

In Search of a MAN

On Mission in Bangladesh

BY OMAR C. GARCÍA



1998:
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o **Bangladesh via the Gobi** | The seeds for my journey to Bangladesh were planted on a train somewhere between UlanBator, Mongolia, and Beijing, China. As the train rhythmically swayed and made its way south across the vast expanse of the Gobi Desert, my heart and mind were in the New Testament, trekking across Asia Minor with the apostles.

Absorbed in Luke’s account of the birth and expansion of the early church, I knew God wanted me to join Him on mission in the Muslim world. My friend and traveling companion Lee Pullin and I spent considerable time talking about how such a conviction might become a reality. We both felt confident that our church would adopt another unreached people group in the 10/40 Window — home to the world’s least-reached peoples (see sidebar on p. 19). That night as I listened to the wheels of the train marking time to Beijing against the tracks, my heart arrived in Bangladesh.

Soon after returning home from Mongolia, I read about devastating floods in Bangladesh that had killed thousands and displaced millions. I found myself captivated by the haunting images of the dead and the living as I sat in the comfort of my home. What made these images even more haunting was the realization that out of the thousands whose cries for help were silenced by an unforgiving deluge, relatively few had had the opportuni-

ty to hear and respond to the claims of Jesus Christ.

I could not help but reflect on the geography of it all. The geography of my birthplace made it possible for me to have access to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not so for those born in Bangladesh. Geography really is a matter of life and death in this overpopulated country — not only physically, but spiritually as well.

Bangladesh is nestled next to India at the very northern part of the Bay of Bengal — an area prone to natural disasters. This small country is home to the third-largest concentration of Muslims in the world. Southern Baptists have had a rich history of involvement in Bangladesh, ministering both to Muslims and Hindus. The majority of the Muslims in the country are Sunni Muslims, although there is a small Shiite community (see sidebar on p. 17). Bengali Muslims represent the largest unreached people group in the world.

The answer to my prayers about venturing into the Muslim world and to Bangladesh came weeks later in the form of a phone call from my friend Jerry Squyres. He had met the International Mission Board (IMB) strategy coordinator to Bengali Muslims while in South Asia. (A strategy coordinator designs and implements strategies to initiate and nurture church planting among specific people groups.) Jerry asked if I would be interested in mobilizing a team from our church to go to Bangladesh to work among Bengali Muslims. I smiled and thought back to my conversation with Lee on that rail journey across the Gobi. God was opening a door into the Muslim world.

OF PEACE

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First Steps Into the Muslim World |

A little more than a year after I stepped off the train in Beijing, I found myself stepping off a plane in Dhaka, Bangladesh. As I clutched my passport and stood in line to clear customs, my heart was pounding in anticipation of what God had in store

for our team of II over the next couple of weeks.

After securing our luggage, we made our way through a gauntlet of begging hands. This scene was the precursor to the greater physical and spiritual needs we would encounter in the days ahead. Lee and I gave each other an affirming glance as we slowly made our way through the crowd to meet the IMB strategy coordinator for work among Bengali Muslims.

The following day, we spent eight hours bouncing and weaving our way to the western part of the country. The distance we traveled was not far by Texas standards. However, we could travel at no more than 35 miles per hour because of the poor condition of the roads and the large numbers of people walking on them.

Once we arrived at our destination, I had the opportunity to share the story of the Bible over a three-day period with six believers from a Muslim background. Each of these new believers had experienced physical abuse and social alienation because of his faith in Christ. Yet these men were determined to grow in their understanding of the Bible and to develop a statement of faith that would enable them to more effectively share Jesus with their Muslim family members and neighbors.

Three days later, the IMB strategy coordinator and I traveled to another area. As we drove through crowded villages and past strands of jute drying along the roadside, he asked if I would be interested in returning to Bangladesh the following year. He explained that he wanted to go in search of a man of peace — an approach to evangelism initiated by Jesus when He sent out the 72 to preach the good news. Jesus instructed them, “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you” (Luke 10:5-7).

The strategy coordinator explained that we would toss a few things into a backpack and just start walking from village to village until we found a man of peace. No lodging reservations, no meal plans, no pressing agenda other than to find a man of peace and to share the good news with that individual and his network of family and friends.

MINISTERING TO MUSLIMS IN YOUR

BY KELLYE TANNER

Four years ago, a speaker at a women's group at First Baptist Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, asked those of us in attendance to fast and pray for Muslims. A

NEIGHBORHOOD



friend and I were so inspired by her message that we fasted and prayed for 30 days. After the 30 days, I continued to pray for Muslims — for the next four years.

During this time, First Baptist started a ministry in an apartment complex. The ministry included tutoring and backyard Bible clubs, among other things. Also during this time, several Muslim families from Iraq came to Smyrna, Tennessee, and moved into the apartment complex where First Baptist Church had begun ministering to families.

The Iraqi children came to the tutoring sessions, and their mothers accepted our invitation to teach them English. They even invited us into their homes. A year later, they can speak, read, and write English. But the best part is the relationships we have established with these families. They are now open to attending special events at church and have had opportunities to hear about Jesus.

I don't know how this story is going to turn out, but I do know that God is faithful to answer our prayers and that He wants His people to have a heart for leading Muslims to Him.

Kellye Tanner and her husband, Bill, have three children. Kellye is an Acteens leader at First Baptist Church in Smyrna, Tennessee.



2000:



he Search Begins | I returned to Bangladesh less than a year later. In the intervening months, our church had agreed to adopt Bengali Muslims. We did this by challenging our Bible study groups to pray for and to financially support the work of ministry among Bengali Muslims, as well as to send members on our short-term trips to Bangladesh. Once we

arrived, we again made the slow and winding journey west. That first night was oppressively hot. The ceiling fan worked only intermittently and served to make our small quarters into a convection oven. Both the heat and the excitement of setting out in search of a man of peace kept me awake most of the night.

The following morning, the strategy coordinator, a pastor, and I donned our backpacks and began walking down a narrow road that dissected broad green fields. I must admit that it was a bit unnerving as we set out on our journey — not knowing where we would sleep and eat or what the day might hold. But my nerves settled down within the hour when we had the opportunity to stop and share the gospel with a Muslim man who was traveling in the opposite direction. Within minutes, a large crowd gathered around to listen to the conversation. We continued speaking to people throughout the day and estimate that at least 100 Muslims heard the gospel for the very first time.

Later that afternoon, we arrived in an area that had not seen foreigners since Bangladesh had won its independence from Pakistan in 1971. Our arrival caused quite a stir, and curious onlookers surrounded and followed us as we walked through the village. That is when we met a man of peace who returned our greeting and invited us to his home. When we arrived, we discovered his home was next to the village mosque. We initiated conversation about spiritual matters by sharing Bible stories. Later that evening, we showed our host and those present the *Jesus* film. Our host was extremely receptive to the gospel and agreed to a follow-up by a local evangelist who is a believer with a Muslim background.

The following day, we met two men who had heard that three Christians from America were in the area and that one could speak Bangla. These men had heard about Jesus

and said they had been waiting for four years for someone to come and explain to them more about Him. We had the wonderful opportunity of sharing the gospel with these men as well as with a larger audience of relatives and friends. As a result of our visit to that village, 125 men and women placed their faith in Christ for salvation and are now organized into three churches. Today, another estimated 500 Muslims are waiting to be baptized as a result of the witness of the 125 baptized believers.

In the days that followed, we continued to meet and share with many Muslims eager to learn more about Jesus Christ. Soon, however, we were asked to leave one village, and eventually our team had to leave the area because of pressure from Muslim imams (leaders). In spite of that, this first experience of searching for a man of peace became one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. I was determined to continue the search for a man of peace the following year.

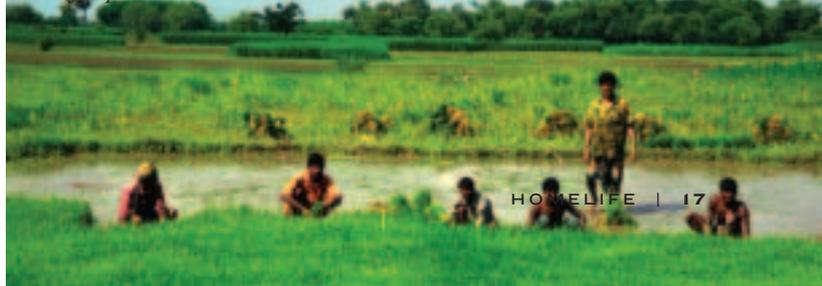
SUNNI & SHIITE MUSLIMS

Following the death of Muhammad, disagreement regarding his successor gave birth to a great schism within the Muslim community. Islam was divided into two primary factions: the Sunnis, who represent close to 85 percent of Muslims, and the Shiites, whose greatest presence is in Iran and Lebanon (**The Progress Report**, www.progress.org/archive/islam01.htm).

While unity remains at the foundation of their faith, these two groups have developed key political and theological differences. The Sunni believe Muhammad's successor should be a male elected from within the community to govern according to the orthodox teachings of the Koran and Muhammad. Shiite belief firmly favors a successor from within the prophet's family who could lead by providing a perfect interpretation of the law of the Koran according to the order of the day (**What You Need to Know About Islam and Muslims** by George W. Braswell Jr., Broadman & Holman).

These fundamental differences account for most of the diversity within today's Muslim community. However, Muslims remain united in their belief of the Koran and in honoring the character of their prophet.

What You Need to Know About Islam and Muslims by George W. Braswell Jr. (Broadman & Holman Publishers) is available from your local LifeWay Christian Store or online at www.lifewaystores.com.



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Different World | Student minister Todd Gaston and I anxiously awaited the arrival of September 16 — the date we were scheduled to leave for Bangladesh to search for a man of peace in the northern part of the country. Todd and I had spent much time in prayer and in the study of Islam and

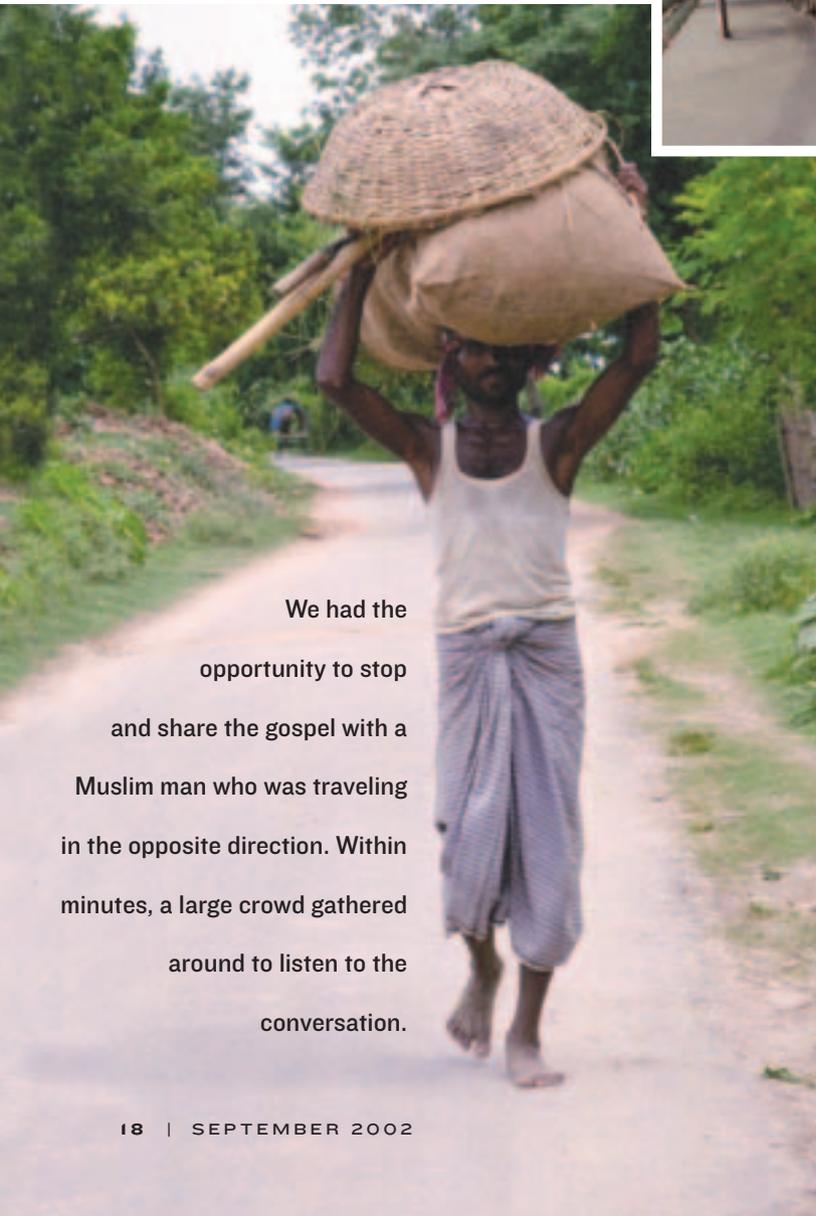
the Koran in preparation for our trip. We felt confident God would lead us to the individual who would be the key to reaching a larger audience with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then, on the Tuesday before we were scheduled to leave, we stood in stunned disbelief in front of a television at the church — watching the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The grief we, along with millions of other Americans, experienced brought us to our knees.

With all flights grounded, we unpacked our bags and wondered if we would be able to travel to Bangladesh at all. We also wondered if it would be safe to venture to a predominantly Muslim country after the attack on America.

Many people who were concerned about our safety advised us not to go to Bangladesh. However, after much prayer, we concluded that God still wanted us to go. And so, on November 2, we boarded our flight to Bangladesh, not knowing how the people there would receive us after the events of September 11.

After we arrived, an IMB journeyman joined Todd and me as we boarded a bus at 10:00 p.m. and headed north. (Journeyman are single college graduates under 30 who commit to two years of missions service overseas.) The following morning, we ventured out to a remote area. We saw many posters of Osama bin Laden along the way; and, on more than one occasion, we were told to return to America. We finally arrived in a village where we met a man of peace who offered his protection and agreed to dialogue with us about Christianity. Because his home was small, we made arrangements to rent a room nearby for one dollar a night.

The following day, we spent many hours talking with our Muslim hosts about the Koran, the Bible, and the claims of Jesus Christ. In the course of our conversation, we learned that this man and his family were supporters and sympathizers of Osama bin Laden. As we sat at their table, I thought of David's words in Psalm 23:5: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Yet, despite their loyalty to bin Laden, this family listened attentively to what we had to say and were very



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kind to us. That first night, Todd and I returned to our room and wept as we prayed for them.

We continued our dialogue the following day. Our hosts showed us around their village and introduced us to other family members and friends. Many people we met urged us to be careful. That night, Todd and I again prayed for this family and then went to bed.

I awoke at 3 a.m. to find Todd pacing the floor in fear. “Someone is tapping on our windows,” he nervously whispered. As I sat up, someone tapped on the window next to my bed. We sat awake for the next three hours as the intimidation continued.

Todd and I dealt with our fears by praying, singing choruses, and reading passages of Scripture aloud. Finally, dawn came, and those outside our room went away. God had allowed us to experience three hours of the kind of intimidation and fear that most believers in these areas experience every day.

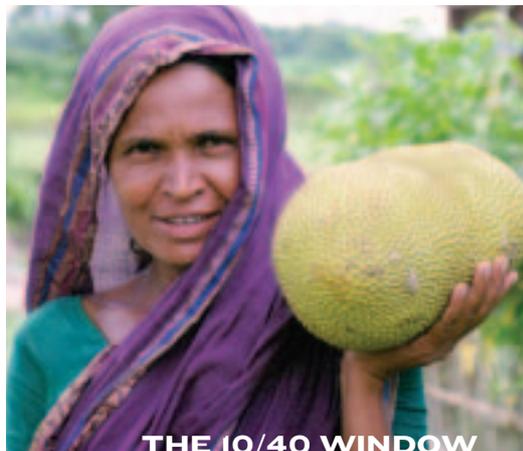
When it was time for us to leave, we made arrangements for our hosts to receive their first copy of the Bible. They agreed to read the Bible and to study for themselves the claims of Jesus Christ. We were elated and thought of the words of Psalm 119:130: “The unfolding of your words gives light.” While this man did not come to faith in Christ while we were with him, we have every confidence that God’s Word will enlighten him concerning the truth about Jesus Christ. We also agreed to continue our dialogue through correspondence. Todd and I recently received a letter from our Muslim host in which he said, “I have learnt [sic] many things with you. So I am very grateful to you. You are not only my friend but also my close

relative.” He then invited us to visit him again. We hope to do just that.

I want to return to Bangladesh to continue the search for a man of peace. But in the meantime, my experiences in Bangladesh have taught me that God wants me to continue searching for a man of peace in my own neighborhood. I recently met two Muslim men in my community and initiated dialogue with them about Jesus Christ. I am hopeful about what God will do as we continue our dialogue.

Perhaps there is a man of peace in your neighborhood — an individual who is receptive to the gospel. Will you allow God to use you to share the claims of Christ with that person? That man or woman of peace just might be the key to reaching many others for the kingdom of God. 🏠

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THE 10/40 WINDOW

The core of unreached people in our world live in a rectangular-shaped window. This area extends from West Africa across Asia, between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator.

- There are 55 countries in the world considered unevangelized. Ninety-seven percent of these countries are in this 10/40 window. Many in these countries have never heard the gospel of Christ even once.
- Two-thirds of the world’s population live in this area.
- People groups in these areas are identified by homogeneous ethnic, historical, and religious characteristics.
- Eighty-five percent of those living in the 10/40 window are considered the poorest of the world’s poor.
- Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (the major non-Christian religions) are centered in this area of the world.