

"How in the world did I end up here?"

It's a question I often ask myself while I'm being force fed sheep's ears and other nasty bits, or travelling by minibus across town with my nose pressed in the armpit of some guy I've never met, or working in a system where corruption and exploitation seem the norm.

I am a nurse working in health related community development work in a Central Asian republic. I joined IS in 2003 when I decided it was an excellent way to combine my desire for travel and adventure with my desire to use my profession

to truly impact the kingdom of God. I'd never even heard of this little country in the middle of nowhere until IS introduced me to it... now, almost five years later, I am about to return for my second term as an IS partner in Central Asia. It is strange, but oh so exciting how God takes you on such incredible journeys for Him.

Central Asia is a huge landlocked area of Asia, with China to the east and Russia to the north. It has high passes and mountains, vast deserts, and treeless grassy steppes, and the Great Silk

Road and the mighty Genghis Khan are exotic memories woven into the fabric of its history. More recently, though, it was part of the USSR - a legacy which many are still trying to recover from. Central Asia is an incredibly fascinating and beautiful place; the culture is diverse and multi-ethnic, with Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians, Ukrainians and Germans, and a small number of Uighur, Dungan (Chinese Muslims) and Koreans.

Economically, the countries are not in great shape. Unemployment is high in the area I live, and many live a 'hand-to-mouth' existence, living off the land and selling anything extra. The majority of the people are literate, and education is available to most, including women. However the health care system is inadequate and illnesses resulting from poor diet and hygiene are a major health issue, as are mental health problems. HIV/AIDS is becoming a major problem as drugs are trafficked through Central Asia from Afghanistan up into the north.

My first term in Central Asia mostly involved language learning. Russian is not the indigenous language of the country but is commonly spoken, particularly in government, educational and health areas. It was my first attempt at learning a language, and it was often quite a humbling experience! I studied at one of the local universities, which are not well equipped like NZ universities, and frequently suffered with a sore back from being squished into wooden benches

designed for children! The buildings were cold and damp and we would often be interrupted part-way through our lesson because the room had been double-booked.

Since finishing full-time language study I have worked with a non-government organisation committed to sustainable community development. Much of my time was spent visiting rural areas, visiting nursing schools and trying to ascertain the health needs of communities and the educational needs of nurses. On my return from Home Assignment I will relocate from the capital city to a 'less-served' provincial centre, where I will be involved in helping translate 'A practical guide to Mental Health Problems' into both Russian and the 'heart language' of the people.

Lives and communities transformed through encounter with Jesus Christ... it has been such a blessing, as a relative newcomer to mission, to see how that is lived out through my fellow workers, going about their normal lives, doing 'normal' jobs, seeking to serve communities in ways which best suit the interests of the people. It's tough work though, living in post-Soviet Central Asia. We are often treated with suspicion (I was told that it stems from a Soviet mentality coupled with a deeply imbedded Islamic mind-set) and ministering to people takes time and a whole lot of effort. But it is a work in which we persevere, doing our jobs as best we can as God's people,

trusting that He is in control, and being willing wherever and whenever possible to testify about Jesus.

How in the world did I end up here? God brought me here... and when He calls, He always provides the strength and resources needed to get through the challenges. I work alongside people from all walks of life – some are fresh out of university whilst others are using their retirement years to serve, some hold PhDs but others never attended university – what we have in common is that God called us and we responded. Is He calling you? ■

Rhonda is on Home Assignment until April 08, and can be contacted through the Interserve office.

