

MISSIONARIES UNDER COVER

Growing numbers of Evangelicals are trying to spread Christianity in Muslim lands. But is this what the world needs now?

By David van Biema

She wasn't a Muslim, but she would do for now. Last March, at just about the time US troops were massing outside Baghdad, she shuffled, dressed in a dark burqa, into a cramped schoolroom in the New York City borough of Queens. The class she was addressing was organised by the US Centre for World Mission and packed with eager evangelical Christian students wanting to learn how to be missionaries in a foreign country. The black-clad "Shafira" was gamely trying to explain her faith.

It is not in the heart of all Muslims to have violence", she said in broken English, alluding immediately to 11 September. "So sorry that people having dying. I'm wanting peace for my children. I'm thinking you wanting peace. It's the same". She listed Islam's five pillars of faith and noted that holy war is not among them. "We have a lot in common", she said, but she did wonder about the Trinity: "God Father plus God Mary equals God Son?".

A student, thrilled at the opportunity to explain, jumped in. After listening patiently, Shafira peeled back her garments and admitted, "I am not a true Muslim". Hardly. In fact, she was a long-time Christian missionary in Muslim lands. She had been hired to explain how such evangelism should be done. She gave her real name (for the safety of missionaries working in potentially hostile environments or returning to them, pseudonyms are used throughout this article. They will be indicated on first usage by quotation marks. Many locations may be omitted.

Over the next three hours, "Barbara", minus her burqa, dispensed comparisons between Jesus and Mohammad ("Jesus arose from the dead and is alive. Muhammad is dead.") and the dos and don'ts of ministering to Muslims. (Do listen to their story. Don't argue about Israel.) She relayed a statement by U. S. Attorney General John Ashcroft: "Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you" After his comment was publicized in late 2001, Ashcroft said it referred to terrorists and not to mainstream Muslims, but the point seemed lost on Barbara. Islam is the terrorist," she asserted.

"Muslims are the victim. ' The class ended in prayer, with one person saying, 'We mourn the loss of life' in Iraq. Added Barbara: 'We pray that the weapon of mass destruction, Islam, be tom down. Lord, we declare that your blood is enough to forgive every single Muslim. It is enough'

For 21 months now, Americans have been engaged in a crash course on Islam. It is not a subject `A most were previously interested in, but 9/11 left no choice. Yet there is one group that has been thinking-passionately-about Muslims for more than a decade. Its army is weaponless, its soldiers often unpaid, its boot camps places like the Queens classroom. It has no actual connection with the U.S. government, but in the past few months, its advance forces have been entering the still-smouldering battlefield of Iraq, as intent on shaping its people's future as the conventional American troops.

Not for a century has the idea of evangelizing Islam awakened such fervour in conservative Christians. Touched by Muslims' material and (supposed) spiritual needs, convinced that they are one of the "unreached megapeoples" who must hear the Gospel before Christ's eventual return, Evangelicals from all over the world have been rushing to what has become the latest hot missions field. In Europe, waves of Muslim immigrants have raised awareness about the Islamic world. "Given that many Muslim governments and cultures are at times repressive to minorities, you have a flood of people leaving, seeking asylum ' seeking refuge from that repression," says Stanley Davies, executive director of London-based Global Connections, an umbrella body for missions-minded evangelical groups. Figures from the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts suggest that the number of missionaries to Islamic countries nearly doubled between 1982 and 2001 from more than 15,000 to somewhere in excess of 27,000-and approximately 1 out of every 3 is Evangelical. Sept. 11 was, adds Davies, "a wake-up call" that seems only to have fuelled the missionary impulse.

This boom has coincided with mounting restrictions on missionary efforts by the regimes of Islamic-majority countries and with swelling anti-Western militancy. The resulting tensions have sometimes erupted tragically: the past two years have seen the imprisonment of two American missionaries in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and the apparently religiously motivated murders of four more in Yemen and Lebanon. The botched bombing last month of a Dutch-German missionary family in Tripoli, Lebanon, suggests the danger is not abating. Says Stan Guthrie, author of the book *Missions in the Third Millennium: If you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you could be killed.* Missionaries have always considered the possibility, but now it's a lot more real "

Such fears, plus the entry of missionaries into Afghanistan and Iraq on the heels of American troops, have raised other questions that are particularly acute for the U. S., not only because to be American today has more baggage than, say, to be Swedish, French or even British, but also because 1 out of every 2 missionaries is American. The new arrivals mean well: in addition to the Gospel, which they consider their most precious gift, they have channelled

millions of dollars in aid and put in countless hours of charitable work. But some workers for more liberal Christian groups claim that some of the more aggressive tactics

can put all religious charities at risk. Critics accuse missionaries of lying about their identities and their faith to achieve their goals. And as tensions between Islam and the West continue to simmer, some familiar with the Middle East have begun asking whether the missionaries, who love Muslims but despise Islam, are the sort of nonappointed ambassadors the West needs in a region dense with the rhetoric of holy war. 'Sincerity isn't the issue,' says Charles Kimball, a Baptist minister who was director of the National Council of Churches' Middle East office in the 1980s. 'The region is at a pivotal and volatile juncture, and it is arguably not the time for groups coming in, like someone with a lighted match into a room full of explosives, wearing Jesus on their sleeves.'

just how large a proportion of Christian religious workers fit that profile? One reason it is difficult to know is that zeal is often tempered after some time spent in-country. Two centuries ago, in a similar burst of enthusiasm, such mainline denominations as the Presbyterians and the Methodists sent thousands of missionaries to the Middle East. Like the current crop, they started eager for conversions. But over time they settled for an agenda that obeyed anti-proselytizing laws and focused on building charitable institutions and providing humanitarian aid. Such groups still constitute the major missionary presence in the area, and they enjoy fruitful and respectful, if circumscribed, relationships with local regimes and populations.

Even within today's evangelical wave, there is a broad range of methods and attitudes. Some missionaries, while maintaining the right to evangelize, primarily uphold the tradition of helping the needy. Others distribute literature at European ports to North Africans returning home, or, from a distance, flood whole populations with Christian TV and radio, tracts and offers of correspondence courses, hoping that a few seeds will take root. Some target Muslim immigrants in Paris or London or Marseilles—"a mission to our neighbours," says an Evangelical leader partly in the hopes that those who convert will pass on the good news to loved ones in their native lands. In the dozens of Muslim countries that deny "religious worker" visas, ever more Evangelicals take secular jobs to enter less obtrusively. Many show exquisite sensitivity, sharing their Lord only with people whose friendships they have earned.

But there remains a troubling contingent of indeterminate size that combines religious arrogance with political ignorance. Its activities would not necessarily raise eyebrows in the West: handing out tracts, inviting passers-by to a movie about Jesus, talking about Christ to children while distributing toys. But in societies in which state and mosque are intertwined, in which defamation of

Islam is a crime and conversion out of it can invite vigilante violence, the more audacious missionaries are engaged, intentionally or not, in provocation, and their actions are debated even among Evangelicals. Some experts see their clumsiness as the product of nondenominational churches lacking the resources for proper training. Others suggest that the culprits are "short termers" who do not stay long enough to witness the cycles of retribution their confrontational styles can touch off. "There is a lot more good than bad," says Robert Seiple, the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom until 2000 and himself an Evangelical. "But what I discovered is that well intended people have in many, many cases eroded the message they were trying to communicate through inappropriate methodologies. Persecution results, and there are times you wish they had stayed home."

"Josh" is a new missionary, but not a foolish one. "I would never do anything stupid like blatant preaching on the street or going up to someone I don't know and handing out literature," he says. But at age 24 and after only eight months on the job, he occasionally gets antsy. "I'm impatient by nature," he says, so maybe expectations are a problem.' The son of Pentecostal missionaries, he grew up abroad, but an Arab capital is his first solo posting. He strolls its working-class neighbourhoods on errands for his day job as a youth worker with its small Christian community and wonders whom he will talk to today. He enjoys sharing Christ with cabbies, in part because their English is better than his - Arabic. He points out three young men in a carpentry shop as part of his target audience: "They're my age," he says. "The younger generation is influenced much more by the West, and they're searching." Josh has his up moments, as when a neighbourhood boy 7 complimented him, saying, "You're a good Muslim ... I mean Christian.' And there are times when he feels "overwhelmed. I'm just one person-what can I do to help?" But each morning he is reminded of why he is here. The muezzin's first call to prayer is at 4 a.m. And pray Josh does. I pray for the people responding," he says. I pray that as they go to mosque, Jesus would somehow be revealed to them. I pray against that call-that it would not affect their souls.' He prays he may help lift this to tally oppressive spiritual atmosphere"

In the broadest theological sense, Josh and other emissaries of Christ are answering Jesus' call in the Gospel According to Matthew, known as the Great Commission: Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' Since the Middle Ages, missionaries-revered by some, reviled by others-have been among history's great cross-cultural pollinators.

In the past century, as meantime Protestants and many Roman Catholics adopted a social gospel that stressed aiding the poor over preaching to the unenlightened, evangelizing at its purest fell mostly to Evangelicals. Rare is

the conservative Protestant church that doesn't send its teens off on short-term mission trips or play host to missionaries on home leave, their stories full of exotic places and changed hearts. Although they would never admit it, the returnees are Evangelicalism's paragons, making its philosophy of relentless outreach their lives' work. Says Beth Streeter, a Moraga, California health-care consultant who left on a short mission trip to Egypt with her husband and two young children shortly after Sept. 11: "When you believe at your core that the love of Jesus Christ really is the best gift to humankind, you want to find ways and places for people to hear that for themselves. Sometimes it drives us places that can be awkward and uncomfortable".

Through the 1970s, the great mission fields were Latin America, where conservative Protestantism competed with Catholicism for the hearts of the poor, and (for the more daring) Africa and the Iron Curtain countries. Gradually, however, the focus shifted. A missions strategist named Ralph Winter suggested in 1974 that Christians turn their attention to "unreached people groups" who had never heard the Gospel. In 1989 Argentine-born evangelist Luis Bush pointed out that 97% of the unevangelized lived in a "window" between the 10th and 40th latitudes. This global slice, he explained, was disproportionately poor; the majority of its inhabitants "enslaved" by Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism and, ultimately, by Satan. Of Islam specifically, he wrote, "From its centre in the 10/40 Window, Islam is reaching out energetically to all parts of the globe; in a similar strategy, we must penetrate [its] heart with the liberating truth of the gospel" Many mustered themselves to the Window.

Only to find it closing. Of the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam is the most ferociously opposed to the straying of its flock. Shari'a law calls for the death penalty for those who convert to other religions, and although the penalty is not binding in most Muslim majority states, persecution is common. This alone would not retard missions work. Most evangelists accept it as a cost of sharing faith. What did slow their efforts was a more prosaic measure: the gradual elimination by most Muslim countries of "religious worker" visas. Organizations built around salaried missionary lifers found themselves hamstrung.

So they were supplemented with a more manoeuvrable approach called tentmaking, after the Apostle Paul, who supported himself at that trade while spreading word of the risen Christ through the Mediterranean. Like Paul, the new missionaries did not hang up an evangelist's shingle. They took day jobs-often in development or areas in which the host country lacked expertise and preached unofficially. The possibilities are endless-evangelical websites feature references to mechanical engineering in "a large Arab city," computer sales in "an Islamic country" and business teaching in Kyrgyzstan-and missionary-recruitment seminars can sound like job bazaars. At a small

Tennessee Bible church, a mission facilitator assured his listeners that "if you're a native speaker and can fog up a mirror, you can teach" English abroad. He projected a cartoon on a screen to show the advantages of being unofficial: a man wearing a turban and dagger halts a standard-issue missionary at a barrier while another Westerner carrying a toolbox strolls blithely through, toward a mosque in the middle distance.

"Henry" and "Sarah" practice a kind of evangelism that might satisfy the staunchest agnostic. In the early 1980s they arrived in North Africa, where they serve as missionary team leaders. 'We didn't want to run through, do our thing and preach,' says Sarah, 'We wanted to live,' They founded an adventure-travel business. They talked sports, taxes and children with their neighbours, went camping with them and gathered with them on Muslim feast days. They didn't hide their faith, but they didn't press it on others, so when a friend's friend who had taken a Christian correspondence course approached them on behalf of his family, they shared Christ on his terms. "They pursued us," Henry insists. The two clans grew close and still are; eventually several of the Muslims embraced Christ. To tentmaking theorists, this is "relationship evangelism." Henry prefers to speak of the difference in connotation between two Arabic words, tansir and tabshir. "Tansir means to coerce people to change their religion," he explains. "Tabshir means to share, to be a witness "

At its most subtle, tentmaking embodies St. Francis' edict: Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.' But the sometimes clandestine status can breed bad habits. Visa bans turn many Evangelicals, usually straightforward to a fault, into truth stretchers, if only at the customs desk. They use encrypted e-mail and code words. "Some," says a minister in Morocco, "seem to have been inspired by the book of James, verse 007' It is not really their fault. says the leader of one mission, contending, It should not be dangerous for a person to move to a different country and, to use the words of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 'manifest his belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance- Yet a classroom scene at Columbia International University in South Carolina reported last year by Mother Jones magazine shows an unnerving ethical elasticity. "Did Jesus ever lie?" asks a lecturer. His class replies, "No." "But did Jesus raise his hand and say, 'I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?'" Again, 20 voices call out, "No!" (The instructor confirms the quote but says it was taken out of context.)

Then there are the apparent attempts by some missionaries to camouflage their faith as a kind of Islam: inviting prospective converts to "Jesus mosques" or publicly reciting the Muslim creed, "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.' Such techniques are rationalized as part of "contextualization," the necessary presentation of new ideas in a familiar idiom. But Ibrahim Hooper, of the Council on American-Islamic Relations,

claims, "They know it won't work to just say, 'We want you to become Christian, and here's why. So they have to pretend to be Muslims.'" Some Evangelicals are also wary. The term Jesus mosque "blurs the issue," says a missionary in Jordan. If Muslims are coming to Christ, they really need to know what they're coming to "

Some of the secrecy may be unnecessary. David English, executive director of a tentmaking assistance agency called Global Opportunities, points out that even in Saudi Arabia, one of the more restrictive Muslim nations, "if in the normal course of your work people ask about your faith, you're perfectly free to talk about it and explain it. There's a law against conversion-they're still not playing fair-but that much is O.K. . "

Other experts say local leaders will often tolerate informal preaching as the price for Western expertise in other fields. "We're creative in finding where the government itches, so we can scratch it;" says Daryl Anderson of the Evangelical Free Church of America, whose workers toil primarily in the health and information-technology fields. "And depending on the ideological purity of the government agency, we have a certain freedom to be open about our faith."

Such informal understandings, however, can evaporate when a regime cracks down. In August 2001, Afghanistan's Taliban arrested Heather Mercer, 24, and Dayna Curry, 29, who had travelled from a Texas church to work in Kabul for a group called Shelter Germany. During their three-month incarceration, subsequent rescue and visit with President Bush at the White House, the press called them "Christian aid workers;" implying that they were engaged solely in humanitarian ministry and that their jailers' claim that they were proselytizing was false.

In their book *Prisoners of Hope*, however, Mercer and Curry wrote of urging Muslims to listen to evangelistic broadcasts (in one case providing a radio) and showing a film on Jesus. 'We understood that the Taliban prohibited non-Muslims from sharing their faith with Afghans;' the women stated. But they claimed that this violated international norms, and wrote, "The Afghans-like all people-should at least have the opportunity to hear about the teachings of Christ if they choose.' Mercer told TIME, I look forward to the day when the people of Afghanistan, and those of nations like it, have the freedom to choose whom they follow the freedom of religion and conscience.'

Such sentiments are noble enough. But the women's acts were unpopular with a spectrum running from secular aid workers to fellow Evangelicals. "They broke every rule in the book," says ex-ambassador Seiple. "They were women in a patriarchal society, didn't know the language [well], didn't know the culture and were counselled against doing this by other Christians.' Says "Kay," a 13 year veteran of evangelical missions in another Muslim capital

who reports that the incident eventually hampered her own work: "I'm sorry that they suffered, but they just didn't think. They did not project their idealism to its farthest conclusion.

Intra-Christian recrimination also arose around the shocking death last November of Bonnie Witherall, 31, a nurse's assistant at the Christian and Missionary Alliance clinic in Sidon, Lebanon. One morning as she arrived to open the clinic, an unknown assailant shot her three times in the head. Her murder may have been simple anti-Americanism, since it followed one of Osama bin Laden's bellicose edicts. But the New York Times reported that members of the Alliance-which flew a banner emblazoned with the Arabic for 'And Jesus said to them: I am the bread of life, and who accepts me will never go hungry'-had received threats after local imams denounced them for allegedly handing out Christian literature and evangelizing to Muslim youth.

Such overtures are legal in Lebanon but are regarded by both Muslims and some Christian leaders as threats to the fragile peace among the country's sects. Thus the local Catholic Archbishop, while condemning the crime, said, "We don't accept this kind of preaching. We reject it totally."

"Sam," 46, recalls the day Israeli soldiers spotted his white Citroen van on the shoulder of a back road outside the West Bank town of Nablus and, hearing the murmuring behind its closed curtains, concluded they had stumbled on a nest of suicide bombers. At gunpoint, the American exited his vehicle and explained that the six Palestinians with him were a clandestine Bible-study group avoiding the prying eyes of their neighbours. "They are in danger," he told the baffled soldiers, "of being killed.' Sam claims to have led more than 100 Palestinians to Christ but says that they are heroic, not he. Some of the converts, say their co-believers and local diplomats, paid with arrests and torture at the hands of Palestinian forces. The same sources report that one man was then turned over to Fatah militiamen, who killed him.

Paul Marshall, of the human-rights group Freedom House, says that although conversion is a crime in some countries, the biggest problem is that somebody else, a family member or local vigilante, will kill you, and the state will not intervene.' Such perils support the missionary argument that some Muslims remain in the fold less out of faith than out of fear. But the persecution poses for evangelists an additional problem of relative risk, given that (notwithstanding the four recent deaths) converts are in far greater jeopardy than those who brought them to Christ. Conversion is an act of free will, and the Muslims know the risks. But one must share the faith of Wally Rieke, candidate coordinator for the agency Serving in Mission, to accept his observation that converts' "security and their care is dependent on the Lord, and not on us. If it was dependent on us, we would have a lot of people in trouble.' Similarly, the Baptist report says that "missionaries need spiritual toughness so that when the fruits of their witness are required to walk through

the fire, the missionary does not automatically attempt to rescue them.' It continues: "To avoid persecution is to hamper the growth of the kingdom of God'

Missionaries also face charges of carelessness regarding reprisals they sometimes bring down on existing churches and non-evangelistic aid groups. Says Lamin Sanneh, a Muslim convert to Catholicism who teaches the history of Christianity at Yale: "They come in, don't report to the local churches, stir up a hornet's nest and then quit town when the going gets tough. Why start a controversy if you're not there to face the brunt of it?" Seiple notes that after Curry's and Mercer's arrest in Afghanistan, "all of the other Christian organizations were expelled until the Taliban fell."

For "Robert", the days of waiting appeared to be over. For months the globetrotting evangelist had kept a low profile, living in a nearby capital and waiting for his latest mission field, Iraq, to open up. After Baghdad's liberation, Robert was ready to roll. He planned to enter Iraq With a secular humanitarian team as a kind of travelling tentmaker. Many missionaries did not support the Iraq war, but Robert identified personally with George W Bush. "Something you must understand," Robert e-mailed, "is that diplomacy does not work with Satan" Interjecting an uncompromising gospel at so sensitive a time may provoke hostility but he sees that as an inevitable consequence. If Satan's armour is pierced," he wrote, that fissure will be violently contested at every point " When Christ is proclaimed in Iraq, there would be "riots,' he predicted. But after all, his mandate "is to turn the world upside down"

It seems worth asking, however, whether that is a mandate with which most Americans care to be identified. Missionaries complain of suffering from a stereotype of Americans as purveyors of libertinism Now the shoe may be on the other foot: missionaries may, more than ever, actually affect the way the Muslim world understands America. Much was made of evangelist Franklin Graham's strange triple role as Islam hasher ("a very evil and wicked religion"), Bush Administration favourite (he preached a Good Friday service at the Pentagon) and would-be provider of aid and the Gospel to the liberated Iraq. But Graham is just part of the missionary wave, made up not only of non-proselytizing

charities but also of evangelical groups like his Samaritan's Purse organization. Some offer only material aid or aid plus the Good News. Others such as Discipling a Whole Nation (DAWN) fOCUS on spreading Gods word. Why now? DAWN's Rich Haynie says that to the extent at the conflict induced Muslims to question their faith, "we could say that the war was a ripeness moment.'

Such talk irks Wake Forest's Kimball, author of the book When Religion Becomes Evil. "This is an area that lives with a history of crusades and in the

shadow of colonialism," he says. "The image of an overwhelming military power coming in already provokes major questions about deeper US intentions. If you add an aggressive missionary presence, it will be easy to see this as a kind of American Christian triumphalism" Says Azzam Tamimi, director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought in London: "Wherever I go, people say, 'Haven't you heard about American missionaries in Jordan waiting to go into Iraq?' These are educated people; under normal circumstances, the missionaries would not be a big deal, but now people find it very difficult to believe this is not a crusade against Islam on the part of the Bush Administration"

Evangelicals assert again and again that their message is based in love. They are better informed and more actively concerned than the average American about the Islamic worlds material needs, and their desire to share Christ springs in the main from a similarly generous impulse. Claims that Christian groups engage in charity as a "cover" for proselytizing do a disservice to the sometimes heroic humanitarian efforts by workers who believe that Christians should heed not just Jesus' message of salvation but also his example as a feeder and a healer. Yet there should be no question that while most evangelicals love Muslims, they hope to replace Islam. Some cringed at Graham's "evil and wicked" description, but the critique was more about tone than substance.

Clearly, this ideology is at odds with President Bush's statements that Islam is a religion of peace, his visit to a Washington, D.C., mosque and his invitation to prominent Muslims to break their Ramadan fast at the White House. Sufficiently amplified, it could also complicate American efforts to bolster moderate Islam in the Middle East. The Administration, however, does not see it that way. Government officials admit the existence of a few "cowboys," but by and large, says one, missionaries "are often helping people, and not simply because they want to convert them," and Muslims are happy for the aid. During discussion of Graham's role in Iraq, a U. S. Agency for International Development spokeswoman told a reporter for the Beliefnet website that the government could not control private charitable organizations, And a senior Administration official told Time that given the President's support of faith-based charity work and his close ties to the Christian right, there was little chance the White House would discourage Christian aid groups from going to Iraq.

The debate over missionaries in Iraq has provoked a new chapter in the ongoing dialogue among Evangelicals about how best to share God's word. In May, at a meeting called by the Ethics and Public Policy Centre, a Washington think tank, fervour and self-criticism mixed with a sense that Christian overtures to Muslims may be entering a crucial stage. If we don't get this right this time, we could become irrelevant," said one participant. Another,

Serge Duss of the charity World Vision International, asserted that the current controversy is "merely a blip on the screen." The value of Christian missions would not be judged on the past few months but on the past half-century, during which, "because we love God and love our neighbour," they have been "in the forefront of providing not only humanitarian aid but development, child health care, sanitation and communications.' At times, Duss said, we have been able to be more overt about our Christian faith and at times not. And this," he added, "is where we need to be very wise.'

And wisdom, in the end, comes from above. The muezzin has called twice more, and Josh, the first-time missionary, looks out his window at a stooped old woman in a billowing cloak, picking her way up a neighbouring hill. The sight fires some kind of synapse in the place of convergence among his youthful eagerness, the desire to share, the impulse to meddle and the conviction that God's providence will sort them out. I see people like her, and I wonder, what's her story?" he says. "What can I do to help her? When I feel the calling on my heart, I don't see how it is possible to be here and not want to be able to speak to people, to love them, to get to know them. Every day I say to God: use me. Tell me what to do. Tell me what to say."

-With reporting by Perry Bacon Jr. and James Carney/ Washington, Amanda Bower and Manya Brachear/ New York Jeff Chu/ London and Matthew Kalman/ Jerusalem

KEEPING THE FAITH WITHOUT PREACHING IT

The tomato greenhouses he helped build in Baghdad for a seeding project are smashed and looted. Some 1,200 patients at an Iraqi psychiatric hospital who were relying on his group for food had escaped or been released, and now about half have straggled back. Edward Miller, who once oversaw several of the Mennonite Central Committee's Iraqi charities before the war (it spent \$6.4 million in 10 years) and recently returned to pick up their pieces, has his work cut out for him. But one thing is not on his to-do list: evangelizing. Mennonite representatives delivering aid in Muslim countries do not preach the Gospel.

They are not alone in this. Many Christian groups active in these countries, including some in Iraq, avoid trying to convert the people around them. The practice is clearly out of bounds for those that form partnerships with local Muslim groups or with the Red Crescent (the Islamic counterpart of the Red Cross). Others simply feel that any good done by outright evangelizing is outweighed by the violence it could provoke or the possibility that needy Muslims might be discouraged from accepting aid. Donna Derr, an associate director at Church World Service, a joint ministry of 36 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican denominations that hopes to deliver approximately \$2.5 million in medical supplies in Iraq, notes that her group's faith-based status is evident in its name. 'And our name is on the materials we provide in many cases.

Beyond that, do we -do any sort o proselytizing as we offer assistance? No. We simply consider being there a witness" to God's love.

Whereas Evangelicals often trace their missionary activity to the Great Commission ("Therefore go and make disciples of all nations," Matthew 28), more liberal Christians prefer a verse from Matthew 25: I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was sick and you took care of me." That reference shows up on the Mennonite Central Committee's website, along with a commitment to "sharing ... faith in Jesus Christ." Mennonite Committee executive director Ron Mathies explains that his church's position is no less Christian than any other's, "but our stance is one of humility and respect."

Back in Baghdad, Mennonite Committee employee Miller feels no impulse at all to share his faith with his clients. Miller is a devout Mennonite; he was raised in various locations in Africa where his parents did the committee's humanitarian work. While he was growing up in his church's "peace and justice" tradition, he says, "there was always discussion about the injustices and inequalities around the world and what we should do about it." But he does not think that Christ's word needs further elucidation in the region. Referring to indigenous churches that Evangelicals tend to ignore or scorn as compromised, he says, "You have to realize that Christianity has been part of the Middle East for 2,000 years. People here know all about my religion and don't need me to explain it. I don't feel I have anything more to teach the Muslims than they have to teach me."

-By David Van Biema Reported by Amanda Bower/New York and Aparisim Ghosh/Amman