

FACES: Reflections From Central Asia Mission

Faces. Young and old and in between.

Faces. Smooth and lined and smiles few and far between.

Faces. Weather-beaten, weary, and worn.

Faces. From lands to the east, south, west, and north.

August brought adventure to strange-sounding places painted in my imagination by tales of the Khans, Tamerlane, and Marco Polo as well as stories of the Silk Route and the convergence of the world's civilizations. The ancient sites and the varying ethos of the cities and countryside in Central Asia are seared in my mind and documented by an assortment of photographs.

However, what lingers with me most is the faces of the people we saw, encountered, and engaged. Some streets were crowded, slowing our pace to a crawl. Other vistas were isolated and empty, allowing the quicker pace to which Westerners are more accustomed. But no matter where we traveled, regardless of our means of transportation, it is the faces that are embedded in my memory banks.

Central Asia is an ancient portion of the world with a complicated confluence of cultural and tribal experiences and traditions that make it almost impenetrable to Western minds. Many and different political-military systems have forced the area to conform to influences and expectations outside the tribal loyalties and values.

Shaped into countries for the convenience of faraway powers, the entities of Central Asia have been most recently adjusting to the realities of life following the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. Commonly referred to as the "stans", the people dwell in places almost altogether unknown to others in the world.

Although the faces of the people appear dissimilar to mine, they are universal and yet distinctive. The faces of people in Central Asia reflect their inner struggles, orientation, and identity.

Immediately striking were the faces of children. It was difficult to find a child whose face was marked by a smile, aglow with joy, or enlivened by laughter. The hardships of life, the oppressive basis of governmental control, the secular nature of society, and spiritless religion may all contribute to my observation.

Such somber, almost sullen, seemingly lifeless faces were borne also by youth and adults of all ages. The fatigue of a hard life matched the weariness of spirit on the faces of grown-ups as well.

Yet those were not all the faces we saw. Our small group of United States ministers and eastern European leaders were honored to meet with the President of one of the Baptist Unions in Central Asia. As leader of the registered churches in this particular region, he was visibly burdened by the constraints imposed by the national government. Fearful of religious extremists of any type-- Christian, Muslim, or otherwise-- the government has severely limited the freedom of religious expression.

The practical rationale derives from the government's desire to avoid introduction or expansion of radical, destabilizing influences.

The effect of this decision is to drive many believers to secret, almost underground status. They live with fear of discovery, fines, seizure of property, detainment, and even arrest.

After centuries of Islamic domination and then Soviet control, it was an amazing evidence of the Holy Spirit's power to discover in the early 1990s that there were indeed Christians present in Central Asia. God's gracious power facilitated their identifying one another and beginning to gather for worship.

Faces. My, how the faces of the believers differ from the countenance of the masses of people we encountered.



The Registan in Samarkand

In the small house church gathering for Sunday worship where we sat on the floor around a household table set for a meal, we communed across boundaries of language and culture. For fear that neighbors would report the religious assembly to the authorities, we arrived in quiet, trying to draw no attention to our presence. We refrained from singing and kept our voices, like our movements, quiet.

It was a holy privilege for me to preach with the translation aid of Mihai Malancea, our friend and primary counselor and guide for our journey. Most of the dozen believers were older women. As we shared some measure of our faith experiences, how striking it was that they had all come to Christ in the past decade. They were relatively new Christians, having sacrificed family relationships to claim Jesus as Lord.

How eager they were to grow in the faith; to learn more about the Bible, which is difficult to find in their own language; to study online or in educational settings; to assemble with other followers of Jesus. Their opportunities, freedom, and resources are so limited and constrained.

But their faces! Creased with long years of suffering, heartache, and hardship, they were radiant with joy, hope, and faith.

As I preached, bearing the Gospel, I realized how little I actually had to offer them and how very much I had to learn from them about following Jesus faithfully, come what may. Although there was no one present to capture a portrait of their faces, their visage provided a window into their souls. What depth, what care for one another, what longing for fellowship with other believers, what desire to mature in discipleship.

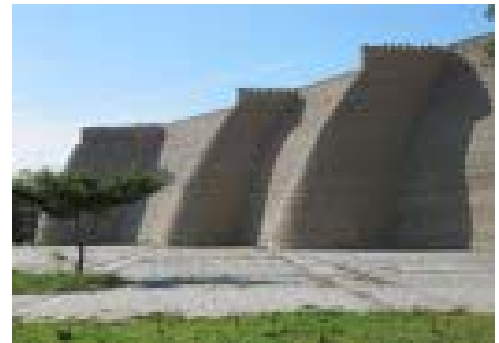
The same longing in their faces is found in the faces of those who feel called to lead the house churches, serving as pastors to the people and enlarging the circle of Christian community. At great risk to themselves and their families, they travel many hundreds of miles to avail themselves of the few opportunities for theological training at conferences and periodic sessions that help them move toward certification in ministry. The faces of these church leaders are eager, kind, gracious, and Christ-like.

The faces. Surely those first century followers of Jesus were possessed of such faces. Central Asia Christians are living in a time similar to the milieu of the New Testament.

Their faces inspire me, haunt me, challenge me. What do I see in my face as I gaze into the mirror? What are you wearing on your face?

I feel embarrassed by the riches at my disposal. But more than that, I feel invited by the God who created and loves the whole world to remember these faces from Central Asia, to pray for them, and to pursue partnerships with them so that the light of Christ's love can shine on their faces.

Will you join me in facing up to the calling of God to grace their faces? I pray that First Baptist will enter a partnership collaborative to provide funding over the next several years to train pastors of house churches and to aid other pastors with seminary education.



The Citadel in Bukhara

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