STORIES: MONGOLIA

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You don't have to have a large church and a thriving economy to start sending missionaries.
Category: Observations

Mongolians are historically legendary warriors, forging an empire spanning from the Pacific Ocean across Asia to Eastern Europe. Genghis Khan has been called the â€˜Man of the Millennium.â€™ How could an illiterate man from an insignificant tribe be such a masterful military tactician? Mongol armies wore light, flexible chainmail and moved quickly on horseback. They were clever, feigning retreats, then surrounding the enemy by surprise. European soldiers in clumsy suits of armour were no match for these swift warriors and called them â€˜Tartars,â€™ or â€˜hell-beings.â€™

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, in order to pacify the great fighters, China encouraged and converted Mongolians en masse to Tibetan Buddhism. An ardent Tibetan Buddhist, the Mongolian king Altan Khan outlawed indigenous shamanism in the sixteenth century and gave horses to Mongolians for learning Buddhist sutras.
Over time Mongolia retreated from the international stage.

In the twentieth century, Mongolia gained independence from China and followed the USSR closely, with many Russian troops and advisors living in Mongolia.Â Though Mongolia was hidden behind the iron curtain, many Christians quietly prayed on.Â While the USSR used Mongoliaâ€™s natural resources, they also built modern infrastructure, hospitals and schools. So by the time of the Democratic Revolution of 1990, Mongolia had a near 100 per cent literacy rate. While Communism fed the body and filled the mind, it had failed to generate spiritual life. When the ban on religions was lifted, many Mongolians returned to Buddhism and shamanism.

Christianity is also making a return to Mongolia. Centuries ago Christian Nestorian traders and Roman Catholic priests had gone to Mongolia. Tribes such as the Kerait and Naiman had converted to Christianity and the famous khans Genghis and Kublai had Christians in their courts, alongside shamanists, Buddhists and Muslims. And after 1990, Christians from many nations came to serve the Mongolians and share the love of Christ.

In 1990 there were less than 10 known Christians in the country.Â Over the years, many Mongolians responded to the gospel, and while today the number of Christians is uncertain, the 2010 Mongolian National Census reported approximately 41,000 believers. There are now over 600 churches, and Mongolian Christians regard 1991 as the beginning of the Mongolian Church today.

Remarkably given their short modern history, Mongolian churches have sent out more than 20 long-term missionaries. In the 1990s, many gained the vision of taking the gospel to all the lands where the Mongolian Empire once reigned and many short-term teams were sent out.

Christians young in the faith had the zeal to â€˜conquer the worldâ€™ for Christ.

Soon, Mongolians found that the people in those lands could not be â€˜conqueredâ€™. They found they needed to learn the language and culture to build relationships. Wisely, some decided that repeat trips to the same people were better than going to random places, while others received a calling to live abroad long term.

Tsetsegee was one Christian who learned the value of longer-term service. While studying at Bible school in Mongolia she wrote her senior thesis, supervised by an OMF worker, on reaching the Mongolian diaspora in Asia.

After graduation, she put her learning into practice, joining a fledgling Mongolian mission agency made up mostly of Bible school graduates.Â Tsetsegee served in a nearby country for several years, and assisted a Korean missionary in starting a church. Later she translated the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) course materials into the local language. She is now back in Mongolia, but still has a heart for serving where she used to work.
More recently, with the help of others, she has begun an alcohol abuse prevention programme in another East Asian country.

Mongolians make good missionaries and we can learn a lot from them. Like the warriors of old, they travel light. They are good at learning foreign languages.Â They eagerly try and learn to cook new foods. They are adaptable. Mongolian Christians are used to being in the minority and they approach peoples of other faiths with respect. So how can we come alongside Mongolian missionaries?

We offer training in areas like a biblical understanding of mission, mission practice and history or care for cross-cultural workers.

Our experience in these areas is appreciated by nascent Mongolian mission agencies and sending churches as they learn how to structure themselves, and care for those they send while overseas and when they return home.Â Partnering with international missionaries has proved fruitful.Â One international team included a Mongolian woman for many years. They appreciated her tremendous faith and prayerfulness, while she appreciated their creative ways of working and their fresh ideas in reaching their neighbours.

Mongolians are again on the international scene, not as warriors of destruction but serving the Lord God as ambassadors of peace.

This story by Kirk Matthews comes from the OMF Billions Magazine