

Monday 16th November

Introducing Kazakhstan

Central Asia is a part of the world that most Westerners aren't very familiar with. Beyond the Caspian Sea, it stretches for thousands of miles across mostly flat plains, the Steppe, until you finally reach the mountains, and beyond them, China. These are the lands of the ancient Silk Roads, and until 30 years ago they were locked away, inside the Soviet Union.



image of Kazakhstan by Flickr

Kazakhstan is the largest of the former Soviet Central Asian states. Indeed it's the largest land-locked country on earth, the size of Western Europe and home to around 18 million people. It is also the closest to Russia – geographically, politically and socially. Yet its people are very much Asian, and Muslims make up around 80% of the total.

Through the development of extensive natural resources, Kazakhstan's economy has grown steadily since independence in 1991. It has

developed a clear national identity centred around the Kazakhs, the majority people group who were traditionally nomadic herdsmen, yet with a strong inter-ethnic harmony among the 100 or so different ethnicities that make up the population.

It is also a land of contrasts, extremes and tensions. In the north, the winter is Siberian, lasting six months or more and with temperatures falling to minus 40 degrees; in the south, the summer is almost desert-like, with temperatures reaching over 40 degrees and plentiful supplies of melons, watermelons and more. In the shiny new city centres, full of glittering tower blocks and shopping centres, you could almost be in any modern city; yet in the villages it can feel like time has stood still since the 1960s, with basic small-scale farming and widespread poverty.

The older generations, still very much influenced by Soviet mentalities, see the world very differently to those who have grown up since the end of the Soviet Union and who are challenging cultural traditions and assumptions. Through the internet and social media, this younger generation is engaging with issues like freedom, choice, self-identity, consumption and environmental protection in ways their parents never did, and that can create a lot of tension in this fast-changing part of the world.

Please pray for Kazakhstan:

- That God would move across this vast land and redeem people from every ethnic group.
- That those left behind and living in poverty would not be ignored or forgotten.
- That there would be understanding and reconciliation between the generations.

Tuesday 17th November

The Kazakhs

The Kazakh people, about 70% of the population of Kazakhstan, are an ethnic group descended from the tribes led by Ghengis Khan. Islam was introduced around the 8th century, and the Kazakhs emerged as a distinct ethnic group in the late 15th century. For most of their history, they lived a largely nomadic lifestyle, moving their flocks and herds across the vast Steppe according to



unwritten customs. Their proud warrior-style culture is greatly honoured their grey-beard elders, with ancient stories retold in song on the dombra, a two-stringed guitar.

As Russian influence in Central Asia grew during the 1800s, urban settlements were built in some places, but the people's lives remained largely unchanged. However, following the Russian revolution, Moscow began to demand higher agricultural output from the land and to exert greater control

over the non-Russian ethnicities. In the 1930s, the Kazakhs were forced to settle and work in collective farms, despite lacking the knowledge or resources for such things. Their animals were slaughtered and more than one million people perished.

During Soviet times, huge numbers of people arrived in Kazakhstan. Some, including Koreans, Crimean Tatars, Germans and Turks, were forcibly moved from other parts of the country, whilst at least two million Russians came to take part in state-sponsored 'development' initiatives. This resulted in the Kazakhs becoming a minority in their own land by the 1980s. However following independence in 1991, as many non-Kazakhs moved back to their homelands and Kazakh birth rates remained high, this gradually reversed once more.

The Kazakh people remain incredibly welcoming, hospitable and proud of their heritage whereby many other ethnic groups live peaceably among them. Yet the trauma that they faced as a people group during Soviet times lives on below the surface, and some have likened it to an inner emptiness that has somehow robbed them of their soul. Their identity as Muslims is very clear, yet most have little understanding of their own religion, or any particular interest in seeking out spiritual truth.

Please pray for the Kazakh people:

- That God would bring healing and restoration from what they as a people have experienced.
- That there would be a desire to ask deeper questions and discover the truth.
- That a disciple-making movement would emerge among the Kazakhs.

Wednesday 18th November

Shymkent

Shymkent, located in the far south of the country near Uzbekistan and with a population of about 1 million people, is Kazakhstan's third largest city. You can watch a great 2-minute video of the city on this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0N_gcd_WKA



It was founded about 150 years ago as a Russian army town on a bend in the river, and became a typical industrial centre during Soviet times, producing lead (including most of the Red Army's bullets), bricks, phosphorous, tanks and cement, among other things. The city has a significant legacy of industrial pollution, particularly from the decades of lead smelting. Indeed, the high levels of lead contamination in the soil are thought by some to be part of the reason that people from Shymkent have a reputation in Kazakhstan for being a bit wild and lawless. These days, it is expanding fast as more and more people from the surrounding rural areas are drawn to the city to attend university and to look for better work.

The 'old city' is the area of the original settlement that existed before the Soviet planners enclosed it with their wide streets and imposing buildings in the standardised style. Even now, there's a very clear distinction between the newer parts with their apartment blocks and wide streets, and the old city with its narrow winding streets and closely packed dwellings. The government is rumoured to have plans to completely redevelop the whole area, primarily to remove inadequate housing and improve standards of living, though many thousands have lived there for generations.

This tower, attached to a mosque in the old city area, is believed to be the oldest building in Shymkent, and certainly one of the few with any continuing architectural interest. Proverbs 18:10 says that 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous run into it and are saved.' As attendance at Friday prayers in the city increases, may righteous people who are genuinely searching for truth in their own religion discover the name of the Lord himself and be saved!

Please pray for the people of Shymkent:

- That those drawn into the city for whatever reason would find more than just better prospects and be touched with the gospel in a way which enables them to take it back to their village too.
- That people would run to the right tower, and in their spiritual search find the One who can save.
- That the people living in the old city would be respected and treated justly as the government pursues new projects within that area.

Thursday 19th November

Islam and the Gospel in Kazakhstan

In the 1990s, when the country first became independent, there were huge needs everywhere here. The economy and much infrastructure had collapsed, everything had suddenly changed, and many people were desperate for hope, for stability, for a new life. As workers entered the country for the first time, they found people wide open to the gospel and huge numbers responded. It was a wonderful time of harvest.

Over time, as the country has found its feet and much of the population has gradually grown relatively affluent, attitudes and values have changed. The national and ethnic identity of the Kazakhs has strengthened, and the neediness of the 1990s has been replaced with the self-confidence of an emerging Eurasian nation that wants to forge its own path. Islam in Kazakhstan is largely a culturally acceptable belief system and most people have very little genuine religious understanding. However, religious observance is slowly growing as people seek ways to express their Central Asian identity and search for meaning beyond the material things that capitalism has brought.

Meanwhile, church attendance has been static or falling since about 2003, and many churches have retreated from meaningfully engaging with the world around them. In many places, a Christian sub-culture has grown up that is more Western-looking than genuinely embodying local Kazakh culture. As a result, it's not surprising that most Kazakhs would never consider going to a church, seeing that as the Russian religion, not their own.

A new wine skin is needed, and in some places it is emerging as believers are taught and encouraged to grow in their faith in culturally relevant ways and to build relationships with those around them, introducing them not to a different religion but a person, Jesus himself. These are encouraging signs! How we long to see Kazakh (and Uzbek, Tatar, Turkish etc.) Muslims in Kazakhstan following Jesus as his disciples, and teaching others how to also follow him – without problematic symbols and barriers like church buildings obstructing them.

Please pray for the Muslims of Kazakhstan:

- That those who are believers would find cultural relevant ways to share Jesus with their family and friends.
- That those who came to faith but have since slipped away would be re-awoken and return to their Saviour.
- That those who have never heard the good news would encounter it in a way they can accept, without unnecessary cultural barriers getting in the way.

Friday 20th November

A day in the life of a fieldworker

Here, a fieldworker in Kazakhstan shares what a typical day looks like.

“I’m normally the first one up, desperately trying to find some quiet and space to settle my heart and get the priorities of the day clear before the kids emerge. After breakfast we generally manage to squeeze in a quick family devotional with our three kids, which is always a great chance to talk about the big ‘why?’ questions!

The first hour of the day I’m on home-school duty, teaching Maths and supervising whatever other work they’re doing. After that, my wife takes over and I get some precious time at the desk: keeping on top of emails, studying for a Masters part-time, and engaging with the wider organisation in various ways. Two or three days a week I work at a local NGO overseeing the local leadership and teaching some English, but today I have time set aside for my weekly meeting with some key locals.

These three young men who began their own home-based fellowship have a heart for our city and reaching out to those around them. One of them runs a boxing training club which is a great opportunity to be a normal Kazakh guy (boxing is very popular!) but obviously carrying a very different spirit. We sit in a coffee shop together, read and discuss some Scripture, and talk through strategy issues together. It’s always a really encouraging time!

After lunch it’s back to the desk for a bit, in a quieter house while the kids are out at one of their clubs in the city. There’s language study to do (there are two key languages to learn here!) and preparation for other meetings, including for an online strategic prayer group for other workers in Central Asia later in the week. After the kids get back, our local team-mates arrive for an evening meal with us all, and we spend the evening talking and praying together about how we can see more effective discipling and equipping of those who have a passion to share in culturally relevant ways with those around them.

Once they’ve gone and washing up is finally finished, it’s definitely bedtime. Another busy day, but where better to be than in the place God has called you to, investing in people, and seeing him at work!”

Please pray:

- That God would continue to provide for and sustain field workers across Kazakhstan.
- That workers here would have wisdom in juggling all the demands on them, and perseverance for language learning, cultural adjustment, etc.
- That God would raise up more workers to come for the long-term and invest in his people.

Saturday 21st November

People growing in faith

We want to introduce you to one of the people our workers have had the chance to invest in, we’ll call her Julie. She’s 21 and came to faith about three years ago. She is a natural sharer! One of our workers met with her fairly regularly for about a year to look at the Bible together. However, when she left school and spent time in another city she drifted away and stopped walking with God.

Then she suddenly got back in contact saying she really wanted to meet. She told the worker of how she had realised that her choices were not good ones and how badly she needed God, his grace and

his healing and needed help to start following Him again. They managed to meet only a couple of times before the Covid lockdown, during which time the worker was concerned about how she was doing. Then she received a long message from Julie, parts of which are translated below.

"So much is happening right now and I have become closer to God. Every day I study and take steps of faith, I study the Book and fill myself with that, so my faith is getting stronger now and my confidence is growing...and when something rises up in my head, then I remember a verse, or I look for one...he speaks and makes promises to us and I am being set free from fear...I am making the decision not to be afraid but just to trust Papa God!

I am sure and know that Papa has a great plan prepared for me, and it seems that I will help people. A great desire has woken in me to bring value to this world and help as much as I can.

You can't even imagine how helpful lockdown has been for me. Everyone who sees me says 'Your eyes are shining, you are doing so much better!' and this is all Papa, he is filling me so much right now.

Papa especially gives us people, those we need, so please pray for me, for my health and my life."

Please pray:

- That God would continue to bring the right people into Julie's life so that she would continue to grow and share the good news.
- That others like Julie who are still young shoots would find the support and encouragement they need to grow into mature plants.
- That God would raise up more local people in Kazakhstan who can be shining lights in their communities.