

*Summer of '85—
Update on car project &
ecumenical ministry*

2 Bd. Abbane Ramdane
ORAN, ALGERIA
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Dear Friends,

Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, Joyous Easter and Powerfully Blessed Pentecost--these are our wishes for you all; and they are as real as they are belated.

What a joy it was for us last summer to see all the family again even if we were never all together at one time! And what a joy to see so many of our good friends even though we were also greatly frustrated in not getting to visit so many others widely dispersed from California to Florida to Montreal!

Although it was a bit fatiguing at times, we also enjoyed our two forays into Iowa. For a total of 22 days, we barnstormed the state, speaking 50 times in 42 different parishes plus two retirement homes and a video-taping studio. These engagements were in 33 different counties scattered all over the state and gave us the opportunity to see a great deal of the Iowa countryside. At the same time we learned a lot about how the farm crisis has affected the lives of the people there. We also spoke three times outside the state.

In our last letter we spoke of the new car project. We also had the chance to present that project to the Iowa churches in the summer after a few gifts had already come in. The car was desperately needed, and we knew the costs would increase the more its purchase was delayed. Hence we arranged some interest-free financing to cover all that was needed for the original purchase in France, trusting that gifts would come in fast enough to cover the big hunk of costs here (140% tax plus some fees) before that had to be paid. All that has worked out very well, and we have been making good use of the car since mid-December. However, most of the advance financing has yet to be covered. Other gifts are still very much needed to complete the project. That is Advance Special Project #009218-0 A-S. **PROJECT WAS COMPLETELY FUNDED LATER.**

We most truly appreciated the new R4/F4 as we drove to the General Assembly of our church held in Algiers. Then, as at a number of other times, we had to drive in the rain. How nice to have wipers that work properly, a floorboard that prevents geysers from soaking us when we hit puddles and a body that doesn't let water seep into the glove compartment and drip onto the knees of the rider in the right front seat!

The new car also made it possible to make two important trips to the south that we would not have risked in the old one. The first was similar to a trip some years ago (see letter of July 1980). At that time we went to visit a distant parishioner of the Swiss Reformed Church. This time it was to visit a German Lutheran. In both cases these were Protestant women accepted into the Catholic order of the Little Sisters of Jesus. Once again we had the privilege of sharing some 30 hours in the life of a small group of these nuns living in their home-made nomad tent in the midst of a small nomad community in the steppe lands of the high plateau at the northern edge of the Sahara. The sisters have a base group in town as well. The nights before and after our visit to the tent were spent with them. In town there is also a small group of the Little Brothers of Jesus, one of whom is the priest for the area. Father Jean Michel also works full-time with the Department of Hydraulics in that water-starved region.

We were welcomed by all, not just as the pastoral couple coming to see one Protestant in their midst but as a brother and sister in Christ. David was asked to lead in a time of meditation, sharing and prayer at the tent and again

back in town. Then early Sunday morning (2nd workday of the week here) we joined all the town group for mass before Father Jean Michel had to go to work and before we left for Tlemcen where David was to preach at mass in the evening. We had a late supper with our one Protestant family there and returned home after midnight.

We have spoken of "the tent." Actually, the sisters have two tents. Half the smaller one serves as chapel and the other half as a storage room. That tent also serves on occasion as guest bedroom. That's where we slept. The chapel half of it has a thick wool rug covering most of the sandy soil "floor." Fearing for the welfare of their tenderfoot, city-dwelling guests, they had asked Jean Michel to bring along a couple of narrow foam rubber mattresses to put on the rug. Besides all that, we had our heavy sweaters, ski jackets and sleeping bags; so we were quite cozy even though the temperature on rising at about 7 was only 36 F. inside the tent. At 9 it was only 32 outdoors in the shade, and the high for the day was a mere 46 in spite of glorious sunshine. That was January 31. Incidentally, the 2 preceding days had been much less pleasant due to a mini sand storm. Even the new car, tightly closed, was easily infiltrated by fine powdery sand. We had an oil change before heading back north!

The second trip took us further yet. We left on a Sunday morning around six. Early morning clouds soon disappeared and we had good weather for the whole trip. By 12:15 we had crossed the high plateau and arrived at the only large town in the area with about 1 1/2 gallons left in our tank. As we approached the town, there was a large filling station along the highway--out of gas! This forced us into town instead of going by on the highway. In town there was but one other station, likewise out of gas! How far to the next town with a gas station?... Nearly 100 miles! When would the gas truck come to fill the reservoirs?... Around 2:30-3:00, which we knew meant more likely 3:30-4:00, whereas we had announced to friends in Bechar that we would be there (some four more hours down the road) by 4 to 5 p.m. We were to have supper with them before our house-church service at 8. It began to look as if we'd be lucky to arrive by 8 for the service.

David explained our predicament to the attendant and asked where the post office was, knowing that was the place he could find a public telephone to call our friends in Bechar. But, of course, the post office is closed from noon till 2! So David set off on foot for the tourist hotel at the edge of town. At least it would be open during the noon hour and would have a phone they might let him use.

Carol stayed with the car so as to be sure to remain first in any line that might start forming. David had been gone minutes and Carol had just barely had time to settle down with her book when the few remaining people in the streets disappeared to enjoy their noon meal at home. Then the attendant came up to ask her to drive around to the other side of the station. She assumed that was where the line would have to start forming to leave space for the big gas truck that would eventually come up to the pump area to off-load its precious liquid. Once on the other side, she discovered that the attendant had squirreled away a jerrycan with about 5 gallons of gas that he immediately started pouring into the tank. As soon as she'd stammered surprised thanks and paid, he sent her on her way rejoicing. It was one more of our many experiences of traditional Arab hospitality, and that is what got us to our destination on time.

Fifteen adults and three children filled the living room for our worship service. We represented seven nationalities and four continents. One was a Catholic priest and five were of the Coptic Orthodox Church (Egyptian). None of the Egyptians understood much French, but one of them understood English quite well. So did our French host. So, David preached in English sentence by

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sentence, having the Egyptian translate into Arabic for those on his side of the room and the host translate into French for those on the other side of the room. Five or six of us understood the English, of course. Once again, in spite of our widely differing origins, we sensed that we were quickly welded into one community through our Christian fellowship.

The next day we had a lovely 6 1/2 hour drive south, skirting the western edge of the Great Western Dunes. We spent the next two nights with Mr. and Mrs. Solomon, both of them medical doctors from India, and their two children. They were just newly settled in the area after several years in the north, less than a two-hour drive from Oran. There we also had an evening house service--just the six of us, nearly 100 miles from any other Christians.

Their oasis town is nestled between the base of the great sand dunes and the hollow of a dry river bed that occasionally carries flash floods. Electricity reached there just a few years ago. The telephone is supposed to reach them this year, along with television, both using the same system of relay antennas. Fairly close by there is a tiny village perched up in the dunes. The second evening, we went there to have tea in the home of one of Solomons' friends--a male nurse. We were there through sunset. Peace and tranquility; open vistas with a clear, pure atmosphere; dune ridges and palm trees silhouetted against the sky and finally a black velvet heavenly vault star-spangled from horizon to horizon--what a blend of calm and beauty and majesty! Carol's comment: "If the Sahara were ALWAYS like this, it would soon be overpopulated."

The car has also been put to good use in our regular ecumenical ministry, including David's preaching at Sunday night masses in the area. Since the beginning of the "WEEK" of prayer for unity in January, he has preached at the cathedral, three other times here in Oran and four times in other cities from 50 to 150 miles away. In our Protestant Church context, we also have the monthly trip to the Brazilian camp (a two-hour drive) and our trip to serve the English-speaking group 25 miles east of us every other week. Even for our local Protestant meetings here in Oran, the car plays a key role. We often have to take the African students back to their respective campus housing units scattered from one extremity of the metropolitan area to the other. They can come by bus but cannot always count on buses getting back fast enough to arrive before the student restaurants close. When they stay for supper with us after our evening ecumenical Bible study group, they are totally dependent on us--the buses have stopped running well before we finish. Fortunately we usually have at least one other person with a car to help us. Nevertheless, we have had occasion to squeeze seven people into our mini-station wagon, which is intended for only four. SO A HEARTY THANKS FROM US AND THE STUDENTS AND MANY OTHERS TO ALL WHO HAVE HELPED (OR WILL HELP) WITH THE CAR PROJECT!

Fraternally yours,

David and Carol Butler