

The Land of Suffering

By Bohus Zivcak

It has been ten years since Renewal Ministries asked the River of Life Fellowship in Slovakia to help with the mission work in Kazakhstan. During that time it was an unknown country for us, about 4,000 miles away (the same distance from Slovakia to the U.S.), but we also had a common history with them under Communist regime, which was similar everywhere. We felt unprepared, weak, and inadequate for such a mission...but we went!

The River of Life is a fellowship of 42 people, mostly young Catholic families. The missions are not unusual for us; we were brought up in a missionary environment and have been doing outreaches and the work of evangelization for many years in Slovakia and in post Communist countries as well. But Kazakhstan is different.

On our first visit in the summer of 2000 we took two lay missionaries and they remained in Almaty for two months. Since that time, about forty lay missionaries have spent at least a year in Kazakhstan (many of them spent even more time) as well as eight priests and seminarians. The work there is hard, slow and invisible. Many times we start from zero. People there are open, friendly and hungry for God, but it is like trying to garden in a barren, desert land with severe weather; what you are able to grow with hard work is suddenly cut down in a moment by blizzard, frost or burning sun.

We have experienced many problems, frustrations and wounds in Kazakhstan. Sometimes I wonder whether it is still worth it to fight. But then God begins to speak to me about Kazakhstan again in a very gentle and surprising way. From time to time I meet people, places, and memories connected with Kazakhstan in unexpected parts of the world.

When I first visited the museum of the Communist regime in Kaunas, Lithuania and saw and heard stories of the nation where the strength and future of their country—the intellectuals and the youth—were either killed or escorted to Kazakhstan, I realised how much suffering is buried there. I saw pictures of small crosses in the Kazakh Steppe, located in the southern end of the Ural Mountains, where families are trying to keep their faith. I do not know much and I believe the world doesn't know much about all the suffering that is planted in the Steppe of Kazakhstan. Only God knows every tear that has been shed and maybe this is the reason why He keeps trying to cultivate the hearts there. If you want to get better picture about the life in this part of the world in the past read Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy. Just recently, I have studied a bit of Chechnya history and learned that Stalin deported 350,000 Chechens to Kazakhstan in 1943. Many died during the three weeks' travel and 147,000 died from the cold and hunger in the Steppe of Kazakhstan during their first winter. These numbers are only from one nation, what about Germans, Polish, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and Russians who were also sent there?

Kazakhstan is not just a place in the middle of Asia with majestic Tian Shan Mountains and broad acres of Steppe. It is also the place of tears, and blood and the deaths of many, many Christians of Europe. And now we try to plant the little seeds of love again. Will they grow? Will they flower? Will they ever bring the fruits?

God is the one who gives growth and I trust Him. We currently have Fr. Vladimir in the Prishahtinsk parish in the suburb of Karaganda, working with a local group of young people who are helping him building the parish life. This past year we employed Alexei, our first full time lay Kazakh missionary who works with Fr. Vladimir in the Diocese of Karaganda. Fr. Peter and Eva work in the Uralsk parish above Caspian Sea. Daniel and Eva work in Molodezhnyy where they serve in the retreat centre for the Diocese of Karaganda. Branislav helps bishops and dioceses with their

websites, internet and publishing in Karaganda. Fr. Ondrej leads the parish in Kapshagay near Almaty and is responsible for 84 children living in three houses who were collected off the streets. Last summer the team of six lay missionaries from the River of Life led retreats in all the places I mentioned, encouraging brothers and sisters in faith.

This small Jesus Garden grows in the wild Kazakh Steppe because of your faithfulness in prayer and in the sharing of your resources with Renewal Ministries. I thank you from my heart and from the heart of Kazakhstan where many Christian have lived, suffered and died in the faith. Yes, it is a land of suffering, but because of that it is also a holy land.