# Adventist Ministry Reaches Remote Tribes of the World

By Cristian Dumitrescu

*For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?* (Rom 10:13,14 ESV).

In 1995, Sebastian Tirtirau and Dan Serb transferred from the Adventist Theological Institute in Bucharest, Romania, to Helderberg College, Somerset West, in South Africa. The two young men had little idea where this change would lead them. One year later, they volunteered to go as missionaries to the Tsumkwe area of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia. Even though they had little experience and close to no knowledge of the place and people of the Kalahari, at the end of six weeks there was a group of thirty-two Bushmen who were baptized.

Shortly after their return, Sebastian left South Africa and, after working for a while as a pastor in the United States of America and then Canada, in 2001 he founded *Pilgrim Relief Society*, a self-supporting nonprofit missionary and humanitarian organization. Since 1996 he has continued to visit the Kalahari with groups of volunteers from various countries. The work has grown exponentially and he has begun new missionary work in other parts of the world. The founding of the Society was a natural step meant to create a better platform for the expansion of work in the most remote parts of the world. This was the specific focus of *Pilgrim's Society*.

Dan remained in South Africa where he worked as a pastor in the Cape Conference for nearly ten years before rejoining Sebastian in July 2006. The same year, Sebastian was appointed as the Remote Tribes Coordinator for *It Is Written* USA. This new department was specifically created to facilitate the partnership of the two ministries with the objective of preaching the message of hope and also to address the immediate needs of those living beyond the reach of conventional church evangelism.


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**Cristian Dumitrescu**: Sebastian, tell us about *Pilgrim Society*, its philosophy, strategy, and goals.



**Sebastian Tirtirau**: The philosophy of the Society is summed up in our unwavering commitment to follow Christ's commission to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, to every tribe, language, and nation. The strategy also includes involving the local communities we reach. As a norm, we begin by visiting the so called "unentered area" where we build relationships with the local people, familiarize ourselves with the environment,




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assess the felt needs of the community, and then develop a plan for effectively helping the people while preaching to them the good news of God's plan of salvation. In our twelve years of experience in the Kalahari, we discovered that the most effective means by which this work brings forth results is through training into discipleship local leaders who themselves become missionaries to their own people. This strategy has enabled the work in the Kalahari to grow by leaps and bounds, with over 2,000 San people having been baptized in the last decade alone.





**CD**: I understand you just attended the graduation ceremony of a new cohort of students at your missionary school in Romania. How did that project start?

**Dan Serb**: The idea of a school where young people could be trained to minister in remote areas was first conceived in 1996. Realizing the great need for such a peculiar type of missionary work, Sebastian began to plan for this idea wishing it to become reality. This happened ten years later when, at the beginning of 2007, the *Remote Tribes Mission School* opened in Vama, Romania. The circumstances under which this project came about were, we believe, providential, a fact confirmed by the work done so far by the graduates of the Class of 2007. The school is run in partnership with *It Is Written* which provides much of the teaching staff.

**CD**: Where are the students coming from and what are the qualifications required? Is there any admission test?

**ST**: The program lasts six months and focuses on the specifics of missionary work to remote communities; it also includes a practical intensive survival course taught by Sebastian. The class of 22 students graduated in June 2007 and, after a thorough scrutiny, 12 of them were sent out into four major areas of the world to serve as missionaries for a year or more. Of the 12, five went to the Kalahari Desert in Namibia, two were sent to the North Kivu Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo, three are working deep in the Amazonian forests of Peru, and two are currently ministering to some of the villages of the Nunavut area in the Canadian Arctic. There are 12 graduates from the Class of 2008. Soon the assessment of their performance will be done and those meeting the requirements will be sent to either followup the work of their predecessors or to new mission fields.

**CD**: I have seen an *It Is Written* report about Sebastian distributing Bibles to the Inuit tribes in the Arctic. How did you get involved there?

**DS**: In March and April 2007, while I was managing the school in Romania full time, Sebastian took his third trip to the Arctic. He first traveled to the far North in March 2005 in search of the ancient people of the Arctic and again in June 2006. In his travels, he managed to visit more than 18 villages while also being able to distribute 3,300 Bibles in the Inuktitut language. In the 2007 trip he was accompanied by a team from *It Is Written* led by Shawn Boonstra. More Bibles were distributed thus reaching the goal of ensuring that each family in the Canadian Arctic has an Inuktitut Bible in their home. Another highlight of this trip was being able to encounter and experience first-hand the

hospitality and kindness of the Inuit. Because the Inuit view physical absence as nonexistent as long as people think of and talk about you, the gospel and God's messengers are constantly remembered. Our next project in the Arctic is the building of a Community Center in the village of Igloolik, in Nunavut.





**CD**: Let's move from the Arctic to the desert. Tell us about your Kalahari mission in Namibia.

**ST**: From June to August 2007, the *Pilgrim Relief Society* and *It Is Written* joined resources and organized the largest Kalahari mission ever. There were 84 volunteers from 11 countries, with 6 vehicles and 1 truck, that made their way into the desert to spend time with the San people. During the two months, the volunteers installed water systems, delivered 1,000 blankets to 40 villages, delivered food, equipment, and Bibles on Ipods (in the San language) to many villages. Two evangelistic campaigns were held and over 120 Bushmen were baptized. We also built the new Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tsumkwe. The volunteers worked

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hard to complete all the projects while new friendships developed with the San people and among the members of the team. There were people from Canada, the USA, Australia, South Africa, Romania, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Moldova, and the Ukraine, and they were all united in one purpose: to serve the people of the Kalahari and to bring them closer to Jesus.

**CD**: Did you meet any challenges? And how do you follow-up on such projects?

**ST**: There were numerous challenges, but when you are able to give water to villages stricken by the lack of it, when you see joy on the people's faces when they receive blankets, food, and Bibles, then you realize that all the effort, sacrifice, and preparation was worth it. Currently, the student missionaries from the Romanian mission school together with the local lay leaders carry on the work with the San people. They continue to install water systems, to visit the people, and to plan for future missions in the desert. The next immediate project is to establish a mission station in the close proximity of the Kalahari which will include a clinic, a school for grades 1 through 12, a church, camping sites, workshops, and various plantations.

**CD**: I see some pygmies in the pictures from Africa. Where do they live and how did you reach them?

**DS**: In August 2007, accompanied by three of our friends, we left the Kalahari for the jungles of the Congo in search of the Bambuti pygmies. Once in the Democratic Republic of Congo, more specifically in the North Kivu Province, we quickly realized that the region and its people were suffering tremendously from the aftermath of war. For many years, thousands of people have been killed, displaced, and uprooted. Poverty is rampant, people live in a constant atmosphere of fear and suspicion, and their faces are marred by deep sadness and desperation. In Butembo we met with Seung Chun Yang, a Korean missionary who'd been working there for a few months. His help proved invaluable in guiding us through the jungle and organizing our trip to find the pygmies. Mr Yang is currently the *Pilgrim Relief Society*'s Director for the Asia Region as well as the coordinator of the Congo Mission.

**CD**: What is it like to be a pygmy in the midst of tall, strong African people? And are there any dangers for missionaries trying to reach them?

**DS**: Even though we only planned to visit pygmy camps in the region, we had the opportunity of meeting a group of the Lugbwara tribe, an ancient tribe that lives in North West Congo and stretches all the way through to Uganda and Somalia. These amazingly strong and tall people


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welcomed us like royalty, singing, dancing, and waving palm branches. We spoke to them and, while there, launched a number of projects which focus on education, medical care, church building, and evangelism. After a few days in the Lugbwara tribe, we went further into the jungle where we met with people from three Bambuti pygmy camps, a tribe of pygmies that is widespread in the western and northern Congolese jungle. They were very kind and welcoming people, in spite of their past and present difficult life circumstances. We later were told that many of the men were killed by rebels right





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in front of their own children and wives. For several days we traveled by car and on foot to their camps and spoke to them, comforting them, and offering them the hope found in Christ.

**ST**: In October Dan returned to the Congo with two graduates from the mission school. While there, the reality of the imminent dangers became evident when the car in which Dan was traveling was ambushed by armed men; only Providence ensured their safe escape. Weeks later, one of the students, David, was hit by a truck while returning from one of the mission projects and left for dead. Once retrieved from the area, we had to pull him out of the country in order for him to receive adequate medical care. Within days of that accident, our second young missionary, Gabriel, contracted a serious case of malaria. It was again necessary to evacuate him, but as soon as he recovered he returned to the Congo and is currently making a significant contribution in the North Kivu area, together with Mr. Yang and the local church leaders. To date, churches have been built, medical care has been offered, water systems installed,

and hundreds of people have been baptized.

**CD**: As though the Arctic and the African desert is not enough for you, I see pictures from Vanuatu. It seems to be the most challenging but also rewarding for you.

**ST**: A few years back, a *National Geographic* reporter went deep into the interior of one of the many islands of Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides) in the South Pacific. Vanuatu is an 84 island archipelago, with active volcanoes, rugged peaks, and almost impassable jungles. It lies on two tectonic plates so every few days or so there is an earthquake. In spite of many of these challenges, the people of Vanuatu were recently dubbed by the United Nations as being the "happiest people on earth." The *National Geographic* reporter encountered, on one of his island travels, a tribe that has never seen a white man, and has never been documented or known by the outside world. I was fascinated by this story and decided to go there and see that remote tribe with my own eyes. In September 2007, together with my brother Christian who sailed his sailboat from San Diego to Fiji from April to August, we left from Fiji by sailboat and sailed all the way to Vanuatu. During that journey we visited the islands of Tanna, Erromango, and Efate. From there, after many weeks of sea sickness, high waves, storms, and squalls, we managed to reach the island of Espiritu Santo and went deep into the jungle in search of that tribe. I gathered a number of guides and porters to carry the 500 pounds of gifts. These people could also speak the unique dialect of that most remote tribe on the island. The trek up through the jungle



and mountainous peaks was exhausting. It rained day and night for a whole week. There were also three earthquakes and four raging rivers which needed to be crossed, and these were just some of the challenges. Eventually the caravan made it to the tribe whose name is the Kiai people who speak two languages, namely Kiai and Moijo. (Vanuatu is home to English, French, and Bislama as well as 124 tribal languages).

**CD**: What could you do for those people? What are their needs?

**ST**: While among the Kiai, we visited six villages; we slept in their huge "guest huts," ate with them, and listened to their stories. The people of this tribe encounter numerous life hardships; we found out that over thirty percent of their children are dying of malaria and dengue fever, the water is full of bacteria and is also poisonous due to the volcanic ash that covers the ground. In order to reach clean water one has to climb up and down rugged mountains. They have no modern tools and thus were very appreciative for the machetes, the knives, and axes we had brought with us.

**DS**: In April 2008 I joined Sebastian and we returned to Vanuatu. During this trip, hundreds of mosquito nets were distributed in the village of Port Resolution, on the island of Tanna. While there, we also met with the community leaders and made plans for the start of a medical center and the building of a church in the area. From Tanna, we flew to Erromango island where the construction of the first water system has commenced. The trip was full of challenges with danger courting us at every step. But once again, the hand of the Almighty intervened and the work continued. The plan is to have 10,000 mosquito nets distributed in the near future (one mosquito net protects four children and costs $7), to build five water systems at $15,000 each (these will provide water for villages on three islands), and to distribute hundreds of axes, knives, and saws. Beginning in September 2008, six new missionaries will begin work on the Tanna, Erromango, and Espiritu Santo islands, while the building of two clinics, two churches, and one school are also envisaged.

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**CD**: What are your plans for the future?

**ST**: After the graduation ceremony in June, Dan will be leaving for the Kalahari with two groups in order to install ten more water systems, finish the construction of a church in the Aasvolnes area close to Tsumkwe, and the distribution of more aid. Also, this year we intend to set up a mobile clinic so that we can reach those living in remote villages and who are in need of medical attention. I will leave for Africa in June as well and, after a trip through Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Botswana, I will go to the Kalahari. On the 16th of July I will be leaving for Vanuatu and we plan two more trips this year, one to Vanuatu and to Africa in October. We are also busy planning a trip to South America for next year to a number of tribes that have just been noted on the world map.

**DS**: *Pilgrim Relief Society* would like to thank all those who support this ministry and the missions we endeavor to carry out around the world. Ours is a global vision and we intend to continue reaching those found at the peripheries of civilization as we know it, or who have remained isolated due to armed conflict, or unfavorable political and social circumstances. For more information and to donate, contact *Pilgrim Relief Society* in Canada at PO Box 392, Hudson, QC, J0P 1H0, Canada, 1 (514) 312-2761, or in the U.S. at 1 (805) 433-0210. Visit us at www.pilgrimsociety.com or write to us at info@pilgrimsociety.com. We appreciate the sacrificial support and assure everyone of our resolve to complete this work. *"Therefore, having this ministry by the grace of God, we do not lose heart"* (2 Cor 4:1 ESV).

