

Notes from the Edge of the World



Above: The Khan always looms large in Mongolia
Rev. Matthew Heise

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Lutheranism comes to Mongolia

I have often written how Mikhail Gorbachev's "glasnost" program in the late 1980s, whatever his intentions, opened up the former Soviet Union to the Gospel. That new "openness", though, also had an effect upon other communist countries that were not directly controlled by the USSR. In 1990, inspired by the changes taking place in the Soviet Union, young Mongolians pushed for a democratic revolution of their own. Step by step political reforms began to strip away the detritus of the old hated system. The Communist Party was now forced to compete in elections, the title People's Republic was dropped in 1992, and eventually the Party itself lost power in 1996.

Those heady days saw missionaries like Pentti and Marja Marttila from Finland come to Mongolia with hopes of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Mongolia had experienced a Christian presence in its past, but it was so long ago in history (7th century) that no one could recall it. (On page 64 in his book *The Lost History of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins writes about a Nestorian Christian cemetery in Kyrgyzstan and the gravesite of a Christian known as Tatt the Mongol- I've not yet seen this although I am now aware that I was only eight kilometers away while I was visiting another historical site. Definitely next time!).

In 1997 Nerguisaikhan Myadagmaa (hereafter, "Sainaa", for obvious reasons!) first heard the Gospel through his wife Hishigjargal ("Hishgee") who worked as a nanny for the children of the Marttilas. Hishgee and Sainaa began to discuss what it meant to believe in Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they became believers and in late 1999 asked the Marttilas: "Could we start church meetings close to our home?" This request was prayed over with the missionaries and literally at the dawn of a new century, January 2000, Sunday services were started at Sain Medee (Good News) Church in western Ulaanbaatar.



Above: Sainaa (37 years old) often leads the worship on his trusty guitar

Since that time, Sainaa has been looking for opportunities to learn more about that Faith. He first received some structured education from LCMS missionaries Leif Camp and Douglas Reinders in 2002 in Krasnoyarsk, Russia. After this initial exposure to Christian doctrine, Sainaa studied independently with LCMS Pastor Armand Boehme and Pastor Gennady Khonin of the Kazak Lutheran Church in Alma-Ata. Now through an agreement with Rev. John Loum, director of EIIT (Ethnic Immigrant Institute of

Theology) based at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Sainaa is a long-distance internet student.



Buddhism still matters

While teaching in Mongolia this past April, Sainaa explained to me how Buddhism still casts a heavy shadow over Mongolia. Look at the building in the picture above, right in the center of Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar. Seems normal, doesn't it? It is, but somehow a rumor was started that the building was inhabited by evil spirits. To this day, this perfectly normal building stands abandoned, already fifteen years! Such is the fear engendered by the spiritual world in Mongolia.

On the one hand, at least people there take the spiritual world seriously. But on the other hand, this inordinate fear causes problems for Christians. For instance, when a Christian dies, naturally the desire of the church is to have a Christian funeral. But it's not that easy in a culture where Buddhism dominates. The relatives usually demand a Buddhist funeral whether they themselves are faithful practitioners or not. They fear the consequences towards themselves if they don't hold a Buddhist funeral. There is no real concern for the wishes of the recently deceased, whether he or she happens to be a Christian or not. Held captive by their fears, they are more frightened of offending evil spirits.

So what can Christians do in such circumstances? Well it turns out to be a great opportunity for witness. After all, we serve a God who has conquered death. As St. Paul reminds us in Romans 8, if God is for us, who can be against us? Sainaa tells me that in

practice he has agreed with Buddhist priests that they can both hold the funeral at the same time. In a situation strangely akin to Elijah's battle with the priests of Baal in the Old Testament, during a funeral Sainaa has a captive audience in which he can proclaim the certainty of Christ's victory over death to those of a Buddhist background. He and the priests basically flip a coin as to who goes first.

Sainaa's service to the Gospel is on the front lines in a spiritual battle with the forces of darkness which Buddhism represents. I remember Mende, the leader of a congregation in Zuunmod, telling me last year that his father had come to faith before his death. Although Mende hadn't been certain as to whether his father had become a believer, he related that as he lay on his death bed with Buddhist relatives surrounding him, his face began to shine. Mende's father said that he saw Jesus coming for him. Then he died. Naturally the Buddhist relatives were stunned and wanted to know more about this Jesus! So in parts of the world where there has been little Christian witness over many centuries, the Holy Spirit is now working overtime to penetrate hearts with the knowledge of Christ!

Update: Please pray for Sainaa. He has had a mild heart attack recently and is experiencing enough problems that he will need surgery. Please pray for his health and the doctors and nurses ministering to him. Also pray for his wife Hishgee who is expecting their fourth child in September.



Above: Ingrian Lutheran seminary student Boris Chuprov

We are overwhelmed with grateful thanks to the Lord for his healing hand on our LCMS Eurasia accountant, Karen Roemer in Germany, and seminary student Boris Chuprov in St. Petersburg. Karen is now back to work and more importantly, completely cancer free! Boris, who suffers from HIV/AIDS, is now sufficiently healthy to return for classes at the seminary in the Fall. Thanks be to God!

Prayer Requests: In addition to the prayers for Sainaa and Hishgee, as well as prayers of thanks for Karen and Boris, please pray to the Lord ...

...for the health of Aima in Kyrgyzstan and for God's protection for the church there and Dr. Robert Rosin during his current visit.

...in thanksgiving for my safety. I have traveled a lot lately, and God's angels have been watching over me, for which I am very thankful. Please pray for a safe journey back to the USA for classes and vacation on July 14.

...in thanksgiving for a successful conclusion to the 2009-10 school year at the Ingrian Lutheran Seminary in Koltushi.

... for the mission outreach of our Georgian evangelists, engaged now in sensitive work.

Mail Issues---A few notes about the mailing address--- It appears that my mailing address in Russia is no longer accessible. Since I only get to Moscow three times a year now, it is probably best for anyone wanting to mail anything to use my parents' address in Michigan. I get there twice a year and it is more reliable than the Moscow address. Since I am in a different country every month, I hope you understand that I simply cannot regularly access "snail-mail". Thanks!

E-mail: matveih@yahoo.com --- New Mailing address- 26650 Woodshire, Dearborn Hgts., MI., 48127. To support my work financially, you can send a tax-deductible gift to: LCMS World Mission, 1333 S. Kirkwood Rd., St. Louis, MO 63122-7295. Make checks payable to LCMS World Mission. Mark checks "Support of Matthew Heise." If you would like to partner with me in my ministry with ongoing support as an individual or congregation, please contact Debra Feenstra for information on Together in Mission or Mission Senders at 1-800-248-1930 Ext. 1651 or Debra.Feenstra@lcms.org Thank you, and may the Holy Spirit's fire infect you!