



Planting Indigenous Churches

Missionary Money Muzzles Movement

Gene Daniels

Imagine the following recruiting bulletin for a new mission field:

Today we are seeing a rapidly growing number of new believers among certain unreached people groups. More and more Muslims are coming to Christ, and churches are springing up almost on their own. We are even seeing miracles, signs, and wonders. Come join the fun!

For most of us our first response would be, "Sign me up!"

And that is how the situation was, in formerly-Soviet Central Asia during the 1990s. By the middle of the decade there were movements to Christ among several Muslim unreached people groups. Notice that I used the word "was." Today there are still Muslim-background believers, and a few churches are still growing, but for the most part the promising movements across the region have ground to a standstill. Why?

Some might point to more the new government restrictions which have hit the church in the past ten years. Others would remind us that there is often a low retention rate among Muslim converts to Christ. But since all the young churches in that region have faced the same government pressures and problems, why is it that a handful continue to grow while the majority have plateaued and many even declined?

I'm sure there are many reasons, but the simplest one might be something we don't want to hear. But hear it we should, and perhaps the best way to do that is through the words of a local MBB evangelist who lived through those heady days.

"In 1992, 1993, and even into 1995, there was so much happening here. Everyone was so on fire for Jesus. We would sometimes just get on a bus and ride to whatever village it stopped in. Then we would go to the mosque and start preaching. No one was ever afraid. People were getting saved every week.

But then lots of foreign missionaries started coming and soon they started paying people to do evangelism. Now the people in our churches say, 'Oh I would go and preach at my uncle's village, but I need a sponsor...' Today, no one wants to do anything without a sponsor."

As one who was there, I can say these words ring sadly true. My family and I were some of those who came in response to a revival that was happening among a Muslim unreached people group in the region. I would even go so far as to say that the only reason we did not make the same mistake and start spreading cash around is that we were too poor to do so!

Maybe a lack of money is sometimes a good thing, and there are more important things for missionaries to do than raise money. Perhaps another Central Asian story is in order.

A local MBB pastor went to the appropriate government office to try to register his little house church. To his surprise the woman at the desk was an old friend from back in the Soviet days. After a short catching-up, they started on the paperwork for church registration. Their conversation went something like this:

Officer: So Hakim, what is the address of your church building?

Hakim: It meets in my house.

Officer: OK, but since you are the pastor, where is your office?

Hakim: I don't have one.

Officer: OK... But how much is your salary and who pays it?

Hakim: I don't have a salary.

Officer: What?! No salary? How do you live?

Hakim: You know my wife and I are school teachers. That is enough for us.

Officer: OK. But what about a car, or a travel account, or something that you get for being the pastor of this group?

Hakim: I don't get any of those things.

Officer: You mean to tell me that you lead this church without any kind of pay? Without any material benefits? That doesn't make sense. Why would you waste your time being the pastor?

Hakim: I do it because I believe in Jesus.

Officer: You must, because there doesn't seem to be any other reason.

Now that is a powerful witness. We should think long and hard before we rush in and sweep away something like that away with our foreign money. 🌐

Gene Daniels is a church planter with many years of experience in Central Asia and Muslim outreach in general. His name has been changed for security purposes.