

Ministry in Mongolia

Miriam and Richard Carter

For six months we served as volunteers in Mongolia, two three-month stints, one in the spring and one in the fall of 2025. We were asked to serve by a mission team of four Lutheran pastors, one Kazakh-Mongolian, one Kazakh, and two from the United States. This was under the umbrella of the Mongolian Evangelical Church. Our assignment was to be “grandma and grandpa” in a temporary dormitory housed in a two-floor apartment. The vision was new: mission service in a new dormitory building. Our position was part of the launching process. We would be serving new believers of a Kazakh-Mongolian congregation as they came to Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, for university studies.

We introduce you to three main areas of Lutheran and Christian mission in Mongolia: the work of foreign missionaries, the life of new believers and ministry workers, and finally, the blessings that come with ministry in Mongolia.

What is ministry like in Mongolia? It is quite complex, with challenges requiring great flexibility and patience for us. But at the same time there are blessings. There has been freedom of religion in Mongolia since the time of Chinggis Khan. Although people are not put into prison for their religion, it is not always easy for people to show their faith.

What is it like to be a “foreign” missionary or worker in Christ’s service in Mongolia? To begin with, we don’t usually use the term *missionary*, as it seems to identify “mission” as foreign influence. Although Mongolia was never part of the Soviet Union, its policies were greatly influenced by its proximity. A foreigner can talk about Christian faith and share with Mongolians who are already believers. (Online reports suggest that less than 2% of the population is Christian.) Foreigners can also teach in a recognized Bible school to believers who want to learn more. Foreigners can come and serve in care ministries, and while doing that, they can answer questions and let Christ’s light shine. Believing foreigners can do a lot to serve and share.



Richard and Miriam Carter are both retired, Rich from serving as a theology professor and Miriam from serving as an elementary teacher. In retirement they continue to serve. At the beginning of retirement they served in Hong Kong for six years. In 2025, they served two six-month stints in Mongolia.

One foreigner finds his mission field in a gym. He is asked many questions about the cross he wears or why he is in Mongolia. He will talk about Jesus while talking with interested exercisers.

The opportunity to serve cross-culturally or globally in a place like Mongolia is a gift. Being there seemed like being in the Garden of Eden. Well, OK, in the city there were lots of cars, and there weren't a lot of flowers or beautiful nature much of the year, but there were so many wonderful new discoveries to make. This includes discovering the beauty of the mountains, daily, in virtually every direction on any street. In every culture, in every place, there are discoveries to be made.

Not even those wonderful mountains make life there all sweetness and light. In Mongolia, much of the year is very cold and dry and dusty. In late spring, looking for the first buds to show requires patience. Also, for us, to see so many Soviet-era old apartment buildings brought back memories of our year in St. Petersburg. In the same Soviet-era vein, you can see the huge pipes on the outskirts of the city that go underground to provide the city's heat supply. Heat goes off 15 May (Worship in the local Mongolian service was a bit cold the next Sunday.) and is turned back on 15 September. The heat was appreciated.

What is it like to be a Christian in Mongolia? Since there is freedom of religion, believers do not fear the government. Believers in Christ are free to worship as they please. In fact, there are quite a few churches in the capital city. Many are small and are more like house-churches. There are not many buildings in the city that look like churches in Western countries, but there are many around. One guess is that there may be as many as one hundred, but they are small. With the freedom that came after the Soviet era, many believing Koreans came to Mongolia. They started businesses and also shared Jesus.

But what is it like to actually be a believer? For most Mongolians, "religion" would mean a kind of Tibetan Buddhism. In the largest of the smaller ethnic groups, the Kazakhs, most are Muslims. In addition, throughout Mongolia, animistic shamanism invoking the ancestors, nature, and the Eternal Blue Sky commonly underlies both Buddhism and Islam. One of our team members who comes out of a western Mongolian /Kazakh context shared that her grandfather is a shaman. In this kind of multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, it is not surprising that Christian believers might be regarded with suspicion. Families generally

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do not accept new beliefs easily, and within families, there can be all sorts of trouble. New Christians may be rejected by the family or even punished.

For most of our students, becoming a believer was relatively new. They did not go to Sunday School or have much training at all. The students did not know how to use the table of contents in a Bible or the maps. They did not have any idea where Jerusalem and Bethlehem are. For some, no one else in their family is a believer. It was exciting to see how diligently some of the students read and studied the Bible. And there are simple logistics issues. A part of our learning was that the Psalms are numbered differently in the Kazakh Bible from the Mongolian and our English Bibles.

In society, life for a believer can be lonely. One woman who works in a local government office told us she has no friends because she is a believer. One young man told his friends that he thought Christians were not too bad and he was beaten up for that comment. After that, he declined to be baptized.

It is good when church leaders are Mongolian nationals because they can openly share Jesus, although it is a very isolating position. People want to fit in and do not want to be seen as believers, and as a result, it is hard to encourage people to gather to be strengthened in their faith. Worship services can often involve only five to ten people. Congregational workers become discouraged and can become burned out trying to reach people with the love of Christ. Life is hard, and even finding time to be in the Word with other believers is difficult. This is a dominant feature of the place: Winter is long and hard in Mongolia.

Now we unfold the blessings we experienced in Mongolia. The first big one is that there is freedom of religion. That is a huge blessing dating to the time of Chinggis Khan (1162-1227). We understood this freedom more than we had in other places that mission life has taken us. There is no government threat for Christians.

Another big blessing is that by Christians serving and loving people in a Christ-like way, people can see the light of Jesus. Childcare and parenting help, care for handicapped people, English tutoring or teaching, better hygiene, and even teaching music or sports are areas that foreigners can come in and help in the development of Mongolia. There are many opportunities.

There is an organization, JCS (Joint Christian Services International), that serves as a focal point for Christian organizations coming in to strengthen and enrich the lives of Mongolian citizens. Such help leads to settings where it is appropriate to talk about Jesus. This organization sends Christian people throughout the country—and can always use more people.

In the project where we served, the future plan is to have not just the present two-floor apartment building, but an entire dormitory in the capital city for new Christian university students. Many of them come from unbelieving families, and

being with fellow Christians at the university provides an opportunity to help them become firmer in their faith. They can worship and pray together daily and grow with a weekly mentoring time by being in the Word. Whether it is in the Mongolian or Kazakh language, they join to sing praises to God with joy.

We experienced the blessing that Mongolians are a strong people who are also kind and generous. Even though hugging is not done much in many families, they do learn how to hug and are good at it!

Another blessing of being in ministry in Mongolia is that we continue to learn. As with any mission or ministry setting, that requires carefully getting our bearings. What work is going on here and how can I contribute? When we arrived in Mongolia, it became clear quickly that encouragement for the church leaders is needed. Being in the Word together was very important. Also, it became clear to us by paying attention that their devotions were not a teaching time, but a time for being in the Word and worshiping. Our role is to pay attention to the people, their needs, and rituals.

After we returned from Mongolia, we have been refreshed by some good reading: *Send Me* by a colleague, Bernice Bunkowske, tells of LCMS Nigeria mission history; and a biography of Watchman Nee, a Chinese believer, pastor, and martyr of the last century, documents his service. It would have been good to read both before Mongolia, to refresh and challenge us in our faith. They now invite us to take seriously the challenges we met in Mongolia and might meet in future opportunities to serve and grow in faith.

In spite of long-held familiar beliefs and long hard winters, foreigners and Mongolians find it very possible to work for the Lord in Mongolia. In spite of the challenges, the Word is spreading, and the church is growing there. It is a beautiful country, although rugged— and the people also are beautiful and rugged. Serving in Mongolia has so many blessings. The Lord made it a very special place.