

GOD IS WORKING IN Central Asia

Lives are being changed in the Central Asian Republics through the power of the Good News. This intriguing part of the former Soviet Union is made up of five countries - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - all of which gained independence in the early 1990s.

Since that time, in two or three of the “Stans”, there has been a relatively open door to aid and input from the West. While the majority religion is Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church has a strong presence, there has been a dramatic growth in the evangelical or Protestant church, even though many of the new believers face persecution from their families and villages.

In the last few years, in the country we know best, this growth has levelled off, or even decreased. And the door is less open now - new laws threaten to limit the work of NGOs and already restrict the activities of Christian believers, both national and expatriate. But local pastors rebuke the fears of foreign workers by saying: “Where is your faith? God will be glorified!”

Big issues like corruption, poverty, unemployment, rampant inflation, political instability and economic turmoil lead to a widespread sense of hopelessness among the common people. Here and there, though, people are finding hope and faith and lives are being transformed.

Some are ready...

On one of those public holidays when businesses and schools were closed but our small, inter-church theological college was working, a woman came in asking to see the principal. Tania said she had come to offer her help – in translating, or in any other way – as she wanted to be of service to “Americans”. As she spoke, tears started flowing, and we took her off to a private office. There she poured out years of hurt and misunderstanding and her longing to be involved with foreigners because with them she sensed more acceptance. We had no answers except to point her to the One who could meet her needs. And there and then she prayed to receive the Lord into her heart.

Tania loves speaking English and she attends the International Fellowship. She bought an English Bible, preferring that, but providentially found a Russian Bible in her workplace. She reads some of this each day and is making progress in understanding.

Some take time...

Chinara is a poorly-paid doctor who came to an English Club. Having three children already she was distressed to find she was

pregnant again. With her surgeon husband's encouragement she was going to have an abortion, a very common way out in this part of the world. After our lesson one day she mentioned her predicament to Gulnara, another member of the group.

Gulnara has been a keen and dedicated believer, involved in ministry for more than ten years. She was harshly persecuted by her family in the early days but from the beginning forgave them - and some believed. Divorced, with three young children, she lives hand to mouth, but continues to work joyfully, largely unpaid, in her church, evangelising, teaching the youth, caring for the poor, and leading Bible studies. Every new arrival in the English Club called forth Gulnara's loving care and evangelistic effort. Sometimes I had to urge her to take it easy in class, when her bold forthrightness upset some! Often after the lesson she would spend an hour or two talking with one or another in the courtyard, interested in them, sharing in their problems. She followed them up with invitations to her home, in time to her church, and built friendships with them.

Gulnara poured time and love into Chinara, and after a week or two she let me know with delight and praise that Chinara had decided to go ahead with the pregnancy. Gulnara's family and Chinara's family became close, and Chinara's children started going to Sunday School. After a while Chinara began going to church occasionally. It took time, but at last Chinara was ready to enter the Kingdom.



Some are 'not yet'...

For several years I ran an English Bible Study group. For believers like Gulnara, it both helped their English and increased their understanding of the Word. But it wasn't only believers who came along. Two young women who were at least nominally of the majority faith were the most regular attendees. They loved singing songs of praise at Easter and Christmas and they showed a real perception of some of the truths that were being discovered. But although they intellectually agreed with and believed what they were reading, they were not ready or able to take the step of faith into a new life. The seeds have been sown... pray for fruit to develop.

Some are captive...

A band of our workers regularly visits a women's remand centre, at the invitation of the prison director ("I want to keep the women, women," he said) and with official permission. The visitors take in necessities like soap and shampoo, toilet paper and candles, and when they have the funds, more expensive things like metal buckets for the cells and seed for the vegetable garden; they also have a message to share. There are times of discouragement, when no one seems very interested, but there are other times when women ask for prayer and teaching. "We're all hard-core criminals," said one. "Tell us what God's Word says!" On a recent visit, the visitors found that one woman had come to the Lord a few days before.

Another woman in her cell had shared the gospel with her and all the women in this cell were now reading the Word and praying together. Our friend wrote: "Indeed it is God who causes the growth! How can we not continue to go out there while the doors are open?"

Some are moving ahead...

In the theological college we had the privilege of getting to know and training some of the most committed of the Lord's servants. One older lady, retired and widowed, wanted new direction for her life, and persisted through physical and mental struggles to prepare herself to be more useful in

her church. Two fine young men, already pastoring growing churches out of town, committed themselves to two years' study. Burning the candle at both ends they found little time for doing homework. When I ignorantly suggested doing some study on the hour-long bus journey morning and evening, Esen sheepishly told me he usually slept en route. How encouraged we were when we attended the official opening of his church in a freshly-painted, converted village house and witnessed the joy and zeal of his little flock.

One thirty-ish man was sent, a little reluctantly, by his large Pentecostal church. He was a rather unusual fellow, a bit gauche, and not particularly academic. Those interviewing him wondered whether to accept him as a student. But they did, and through three years of study, with a few hiccups along the way, Talantbek progressed and matured and developed into a trustworthy and sound pastoral candidate. He even married one of the most promising girl students. The senior pastor at his church was so taken by the changes evident in Talantbek's life that he

sent seven more students to the college the next year.

Some are moving out...

Ainura is a young woman with a heart for missions. For several years now she has drawn around her a mission prayer movement. Prayer and training conferences have been held, resources prepared, and a "foreign missions society" established. Participants are taught that when sent out they should expect to hold a job in order to support themselves and their families. Ainura provided a model at home base when she took a part-time job in an NGO and devoted the remainder of her time to promoting prayer, oversight and training. It's all very new, but already one couple has crossed the border into a foreign land and another is to follow. Others are heading in other directions. The evangelical church in Central Asia is young, it suffers hardship and persecution, and yet it is sending out workers into the harvest field.

While some activities and involvement may need to be curtailed because of the restrictive new laws, there is no doubt that the Father will continue to work and to draw people to Himself in Central Asia. He is building His church, and it is our privilege to partner with Him and His local children in that process of transformation. ☺

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