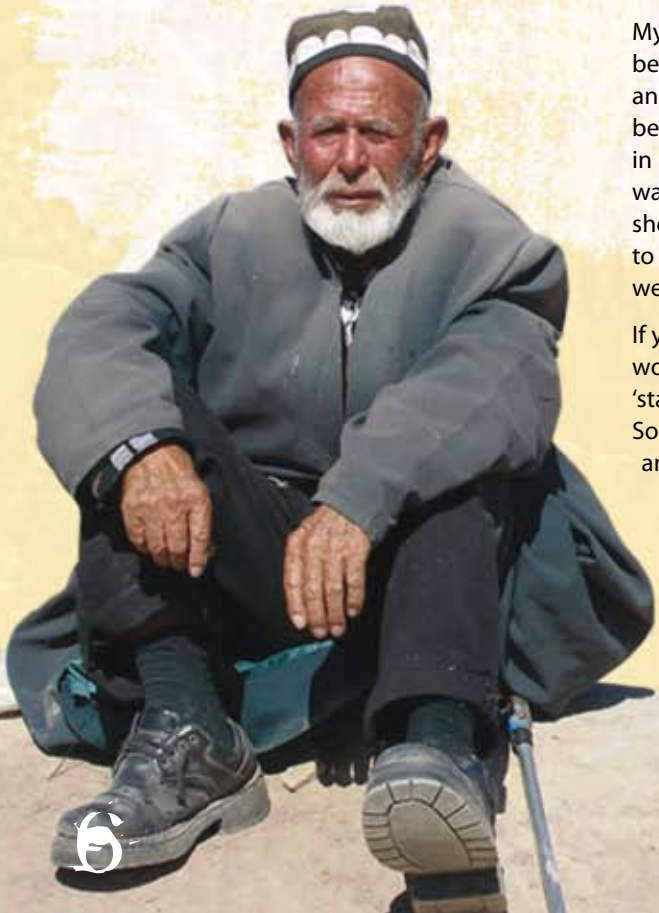


Encounters with Jesus in Central Asia



A few years ago a stranger approached my landlady at the local bazaar, and told her about a man who could help her with her problems. "Is he a rich man?" she asked, because she needed \$2000. The stranger was talking about Jesus, and he encouraged her to pray, which she did. A few days later, someone knocked at her door and asked to rent some of the rooms. When she asked how much they would pay, it was \$2000.

My landlady found out more about this faith and became a believer. Her attitude to her husband and family became more loving. As she stopped beating her children, they recognized the change in her and they too believed. When her daughter was desperately ill with typhoid, they prayed and she recovered. Her husband doesn't allow her to have regular contact with other believers, but we're sometimes able to pray and share together.

If you look in an atlas published before 1991 you won't find the Central Asian republics- the five 'stans' west of China. They were occupied by the Soviet Union for much of the twentieth century, and underwent huge upheaval after the collapse and withdrawal of the Soviet Union in the early nineties. However these are ancient lands, through which invaders, explorers and merchants such as Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great and Marco Polo travelled on their camels and horses along the Silk Road.

The Central Asian country I work in is predominantly Muslim, and the majority of the people live in serious poverty - the average annual income is only 2% of the average New Zealand income. They are people scarred by a history of violence and oppression, and feel powerless in the face of injustice, high unemployment and substandard public services. They long for their country to become peaceful and prosperous, but there is much political corruption, incompetence and naivety amongst the country's leaders: despite the authoritarian brutality of the Soviet regime, many people desire the return of the stability it brought.

Living in Central Asia is not easy, with extreme heat in summer and bitter cold in winter. Outside the main city there is limited or no electricity for four months of winter - ironically, the country ranks among the top in the world for water resources and electricity generation potential. Where I live, the water that comes out of the tap is often chocolate-brown dirty - we call it 'typhoid water.' My housing is much better than one of my visitors, though: I was shocked to discover she lived in a hovel, with cardboard boxes along one side serving as walls and a dirty drainage ditch running through the middle of it. She lived right next door to a grand embassy building.

I am a teacher working with educated adults: young professionals, bankers, business people, government workers and university students.

A taxi driver told us his story. He had been in prison - not a pleasant place - and a religious leader told him this was his destiny. The man was angry at God for this, but had a revelation of Jesus in a vision and said, "God, if you are real, of course I will follow you." Now out of prison, both he and his wife are believers.

It was very important for local people to be able to slot me into a role ("Oh, she's a teacher"), in order to accept me. They also value the contribution I'm bringing to their community: education opens doors to employment and further education opportunities, and is needed in order for the country to develop. Some of our former students completed further studies abroad before returning to Central Asia to take up high level leadership positions with international development and aid organisations.

School provides more than education, though - it also provides opportunities for students and staff to build meaningful relationships. Several women in my classes told me how they made supportive friendships and gained a sense of self-worth through school. In one particular class the women formed a strong bond, and a group of them would come regularly to my home throughout the summer break. They witnessed how God answered our prayers - for example, a student's mother who was desperately ill with a bleeding

artery in her neck recovered after we prayed for her. Some of these women and their families have become my long-term friends.

People are very hospitable, and I sometimes found myself in unusual situation, such as singing The Yellow Submarine at a karaoke party held to celebrate Women's Day. The philosophy was that we had to make the most of this day as it was the only day in the year that was any good for women! The hostess, a somewhat vodka-drunken Russian-speaking downstairs neighbour, ended up becoming a good friend, and proved to be a real help when I had a flood and unexpected intruders in my flat.

The local people generally think of Christianity as a foreign religion, and consider their own religion (mainly folk Islam) to be an integral part of their national identity. A handful of my friends, however, expressed a serious interest in Christianity as they saw it being worked out in my life.



a sixteen year journey

God has led me gently and step by step into cross-cultural work. It started back in 1992 when I made the decision to do something purposeful with the rest of my life. At the time I was picking carnations on a flower farm, which gave me plenty of time to pray for God to show me His direction for my life. I wasn't really considering going overseas because I wasn't a very confident traveller, but then in 1993 the door opened up for me to go on a short-term mission trip to Vietnam. It really inspired me, and since then I have spent a year in Russia, made two short-term trips to the mountain areas of Pakistan, and lived in Central Asia for two years.

Each trip made me more ready for the next, and caused me to grow in faith. I'm so glad that I went, as all the trips have been amazing highlights and growth periods in my life.

The decision to come to Central Asia was more difficult, as I didn't have a strong sense of calling to this country. But I came because I was available and needed, and was confident that I would be given sufficient support from inside and outside the country to enable me to do a good job. "Send me forth, Lord, bearing seed, destroying our fears, conscious of our needs."

When a 14 year-old neighbour became seriously ill with meningitis, we prayed for his recovery and, after two months in hospital, he came home. It was a delight to once again hear him singing in the stairwell and thumping out one-finger tunes on my old Russian piano.

My once-a-week cleaning lady became a loyal friend, and introduced me to her village relatives. She knew how to fix important things like telephone lines that wouldn't connect. Her sister



had died of tuberculosis, and over the months we walked through her grieving together. Although she still holds to her traditional superstitious beliefs she has recognized that God answers our prayers.

The church here is small, weak and doesn't seem to be growing. But I have a lot of respect for the local believers, who are unafraid to shine their light courageously. One pretty young woman has a visible joy; she is undeterred in her continued witness even after recovering from a tragic near-death encounter a few years ago, when a bomb explosion targeting young Christians succeeded in killing ten. There's a solo mother who bravely runs a business, undaunted by harassment from family and officials with their long interrogations; a flatmate who, even though only a young believer, steadfastly preached out in the villages despite there being strong opposition and demands that she stop; and the busy mother of five young children who took the time to patiently and sensitively befriend a lonely refugee woman of a different faith. These are just some of the people who give me hope that Christ is at work in this land. ■

Robin is currently on Home Assignment, and is available to share about her experiences with interested groups. Please contact the Interserve office for more information.

support

Living in Central Asia is not easy, but it's very worthwhile. The Interserve team I was part of was vital to my survival here, helping with orientation when I arrived and providing friendship, shared experiences and support. One wintry night I decided to stay over at my Interserve team buddies' house on the other side of town. They are Chinese. I can't help smiling as I remember... they were very concerned for my comfort, and since their bedroom was the warmest room in the house, they insisted I sleep at the end of their bed.

hospitality

One time I was invited to a student's house for dinner. She prepared a delicious feast of several different salads, chicken soup, traditional pilov with meat, dessert of fresh peaches and grapes, and, of course 'nan' bread. I wore my new cotton summer dress with large pink and yellow flowers on it, unaware that cotton is not considered a dressy or appropriate material to wear out to dinner! When I arrived at the rather affluent looking two-storey house the other students were dressed in stylish western clothes. So as to make me not feel out of place (a laughing comment was made that I was dressed for the beach), one girl went away and returned dressed in a borrowed frumpy oversized cotton dress, and clowned around in it to make us all laugh.

