

Chapter 11

Developing Christianity in Mongolia During the Last Two Decades

Purevdorj Jamsran

Editor's introduction: During the past twenty years, Protestant Evangelical Christianity has become an important force and major influence in Mongolian society. Reverend Purevdorj Jamsran poignantly summarizes these changes from the perspective of an insider who has been strongly associated with their development. From a negligible and practically nonexistent base at the outset of the 1990s, Christianity according to Reverend Jamsran has grown to include some 100,000 Mongolians, whom he assesses constitute approximately ten percent of the Mongolian voting electorate.

Dividing Mongolian Christian development into three stages, Reverend Jamsran emphasizes the interweaving of social and cultural problems with the need for Mongolian spiritual development in the wake of the collapse of socialism. In this crucible of stress and transition, Christianity is seen as providing material, educational, and social as well as spiritual support, especially for young people. He describes how the initial thrust of Christianity through the influence of foreign missionaries and teachers has given way increasingly to Mongolian co-direction and co-leadership.

In an analysis of the causes and trajectory of Christian spread, Reverend Jamsran suggests that Christian involvement in humanitarian work, including in poverty reduction, social outreach to combat alcoholism and crime, and work among prisoners, has had both positive social effects and been a positive stimulus to the further growth of Christianity in Mongolia. As opposed to what he characterizes as emphasis on alien beings and magic, he assesses and asserts in conclusion that Christian impetus in Mongolia is currently growing with the same strong fervor and effectiveness that it did at its outset in the early 1990s.

One of the major changes in Mongolia following the collapse of socialism inevitably concerns religion. Along with traditional religion, Christianity is spreading rapidly and affecting a broad range of elements in society. My perspective does not represent all Christians. However, I can talk on behalf of Protestants and Evangelicals, who constitute about 90 percent of the Christians in Mongolia. I have been asked by the conference organizers to focus more on Mongolians and their lives rather than institutions, policies and systems. I present here the process of conversion and the history of Christianity in Mongolia during the last two decades.

Conversion

There was a spiritual revolution in Christianity that began at the same time as the democratic revolution of 1991 in Mongolia. This was the third period of conversion to Christianity and Evangelism, thus we call it the third spreading. In unofficial ways and through oral transmission Gospel (*Sainedee*) was familiar to Mongolians, but it became more wide spread after 1991. There is no clear research on why Mongolians openly accept Christianity. However, I can share with you my observations and work experience.

Instead of a failed socialist ideology, Mongolians were seeking another ideology to sustain their hope and faith. They needed beliefs to follow and rely on. Mongolia was spiritually starved and people became interested in very fundamental metaphysical issues, like what is truth and what is the meaning of life. People lost their beliefs in socialist ideals and atheism, which had been forced upon them. At just the same time, when people were searching for other meanings for their existence, the notion that “money and economy are the most important things in life” was increasingly advocated. At the same time, the Christian idea that “human life is created” was becoming

better known. People are interested in Christianity for different spiritual and economic reasons, such as seeking opportunity, learning new things, establishing friendships and social networks, and how to spend free time. Economic devastation, difficult life conditions, and poverty encourage people to open up to new ideas. Young people especially have been eager to know new things.

Development

I propose three main periods in the history of Christianity in Mongolia during the last two decades: (1) 1991-1995; (2) 1996-2005; and (3) 2006- present.

1. *The Period of Christian Formation in Mongolia, 1991-1995*

During this period, many hundreds of Mongolians decided to convert to Christianity and flocked to churches. Most of them were young people, aged 18-25. The average age of the first believers was 20-22. Since the first Christians were young people, their main activities were missionary, teaching and leadership, which again attracted other people of the same age. They gathered in their homes, or rented work offices, and they studied new beliefs every week by inviting foreign specialists who worked in Mongolia. Well educated young people played important roles; in addition to often being proficient in different languages, they frequently had good experience with modern information technology as well as inter-cultural or cross-cultural experience. International organizations and individuals heard about the Christian conversions that were taking place in Mongolia, and they worked to support and extend these activities. International governments and

non-governmental organizations also became aware of the fact of religious freedom in Mongolia, and they launched humanitarian activities that supported young Christians. Young believers set up their own groups to spread missionary activity in the countryside, opening churches in province centers. There were only approximately twenty active (Evangelical) Christians in Mongolia at the beginning of the 1990s, but they had increased in number to 2000 by the end of 1992. That small group, who were addressed as “alien” in the press, grew intensively and reached 10,000 by 1995 according to their own accounts.

2. *The Period of Christian Growth and Transition, 1996-2005*

By the mid-1990s, it was not difficult to establish churches similar to those that had already been newly founded. But it remained difficult to find pastors who could lead, teach, and organize the churches. Therefore, many churches stepped forward to train their pastors, which they accomplished with the support and assistance of foreign organizations. At that time, practically every new professional field in Mongolia needed the guidance and experience of foreign specialists. Other challenges also loomed. First, perhaps only two percent of the churches were officially registered; most of them were home-based churches. This situation made it difficult to invite foreign specialists. Even though official registration of churches had increased, visas issued to foreigners entering Mongolia for religious purposes were rarely given. Therefore our international pastors tended to have only short-term tourist visas for teaching. Nonetheless, this exposure has helped us not only to learn Christianity but to learn about different cultures, histories, and ways of thinking. This impetus for pastoral training has also led

some Mongolian Christians to study abroad in Biblical schools. As local pastors began to fulfill their duties, there was a reduced need for foreign specialists in this regard, while Mongolians themselves adjusted Christian activities to their own social and cultural conditions. These years between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s hence marked a transition from external Christian leadership in Mongolia to internal and external co-leadership. This transition is continuing today.

With regard to the training of pastors, certified Biblical education carried with it international standards of understanding and accomplishment in addition to regional and local training and lecture programs within Mongolia. To better serve their members, churches in Mongolia consolidated and co-organized a large Union Bible Theological College and the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance. These organizations established a self-governing system between 1995-2000.

During this same period, many churches appeared in soum (county) centers, and the total number of churches rose to 370, with some 50,000 members. Churches collaborated in organizing humanitarian work projects, which became one of the biggest expressions of their beliefs, and for this purpose they established a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well. Churches and NGOs pursued diverse activities, such as spiritual advising for children and youths; giving lectures to childrearing parents, families and elders; caring for poor people through financial and spiritual assistance; training small and medium entrepreneurs in foreign languages, music, and so on. Now, Mongolians are increasingly aware of such activities taking place in small, medium and large ways.

3. *The Period of Christian Identity from 2006 to the Present*

Twenty years is certainly a short time in larger historical terms. Even so, if we divide this short time into periods, the current period can be considered a time of increased Christian maturity.

Although the process of training pastors has not yet met the needs of all the churches, many national pastors are now available for our local churches. Officially, a total of 180 pastors have been appointed to churches, and the Union Bible Theological College alone has trained 350 leaders in Bible knowledge programs that range from two to four years in duration. Through improved training and work experience, church leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the contributions they can offer Mongolian society both in education and in facilitating modern Mongolian citizenship. Today there are 600 churches and 100,000 Christians in Mongolia. This testifies to the degree that Christianity in Mongolia developed along with its democratic revolution and market economy and globalization to become an inseparable part of Mongolian society.

Development Factors

I would now like to address principal factors that have influenced the development and growth of Christianity of Mongolia.

Spiritual Space

As mentioned above, socialist ideology became unable to meet the spiritual needs of people. As such, there was a great attraction to supernatural things such as aliens, magic,

and people who were believed able to magically make fire. Christianity, which has hundreds of years of development and is one of the greatest heritages of humankind, began to provide alternative spiritual answers. It was a new belief to Mongolians, especially to young people, and thus it influenced them to make a revolution in the spiritual space of Mongolia.

The Economic Factor

During and after the democratic revolution of the early 1990s, Mongolians faced severe economic crises. During this difficult period, foreign voluntary and humanitarian organizations established by Christians made enormous efforts to help Mongolians with their struggle against poverty. They distributed flour, rice, and clothes to poor families, and I believe there are few impoverished families in Mongolia that did not receive their assistance. Through this work, many people came to churches, received the Gospel, and came to believe in Jesus Christ.

Education and Socialization

I assume that the most important factor of growth and development of Christianity in Mongolia relates to education and childrearing. When it became important to learn foreign languages and work with foreigners, Christian churches enabled Mongolians to learn English, Korean, and Japanese. Many young people came to churches to become acquainted with or connected to countries abroad and foreign people. They wanted to have friends for learning English, and many young Mongolian Christians went to study in universities abroad.

Initially, Mongolians came to churches for the sake of their individual interests, but later they were attracted by various church activities, including those that helped young people who were in unstable social relations. They were offered discipline and friendship that helped them escape alcoholism, family divorce, and crime. On the other hand, hundreds of people who were alcoholic and divorced came to churches seeking advice concerning their problems.

At the beginning of the 1990s, condition in prisons worsened and many young people died there. Christian organizations provided food, warm clothes and showed spiritual support. When prisoners were later released, many of them came to churches for socialization and contacts. Alternatively, parents who were worried about the fate of their children's education often voluntarily sent them to church schools, which offered an improved learning environment, and they requested lectures by pastors and church leaders for their children. Churches focused on creating a proper childhood environment over and above the formalities of education per se, and I think this was the right approach at the time, as well as attracting many people.

Different activities were organized in addition to those that focused on creating a better environment for children, such as providing health care and child advocacy, developing herding skills, and promoting agriculture and management of small and medium businesses to benefit people's lives. Training courses on parenting and family life were developed, based on international best examples, and today we see positive results from these activities.

Conclusion

Christianity was not registered in Mongolia in 1990, but today five percent of the Mongolian population have become Christians, who are active in all areas of Mongolian society. As politicians have emphasized, Christianity is now a major influence in Mongolia, and Christians comprise approximately ten percent of the country's voting population. Given the degree to which Christianity has grown and spread in Mongolia, there is no way that its influence can be ignored.

In my opinion, the intense growth of Christianity in Mongolia is still as strong as it was at the beginning of its conversion phase, toward the beginning of the 1990s. Christianity intends to continue fostering positive influences in Mongolian society. I would like to say in closing that during the twenty-year history of contemporary Christianity in Mongolia, we have been working for the wellbeing of our government, our society, and our people by melding Christianity with our unique cultural heritage and asserting this internationally.