



**Deep in the rain forests** of Vanuatu thousands of ni-Vanuatu have never heard Christ's message of love and hope. To change that, Assemblies of God missionaries and local believers are penetrating treacherous terrain in search of soul survivors. Following is the account of one such trek.

By Kirk Noonan  
Photography by Gaylon Wampler

# Vanuatu:

## Soul survivors

**As if reliving** his finest moment, the old man pretends to aim a rifle. Spotting a target, he tracks it with the imaginary gun and slowly squeezes the trigger. He makes a popping sound with his mouth and jerks his shoulder to the phantom firing and recoil of the weapon.

“The bullet hit him here,” the old man says, pointing to his own cheekbone. “It continued through his head and came out the other side. His teeth and jaw came out, too.”

At this, he laughs.

His account is disturbing because the prey was another man. The old man claims to have killed at least seven other people in similar fashion. Hunting other men and cannibalism, he says proudly, used to be a way of life in Vanuatu — formerly New Hebrides

— as recently as the late 1960s.

“Did you eat the man?” I ask.

Before the interpreter finishes translating my question, the smile on the old man’s face vanishes. His shoulders slump and his eyes — beaming only moments ago — take on a china doll’s hollowness.

“I’ve never eaten anyone,” he snaps. “I only hunted.”

In Vanuatu, former cannibals usually categorize themselves in one of two groups, depending on who is asking. There are those who readily admit they have eaten others and those who say they’ve only seen people eaten.

No matter what they admit to, each person I spoke with says missionaries, representing several denominations, helped bring an end to cannibalism in Vanuatu by introducing people to Christ.

Though many ni-Vanuatu (those who live in the country) have embraced Christ as Savior, thousands in this Y-shaped archipelago located between Fiji and Australia have never heard the gospel. Assemblies of God missionaries Bryan and Renee Webb and Phil and Kimberly Rojak are working to change that fact. But doing so is a slow process due in large part to the remote and unforgiving topography of the islands and the sometimes inseparable bond ni-Vanuatu have with tradition.

Though we — photographer Gaylon Wampler, videographer Derrick Smith and I — were advised that trips to remote villages in Vanuatu can be physically taxing and even dangerous, none of us is completely prepared for what lies ahead: a 46-mile jungle trek that will include 38 river crossings, treacherous mountain paths, a tropical storm, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, sweltering heat, humidity, dehydration and hunger.

But at the moment, we need to placate the incensed former cannibal.

Obviously angry, the old man pulls himself upright with his walking stick, then hobbles out of the hut. I wonder aloud if I shouldn’t have asked him if he had eaten anyone.

“It was a fair question,” says Bryan Webb, a missionary to Vanuatu for two years. “It wasn’t the question so much as the conviction it brought. Cannibals who have not accepted Christ as Savior don’t know how to forgive themselves for what they’ve done.”

**Breaking free from** the consequences of cannibalism and the black magic connected with it is never easy. An hour after our encounter with the old man, we meet several former cannibals in Tulwei, a coastal village on the island of Malekula where we camp. One man says black magic made his enemies’ bullets run like water off his skin. Another says he drank cursed water that made him angry enough to kill and eat men. After cooking a man, a third man says, he would “cut up the body the same way I would a pig, then I’d toss his bones to the dogs.”

Twelve witchdoctors practice black magic in Tulwei, a village of 300 residents. The locals, Webb says, turn to them for advice, to put curses on adversaries, settle disputes and heal sickness.

“It’s a daily part of life in the villages,” says Webb, noting that villagers commonly

believe that a witchdoctor can transform into a fruit bat or shark and fly or swim from island to island. “Black magic is a real threat because people are absolutely convinced it works.”

The former cannibals I interview say they stopped killing and eating others after missionaries confronted them in the mid-1960s. They learned they could live in peace if they dropped their weapons and accepted Christ as Savior. Life on Malekula, the men say, has never been the same.

“It sounded good to let the weapons go, to live in peace and not fear,” says one of the men. “Today we tell our children not to fight, make trouble or kill men. Because of Jesus we live in peace.”

As if proving the man’s point, nearly 50 ni-Vanuatu men, women and children from different villages gather to watch Webb baptize four teenagers in tidal pools on the jagged coral shoreline of Malekula. Such an intervillage gathering would have been unheard of when cannibalism was practiced. But today such gatherings are frequent, and the service sends a clear message: Fear and death rule Vanuatu no more.



ISLAND STYLE: (TOP LEFT) MEDIA TEAM — DERRICK SMITH, KIRK NOONAN, GAYLON WAMPLER; (TOP RIGHT) CHURCH SERVICE ON SANTO; (MIDDLE RIGHT) NI-VANUATU CHILDREN



(BOTTOM RIGHT) HIKE TO FARM; (BOTTOM LEFT) FORMER CANNIBAL TELLS HIS TALES.



continued on page 41



MISSIONARIES: PHIL AND KIM ROJAK

# Q & A

with a missionary  
on the front lines

**Under swaying palms** on a grassy hill in Port-Vila, the nation's capital, 15 ni-Vanuatu students live, work and study at Joy Bible Institute and College. Though the campus is small and the student body few in number, God is using both to touch people's lives. Assemblies of God missionary Phil Rojak has ministered in Vanuatu since 1996 and helps direct the college.

**PE: What is a spiritual highlight for you since you've been here?**

**Rojak:** In 2000 a districtwide youth camp was held here, and the campers experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Many teenagers were baptized in the Holy Spirit.

**PE: Describe your family's work in Vanuatu.**

**Rojak:** Our primary task is to train men and women for ministry. We're involved in this through the college. Our goal is to equip students to plant and nurture churches in the unreached islands and villages of Vanuatu. We also equip youth leaders and lead purity seminars for youth.

**PE: What is the most challenging part of ministering in Vanuatu?**

**Rojak:** Figuring out the logistics of reaching all the islands. Vanuatu has more than 50 inhabited islands (33 are not inhabited), and

interisland travel is expensive. As a result, ministry is often limited to a few key islands.

**PE: How can readers effectively pray for your family and ministry and for the people of Vanuatu?**

**Rojak:** Pray for our safety. Pray that we will have the ability to complete the many goals we have, such as increased enrollment at Joy Bible Institute, translating Sunday School materials into the language of the people and developing tracts dealing with various cults coming into Vanuatu.

Pray also for the people of Vanuatu. Believers here need revival. Many struggle to obey the elementary truths of the Christian life. Also pray for a work of God among youth so they'll say yes to the call of God and prepare themselves accordingly.

**PE: Besides prayer, how can our readers support you?**

**Rojak:** Our campus has a great need for a large multipurpose building that can be used for conferences and youth outreaches. Currently, all large gatherings are held in the open air and are subject to extreme weather. We are praying that God will supply the financial resources needed to construct this building. **tpe**

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

**Later we crawl** out of a rugged Twin Otter, an 18-passenger airplane, on the island of Santo. We're glad to step out on the hard tarmac. Today, we've already landed on a beach and two grassy runways en route to this island, the inspiration for James A. Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*.

Our itinerary has us in White Grass, an interior village, by 6:30 p.m., but since the plane was late we're behind schedule. Attempting to beat nightfall, we drive inland in Webb's Speed the Light vehicle. Thirty minutes into our journey the sun sets, leaving us to navigate dark jungle roads with few road signs. Doing so is tricky business and a bit frustrating.

"In Vanuatu, nothing goes as planned," says Webb, giving us a lesson in island life. "Flexibility is a must."

We're an hour late when we arrive in White Grass. That night we sleep in the village's *nakamal*, a community house where meetings take place, meals are cooked and guests sleep.

Village life seems simple, but in reality it is based on complex traditions, customs and hierarchy. Plus, there is no electricity, easy access to water or quality health care. Malaria, parasites and malnutrition are common. Life expectancy for men is 55 years; for women it is only 47.

As a diversion many ni-Vanuatu get stoned drinking kava, a liquid narcotic. Many locals drink kava as a nightly ritual. But where some see escape, others see bondage.

"Kava keeps most people away from a relationship with Christ," says Maxim, a 33-year-old schoolteacher. "They think it's part of our tradition and our strength. Because of that it's hard for them to leave it."

The next morning we rise early and eat stew made of taro roots and rooster before strapping on our backpacks for the 23-mile hike to the village of Vunakurekuem, one of many Vanuatu villages that have few, if any, Christians. In many villages the gospel has never been presented.

Webb admits our journey will be long and potentially dangerous. But if he and the students don't take the gospel to the difficult places, "Who will?" he asks rhetorically.

"I don't think there should always be rational limits in what we do to lead someone to Jesus," says Webb. "Sometimes we must do the irrational."

Our team leaders are impressive. Norman, 26, the chief of White Grass, has a wisdom-beyond-his-years demeanor. Dick Joel Peter, 51, a national pastor, knows the language and possesses a commanding yet laidback presence. George, our 60-something guide, has traveled the route numerous times. Webb is intent on taking the gospel anywhere it is needed, and the five students from the Bible training center Webb leads are passionate about sharing their faith. All of the nationals except Peter travel barefoot or at most wear 99-cent flip-flops.

At the wide but slow-moving Jordan River, Wampler and I pull off our boots to keep them dry as we cross. When we reach the other side, we dry our feet and put on our boots.

"Do you realize there are 37 more crossings to make?" George asks us.

continued on page 43



WORSHIP: SATURDAY NIGHT SERVICE AT VILLAGE OF MALEKULA.



JUNGLE TREK: TEAM MEMBERS ASCEND ONE OF SEVERAL MOUNTAINS.



**Maybe God** delayed our trip with the rain. ... **Maybe God** led us to stay in this village. ... **Maybe God** sent us on this trip just so this young couple could accept Him.

**At the next** crossing we step into the river, still wearing our boots. Our main task for the next three hours becomes trudging through the river and climbing over and sidestepping the smooth boulders of varying sizes and shapes that line the riverbank.

We enter a narrow canyon where waterfalls rain down on both sides. Paradise? This location might be a contender, but we emerge to find dark, low-hanging clouds. It begins to rain, and we clamor to the base of a cliff in an attempt to stay dry.

"If it has rained in the mountains, the trail we take will be muddy and dangerous," warns Norman, pointing to more clouds ahead of us. "We might not make it to the village."

This is discouraging news. Since the service Webb has planned for the village was scheduled weeks in advance, many ni-Vanuatu who travel to Vunakurekuem will be turned back.

"We have our itinerary and everything is ready to go," says Webb. "But if the rainstorm is as bad as Chief Norman thinks, we'll have to change our plans. But maybe God wants to take us somewhere else."

Staying optimistic in the face of adversity, Webb tells me, is the key to survival as a missionary in Vanuatu. No matter how much planning one does, he adds, something always goes wrong. That's a fact of life in a country made up of 83 mostly primitive islands.

We stop at a small garden along the river for lunch. The students boil a yam and leaves in a pot over an open fire. After the meal, Peter disappears into the garden and emerges a few minutes later with a watermelon in hand. Everyone cheers. But just as he cuts into it, the sky opens up and a torrential downpour begins.

We pile into a nearby hut. As the temperature drops and the minutes pass, our wet clothing becomes uncomfortable. Some pull off their shirts, socks and boots and hang them to dry. Others, resigned to the discomfort, lie down on the dirt floor for a nap. Norman seems eager to talk.

"Do you like living in America?" he asks me.



**SALVATION: EIGHT PEOPLE ACCEPTED CHRIST AT BONFIRE SERVICE.**

I tell him I do, and we start discussing our very different lives.

"What's your main responsibility as chief?" I ask him.

Norman tells me that he places leaves in various places throughout the village that alert people not to do something.

"So what would be something a person shouldn't do?"

"Last week I placed leaves near the river where fresh water prawns are," he said. "Because of the leaves people know not to take the prawns until I say it is OK."

Besides making laws Norman also settles disputes, plays host to guests and oversees most village matters. As the

firstborn male in a wealthy family, his role as chief was a given. But Norman also was groomed for leadership. His father sent him to live with Peter in Luwaiville on Santo so he could get an education and learn English. Though the acquisition of such skills was important, Norman says, he discovered something of far greater significance.

"The Peter family had devotions and went to church on Sundays," recalls Norman. "Their life was good. I wanted that for myself, so I became a Christian. Coming to the Lord changed me. There is peace in my heart."

We while away another two hours talking about God, Vanuatu, the United States and our families. Finally the rain stops, and we climb out of the hut. Everyone is eager to get moving because there is still a chance we'll make it to Vunakurekuem — but time is of the essence.

Only hours earlier the Jordan River was crystal clear, slow-moving and inviting. Now it is brown, thrashing and laden with debris. We cross it anyway by employing the buddy system: Everyone gets a partner and links arms. While one person steps, the other acts as an anchor, bracing himself against the current. The method is time-consuming, but no one slips.

With the sun setting, we realize making it to the village is unlikely. Norman pulls everyone together to discuss options. A few ni-Vanuatu want to keep going. George points out that the trail is dangerous enough during daylight hours. Norman patiently takes everyone's opinion into account before deciding what we'll do.

**“It’s not safe,”** he declares. “Babarro is the next village. I’ll ask if we can stay there.”

We follow Norman into the jungle. After climbing an escarpment, we walk through a well-tended field toward a tiny village inhabited by a Malmal tribe. The Malmal are tribal groups that have rejected Christianity and all forms of Western culture, evidenced by their refusal to wear clothing.

Norman enters the chief’s hut. Ten minutes later he returns and says, “We’re welcome here.”

A Malmal man leads us into the nakamal where three fires burn. A woman with a large bone piercing her nose tends one of them. The fires are used to boil water, cook meat, keep insects at bay and provide warmth. Poor ventilation leaves the hut smoky, and the ceiling is covered in a thick blanket of soot.

Webb, Peter and the students lead an impromptu service. At first, the villagers seem indifferent. But when Peter asks if anyone would like to receive prayer for sickness or to accept Jesus as Savior, most everyone goes forward. A husband and wife commit their lives to Christ, and suddenly the rain and our change of plans have significance.

Eager for sleep, I place large green banana leaves on the dirt floor for bedding and fall asleep to “maybe” scenarios. *Maybe God delayed our trip with the rain. ... Maybe God led us to stay in this village. ... Maybe God sent us on this trip just so this young couple could accept Him.*

The next morning, visibility is less than 20 feet in any direction. If not for our guides, we would get lost easily in the thick foliage of the jungle. But not knowing where one is going can be a good thing when challenges loom. Suddenly the trail ends at the base of an extremely steep hill — the kind of hill that will force us to climb rather than hike. To ascend it we use roots and ground cover as handles to pull ourselves up.

The short climb is made more difficult because of our backpacks, the 80-plus degree temperature, high humidity and rain-soaked soil. When we reach the top of the hill, we are drenched in sweat. It’s only 5:45 a.m.

The trail before us runs on the spine of the mountain and, by best estimates, has a 60-degree incline. Sheer drops are sometimes 50 feet, other times 5 feet off the trail. At the moment, anyone who is not ni-Vanuatu is thirsty, and all of us are desperately low on water.

Peter uses his machete to carve out footholds in the soil. With each step I become increasingly parched. Wampler has an altimeter on his watch. In just over half a mile we climbed 800 feet, he reports.

Under the shade of trees everyone stops. Wampler and I lick dew off some leaves. Peter chops a long-stemmed flower and tells us to drink the liquid inside. We peer into the stem and, seeing more bugs than liquid, politely pass on the offer.

I ask a student if he has any water. He happily hands me a well-used bottle with less than a cup of water in it. Wampler and I thank him as I pour it into our filter. We both get two squirts of water and hope it is enough to keep dehydration and heatstroke at bay.

After resting we climb another half mile before descending the other side of the mountain. Forty-five minutes later we reach the spring the guides told us about. Like men who have just found an oasis in a desert, we peel off our packs and jump into the water.

continued on page 47



LIVING LIFE: (CLOCKWISE TO CENTER) FATHER AND SON BONDING; AT THE SWIMMING HOLE; MORNING IN THE JUNGLE; LUNCH; PRAYERFUL MOMENTS; A STONE IDOL





**“It sounded good to let the weapons go, to live in peace and not fear,” says one of the men. “Today we tell our children not to fight, make trouble or kill men. Because of Jesus we live in peace.”**

**For the rest** of the hike, I take every step Norman takes. If he stretches from one rock to the next, I do the same. Norman and the other ni-Vanuatu know this trail like I know my backyard. Not only are their steps easier, they’re also wiser. Three hours later we have a little more than a mile and a half to climb before reaching Vunakurekuem. But our weakened legs make this part of the climb the most grueling and time consuming of all.

The only thing that keeps us going is that we can see the top of a tree Webb says is in the center of the mountaintop village. Somehow being able to see the tree, coupled with knowing there are people in the village who need to hear about Jesus, gives us the incentive to complete the climb.

We’re excited to reach the village, but our enthusiasm is short-lived. The village is nearly vacant except for a few men having lunch.

“Where is everyone?” Webb asks a man who has come to see who we are.

The man tells us there was a funeral in a neighboring village and a wedding in another. Almost everyone, he says, went to one or the other.

“When do you think they will return?” Webb asks.

“Some will tonight, some won’t,” he says, turning his attention back to the bowl of stew he is eating.

Webb and Peter decide to hold a service. If only one person comes and accepts Christ as Savior, the trip will have been worth it, says Webb.

At 6 p.m. the stars are shining and the bonfire we build roars to life. Though only four people other than our team are present, Peter and the students sing praise songs. Suddenly, as if drawn by the music and fire, people step from the surrounding darkness and join our tiny gather-



**FIRSTFRUITS: A PERCENTAGE OF CROPS ARE GIVEN TO THE CHURCH.**

ing. Twenty minutes later more than 25 men, women and children are worshipping.

Webb delivers a simple message calling everyone to salvation in Jesus Christ. When he asks who would like to accept Jesus as Savior, no one responds immediately. Then a young woman, with baby in arms, steps from the crowd.

“If you don’t want to be spiritually thirsty, you need to accept Jesus as your Savior,” implores Webb in Bislama, one of the primary languages spoken in Vanuatu. “Don’t be afraid to move. Come up here.”

Seven more ni-Vanuatu come forward to accept Christ as Savior. Webb, Peter and the students lay hands on each person and lead them in

a prayer committing their lives to Christ.

Later our team sits in the nakamal, eating roasted pig and chicken purchased from a villager. Each of us agrees that the trek was harder than we imagined it would be. But the effort has paid eternal dividends: 10 people now know Jesus as their Savior. As the fire flickers and we eat our meal, I am reminded of a conversation I had with Webb.

“Now these villages are on the map,” he told me. “By coming here we have opened the door for more ministry. The next time we come this way we’ll go farther. Many people in even more remote villages still need to hear about Jesus. They’re the reason we do what we do.”

I am not sure if his words are a promise or prayer. I just hope they become every believer’s challenge. **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN is associate editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*.

Originally published March 7, 2004.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).