

KYRGYZSTAN

a new beginning

Story by Jose Martinez
Photos by Jed Gourley



Pastor Paul Billings shares Jesus with a crowd of young people at an outreach in downtown Bishkek.

While Kyrgyzstan has been called “religiously tolerant” by some, many Christian missionaries clandestinely share the Gospel under threat of persecution in the mostly Muslim country. Located west of China and north of Pakistan and Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan is a hotbed of political and religious tension. Three Calvary missionary couples—two sisters, their husbands and the sisters’ parents—recently moved there to share Christ’s love and truth among the Muslims and nonbelievers.

“We feel there is a great need for churches that solidly teach God’s Word and are

dependent upon the Holy Spirit to be planted here, and for Spirit-filled men and women to be raised up and go out and reach their own people,” Pastor Paul Billings said. “The need for laborers among the Muslims is great.” He estimates that there is one Christian missionary for every one million Muslims.

The three couples served together in the Ukraine before starting the new work in Kyrgyzstan. Paul and Melanie Billings were the first to move to Bishkek—the largest city in Kyrgyzstan—to plant a church in 2005. Paul had attended CC Bible College in

Austria and Hungary prior to serving in the Ukraine, where he met his wife and served at Calvary Chapel Kiev, which was founded by Melanie’s father, Pastor George Markey.

A few months later, Jed and Renee Gourley joined the Billings in Bishkek. George turned over to a national pastor the established church he planted in Kiev



Man wearing a traditional kalpak hat.



Muslims talk outside a central mosque in town.



Kyrgyzstan’s terrain is nearly 90 percent mountainous.

before joining his two daughters and their husbands in Kyrgyzstan this year.

Made up of 75 percent Muslim, 20 percent Russian Orthodox, and 5 percent of other faiths, Kyrgyzstan achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Ninety percent of the people live in poverty in the mountainous country.

“The Kyrgyz Republic enjoys the greatest amount of religious freedom compared to other Central Asian countries,” Paul points out. “Many of the surrounding countries are completely closed to the Gospel and many Christians experience persecution from the government and other Muslims. For those who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, much persecution is experienced from family and other Muslims. There have been several instances in which Christians have died for their faith in Kyrgyzstan. God has given us a unique opportunity to reach the people of Central Asia here.”

The Markey children grew up with a ministry/missionary heritage. Before their father, George, pioneered Calvary Chapel mission work in the Ukraine, he started one of the first Calvarys in the Mid-western U.S. His wife, Pamela, grew up on the mission field in Africa. Other members of the Markey family continue to serve in Kiev.

“As I think about being a missionary kid,” Renee explained, “I remember what my grandfather, who was a missionary in Africa, said: It is not a sacrifice to be a missionary, but a great privilege. That is how I feel about getting to move to Bishkek.” While

it was difficult to leave behind family and friends in Kiev, I know that being where the Lord wants you to be is the most exciting place to be. He is already blessing [us] more than we could ask or think.”

Forewarned to keep any public sharing of Jesus to one-on-one conversations, the three couples know the dangers they face as missionaries—persecution, death, extradition—yet they feel compelled to continue. “Now is a time of spiritual openness,” Jed said. “Who knows how long the doors will remain open? Many people with whom we share have never heard about Jesus.”

“It is not clear how long the doors will be open here or how long people’s hearts will be receptive to the good news of Jesus,” Paul added. “Kyrgyzstan is just one of the many predominantly Muslim countries



Kyrgyzstan borders Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China.

waiting to hear the Gospel of grace. Pray that other countries around Kyrgyzstan would be opened and that there would be a mighty move of God’s Spirit among the people here.”

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Back from left: Pastor Jed, Renee with Joshua Gourley; Pastor Paul with Timothy, Melanie with Titus Billings; Aaron, Pamela, George Markey. Front from left: Elizabeth Gourley, Kristen Markey, and Anna Gourley.