

KAZAKHSTAN REPORT

January 30, 2006

Dear brethren and friends,

Ramash and I want to wish you a belated Happy New Year. Hopefully this new year will bring us all closer to the Lord as we move one step closer to eternity. It seems that this report has been a long time in the writing, almost but never being completed, so apologies for the delay.

Gospel Meeting:

We have just concluded our gospel meeting with Martin Broadwell, from Atlanta Georgia. Brother Broadwell is to be commended for his desire to come to well-out-of-the-way Almaty and teach the gospel here to the brethren and strangers alike with the enthusiasm, gentleness and humour that he possesses. The brethren have been encouraged in their faith and commitment to the Lord, the good news has been preached, and the seed has been sown. And all this in a week when temperatures never got above 10C (+14F) and snow and ice were daily obstacles to be battled through to reach the meeting hall.

Each night of our meetings was well attended ? starting off on Monday night last with 28 souls in attendance and averaging out at 24 for the duration. But one of the more encouraging signs was the presence of adult visitors each and every night, (average was 6). Among the visitor were our two translators (Saule and Shinar), and two Christians who have fallen away, and friends and other acquaintances of Christians. All of which means for the most part there are opportunities to follow up on contacts.

Baptism:

Since the middle of December, our Monday studies in the gospel of John with Jumabai have been held in the home of one of his daughters, Gulnara. She has been a believer for a few years now, and has attended both Charismatic and Methodist churches here. Over these past few weeks we have had opportunity to discuss with her some things peculiar to New Testament Christianity, and she began to attend worship services and mid-week Bible studies. Gulmira, her sister, has also been talking with her during this time, following up on our conversations. Some weeks ago, Gulnara came to me after worship expressing the desire to be baptized. I said that we would discuss it again the following evening at our Bible study. I was a little reluctant to baptise her straight away, as I felt she still did not fully understand scriptural conversion and was confusing it with denominational practices and teachings. After talking with her that Monday evening and showing her verses from the New Testament about the need to be born again (Jn.3:5-7), and the purpose of baptism in our conversion (Acts 2:38), I asked her did she want to be baptized. She eagerly agreed. But when I asked her was she now walking with God (i.e., prior to having her sins washed away in baptism) or was she still in her sins, she stated that she was a child of God and had been walking with Him for a few years already. I was left with no alternative but to tell her that I would not be baptizing her, and told her that if she was already a child of God, then there was no need for her to be baptized!

Gulmira told me that there were some heated conversations with Gulnara subsequently during that following week on the topic.

Again, on following Sunday morning, Gulnara came to me quietly after worship and again asked to be baptized. I again said we could talk about it on Monday evening. And again we methodically looked at verses in the Bible that deal with the purpose of baptism in our conversion (Mk.16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet.3:21 & Gal.3:27). I once more asked her about her spiritual condition before God, and this time, with a full week to think and study, she replied that although she had been a sincere believer for a long time, and thought she had been fully serving the Lord, she understood that she needed to be baptized to remove the sins of her past and become a Christian. We baptized her that very hour of the night, and rejoiced with her and God for her unfeigned faith in Him. Please remember her and her family to our Lord in your prayers. There have been a couple of Sunday mornings when she has not come to worship but has instead returned to the Methodist group she was attending, which leaves me with the feeling that she still does not understand the concept of the Lord's church.

The Lord's Church:

Charles and Kay have returned from their trip to the States to be with us again and we are happy to have them with us once more. Our attendances at worship and mid-week Bible studies for the month of December have averaged 18 and 15 respectively. In January numbers increased again, averaging 22 each Lord's Day and 17 for Bible studies on Wednesday evenings.

Right now our brother in Christ, Nurserik, is a "guest of the nation." Earlier this past summer he was involved in some sort of altercation at his workplace - alcohol was involved - and someone was insulted, someone was abused, and someone was beaten up. And as a result of all this, someone was recently arrested and is being held in jail until he will appear for trial. It seems that a warrant was issued 6 months ago, during which time there was the possibility to clear up the matter, but Nurserik was too afraid to apologize and was hoping that it would just "go away." It is not yet clear what will be the outcome, but one thing is certain; without money changing hands somewhere, the courts in Kazakhstan take a dim view of anti-social behavior and there is a good probability that he will have to go to prison. Please pray for him, that he will understand that sin has consequences, and that he can grow stronger as a Christian by trusting in His Lord even in such terrible conditions.

My classes with Slava continue and I have also asked Charlie to take two of the classes each week.

Just before our meetings commenced we had a visit from a Christian from Bishkek, just over the hill in Kyrgyzstan. Asila had been working as an au-pair / nanny in Germany where she was converted to Christ. She was working there for an American couple and after seeing a small ad in a newspaper, inviting people to come to Bible studies and worship, she decided to make the one-of-our trip to find out for her self and subsequently became a Christian. After a year she then moved back home to Bishkek but kept in contact with Christians in Mainz, Germany. It just so happened that that is where Kim Ottwell had decided to worship when she relocated to there after her 3 years here. Small world? Or big family? Please remember Asila in your prayers that she will have the fortitude to continue to be a Christian while alone. Hopefully she will also seek more opportunities to travel the 160 miles to find encouragement among brothers and sisters in Christ.

Studies and Contacts:

Kulsharia has made contact with us again. She has been sitting in on our classes each Monday evening with Jumabai and her sisters. I've asked her why she has not coming to worship and she has been reluctant to answer, saying simply that she had been too busy with work. You may want to look at last month's report for a more detailed explanation of her situation. She has recently come to worship on a couple of occasions and to two evenings of our gospel meetings. But as yet I am not convinced of the purity of her motivation, it may be more of a case of Jn.6:26 than that she seeks answers like those in Jn.9:36. [That last sentence is a subtle attempt to get some to open their shiny-new, airtight Bibles.]

Right now, one of our regular non-Christian visitors at every Bible study and worship assembly is Charles, brother Steven, who is visiting with the Gants. Lord willing he will see and realize his need for a Saviour while here.

Irina is Jumabai's daughter-in-law, who had been living in the village with her children while her husband works as a bus driver here in town. Life is obviously a lot easier for city folk, as she too has made the decision to move here and live, and she has moved in with Gulmira. One obvious benefit of her association with her in-laws is the possibility to hear and study the word of God. She has been coming to services and Bible studies whenever work and family commitments have allowed. She's a good student, who is able to understand quickly not only the contents but the implications of our studies. However, there is one major obstacle that will need to be faced soon; her unscriptural marriage. Please pray for her and us as we approach this thorny subject.

Review of the Year:

2005 was a busier year than previous ones for us in lots of ways. And the statistics will confirm this: 118 visits to the assembly by 21 visitors; 7 baptisms; 1 restoration; 10 children attending; 1 Christian moved away, 2 Christians came to visit; 1 family moved here to work with the congregation and 1 new meeting place. Oh, and we also managed 1 trip home to Ireland. All a little dry, isn't it.

In January we began to make the arduous fortnightly journey to Chillik to study with Jumabai and some of his family there. His hospitality is legendary among the brethren at this stage. But we were always heartened more by his desire to know more about God than his desire to ply us with hot tea for hours on end. Our classes there continued until he relocated to town, where we now have weekly classes with him.

Our hearts were gladdened when Alma came back to the Lord early last year, confessing her sins and seeking His forgiveness. It seemed that she had learned some hard lessons when she had returned to the mire (2 Pet. 2:22), but unfortunately, it now seems that she was looking more for emotional and other support during the birth and early days of her unwanted baby girl, Jasmine. And as soon as she felt strong enough again to face the world, she took off again into it! Now it's that same time of year again and she has made the same contact again (she came to 2 nights of our meeting this past week). Hopefully we can encourage her to think of the Lord, and her daughter's future, and get her to see beyond her own selfishness.

April saw us move out of the flat we had been renting for assembling and move to a better location and a more public venue. Charles and Kay also left for a short trip to the Ukraine to be with Christians there. April also saw Kanat and Nurserik converted to the Lord. And we rejoiced with them and the angels in heaven to see them turn to Him. They have both been trying to be faithful Christians. But the devil knows how to work too, and just as Nurserik was really getting serious about serving His Lord, the devil made other demands on Nurserik's time. The week we learned of his arrest was supposed to be when he was to lead the congregation in singing at worship.

May came and Saule and Lyazat were immersed. And their "conversion" has had us all puzzled ever since! (Lyazat came to worship one Sunday morning in November.)

During the year the Connolly family also managed a trip home, in May. And we Ramash and I were both astounded by the attention that everyone gave to us and especially to the girls. We want to again say thank you to everyone who gave us gifts and presents and baby clothes during or trip home. And for your hospitality, for taking us into your homes, for feeding us, for putting up with us and the babies, for that trip to Connemara, for the day in Killarney, for the barbeques, for all those shopping excursions, for the priceless loan of that car, for all the ways you have shown us love and kindness. Ramash and I sit together looking through photographs and video clips, remembering the wonderful times with great friends and family. Thank you.

Kairat then put on the Lord in baptism in June.

In July we were uplifted by the visit of Bill Olson from Houston, Texas who especially rescheduled meetings with clients here in Almaty as an excuse to meet with the saints here. Those meetings for him are usually held in either Moscow or on the Caspian Sea, but Bill flew the extra thousands of miles and added 3 more time zones just to be with the Christians in Kazakhstan on the Lord's Day. And the Christians still remember his lesson from Mark chapter 4 about real repentance? good job!

In August we lost Kim Ottwell. The US state department moved her to Germany. Maybe the Lord wanted her there too to make the link for Asila to know about the Lord's church in Almaty. But we miss her, and her cheery good humour. And Kulsharia became a Christian in August only to fall away in September.

In September we had a 2 week visit from Tanya Moskvina.

And in October her parents, Slava and Lena, along with her little brother Pavel, moved to Almaty so that Slava could "learn" how to become a gospel preacher. Charles and Kay also left for their annual trip "to the promised land" (i.e. Texas).

In November we had a visit from Gulya and another from Lyazat and the year closed with the conversion of Gulnara in late December.

What does it all mean?

Well, as an avid follower of "The Kazakhstan Report" you will have noticed that our numbers have been painfully slowly increasing over the past year. In January of last year our average attendance was 13 each Lord's Day. This past month (January 2006) that number has grown to 22. And while it is encouraging to see more and more people each week coming to worship, it is also understood that numbers do not tell the whole story, and may even be a little misleading. For instance 4 of those who are regularly in attendance now will leave us in May to begin working in Russia. And of the 7 whom we baptized this past year, 3 of those are not faithful.

What it means is that there is no room for smug complacency or for us to think that we are "finally making progress."

It means that we have our work cut out for us to truly ground these Christians in the faith so that they can continue serving the Lord despite the presence or absence of a foreign gospel preacher. It is my desire and purpose to establish a church of Jesus Christ here in Central Asia that will be faithful to Him, not some institution or some station or something that looks like a "Church of Christ" from somewhere else. We are trying to establish a congregation of the Lord's people in Kazakhstan, from Kazakhstan, for Kazakhstan.

The work hasn't even begun yet! That's what it all means.

Brethren and friends, we desire your prayers for us and for the work here. We need them. We appreciate so much the letters and emails offering those words of advice and encouragement. We are so thankful for your support for this work in every way. And we pray that God will bless you all for the goodness that you continue to show toward us.

Brotherly,

MICHAEL AND RAMASH CONNOLLY
P.O. BOX 342
CENTRAL POST OFFICE
ALMATY 050000
KAZAKHSTAN