was expecting more suspicion from the government towards Christian organizations, as the country is primarily Muslim, but restraints upon such organizations appear to be very minimal!

Whether traveling through the country and seeing the needs firsthand, or discussing the needs of Niger with missionaries on the field, both expatriate and local, we were shocked with the unbelievable and overwhelming needs Niger presented to anyone determined enough to take on the challenge! For instance, since 90% of the economy is carried by outside funds or NGOs, a terrible welfare mentality has permeated Nigerians in all parts of the country. We were surprised by the lack of initiative among the people everywhere we went, especially in the larger towns. This mentality was not felt nearly as much in villages as in towns but one could definitely tell it was still there. We constantly got requests for things like money, cigarettes, food, tea, sugar, etc. Every time we stopped in towns during our journey we were almost immediately surrounded and assailed upon by beggars, young and old, with their tin bowls stretched out to us, pleading pitifully for handouts.

**SPIRITUAL NEEDS:** There are around 40 people groups in Niger. The Joshua Project considers most of these groups "Unreached"!

We found that very few missionaries work in Niger, considering the tremendous needs in the county. With the country boasting a 98% Muslim majority and somewhat severe persecution to any national converting from Islam to Christianity, there are very slow and hesitant conversions among the nationals even after being witnessed to for up to 15 - 30 years. With the climate being very difficult to deal with on top of that, there are few missionaries that actually



stay there very long. It's not that I blame anyone, having been there myself and experienced to a small degree the difficulties they face every day. We heard from different missionaries that in the past 15-20 years that they have been there in Niger, 80% of the missionaries that they saw come into the country left again within 5 years!

We were privileged to be able to immerse ourselves into the villages and lives of a few different tribes for short periods of time during our travels. Here is just a brief snapshot of the peoples of Niger and the tremendous needs awaiting anyone willing to attempt living and ministering there.

**THE KANOURI MANGA:** The first tribe we visited, the Kanouri Manga, claimed to be Muslims long before Islam was actually brought to them. Legends say that a Manga woman had been visited by God and told that a "Redeemer" would be born and proclaim the truth to her tribe. They believed this prophetic word and waited for the "Redeemer" to arrive. Centuries later Muslims brought Moham-mad and Islam to the Mangas and found open, receptive hearts waiting for them. They've been strong believers of Islam ever since. I wonder if it was truly God that appeared to this tribe long ago, preparing their hearts for the Gospel of the true Redeemer that a missionary was going to bring them...but the missionary never came!

The Kanouri Manga is a people group of about 400,000 found along the border of Nigeria and all the way up against the Chadian border. In our 3 days there we found them extremely friendly and hospitable. We were told that Kanouris have Ara-

bic roots from way back. Their features are almost completely Black African, though, except for a few betraying hints in some faces that would argue the concept to be true, such as a sharp aquiline nose, piercing eyes that seem as though they see right through you, and more sharply defined features rather than the typically soft, rounded face.

We were burdened with the needs we found among these people. We found absolutely no missionaries specifically targeting the Mangas or planting churches at this point. Thankfully, there is a SIM couple working on translating the scriptures into the Manga language, although they currently do not see themselves as church planters. We also found a few Nigerian Missionaries in various towns ministering among the general population, which would also include a few Mangas.

The SIM Couple shared the difficulties in reaching anyone from this tribe. Although the Manga have shown a great amount of friendliness and hospitality, they are very staunch Muslims and will inflict heavy persecution upon anyone among them that would convert to Christianity.

Through the years there have been different mission organizations that have had a few missionaries stationed in different Manga areas. They found the work extremely slow and discouraging, and after many years of labor, had little or no fruit at all!

**THE DAZA:** We also got to spend a bit of time among the Daza tribe towards the end of our journey. This tribe numbers about 48,000 in Niger, and makes up only 20% or so of the total Daza population, the rest being found in Chad.

We found a tiny village miles out in the desert, on top of a huge sand dune with a gorgeous view overlooking the desert for miles! We were immediately struck with the abject poverty they seemed to be living in. Their houses, or rather huts, very similar to all nomadic-type dwellings, were made of sticks and brush woven together, covered by grass mats and an animal skin thrown on here and there. Only moments after our arrival about a dozen men showed up, suspicious, but curious. Our translator explained our purpose of being there and our interest in the Daza lifestyle, and after some inquiry they seemed convinced of our desire to simply observe them and ask questions for a day.



Again, like all over Niger, we found that these people were friendly and hospitable, but very strongly Islamic. Although there is an SIL missionary family translating scripture into the Daza language, we discovered that very little effort has been made in reaching the Daza people for Christ, even those in Chad, and that no missionary was specifically targeting them and planting churches. They were so far out there - forgotten. No one knew about them or even seemed to care to know them. They were mostly sheep and goat herders trying to find foliage for their animals in the desert. Living semi-nomadic lives, they usually live in small villages spaced great distances from each other. There was one evening when all the

men gathered together in the little room they had provided for us and we had a sweet time of asking, through our translator, all the questions we had on our hearts. There seemed to be a strong allegiance, from youngest to oldest, to their family, friends, and ultimately, to the entire tribe. This would make it so much more difficult for someone to become a Christian and still live in harmony with the rest of the tribe, as there would be the feeling that the individual betrayed the rest of the tribe. The fact that the Daza are 100% Muslim would also mean certain persecution for anyone turning to Christ among them.

The poverty these people lived in was staggering and had a “drawing together” effect on everyone, oldest to youngest. It was not uncommon for a given family to go without food for around three days!

The needs briefly touched in this short article hardly do justice to the incredible challenges and lack of missionary personnel which would be required for the people of Niger to be brought to Christ. Furthermore, the tremendous needs in Niger and the millions of unreached peoples found in this one country are simply an example of the tremendous needs found throughout the great continent of Africa! And then, the continent of Africa is a mere representation of the billions, still completely unreached throughout the rest of the world! My heart thrills and cheers for those who are actively involved in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ here and throughout the world. Nevertheless, my heart grieves for the billions yet untouched and unreached with the Gospel. Would to God He would grip our hearts with the incredible responsibility we have to them and then we would be moved to give our hearts and lives, our absolute all, to fulfill the Great Commission in this our day of opportunity.

—Jeremy Wollman

