

Tentmaking Missions

in Contexts of Special Challenge

There are about eighty-one countries in the 10/40 window where the least evangelized people live. There are 1739 ethnic linguistic groups of more than 10,000 that do not have a Gospel witness.

These are mostly located in the most restricted areas where we cannot obtain missionary visas. The only way to get access into these countries and serve the people is to go there as tentmakers. Under such circumstances, it's inevitable that a lot of tentmakers have to experience persecution, dangers and difficulties because they have to work and minister behind closed doors.

Many tentmakers, under the strict control of the government, struggle with many crises and difficulties. Their difficult stories are seldom told publicly because they have to continue their ministry in the country.

Friends from my country were arrested by their host country's police and had to stand trial. Some of them have been expelled. Some have had their meetings broadcast on national TV by a camera crew that came unannounced to their Bible study. It is not such a rare occurrence for some to have their lives threatened because of their work for His Kingdom.

Wherever we go, we hear the stories of these persecuted tentmakers. Their sacrifices and the persecutions they have to face are beyond our imagination. A while ago, I sent an e-mail to my fellow tentmakers around the world asking for stories of tentmakers work-



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ing in restricted countries. I didn't get much response; I can understand why they are reluctant to tell these stories publicly because of security issues. However, the following is one story from a tentmaker whom I disciplined and sent out.

A letter from a tentmaker in Central Asia.

With a thankful heart I was dispatched to Uzbekistan as a doctor of an international cooperation agency in May 2005. It'd been my dream to go help the people of Uzbekistan with my skills as a doctor and to share my faith with them. I'd like to share what I've learned and experienced during the two years and seven months I was there.

Before I arrived in Uzbekistan, I didn't know much about the situation in Uzbekistan. At that time, the Uzbek government had gained their independence from Russia and wanted to break free from Russia's stronghold. The Uzbek government kept a close relationship with America and other Western countries through a war that was raging in Afghanistan. A lot of NGOs and missionaries, including Korean and American, were working in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan was known as a paradise of NGOs. However, within a week from when I'd arrived, things changed. There was a rebellion that took the lives of more than 500 people. Soon after, Europe withdrew from Uzbekistan, blaming the government. America decided to maintain their relationship with Uzbekistan, but eventually they followed Europe because of pressure from other Western countries. America withdrew their troops from Uzbekistan and the Peace Corps and many volunteers and missionaries were banished from the country.

The democratic movements which arose in Kyrgyzstan, the Ukraine and Georgia threat-

ened the government, so they strengthened their power internally, kept their distance from the West, and began to build their relationship with Russia again. As a result, the environment for

Christian missionaries became more sensitive than before. The government also had a meeting with the leaders of the major religions and initiated a bill stating that any missionaries who preached God's words outside the church would be imprisoned and fined heavily.

Many Korean missionaries were exiled and many Korean NGO's quit their work. The Uzbek government approved only certain religions and religious affiliations. Even with that, it was still illegal to evangelize people even to the permitted religions. If any missionary work was detected, a fine of up to 200 to 600 times the average salary in Uzbekistan would be assessed, and if he was disclosed again, not only himself but also the pastor of his church would be arrested and imprisoned for 3~8 years. The government also strongly suppressed the production and distribution of any Christian documents and imposed heavy punishment regarding this. During that time, two Korean volunteers were detected by the police for attending a Christian meeting so the rest of the Korean volunteers were also strongly oppressed. The government restricted the Christian activities in the international cooperation agency.

I prepared for my work by having a weekly Bible study with the family of a Korean missionary. I also had regular meetings with some families in a Korean church. In October, 2005, the Uzbek religious department banned services in unregistered places like our church and ordered us to move to another place. So we moved to the registered local church and held a service in the afternoon. In January, 2006, the missionary who led the Bible study was deported.

Johnny Chun

From late August, 2006, I worked twice a week in the hospital that was being run by a Korean missionary organization. They had also built a church and did many things ranging from evangelizing, to providing medical care, to teaching the medical college students and doctors. The government commanded the organization to close the hospital and they deported the leader. However, through the efforts of the Korean Embassy, they were allowed to keep the hospital but had to separate it from the church and do no religious activities. Two doctors returned home and the hospital needed a doctor. By the request of the organization and tacit approval of the Embassy and the international cooperation agency, I started my work in the hospital.

I met a lot of Uzbek patients. I was really happy to serve them and to be served by them. I was challenged by my patients to show them the way to open their hearts to God and the Uzbek staff wanted me to evangelize others and to pray with them in the midst of the dangers

At that time, the Uzbek President appeared

on TV and warned the nation against other religions, especially Christianity. He said that Christianity would divide the nation. In December, the program, "Hypocrites," was broadcast nationwide twice. The program talked about the unregistered local churches and said that many foreigners come to Uzbekistan to confuse people in religion and that the government was trying to find them to deport them. It also mentioned Korea twice and showed pictures that were taken at the airport when the missionary who led the Bible study was deported in early 2006. It compared Christianity with examples of heathenism, including Aum in Japan and religious disputes which arose in Sudan and Rwanda. It also insisted that foreigners, including Koreans, were actually breaking up the Uzbek society and confusing the nation. The program said much to damage the image and trustworthiness of Koreans. As a result of the program, many Christians in Uzbekistan went through difficulties and troubles. At times they had to close the church and too often they were dragged, beaten and their jobs and children were threatened.

During my stay in Uzbekistan, I felt sad because of the restrictions. I couldn't help the people of Uzbekistan as much as I had initially hoped. Even though the difficulties in Uzbekistan are great, I believe that the missionaries' efforts to share their true heart with others will have a great impact. I believe that God will write a great history and produce a few but precious fruits. I hope that the Uzbek people will think of us as a people who take care of them and love them with sincerity and don't only focus on missionary work. Therefore, I thank the missionaries who work hard in the barren places with hopeful dreams.

It is not easy for tentmakers to share the gospel in such restricted countries and that is the reality that every tentmaker who lives and works in a restricted country meets everyday. For the tentmaker missionaries who desire to serve in those closed countries, I suggest:

First, tentmakers in these restricted countries should be trained and equipped more than traditional missionaries. They should



Believers holding a prayer meeting in secret in the desert

become experts in Christian ministry AND in their profession. Otherwise, it would be difficult for them to work effectively. Actually, they have to do two jobs: one as a fulltime missionary and another as a full time professional.

Second, tentmakers' ministries should take time to develop. They cannot preach or share the gospel publicly or freely. All the

ministries they do are done personally and carefully. Their identity and their job should be matched so that the people around them will recognize them as professionals, not as missionaries. Lifestyle evangelism is the point of contact for tentmakers. They develop friendship first and then share about life in Christ through their lifestyle.

Third, tentmakers should make every

effort to get to know and understand as much as possible about the situation of in his/her host country. This should include the political situation and the country's policies and regulations regarding evangelism and public Christian meetings. They should also get to know the local culture and customs. <<