

Secret Agent Man

Fifty years ago doctors told Dutch evangelist Andrew van der Bijl that he was “too weak to travel” because he suffered from chronic back pain. That bit of medical advice now seems absurd. This veteran preacher, known as Brother Andrew by his adoring supporters worldwide, has done nothing but travel since his outreach to the persecuted church began in 1955.

So far the man who shouldn't travel has visited 125 countries and logged an estimated 1 million miles since his first missionary trip. He's gone through at least a dozen passports but miraculously has never lost a suitcase. He has survived one plane accident, but he says the impact of that crash in the early 1970s actually healed his back.

His amazing journey started with a drive from his home in Alkmaar, Holland, to Warsaw, Poland, where he first witnessed the suffering of churches behind the Iron Curtain. Then came Czechoslovakia. Then he drove his blue Volkswagen—which came to be known as his “miracle car”—to Yugoslavia. Next came East Germany, Bulgaria and Romania. Then came trips to Russia and China.

Brother Andrew's travels never stopped, but they became more dangerous. In the 1950s and 1960s he successfully transported thousands of Bibles into communist countries, and a 1967 book about his adventures, *God's Smuggler*, gave his ministry the worldwide support he needed to expand. After the biography increased his visibility and made it difficult for him to travel in the communist bloc, he began focusing more of his attention on the Middle East.

Today he is 76, and the organization he founded, Open Doors With Brother Andrew, has 27 offices around the world, 350 full-time employees and an army of volunteers. They smuggle 1 million Bibles to China annually and distribute tons more to 45 other countries.

That's not too bad for a guy who was told he shouldn't drive or get on a plane.

When Charisma interviewed him at his home in Holland recently, he was preparing to fly to Pakistan, where he frequently conducts large-scale evangelistic events. As long as his health is good and the suffering church needs Bibles and face-to-face encouragement, Brother Andrew says he must go.

Born to Be Wild

We might be tempted to glamorize Brother Andrew's daredevil life, as if he were a Christian version of James Bond or Indiana Jones. But he flatly rejects such comparisons. "I am not an evangelical stuntman," the white-haired evangelist says defensively. "I am just an ordinary guy. What I did, anyone can do."

His early years were shaped by enormous challenges. During the German occupation of Holland he hid in ditches with other teenage boys to avoid being drafted by the Nazis. He often ate tulip bulbs to survive food shortages.

When he became of fighting age he went to Indonesia with the Dutch army—until a bullet shattered his ankle and sent him home. The bloodshed he witnessed in Indonesia shaped his views of war and drove him to alcohol until he surrendered his life

to Jesus in a tiny room in the attic of his parents' home. In 1950 he answered the call to ministry in an evangelistic tent crusade.

Then the real adventure began. After he told God he would go anywhere for Him, his ankle was miraculously healed and he enrolled in Bible college in Scotland. His back problems prevented him from graduating, but the lessons he learned at World Evangelism Crusade's training center in Glasgow prepared him for a spiritual battle far more challenging than anything he experienced in Indonesia as a commando.

A defining moment came in 1957, when he pulled his Volkswagen up to a security checkpoint at the border of Yugoslavia. He had dozens of Bibles hidden in the tiny car, and he had to deliver them to desperate Christians who were starving for God's Word. Just before the guard began the search, Brother Andrew breathed this prayer:

"Lord, in my luggage I have Scripture that I want to take to Your children across this border. When You were on Earth, You made blind eyes see. Now, I pray, make seeing eyes blind. Do not let the guards see those things You do not want them to see."

God answered his prayer. The guard didn't see the Bibles even though they were visible in his opened suitcase. Andrew drove his car across the border, then met with small congregations huddled in clandestine locations. He found them in Budapest, Prague, Cluj and Moscow.

There, in those dimly lit meetings, Brother Andrew met his flock. These were the people he was called to serve. They did

not want sermons as much as they wanted companionship. His presence was their reminder that the church in the West had not forgotten them.

He was a heavenly secret agent on a divine mission, and he says he never once felt fear—not when questioned by snooping border guards, Russian KGB officers or—in more recent years—Saudi Arabian police.

“I have never really felt danger,” he says, his blue eyes still sparkling with youthful energy. “There really is no danger, unless you are living your own life.”

That sense of mission has kept him calm in perilous situations. Once when he preached in Colombia, guerrillas pointed guns at him throughout the sermon. In 2001 he visited the home of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the late founder of the Hamas terrorist group, and shared Christ with him. In Lebanon, he distributed Bibles to a group of hostages who were being held in a prison.

Fear is simply not in Brother Andrew’s vocabulary. Show him an obstacle and he will figure out a way to sneak past it. Show him a terrorist and he will embrace him with open arms.

For anyone interested in sharing the gospel with a radical Islamic insurgent, Brother Andrew shared this advice with Charisma: “When you see a guy with a gun, go put your arm around him and he will not shoot you. If you are far away from him it is easier for him to shoot you! That is my attitude toward any terrorist group. I have been to the Hezbollah guys in Israel. We may be the only Jesus they ever see.”

Despite such daring, Brother Andrew has been arrested only a handful of times, in Egypt, Russia and Saudi Arabia.

“But I have never lost a Bible,” he says emphatically.

No one really knows how many Bibles Andrew and his organization have smuggled into closed countries. In 1981, during an ambitious effort called Project Pearl, Open Doors delivered a shipment of 1 million Bibles to China by way of a huge sailing vessel. But Brother Andrew has disdain for numbers because churches tend to measure success with arithmetic while ignoring what really matters.

“I don’t care about statistics. I place a strong emphasis on people,” he says.

How many Bibles have Brother Andrew and his ministry distributed during the years?

“We don’t count,” he says with a shrug. “Millions. But God is the perfect bookkeeper. He knows.”

The Giant Killer

It’s no surprise that this man who has smuggled so many Bibles into unfriendly territory would have a few Bibles of his own. Actually he has more than 1,000 of them displayed in his study at his home in the Dutch town of Hardewijk.

There are French, Polish, English and Chinese Bibles, and dozens of other translations. There are tiny New Testaments

(he convinced a company to publish pocket-size Russian New Testaments because they are easily smuggled) and a huge Dutch Bible, the translation of which predates the King James Version.

For Andrew, these books represent the most powerful weapon known to man, and the only hope for a lost world.

“How can they ever love the Savior if they do not have His Word?” he asks.

Brother Andrew was one of the few Christian leaders in the West who predicted that communism would fall. In the late 1970s he stated publicly that the Soviet empire would soon collapse, at a time when many American “Bible prophecy experts” were declaring that the Antichrist would emerge from the Soviet Union and take over the world.

Andrew didn’t believe such foolishness. While Westerners were cowering in fear of Soviet dominance, he was busy taking loads of Bibles into Soviet prisons and encouraging jailed pastors in every Soviet republic. He was never intimidated by anything with a communist label. To him, the Soviet regime was a noisy Goliath that would ultimately face a fatal blow to the head.

“Communism was a very stupid philosophy,” he says bluntly. “It is stupid to say there is no God. I saw the emptiness and the hypocrisy of it.”

Today, Brother Andrew is eyeing the more formidable giant of Islam, which he considers more dangerous because of its 1,400-year history.

“As far back as 1978 I was telling people that Islam will soon be a much greater threat than communism ever was,” he says. “Russia never had more than 6 percent of its population following communism. Meanwhile Islam has its own book and far more dedicated followers.”

That does not mean he is cowering in the face of the Islamic Goliath. Indeed, Brother Andrew has given the rest of his life to challenge it.

While Open Doors works in many parts of the world, Brother Andrew conducts almost all his efforts in Islamic nations. In 2004 he released his latest book, *Light Force*, which chronicles his efforts to evangelize the most hard-core Islamists in the Arab region.

He has distributed Bibles and copies of *God's Smuggler* to gun-wielding Hamas soldiers (the Arabic version is titled *In Spite of the Impossible*). Yasser Arafat, who died in November, knew Brother Andrew personally and even allowed *God's Smuggler* and copies of the Jesus film to be sold in a Bible bookshop in Gaza. Andrew says thousands of Arabs have read or seen the gospel as a result of his friendship with the Palestinian leader.

Though he doesn't cower to fear, Brother Andrew has faced painful heartache through the years, especially after he became friends with Christians in the Arab world. Some of them have been martyred. Just one week before *Charisma's* interview, three of his friends were murdered in Afghanistan.

Dealing with such tragedy is the most difficult part of his job. Says Brother Andrew: “Liberal Christians tell me I should

just leave [Muslims] alone, but I know we must go to them. People say to me, 'Isn't it cruel to win converts, and then see them killed?' I tell the liberals that it is better that these [converts from Islam] are now with Jesus in heaven than for them to be in hell."

Andrew's feisty, unorthodox ways often have put him at odds with traditional churches that don't appreciate his radical approach to Christian faith or his sense of urgency about evangelism. In fact he has been kicked out of three churches during his lifetime—for being too zealous.

At age 23 he was dismissed from the Dutch Reformed Church because he witnessed to others about Christ. (The denomination at that time frowned on evangelism.) Later he was labeled an apostate because he was baptized in an evangelical church. He was also thrown out of a Baptist church because its leaders didn't approve of his preaching to Pentecostals.

Although he is quite open about his Pentecostal experience, which occurred in the late 1950s, he refuses to describe himself as a Pentecostal or charismatic—because, he says, he "hates labels." He has absolutely no use for denominationalism.

"Once you are out there [in countries where Christians are persecuted], denomination plays no role," Brother Andrew says. "In China, you don't ask, 'What is your denomination?' We are not playing church. That is a game that God hates."

Love Is His Weapon

When a teenage Brother Andrew was fighting in Indonesia in the

1940s, he carried a gun and at least once participated in an ambush that resulted in horrific civilian casualties. The carnage he saw haunted him for months—and eventually brought him to the feet of a forgiving Savior.

But you won't find a gun in his house today. He has a strong distaste for violence—and is outspoken in his criticism of most military operations, including the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq. He hopes that his new book will help convince Christians—and perhaps government officials on both sides of the Atlantic—that the only road map to peace in the Middle East involves compassionately sharing the gospel of Christ.

"The Bible is better than a bomb," he says, hopping on his favorite soapbox. "I can't imagine Jesus flying in an F-16. We have no right to liquidate people."

He states clearly that he is not a pacifist, in the true sense of the word. He has always been quick to condemn violence perpetrated by Muslims, especially their grisly suicide missions.

But he doesn't think it's smart to fight fire with fire. He bases his strategy on Jesus' words in Matthew 5:44: "'Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you'" (NIV).

Brother Andrew's insights about terrorism have paved the way for him to advise governments. During Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure as Soviet prime minister, Brother Andrew found himself offering spiritual advice to a top Gorbachev aide.

The official, who represented the most powerful atheist regime

in history, told Brother Andrew in that 1988 meeting: "If only we could go back to the simplicity of the gospel."

Today, L. Paul Bremer, the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, calls Brother Andrew regularly. So do several U.S. congressmen, some of whom credit him for the 1998 passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, which seeks to protect the rights of all people of faith.

Knowing the Middle East as well as he does (he has visited there 55 times), he has the same advice for all lawmakers: Get smart and stop using violence.

"We are often more politically minded than we are spiritually minded," he says. "The more you fight [radical Muslims] militarily, the more they will fight. Almost all the actions the West takes are creating more fundamentalists and terrorists."

With a hint of frustration he adds: "Understanding Islam could have saved America billions." Then with a boyish smile he diplomatically adds: "But I don't like to get into politics."

Brother Andrew has a peaceful method to resolve this conflict with radical Islam, but it is a strategy most leaders in Washington and Baghdad aren't likely to adopt anytime soon.

"I go to them. I give them a Bible," he says. "I give them a copy of my book. I am Jesus to them."

Even Saddam Hussein? Even Osama bin Laden and radical Iraqi leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi? Brother Andrew doesn't consider

anyone outside the boundaries of God's mercy.

He replies: "I believe everyone is reachable. People are never the enemy—only the devil."

Brother Andrew will be a vessel of that love as long as he can drive a car, fly in a plane or walk through the dusty streets of Damascus or Gaza City or Cairo.

As long as there are terrorists in the Middle East—and Christian converts being martyred anywhere on the planet—Brother Andrew will go to them. If war continues to rage, he will dodge American bullets and Muslim suicide bombers to find anyone who needs the gospel.

The Fine Art of

SMUGGLING

Open Doors has perfected the art of 'delivering' Bibles.

Johan Companjen doesn't like the word "smuggle." It sounds so ... illegal. But he admits that the Open Doors ministry still "unofficially delivers" millions of Bibles to countries where Christianity is restricted.

That would include places such as China and Vietnam—where many Christians don't have Bibles and those who do are often jailed, tortured or killed.

Today an estimated 400 million Christians face religious persecution. Open Doors, founded by Brother Andrew in 1955, is the world's largest ministry to the suffering church. Companjen, 58, international president of

the ministry, was personally trained by Brother Andrew after traveling with him for 14 years.

In this day of satellite phones and digital cameras, smuggling is not the same as it was when Brother Andrew stuffed his tiny blue Volkswagen with New Testaments. "The old way of smuggling, like Brother Andrew first did, has in some cases changed to much more efficient ways to get Bibles to closed countries," Companjen says.

The ministry's couriers delivered 4 million Bibles, children's Bibles and other Christian materials to persecuted Christians in 45 countries in 2003. Some of the ministry's workers have been stopped at border crossings or imprisoned. But Companjen says he is not aware of any of his workers who have been killed in the line of duty.

"Looking back," he adds, "this is one of the many miracles—that we have had so few real problems."

J. Lee Grady, editor of Charisma, interviewed Brother Andrew last summer in Holland.

For more information about Open Doors With Brother Andrew, write P.O. Box 27001, Santa Ana, CA 92799, call 888-5-BIBLE-5, or log on at .