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Photograph, Andy Brown, On-Field Media

» Christ-Centered Churches Among All African Peoples «

In the tiny mountainous kingdom of Lesotho
God is working among those who till the earth
and those who tend the sheep.

SOIL, SHEEP, AND THE WORK OF A KING

By Mike Delorenzo
Photographs, On-field Media



« Mountain Kingdom
*Huts of rock and thatch dot
Lesotho's hillsides, where
sure-footed horses are the
transportation of choice.
AIM currently has a team of
10 missionaries in Lesotho,
from the capital, Maseru, to
the sprawling highlands
pictured here.*

GOD IS A FARMER

August Basson kneels beside a row of rich, brown soil in a field of newly-planted maize and plunges his hands into the earth. With an exuberance well matched to his lively South African accent, and with the experience of a man who holds a soulful connection to the land, he carefully rubs the moist earth between his fingers. Plunging in once again, he begins to laugh. "You see this, you see this!" His visitors crouch down for a closer look as August unearths a prize. "It is an earthworm!" he sounds out with boyish glee. The tiny creature wriggles free of the dirt and dances in August's calloused and careful hands. He laughs again and promptly declares it a miracle.

"I have not seen an earthworm in years. This is a good sign. It means the land is beginning to heal."

August, along with his wife Anita, originally came to the tiny, landlocked nation of Lesotho over 16 years ago to preach. But he soon realized he was preaching to people

with empty stomachs. Lesotho is a nation facing a dire farming crisis which has turned a country that once fed neighboring countries into a land that today can barely feed itself.

Known as the "Mountain Kingdom," Lesotho, on a map, is like a thumbprint in the middle of the vast nation of South Africa. Mostly highlands—arid, rocky, and windswept—Lesotho is a breathtaking display of what one missionary here described as "devastating beauty." Its unique history has yielded a land with a single, homogenous culture and a people ruled over by a benevolent king. Lesotho appears to defy the stereotype of suffering Africa. There are few signs of abject poverty. The literacy rate mirrors that of many developed Western nations. A one-hour flight spanning the country east to west reveals some very impressive infrastructure. And peace, the rarest of commodities in Africa, blankets the land. But unfortunately, peace still evades the hearts of many of the 1.8 million Basotho people who live here.

Lesotho is burdened with one of the

FARMING GOD'S WAY



AIM Missionary August Basson learned that the Basotho people view farming as a low profession, an idea that played itself out in the poor treatment of land over time. Today, due to a program he calls "Farming God's Way," that perception is changing, and improved farming methods are beginning to take root.



SLIPPING AWAY >>

Lesotho's landscape, while stunning, is also literally slipping away as rains erode farm fields and carry off topsoil via a growing network of gullies. "The biggest export of Lesotho," says Basson, "is the land."



highest HIV infection rates in the world. Nearly 24% of the population—one in four Basotho—are directly touched by the social and physical effects of the epidemic. And the land is sick as well. This sober fact is evident every time it rains.

"The biggest export of Lesotho," August says with regret in his voice, "is the land. And they don't get one cent for it!"

He steers his Land Rover off the road and across a field to the edge of a plot neatly cut into rows by an ox-drawn plough. This is a family farm. It was passed down from father to son. It will be passed down again

if it can only last another generation. The rains are pouring heartily from the sky, but what should be a blessing in Africa, here reveals a curse. At the edge of the farm the land falls off into a gully, and the gully itself into a network of others as far as the eye can see. And it immediately becomes clear that this farm was once much larger. August pops an umbrella and bounds across the field. His heart sinks as he describes what is happening: in rivulets of muddy water, the rains are carrying away what is left of the topsoil—and at an alarming rate.

"Your farm is like a living inheritance you

pass on to your kids," he explains with a sigh. "They are passing on death."

As August began to identify the agricultural disaster threatening the land and livelihoods of the people he came to serve, he quickly switched his focus from preaching to developing a program to address the seemingly intractable problem. But he soon found his efforts were failing. Then one day famine came and August was faced with scores of people at his gates. "I can't feed a nation!" he pleaded with the Lord. And God challenged him that perhaps he could. Or rather, God could. Perhaps everything they needed, was already provided.

Over the past few decades, basic farming has been destroyed in Lesotho. It is partly the fault of well-intentioned missionaries, aid agencies and governments. There have been a lot of failed projects, programs, schemes and systems. August summed up his frustrations and the wrong-headed approach of applying Western methodologies to the uniqueness of Lesotho, in a short, sober revelation: "The plough has killed more people in Africa than any war."

The problem was not so much the plough, however. The problem lay deeper than any curl of steel could cut in a field. Deeper than the gullies swallowing up the fertile soil. Deeper even than the sorrow of the Basotho who have summarily declared themselves "cursed." The problem lay in the hearts of the people.

And if it was a problem of the heart, perhaps August had a solution after all. He discovered that farming detached from a God-centered worldview was bound to fail here. The Basotho believe farming to be a "low" profession and have a fatalistic approach to their land. The resultant behavior is destructive. And it has proved impossible to change this behavior without changing the beliefs behind it.

"Ideas have consequences," he explains. "Ideas sit right at the heart of things."

So August presented a new idea: God is a farmer. He was the first farmer. August quotes from the book of Genesis—God "planted a garden in the east, in Eden"—and with this unexpected revelation begins to teach a new way of thinking about farming—God's way.

Adopting a mindset called "Farming God's Way," August has found a means to address the ecological needs of the land, as well as the theological needs of the people. He has become a preacher once again, albeit one with muddied boots and calloused hands.

"There is a need to help people see we have a key relationship with the land. The way we view ourselves has an effect on how we deal with the land, and it all goes back to our right relationship with the Creator."

GOD IS A SHEPHERD

One hundred miles east, high in the bouldered, treeless mountains of Lesotho, a similar transformation is slowly unfolding.

John and Shan Barry live in a small house set on a grassy hill in a broad and beautiful valley, in the village of Molumong. The Basotho villagers here populate the valley only sparsely, and seem to easily blend with the land and bend with the wind. They are typically wrapped for warmth in wool blankets or layered clothes as they go about the tasks of life. Except on Sundays, when nearly the whole village dutifully converges at the church adjacent to John's house. On Sundays, they come dressed in their very best. And for some the day is worship. For others it is social obligation. But for John, Sunday mornings bring a burden.

His glance wanders outside the thick stones of the sanctuary walls to the hillsides far distant. And here John is painfully reminded that there are some among the village who are not represented at church. In fact, there are some who are not even welcome. Speckled upon the hills, adrift among herds of sheep and goats and cattle, is an outcast community of shepherds doing a job which knows no Sabbath, and fulfilling a societal role which places them in the least-reached people group in Lesotho.

"The church has a heart for these boys, but in a half-hearted way," John explains.

Shepherds pose a unique problem. They are respected, but not socially accepted. Ranging in ages from 5 to 65, the boys and

SHEPHERDS REACHING

» SHEPHERDS

Missionary John Barry has a vision for equipping Lesotho's shepherds to reach other shepherds with the gospel.



men who comprise Lesotho's ubiquitous shepherd community work for wealthy stock-owners who need to graze their animals in a country without provision for formal, individual land ownership. In a land without fences. So the boys live and roam with the herds. They are relegated to a life of poverty, paid in sheep and blankets, and grow up detached from the social fabric of their homeland.

As a result, the boys end up unschooled and illiterate. They are sometimes feared and castigated as criminals. They lack both the manners and the clothes to show up in a church. And even if they did, they would be lost in the liturgical tradition of Lesotho's prominent denominations.

AIM's reach into the lives of these boys took root more than a decade ago when missionaries established schools to provide a basic education and a point of evangelization for the marginalized shepherds. The schools are but shacks, scattered throughout the hills like the shepherds themselves. Today, over 700 boys attend them. Some of the boys have become Christians. And now John has ideas for something more.

In a visit to the home of 'M'e'Matankiso, a kindly local Basotho woman, John discussed his vision. 'M'e'Matankiso has worked with the herd boys for over twelve

years. Her brightly painted home is one of the few places these boys feel welcome. A crew of disheveled youth loiter outside, and John asks her why she tries so hard to reach them.

Her response is simple and heartfelt. "I like them so much," she says.

She tells a story about how she first began to see these boys being ignored and belittled. She says it broke her heart. John, gentle in his own way, and a kindred spirit with 'M'e'Matankiso, clearly understands. He begins to share his idea with her. About how God has a special place in His heart for shepherds. And how perhaps for the shepherds of Lesotho, God has a special plan.

As John sees it, God is a shepherd. The Good Shepherd. And in this beautiful imagery is a new way of thinking about the shepherds just outside the door at 'M'e'Matankiso's home, and all over the country. Suddenly the shepherds are more than just an unreached people, but also potential messengers with the right vocation, and unique opportunity, to carry the message of Christ across the country. Could God use this outcast community to show what the church should be?

What if 20 believers from among the shepherds could be chosen and taught



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Scripture in the manner of their oral traditions? What if AIM could establish an oral Bible school to teach them how to “story” God’s Word? The shepherds could come and study in intervals and, in time, eventually become pastors among their own community. This could lead to a church movement. A church that affirms the shepherd’s role.

“I think this is what God wants them to be,” John announces. “They will be shepherds of men!”

AN UNCONVENTIONAL KING

In a land ruled by a King, it’s easy to frame a worldview based on stereotypes and resign oneself to fate and circumstance. But God has a way of turning such things on their head. He himself is a King. Yet one that left his throne and became poor for the sake of impoverished humanity. Is it any

surprise then that God is a farmer and a shepherd?

Is it hard to believe that God still delights in the feeling of moist, fertile soil scooped up in His earth-creating fingers? Impossible to imagine that He still cares to cradle a frightened lamb in His world-embracing arms? That He laughs at the display of a dancing earthworm? Or smiles at a face full of wool? Is there more than just toil in one’s work? Is there also joy, and purpose, and a lesson in reconciliation?

The message to the farmers and shepherds of Lesotho is that God, amazingly, relates to their disparaged vocations. And through them, He is working out His purposes for Lesotho—taking the humble and teaching the “wise,” and quite possibly using the “hopeless” to bring hope to the whole of this Mountain Kingdom. 🇱🇸

SOME CURRENT PERSONNEL NEEDS IN LESOTHO INCLUDE:

- Doctor/Surgeon • Theological Education by Extension Trainer
- High School Teacher • Pre-school Teacher

Contact AIM to learn more about these opportunities.