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Evangelicals reaching out in Central Asia: A Moldovan Experience

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God’s call to mission in the Islamic world

I would like to make a short presentation about the ministry we have performed in Moldova since 1998. In that year, using as a base the College of Theology and Education we started a new Missionary Department. Our vision was to provide good theological and mission education for students from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Caucasus. Firstly, I will give some characteristic features of the religious situation in the Central Asia.

The situation in the Central Asia and Caucasus

A. The situation in the early 90's

- There were very few Christian believers from the indigenous peoples of Central Asia and Caucasus.
- The Russian Orthodox Church was dominant.
- If there were quite a few believers among the nationals, they soon were Russified, and accepted the Russian view and style of Christianity.
- Therefore, for a Muslim to become a Christian meant to accept the Russian God and betray his people and his ancestor's religion.

B. Starting from the 90s there was an explosion of conversion to Christ from the indigenous people

- Russian churches were not ready to accept the new converts, because they themselves were under pressure.
- The desire for independence was often associated with a return to the ancestral religion, and therefore within Moldova the voice of Russian churches was perceived as anti-people and in a way even anti-religious.
- The government, for the sake of "peace" did everything possible to avoid tension in society, and therefore hindered the outside activities of the church to evangelize the local population, by threatening them to withdraw their registration.
- So, the church has grown largely due to national – indigenous – believers, their ability to share the Gospel and give their own testimonies in their own national languages. Of course, the Holy Spirit was at work.

C. Challenges faced by the indigenous churches in Central Asia

- The lack of experience in the organization of the church.
- The lack of trained leaders to preach, teach and build the church.
- The lack of biblical and theological knowledge.
- The lack of theological terminology.
- Lack of vision, how to effectively carry out the mission of God in their own countries.
- Lack of knowledge of Islam and the approaches to deal with Islamic believers in sharing the Gospel with them.
- The lack of research material on how to build a church that reflects the ethnic, cultural and linguistic nuances.

Although Moldova is a small country and the poorest economically in Europe, for many years a lot of Christians have gone out on the mission field throughout the post-Soviet space from Moldova. Moldova is located at the intersection between East and West. Being the gateway to the Orient, Moldova is a place for a strategic partnership on reaching Muslims in Central Asia. God has great plans for this multinational and mission minded Moldavian country.

In 1994, the College of Theology and Education was started with the efforts of local churches in order to train future ministers for the local churches. But very soon we understood that we were being invited by God to get out of our borders in order to be a blessing for many other countries. Due to knowledge of the Russian language and the opportunity to travel without visas throughout the former post-Soviet space, we turned our attention to the Muslim countries of the former Soviet Union.

Mission and Goals

The College of Theology & Education prepares men and women for Christian leadership in Europe and Central Asia. In order to accomplish its educational purpose CTE offers 4 bachelor degrees in Practical Theology, Mission towards Muslims, Social Assistance and Christian Education.

Students who complete these programs should demonstrate progress in Christian formation, know essential biblical and theological resources for ministry, communicate their understanding of the Christian faith to others, develop a theology of ministry as an expression of serving Christ, and demonstrate skills in the various practices of ministry.

Moldova – the strategic place for training MBB students

Moldova is a unique post-Soviet country due to the following benefits:

1. Political situation

- We have favorable laws for foreign student registration. Foreign students are legally registered during the entire period of study.
- Also we have a favorable visa regime. It is easy to get into the country and stay for 90 days which is enough for processing all the documents.

2. The economic factor

- Tuition fees are lower than in other countries in the region (This means lower than in Europe and the former Soviet Union).
- We have developed self-financing opportunities (our farm, our own bakery and so on).

3. The spiritual factor and vision

- The involvement of local churches (the students are accepted in local churches to participate in regular church services, may participate and gain practical experience during summer holidays in these churches, and the churches take care of the expenses of students).
- Pastoral heart of teachers (most teachers and pastors and have appropriate training).

4. Geographic and demographic factors

- Students can use various modes of transportation: train, plane, bus. Moldova is the bridge between East and West.
- We share the Western pragmatic thinking and worldview and understand the Eastern mentality as well.
- Moldova is a multiethnic country (Moldavians, Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians, Gypsies, etc) and also in our country we have Turkish-speaking people – gagauz, who are Orthodox Christians.

5. Training of teachers

- In our college dedicated and well-trained teachers minister to our students. They are devoted to the mission, to fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord. At least twice each year 14 teachers visit Central Asia to teach, to hold conferences or to recruit students.
- Through the efforts of the CTE three satellite schools for training new leaders in Central Asia: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been opened.

The history of the mission faculty

It all started with the College's faculty members who have been involved in the Great Commission in local churches and international missions. While working and reaching out, new doors were opened.

Since the Communist regime collapsed, Gagauz evangelical churches have been involved in mission in Turkey. Many Gagauz pastors and laymen have visited Turkey to share the Gospel with Turks. Personally, I have visited Turkey many times to see how we can be useful for extending God's Kingdom. Due to our first steps in sharing the Gospel with Turks, we started to think about what more we could do at CTE. We developed a specific vision for the Turkish-speaking countries which are scattered in Central Asia and Caucasus.

- As I said ,in 1997 we had already started a Missionary Department.
- In 1998 we started a Faculty of Social Assistance to equip people to face the needs of the Moldavian population.
- During our travels through the Central-Asia and Caucasus we were convinced more and more of the necessity to open the possibility to invite students to this department from Asia and the Caucasus. In 2006 we invited the first students to this faculty. The social needs are enormous in their countries.
- In 2002 we started to extend missionary programs in Central Asia.
- In 2006 we continued to extend the social work and charity projects in Central Asia. We also opened centers in those areas for social worker training.

Our Achievements

During all these many years and up to today 282 students have been trained or are currently continuing their studies. To be more specific, 209 have already graduated, and 73 are continuing their studies.

Mission Department which has a focus on the Islamic world has 200 students from 10 different countries and 25 different nationalities have studied in this department.

Social Work faculty which also has a focus on the Islamic world has had 82 students from 10 different countries.

Countries where the students are from and the number of them from each country:

- Uzbekistan - 58 students
- Moldova - 35 students
- Kazakhstan - 29 students
- Azerbaijan - 20 students
- Tajikistan - 16 students
- Karakalpakstan - 14 students
- Kyrgyzstan - 13 students
- Turkmenistan - 3 students
- Georgia - 3 students
- Kabardino-Balkaria (Russia) – 3 students
- Dagestan (Russia) - 2 students
- Belarus - 1 student
- Ingushetia (Russia) - 1 student
- Ukraine - 1 student
- India - 1 student

In Central Asia we started three satellite schools. Those have finished training or are still training 250-300 students. The opening dates for these schools are: Kazakhstan – 2002, Tajikistan – 2003, Uzbekistan – 2004.

Specific topics for equipping students for ministering in the Muslim world

In addition to the theological subjects, students in the Mission Department have 15 courses which prepare them to minister specifically in the Muslim world:

1. Introduction to Islam
2. The Islamic culture
3. Cross-cultural communication
4. Law in the Muslim world
5. Islamic theology
6. The principles of evangelism in the Muslim world
7. Schools and movements in Islam
8. Church planting in Muslim world
9. Ministry among Muslims
10. Missiology
11. Arab language
12. Studying of the Koran
13. Sharing the Gospel in the folk Islam context
14. Modern Islam
15. The dialogue between Muslims and Christians

Most of these courses are taught by local teachers. But we also invite the teachers from abroad, who have a great deal of experience in ministering in the Islamic world and are well trained in teaching these specific topics.

Information about the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan

Kazakhstan

- The largest Central Asian country
- Population 16,5 million
- Ethnic groups
 - ✓ 67.4% Kazakh
 - ✓ 25.9% Russian
 - ✓ 3.7% Ukrainian
 - ✓ 2.5% Uzbek
 - ✓ 2.4% German
 - ✓ 1.7% Tatar
 - ✓ 6.4% others
- Kazakh believers 12 - 15.000
- There are some registered Kazakh churches

Kyrgyzstan

- 93% of the country consists of mountains
- Population 5,4 million
- Ethnic groups
 - ✓ 69% Kyrgyz
 - ✓ 14.5% Uzbek
 - ✓ 9.0% Russian
 - ✓ 2% Tatar

- ✓ 1,1% Tajik
- ✓ 4.4% others
- Kyrgyz believers 6 - 8.000
- There are some registered churches

Tajikistan

- 93% of the country consists of mountains
- Population 7,5 million
- Ethnic groups
 - ✓ 80% Tajiks
 - ✓ 17% Uzbeks
 - ✓ 1,7% Kyrgyz
 - ✓ 1% Russians
 - ✓ 2% others
- Tajik believers – 1,5-2.000
- Not one registered church

Uzbekistan

- Central Asia's most populous country
- Area: 447,400 km² (172,742 sq miles)
- Population - 27,5 million
- Ethnic groups
 - ✓ 80% Uzbeks
 - ✓ 5,5% Russians
 - ✓ 5% Tajiks
 - ✓ 3% Kazakh
 - ✓ 2,5% Karakalpak
 - ✓ 1,5% Tatar
 - ✓ 2,5% others
- Uzbek believers 8-10.000
- Not one registered church
- Of all the Central Asian countries, in Uzbekistan the Christians are most persecuted, but in spite of this the Church keeps growing

Azerbaijan

- Population 8,2 million
- Ethnic groups
 - ✓ 90.6% Azerbaijani
 - ✓ 2.0% Lezgins
 - ✓ 1.4% Armenians
 - ✓ 1.3% Russians
 - ✓ 1.3% Talysh
 - ✓ 3.4% other nations
- Azeri believers 1 – 3.000
- Not one registered church

Turkmenistan

- Population 6,5 million
- Ethnic groups
 - ✓ 85% Turkmen
 - ✓ 9.1% Uzbeks

- ✓ 2,3% Russians
- ✓ 1.2% Kazakh
- ✓ 2.4% others
- Turkmen believers, about 1.000 (?)
- Not one registered church

The ministry of our graduates

1. Many of them are ministering as preachers, ordained pastors, leaders of home groups, teachers, and evangelists.
2. Others have moved to cities other than their home city in order to plant new churches.
3. Some are skillful in writing poems and putting them into the national music.
4. Some others are working on TWR (Trans World Radio) producing Christian programs for children and adults in their own languages.
5. Others are involved in teaching the new generation of believers.
6. Some of them are involved in youth ministry, family ministry, and social works.

Because of economic problems in their countries, many graduates are forced to move to Russia to work, but even there they do not cease to work for God. They are looking for opportunities to share good news with their compatriots. Some are so successful at this that they have already established small groups, where they gather together for worshiping and studying God's Word.

Conclusion

We thank God for the privilege to serve Him and be part of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, our Lord. When we started the first steps in ministering in the Muslim world, we had no idea what and how to do it. We believed that God was calling us and started with a few people. In the first year we were able to invite only one Uzbek and two brothers from Azerbaijan. The next year there were nine. Then – 15 students. Their number has grown and grown. Last year we were able to invite to both departments (mission and social) 36 students.

For us, this is strong evidence that we have done right, obeying God's calling. We have gotten a lot of blessings that do not pale in comparison with the difficulties that we have had to endure over the years. We have obtained vast experience and a lot of joy visiting their countries and dealing with different people from different nationalities.

Today we have in Asia and the Caucasus, many friends. Relatives of graduates and students know about us and we are warmly welcomed in their homes. Many people have come to know Lord Jesus through the little that we have invested in our graduates. It remains only for us, to thank God for the honor and privilege of fulfilling, along with Him, the great ministry of spreading His Kingdom.