



Below, from left to right: Purevsuren, Church Educational System director for Mongolia; Munkhsaihan, Ulaanbaatar district Relief Society president; Bud, returned missionary. Opposite page: Young single adults gather for a lesson in the apartment of couple missionaries Dennis and Kathy Gibbons.



Mongolia

Steppes of Faith

The gospel is relatively new to Mongolia, but as members change themselves through faith in Jesus Christ, they are changing the world around them.

BY DON L. SEARLE
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Sculpted on a mountainside on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, Genghis Khan looks down on the capital of the Mongol homeland. The giant image of the great khan is a reminder that he once conquered an empire covering most of Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Eastern Europe. "In twenty-five years, the Mongol army subjugated more lands and people than the Romans had conquered in four hundred years. . . . Genghis Khan conquered more than twice as much as any other man in history."¹ The

khan's descendants and their influence would be dominant forces in history for centuries to come.

In July 2006, Mongolia celebrated the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Mongol Empire. Today, some might call this a "developing country," but that term should be used in a positive sense. Energetic and creative Mongolians are rapidly developing both their country and themselves.

For some, this has included developing faith in Jesus Christ. From the 1920s until 1990, no religion was officially tolerated in Mongolia. Latter-day Saint missionaries arrived in 1993. Now there are 2 districts and 20 branches in Mongolia, with more than 6,000 members. Missionaries find that many Mongolians accept the gospel readily.

Following are just a few of their stories.

Purevsuren

Sh. Purevsuren was introduced to God and Bible stories while studying at a university in the Soviet Union. (Mongolians ordinarily go by their first name, with initials of the surname in front for official purposes.) He bought a Bible from a fellow student because the book had Russian on one page and the same text in English on the facing page. Purevsuren read surreptitiously at night to learn English; reading the Bible openly would have meant expulsion.

His father had taught him Buddhist principles of honor and right, and Purevsuren had always



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON L. SEARLE



Above: Odgerel (left), Ulaanbaatar district president; Soyolmaa, one of the first missionaries from her country; Ankhbayar, also a returned missionary. Below: A Primary leader teaches children a lesson. Opposite page, top: Adiyabold and his family in a Mongolian tent home. Opposite page, bottom: Odgerel (back row, wearing a cap) and his extended family, with members from four generations.

tried to live by those. His spiritual interest in the Bible came only after he returned to Mongolia, married, and was a university professor. In connection with his work, he visited India. A Christian he met there gave him a Bible and shared feelings about the divinity of Jesus Christ. Purevsuren remembered his father's teachings about a life following this one. "I had a fundamental belief about God from my father," he says, and he began to wonder how God would want him to prepare for the next life.

As the head of a consortium of Mongolian educators, he was invited to visit the United States, where he first saw the Book of Mormon. In Utah, a Church member who hosted the tour group gave him a copy of the book. Purevsuren read in it briefly, then put it aside.

In September 2000, his family came into contact with LDS missionaries in Mongolia and listened to the missionary discussions. This time he read the Book of Mormon with new eyes and found truth he had been seeking. He and his wife were baptized and confirmed that November. Only a week or two later, he was called as branch president.

Their children were not interested at first in this new church. Their son, then in high school, was especially resistant, but, obediently, he agreed to his father's request to listen to the missionaries. Eventually, both

children were baptized and confirmed. Their son served a mission in Idaho.

Now Purevsuren is deeply involved in teaching young people as coordinator of the Church Educational System for Mongolia, a position he was given in 2001.

There are about 600 institute students in Mongolia and some 700 in seminary. Those numbers have grown by about 300 percent since 2001, even though students often face opposition from family members, and the cost of attendance, in time and transportation, is high.

What is the most rewarding part of his job? "The best thing, I think, is seeing so many kids joining the Church through seminary" as students bring their friends.

Soyolmaa

"I was a hard kid," U. Soyolmaa says, looking back on the period in high school after her parents died. She became involved in drinking and partying while at a university in Russia. After returning to Mongolia, she was surprised when a friend from those party days invited her to visit a church. Her friend seemed so changed.

Soyolmaa was not unfamiliar with teachings of Christianity, but at first she resisted her friend's invitation. When she finally said yes, she felt excited but did not understand why. At the Church meetings, she was captivated



immediately by feelings of peace, of belonging, of knowing where her life should go. Soyolmaa joined her friend's church, and in 1995, they were the first two missionaries called from Mongolia. Soyolmaa served in Utah.

Currently, she is director of Materials Management for the Church in Mongolia. She is also public affairs director for the country, a counselor in the district Relief Society presidency, and a Gospel Doctrine teacher in her branch.

"It is a privilege to be a member of the Church," she says. "Because I am in the Church, my life keeps climbing upward."

The Church is not well-known in Mongolia, and there is more negative information available about Latter-day Saints than positive. There must be constant efforts to spread truth.

Members are the best ambassadors for the Church. They stand out, she explains, because of "that light, that happiness" seen in their faces. They feel a confidence, a joy through the gospel that many others do not have.

Like Latter-day Saints elsewhere, she says, Church members in Mongolia "have the same beliefs, so in the gospel we belong to one big family."

Odgerel

When his mother invited him to visit a Christian church in 1995, O. Odgerel did not know she was already a member. Working at a public library, she was in charge of renting out its assembly room. Drawn by singing she heard from that room one day, she was invited to join the meeting. Later, she listened to the missionary discussions and was baptized and confirmed.



Odgerel had been born in Russia while his parents were students there and had been educated in Soviet socialism; it was almost his religion. But when the Soviet Union fell apart, what he had believed in was gone. He turned to drinking and partying, thinking the only purpose in life was to enjoy oneself before dying. He soon realized, however, that this lifestyle was a dead end and he ought to abstain from things that he could see were harming him.

Like many other Mongolians, he found it easy to accept the Book of Mormon when he read it. "Mongolian people may receive the gospel really quickly because they can see the good things in it easily," Odgerel says. They "open their hearts to it very sincerely." So it was with him. He had felt there was a Supreme Being. Through the gospel, he found a God and a way of life he could believe in. "That was my happiest moment," he says.

Mongolian society could benefit from the reshaping that the gospel brings to people's lives, he says. Drinking is a problem; so too is immorality. In Mongolia, there is only the worldly model, now strongly reinforced via television, to shape behavior. There is no strong religious tradition in the country to work against it. But through the gospel of Jesus Christ, Odgerel says, people find a righteous way to direct their lives.

Odgerel is president of the Ulaanbaatar Mongolia District, which has 11 branches and some 3,700 members. About 70 percent of the members are single.

Ankhubayar

From 2001 to 2003, E. Ankhubayar served in the Utah Salt Lake City South Mission. Now in his mid-20s, he is the young single adult leader in the Ulaanbaatar district.

He spoke no English when he received his mission call; two American missionaries read the letter to him. Now he



manages the one-room distribution center in the Church offices in Ulaanbaatar, helping members obtain gospel materials available in Mongolian and materials in English for those who can use them. He says that as a missionary, he helped people learn about the gospel, and he is still doing the same.

Ankhubayar came into the Church in 1998 with the rest of his family—parents and younger brother. While his family was attending a Church meeting, he had two dreams that influenced him. In both he was fleeing from certain destruction when a bright, shining personage saved him. Ankhubayar's parents told him later that this personage was undoubtedly the Savior and invited him to pray about the meaning of his dream. The answer he received led him to listen to the gospel.

Before they joined the Church, "my family was not close," he says. Now "we talk to each other. I can feel my mother and father's love." In the mission field, Ankhubayar felt like Church members were family. He works now to share the gospel with friends so they too can enjoy this feeling.

One person with whom he has shared the gospel is his girlfriend, who was baptized and confirmed. If they should marry, they would face the dilemma many young Mongolian couples struggle with: where to live. Housing is scarce, and the cost is too high for many young marrieds. They may end up living with parents in a small apartment or perhaps in the traditional *ger*, the circular, one-room tentlike home of the Mongol nomads.

Majigsuren

Since missionaries in Mongolia are not allowed to proselytize, their contacts come through inquiries or referrals. When Mongolians find the gospel, the first people they refer to the missionaries are usually loved ones, so branches often include members of extended families.

Z. Majigsuren lives in a small apartment in Darkhan, Mongolia, with her husband, two teenage daughters, and several members of her extended family: Her daughter and son-in-law and their young daughter also live there. So too does a son with his wife and their baby.

Majigsuren's son-in-law, A. Soronzonbold, is president of the Darkhan district. Her son, Kh. Sergelen, is first counselor in the presidency of the Darkhan Second Branch. And Majigsuren is first counselor in the branch Relief Society presidency.

Missionaries first came to Darkhan in 1996, and she was baptized and confirmed in 1997, one of the pioneer members in the city.

"I am very grateful that all of my children are members of the Church," she says. Majigsuren remembers the fruit of the tree of life that Lehi saw in vision (see 1 Nephi 8). "I wanted to partake of that fruit and return to my Heavenly Father." She wanted her children to partake also. She is grateful that two of them have now been sealed to their spouses in the Hong Kong China Temple: her daughter, K. Selenge, who is married to Soronzonbold, and Sergelen with his wife, T. Altantuya.

Members, she says, "need to come to church, they need to pray, and they need to keep the faith. The most important is faith," because without that, they will not do the others.

Her son, Sergelen, became interested in the Church because he could see how his mother and sister had changed as a result of becoming members. He had listened as a senior missionary couple taught the story of Lehi to his mother, and he had realized that she too was trying to lead her children in doing right.

Like many Mongolian members, Sergelen says, "I love to read the Book of Mormon because each time I read I discover new things." The story of Captain Moroni is a favorite. He is also moved by Jacob 6:11–12, calling on all to "repent ye, and enter in at the strait gate."





“I’m so grateful I had the opportunity to serve a mission in Russia,” Sergelen says. He did not baptize many people, but he believes seeds were planted that will blossom in the future. Since 1993, more than 530 young people from Mongolia have served missions. More than 300 served in the United States, and a significant number served in Russia.

Sergelen’s brother-in-law, Soronzonbold, has been a member of the Church since he was 18, and now, in his mid-20s, serves as president of the Darkhan district, with its five branches. He is a university student. “I am grateful for my calling in the Church because I learn so much from it,” he says.

Mongolians are impressed, Soronzonbold explains, because members serve in the Church without pay.

“Before I became a member, I was very selfish,” he says. Now he has a goal of learning as much as he can about the gospel. “Our challenge is to learn and to share.”

Munkhsaihan

Before she found the gospel, A. Munkhsaihan saw the world as a dark place with little hope. Finding faith and hope through the gospel changed the world for her.

In the years before 1990, she taught Russian. But when the political and cultural climate of Mongolia changed, she found that she needed to learn English so she could teach it.

Munkhsaihan studied English for a year with Latter-day Saint missionaries. Before listening to the missionary discussions, she determined that she would examine their faith carefully. She found their religion was more than a faith based on true principles—it was a way of life. She was baptized and confirmed in June 2000, and the rest of her family joined the Church a month later. Now she sees the world as a much brighter place for her, her children, and her grandchildren. Currently, she serves as president of the Relief Society in the Ulaanbaatar district.

After the gospel changed her own life, Munkhsaihan wondered what would happen if she applied its principles in her work as a teacher. She began trying consciously to love all her students—and with some that was difficult. She began to pray for her students. Interestingly, she found *herself* changing; she developed a greater capacity to love them. Even though the students did not know she was praying for them, their attitudes toward her changed as well.

“As we exercise faith in the gospel, we can change ourselves,” she says.

And this, her experience suggests, is how the gospel may change Mongolia. As members change themselves through faith in Jesus Christ, they will change the world around them. ■

NOTE

1. Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (2004), xviii.

Above, from left: Two Mongolian returned missionaries begin married life together. Majigsuren, a pioneer member in Darkhan. Tuvshinjargal, Ulaanbaatar district Primary president, and her daughter Anudari. Below: Likeness of Genghis Khan sculpted on a mountainside. Opposite page: Horsemen represent Mongol troops in the annual Naadam celebration.

