

# Distant Thunder: Mongols follow the Khan of Khans

by Brian Hogan



In the 13th Century the Mongol tribes, united under Genghis Khan, thundered across the steppes of Central Asia and terrorized the known world. In a short time, these fierce horsemen had carved out an empire that dwarfed those of Cyrus and Caesar combined.

The Mongol empire was not to endure for long. The Mongols embraced Tibetan Buddhism and became a backward hinterland ruled by a succession of Chinese dynasties. In 1921, a Communist revolution turned Mongolia into the first “independent” Soviet satellite. All missionaries were expelled before any church had been planted, and the darkness of Communism settled over this “closed” country Mongolia was one of the very few countries on earth with no church, and no known national believers.

## Doors Begin to Open



Finally, in 1990, Communism released its weakening hold. The door closed for so long began to open. Creative strategies sparked the beginnings. A team of Christian Native Americans entered Mongolia as tourists in 1990. Their visit generated a great deal of interest among Mongols and even in the national press. By the end of their second visit in 1991, they had publicly baptized 36 new Mongol believers. The spiritual landscape of Mongolia would never be the same.

A young Swedish couple, Magnus and Maria, came to Mongolia intending to help plant churches. They settled in the capital, Ulan Baatar, where they befriended some of the growing number of local believers.

Eventually Magnus and Maria moved to Erdenet, the third largest city of Mongolia. With them went a nineteen year old Mongolian believer named Bayaraa. The first to respond to their evangelism efforts were a handful of teen-age girls. It was not a promising beginning, but after teaching on faith and repentance, several of the girls invited their friends to follow Christ with them. In 1993, Mongolians were baptized in Erdenet for the first time in the city's history. Fourteen were baptized – all of them teenage girls!

The first fourteen converts were quickly organized into three "cell groups." They gathered for prayer, fellowship and teaching in an atmosphere of support and accountability. Together they learned to obey the two greatest commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) Active, faithful believers were equipped to lead the cells as they multiplied. A monthly "celebration service" formed for all the cells to unite. A year passed: the number of believers grew to 120.. still, mostly teenage girls! At this point the embryonic "church" was not multigenerational or family based. It was essentially a rapidly growing youth group. After a year of language study in Ulan Baatar, the capital city, my wife Louise, our three daughters and I arrived to join Magnus, Maria, and Bayaraa. We were later joined by others from Russia, America and Sweden.

### **Breakthrough into the Mainstream**

We all realized that teenage girls were not an appropriate foundation for starting a church movement. At that time however, youth were the only ones responding anywhere in Mongolia. So we worked with the fruit the Lord had provided and prayed for a breakthrough to begin reaching whole families. We established "provisional elders" (starting with two younger men and Bayaraa) in order to begin the process of allowing a Mongolian style of church leadership to develop and to allow us to work more in the background.

### **Breakthrough of Relevance**



There was a great divide between the youthful, urban circle of friends and the family-oriented heart of traditional Mongolian society. Even our early converts had the impressions that the gospel wasn't relevant for "real Mongols." To the Mongol understanding, "real Mongols" are the traditional shepherds and gher (traditional round felt tents) dwellers. A visiting short term team began to pray for the sick in some of the traditional gher suburbs on the outskirts of town. God answered prayer dramatically. One lame person, one deaf person, one mute person, and one blind person were all healed. These healings provided a seal of authenticity recognized by the older Mongols. The news spread like wildfire and the fellowship was flooded with growth from every age group and segment of the city. The urbanized youth were especially surprised that "real Mongols" were coming to faith. Soon two older men who were heads of households joined the ranks of our provisional elders.

### **Breakthrough of understanding**

The second factor for the sudden acceptability of the good news by the older traditional Mongols was the decision by our team and the "elders-in-training" to begin using the Mongolian term Burhan to refer to the God of the Bible. Many

centuries before, when the Buddhists arrived in Mongolia, they adopted the term “Burhan,” the generic Mongolian term for “god,” for their purposes. In the early 90’s, nearly all the believers in Mongolia used another term for God, Yertontsiin Ezen, which was a brand new term composed by a translator in an attempt to avoid any potential confusion or syncretism with the erroneous beliefs of Buddhism. But the new term, which can be translated “Master of the Universe,” sounded unfamiliar and unreal to the Mongol’s ears. It had no intrinsic meaning and was essentially a foreign word made up of Mongolian elements. Although the Erdenet elders-in-training were used to using the term Yertontsiin Ezen, they decided the traditional term Burhan would be more appropriate and acceptable and was capable of being filled with biblical meaning.

### **Developing Indigenous Leadership**

During this period of explosive growth our team deliberately stayed in “behind the scenes” roles, giving on-the-job training for the emerging leaders. Care was taken to do everything in imitable fashion-baptisms were in bathtubs, worship songs were not imported, but written by church members, etc.

The team recalled what we had learned from veteran missionary George Patterson before coming to Mongolia. He got to the heart of discipleship saying, “People are saved to obey the Lord Jesus Christ in love.” So in the new church, Jesus’ basic commands were taught in practical ways. The cells provided the atmosphere of loving support and accountability. Believers helped one another to “be doers of the word, not hearers only.”



Yet there were serious problems from our point of view where the cultural norms of Mongolian society conflicted with some of the moral teaching of the scriptures. The elders-in-training were encouraged to search the scriptures to find solutions for sin problems in the emerging church. Cultural blind spots in the areas of sexual purity and courtship were dealt with by defining principles, then teaching and enforcing them. The solutions that these Mongol leaders crafted were both biblical and culturally correct – much better than any we missionaries could have crafted.

The emerging Mongolian church looked far different from any of the team’s home churches in Sweden, Russia or America. Dramas and testimonies quickly became prominent features of the large celebration meetings (which went from once to twice a month; and eventually weekly). The “drama team” wrote and produced their own skits, plays, and dramatic dances from Bible stories and everyday Mongolian life. This became a powerful teaching and evangelistic tool. Time was always set aside for testimonies from “real Mongols” – often new believers in their 60s just in off the steppes. These long and, to Western ears, rambling stories of salvation gripped the fellowship in a state of rapt wonder and awe. God was on the move among their people dressed in the most traditional of Mongolian clothing. Worship rose from their hearts as they sang new songs that had been written by their own people in their own language and unique musical style. This was no foreign fad or import!

About a year and a half into the church’s “life,” the Mongol “provisional elders” decided to politely decline further funds from supporting churches abroad. The funds had been used to provide some of the Mongol church worker’s salaries for about a year. Their own people were now giving and that would suffice. When the foreign church insisted

on sending the funds, they were passed along to the daughter churches for their church workers, with the understanding that this too was only temporary.

The expatriate team concentrated our efforts upon discipling, equipping and releasing Mongols to take the lead in building up the church and reaching the lost. A school of discipleship was formed and by its third class was entirely Mongol led.

With the emphasis upon “learning by doing,” new leaders were trained locally in the ministry rather than being sent away. The leadership of the cells had been placed into their hands almost immediately, and soon the local believers also carried the majority of the responsibility for the weekly services.

### **Overcoming**



The Enemy did not overlook all of this progress and growth. Beginning in November of 1994, our team and the fledgling church endured two solid months of unrelenting spiritual attacks: three cult groups targeted our city, the church was almost split, leaders fell into sin, some were demonized. Our teamkhanofkhans came close to despairing and pulling out.

Finally, two sudden and unexplainable deaths rocked the missionary team and the church. My only son, Jedidiah, had been born on November 2nd. On the morning of Christmas Eve our apartment rang with screams when my wife discovered Jedidiah’s cold and lifeless body – dead of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at two months. We buried our boy and a piece of our hearts in the frozen soil on a cold wind-swept hillside outside of town. The next day a young girl in the church died of no known cause.



In response the believers and our team came together for 24 hours of prayer and fasting in our office apartment. At three in the morning, a breakthrough occurred and everyone knew it. The church has never been overwhelmed by an episode of spiritual warfare like that since.

### **Explosive Growth**

One of the beauties of the cell church model was that, where other churches in Mongolia were sorely hindered by government harassment that usually took the form of evictions from Sunday meeting locations, the church being planted in Erdenet was largely unaffected by such moves – worship mainly took place in living rooms all over town! Growth was constantly taking place in the cells and going months without “celebration” services didn’t slow things

down. When the cells did gather, united in God's presence, the believers were encouraged, seeing their numbers continue to grow.

By early 1997, the celebration service had grown so that no building in the city could house the 750 people who would attend! So they held two services. Recently appointed Mongol pastor/elders lead their church made up of over 57 cell groups. A healthy multigenerational Mongol church had become a reality.

### **The Beginnings of a Church Planting Movement**



Was this the mission breakthrough we had been looking for? To stop with a single church in a city of 70,000 and a country of 2.6 million would mean we'd have gained almost no ground in the task of discipling the Mongols as a people. Our goal had always been an indigenous movement of multiplying churches that would spread throughout the once spiritually barren land of Mongolia.

From the beginning we made it our aim to help the new leaders catch this vision. We taught them to treat their church as an organism rather than thinking of it as an organization. All healthy, living organisms grow and reproduce. The Mongols saw that their church should become a "mother church" giving birth to daughter churches and that could reproduce granddaughter churches. The local leaders presented the vision before their congregation: "God wants to work through our church to create another new church!"

In 1993, the church sent teams of Mongol deacons to a town 60 kilometers away. They were commissioned to plant a daughter church and, the next year, an elder was sent to lead it. As fellow Mongolians it was easy for them to relate to the people in the new community. God blessed their efforts as they shared the gospel and disciplined new believers. A daughter church was born, and soon, two of the new leaders got busy planting granddaughter churches – in other places that were even more remote from Erdenet.

### **The End of The Beginning**



The work progressed to such an extent that in 1996, after just three years, our team realized we had reached an important landmark. Actually, we had been anticipating our "phase-out" from the beginning and had kept it in the forefront of all our plans and activities. But that bittersweet time had come.

We reported to our supporters: "We were blessed to hand over the authority in the church to the elders we had trained... this was the crowning moment for us." A special service was held on Easter Sunday, 1996. In the midst of worship and prayer the team followed the example of Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders: "Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance...." Half of the missionary team left Mongolia that very day. The others remained through June as distant advisors while they finished secular teaching contract commitments.

The newly independent Mongol church moved ahead in faith and action as the Holy Spirit led. At Christmas 1996, 101 new believers were baptized! On Easter 1997, the first anniversary of the “passing of the baton,” 120 more were baptized.

The church is finding ways to bring blessing in Jesus’ name to their city. One ongoing effort was initiated and is carried out by Mongol believers: Every day many of the city’s cast-off street kids are offered food and clothing (not a small matter in frigid Mongolia). A prison ministry is also flourishing, as is a cell group among the garbage dump dwellers!

The movement continues. At last count, the mother church had given birth to 13 daughter churches in towns scattered across the province. The church they planted in Darhan, the second largest city in Mongolia, has over 100 in 11 cell groups and is quite unique in Mongolia because it has mostly families and older people as members. This young body has reproduced two granddaughter churches. A very satisfying report considering we started five years earlier with only teenage girls!

This movement has also begun to work cross-culturally, having planted a church among Erdenet’s Russian population. Teams of Mongols have recently been sent to culturally distinct peoples in two other countries, to an unrelated animistic forest tribal people, as well as to several remote Mongolian provinces. A missionary training school has opened in Erdenet to train the church’s emerging mission force. Some of the expatriate church planters have returned to lead the school, but exercise no authority in the indigenous church.

God seems to have made the spiritual soil of Mongolia especially fertile for church planting. The gospel continues to do its life giving and community-changing work. Churches continue to grow and reproduce. A conservative estimate states that the number of believers has grown from two in 1990 to over 10,000 believers in 1998. Given the zeal of the believers, Mongolia will eventually shift from a mission field to being a powerful mission force. As in a previous age, Mongols will again thunder off to the nations beyond their barren hills – this time under the leadership of the “Khan of Khans” – King Jesus!