

Timothy Wong – Exploration Russia 2007

Itinerary in Brief

Sept 25: Arriving Novosibirsk, Russia from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan by plane
 Sept 26: Arriving Vladivostok from Novosibirsk by plane
 Sept 26 – Oct 03: In Vladivostok
 Oct 03-07: In Ugolnaya
 Oct 07-11: Back in Vladivostok
 Oct 11-14: In Arsenyev
 Oct 14: Short visit to Ussuriysk
 Oct 14-15: Again back in Vladivostok
 Oct 15-18: Traveled with the Trans-Siberian train from Vladivostok to Ulan-Ude, Siberia
 Oct 18-19: In Ulan-Ude
 Oct 19-20: Visited and stayed overnight at Lake Baikal
 Oct 20-21: Back in Ulan-Ude
 Oct 21-23: Continuing the Trans-Siberian train journey from Ulan-Ude to Novosibirsk
 Oct 23: Flying back to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan from Novosibirsk

I am thankful to God for the opportunity to explore the outreach works in Russia, the largest country in the world, during 25 September – 23 October 2007. It all started on a snowy day in November 2006 when I attended a seminar conducted by Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia in Kyrgyzstan. It was there that I heard about **SEAN** for the very first time.

SEAN – Study by Extension to All Nations

SEAN is a **TEE (Theological Education by Extension)** program started in South America in the 1970's. TEE workers in many other newly evangelized nations adopted the program and found it an effective tool to equip Christian leaders and to disciple new believers – such as in Nepal, India, Pakistan, Mongolia, Cambodia, Uganda, . . . just to mention a few examples.

SEAN Russia

Having heard of TEE from Russians living in Paraguay, SEAN materials were introduced to Russia through St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU) in 1992. During the 1990s many SPCU students have studied TEE methods and were involved in testing the initial translations of the SEAN courses plus material from TAFTEE India and CLTC Papua New Guinea (both are TEE ministry entities in those respective countries), with some doing wider field testing in associated churches. In 1997 a small TEE group was established in St. Petersburg, adopting the name SEAN Russia to further the TEE development work initiated by the St. Petersburg Christian University.

ORTA – How it all Began

In February 2004, several Russian Christian leaders from Far East Russia (two from Vladivostok, one of whom was Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia, now the International Director of ORTA) were invited to undergo intensive training in SEAN program in the United Kingdom. Upon their return to Russia, they set up **Open Russian Theological Academy (ORTA)** to follow-up with the work. A number of very dedicated Christian workers then joined the team working on voluntary basis without receiving regular remunerations. They promote SEAN program in churches and Bible schools, conduct SEAN leaders trainings (known as Tutor Training seminar) and also get involved in the work of translating SEAN materials into Russian and publishing them. (The translation work is particularly challenging and time-consuming. The SEAN TEE material is deceptively simple. However, contextualization of the

source material into Russian is far more complicated than straight translation. Russian is a sophisticated language and poor translations are unacceptable. However, the translating work undertaken by ORTA has produced excellent results.) Aside from that, they also meet with the SEAN group leaders (those who have gone through the Tutor Training seminar and are currently leading TEE SEAN groups in their respective churches) from various churches regularly at “reunion” meetings for fellowship and prayer, and to provide encouragement as well as to receive feedbacks on the progress and challenges that SEAN participants are facing (I attended two such meetings in Vladivostok). In their small rented office they also do the administrative work managing the resources, putting the progress of SEAN work in proper record and handling the finance.

Due to the dedication and commitment of the ORTA team, the work of TEE SEAN in Far East Russia is now growing fast and has indeed well outgrown the initial work started in St. Petersburg.

Westward Mission Movement

Only God knows why He chose a small eastern outpost such as Vladivostok to further the work of SEAN instead of St. Petersburg, a city of elites which has been producing many intellectuals for Russia in the past and present. But this recent development goes in tandem with the general mission trend today where some major works of the gospel is seen as moving from the East to the West. We need only to think of South Korea, an eastern nation, which has been sending missionaries in thousands into the harvest field. In China, we have already heard of the westward Back to Jerusalem Movement. Not insignificantly, there are also a growing number of missionaries from South-East Asia moving towards the west. In Kyrgyzstan alone, there are currently almost 30 missionaries originated from South-East Asia. And what is less-known to the larger world is that the Mongols too are having ambitious plan to “conquer” Asia with the gospel. (Mongolian missionaries have already moved into some parts of Russia to work among the minority groups there, e.g. the Buryats) They said they are following in the foot steps of their ancestor Genghiz Khan who created the largest empire the world ever known. It must also be remembered that not too many centuries ago it was a Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan, who issued an invitation to Rome for 100 well-learned Christians to be sent as teachers (in other word, missionaries) to China. Therefore, we must never rule out the possibility that God may choose to use the “weak” and seemingly “insignificant” to accomplish great things for Him.

ORTA – The Dedicated Team

I spent almost three weeks in Vladivostok and other towns in the province of Primorye. In Vladivostok, I met with a number of significant players of Russia’s TEE SEAN work and also the following very dedicated members of the ORTA team:

Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia

The International Director of ORTA

Among the large number of wonderful people whom I met in Russia, Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia, who is now based in New Zealand, was the only one I had met personally prior to my trip there. I was welcome by her personally at the airport. She represents ORTA in meeting a growing number of international responsibilities. There are Russian speaking communities in countries as diverse as the USA, Israel, New Zealand, China and Korea, for example, and the Russian language is a bridging language in many Central Asian countries. Because of this there is a growing demand for access to the ORTA translations of SEAN materials (in Russian). On top of her many other responsibilities, Dr. Anneta plays a vital role in this. In 2006, for example, I met her in the Tutor Training seminar conducted by her in Kyrgyzstan during a trip

that also brought her to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. She also works with **Religious Liberty Commission of World Evangelical Alliance**, a commission which highlights the plights of the persecuted churches all over the world and seeks to minister to them.

During my trip to Vladivostok, however, my time with her was limited to a few meetings together before she went to China to promote SEAN and conduct trainings among a group of Russian believers there.

Michael Huggins

Director General of ORTA

Michael Huggins is based in the United Kingdom, but makes it a point to visit Far East Russia regularly (usually twice a year and each trip lasts a month). He is a man whose passion for God is unmistakable and is keen to see the expansion of His Kingdom, and yet very humble in nature as evident in his inviting me to share the same platform to serve the believers in Russia together.

He has wide experience in the work of SEAN having worked for many years with top world SEAN leaders and have personally visited, pioneered and took part in the work in Nepal, Pakistan, Central Asia (Kazakhstan), Africa (Uganda) and, recently South Korea, as well as in other parts of Russia including St. Petersburg, and Magadan in North-East Russia. A strong supporter of the ORTA team in Russia, he provides endless encouragement and gets involved personally in much of the work of ORTA during his half-yearly visits to Vladivostok. He also helps in raising the much needed fund for the work of ORTA.

Michael's exemplary and faithful service is a great inspiration to me. He was indeed a dear mentor to me during my time with him and this itself is one of the greatest blessings I received while in Russia. Among other things (mostly SEAN resources), he handed me some of his personal papers including articles, reports and even minutes of meetings (some of which are restricted in nature) on SEAN works which dated as far back as 1994 so that I may have a clear picture of the history of the expansion of SEAN in various regions in the world.

Irina Barsegova

National Director of ORTA

Irina, who speaks fluent English and German apart from Russian, has been working for many decades as a professional translator of scientific works for Russian scientists and researchers in Vladivostok. She brings the different components of ORTA together, for example, by maintaining connection with the North Eastern Division in Magadan and also keeping in touch with Dr. Anneta and Michael Huggins who are based overseas. Despite her busy schedule, she gives her best to contribute towards the work of ORTA, attending meetings and gets involved in the translation and editing works of SEAN materials in Russian. Her untiring commitments towards her own church ministries and in setting aside additional time to support ORTA truly impressed me. I was invited to her home several times and was blessed to have the opportunity to take a close look at her life, work and ministry.

Maria (Masha) Vdovina

Training and Development Coordinator of ORTA

Masha was responsible in ensuring that I got all the necessary documents which enabled me to get my visa to visit Russia. She also made all the necessary arrangements for me to maximize my trip there – this includes making sure that I meet with all the key people, visit different churches, Bible schools, attend various meetings and training programs that hugely benefited

me, as well as to visit a number of towns and regions away from Vladivostok, which eventually also includes Buryatia in Siberia. (From her I also learned how to travel with public transport in Vladivostok and to other towns on my own)

Masha, who speaks fluent English, oversees the work of the Far Eastern Division of ORTA in Vladivostok and Primorye region as a whole. She conducts Tutor Training seminars and reunion meetings, builds and equips the regional ORTA team, helps the translators, supplies the study materials, keeps the students' records and develops the general strategy in promoting ORTA near and far. She is already having to respond to requests to conduct Tutor Training seminars in some of the distant regions beyond Primorye – i.e. the Amur region, Yakutia and Buryatia, for now. She works tirelessly to promote the SEAN program despite having some current health concern (as she will soon to become mother). Indeed she is working under very challenging circumstances in ORTA which has very limited financial resources and therefore, she needs to work elsewhere to support herself. Aside from that, she also serves as the dean of an evening Bible School as well as getting involved in other ministries in her church. My salute to her.

Elena Ponasenкова

Secretary of ORTA, member of ORTA Tutor Training team

Elena works closely with Masha in the administrative and teaching works of ORTA. Besides her main office responsibilities, she has recently become heavily involved in Tutors Training seminars. She was one of the main trainers in recent seminars in September in Buryatia, Siberia (5 days train journey from Vladivostok), and also in Arsenyev, a small town 5 hours road journey north of Vladivostok. I had the opportunity to take part in the seminar in Arsenyev, 12-13 October (I traveled with her bringing the SEAN materials on a coach from Vladivostok in a cold night and after 5-hour journey we reached her friend's village home in Arsenyev at midnight!). Both Buryatia and Arsenyev are new SEAN ventures in Russia. (Elena speaks little English – but people like her were a blessing in disguise as it forced me to use whatever limited Russian I had!)

Oleg Polekhin

Member of ORTA Tutor Training team

Oleg and his wife, Oksana, were trained as ORTA tutors at the very first Tutor Training seminar held in Vladivostok back in 2004, which resulted in his leading two successful study groups. His enthusiasm for SEAN TEE soon brought him into ORTA Tutor Training team. In the earlier days he just shared his testimony being a group tutor (leader), but now he is a key regular trainer at Tutor Training seminars and was one of the speakers at the seminar in Arsenyev. Oleg also speaks little English but he is a most modest, sincere, helpful and reliable brother.

Sergei Smirnov

Prison Ministry

ORTA is also developing a TEE ministry into prisons through Sergei Smirnov, former Director of the Russian Bible Society in the Far East. The Primorye region runs several hundred kilometers to the north and north east of its capital city, Vladivostok. There are 25 prisons and penal colonies in this region, with a population of over 20,000. A number of the churches in the region are collaborating in different aspects of prison ministries, from evangelism to the care of the needs of prisoners' families, especially for the mothers, wives and children; and also the follow-up of prisoners after their release. The work is voluntary and the churches involved tend to be very poor. As well as these important ministries, there is a recognized need

for Christian education and discipleship within the prisons. Some of the prisoners are facing long sentences and are eager to study. There are many restrictions facing such work, from limited prison amenities and the continuous moving of male prisoners, to some official opposition, but Sergei Smirnov has already pioneered a tape/CD/DVD (the audio version of SEAN) ministry into many of these prisons. He is also establishing close links with the churches involved. He presented me with a DVD recounting the testimonies of Russian Christians whose lives were changed after they participated in the SEAN program. In a new project, he is now in the process of working on VCD featuring the works of the Prison Ministry there. I look forward to receive a copy of his latest work.

There are still a number of other dedicated members or volunteers of ORTA team who provides the needed helps in SEAN work such as in the administration, teaching, doing follow-up works, translation of materials, book-keeping, handling financial matters and helping to shoulder other responsibilities.

ORTA – Achievement and New Ventures

In Far East Russia now, after only about 3 years, there are already over 600 registered TEE SEAN students. They all meet in groups led by SEAN tutors. The tutors are the very key to the success of the whole program. All potential group leaders (tutors) must first attend ORTA Tutor Training seminar (workshops). The seminar normally lasts two to three days and the ideal number of trainees is about 15 though in some situations more need to be included. In Buryatia, over 50 new tutors were trained recently. In total, since summer 2004, 20 Tutor Training seminars have been conducted by the Far Eastern Division of ORTA in Primorye, Blagoveschensk (Amur region), Nerungry (in Yakutia) and Ulan-Ude (in Buryatia) with over 300 tutors trained.

Ugolnaya and “The Shepherd Heart of God”

“The Shepherd Heart of God” is a recent TEE course developed by Michael Huggins for ORTA specifically targeted for pastors and church leaders. The course is aimed at linking the strong Biblical doctrine relating to sheep, the shepherd and leadership responsibility/accountability to actual shepherding practices. I had a special privilege to listen to Michael presenting this course in detail in altogether about 10 hours that spanned over 2 days (04-05 October) in a Bible School in **Ugolnaya**, a small former coal mining town situated at the edge of Vladivostok. It was an intensive course. (By the way, Michael was a shepherd literally having worked for many years taking care of real sheep on his farm back in England, and therefore there are many new things I learned from him about shepherding) I was in Ugolnaya (Ugol is “coal” in Russian) 03-07 October during which I also had the opportunity to visit, together with Michael and Masha, a church pastored by a Korean there that runs the TEE SEAN program.

The Bible School in Ugolnaya is led by Pastor Alexei Mishchenko an energetic pastor in his 30's who also oversees 60 other churches all over different regions in Russia. Meeting Pastor Alexei was one of the highlights of my time in Ugolnaya. He also sends workers to China. Michael and I met one of them who just returned from China. On Sunday 07 October I attended Pastor Alexei's church (with a 200-strong congregation of dynamic worshippers) which is located in the same compound as the Bible school. The whole premise used to be one Russian military camp and Pastor Alexei has turned it into a camp that trains Christ's soldiers. He and his church team are currently working to fulfill the vision of helping 1000 children in Primorye region to find adoptive families and they would also like to start a rehabilitation centre for children in Vladivostok. Their vision includes children in the orphanages and the

neglected children whose parents are alcoholics, drug addicts etc. Indeed Pastor Alexei and his team's ministry focuses much on downtrodden people most neglected by the society in Russia – another example is that they currently also run six rehabilitation centers for the adults. Pastor Alexei's extensive ministry reminds me that Russia does not lack capable and visionary people who are able to do great things for God. Pastor Alexei is a friend of ORTA – Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia met with him earlier to discuss about the 1000 Children Project. And a few days after I left Vladivostok, Masha Vdovina conducted SEAN Tutor Training seminar for the students of the Bible School in Ugolnaya where over 30 new tutors were trained.

(By the way, all together ORTA conducted three Tutor Training seminars since I left Vladivostok, and one of them was the first seminar for the deaf and mute people – breaking new ground indeed!).

Arsenyev – The Battle Ground

Arsenyev is a small town 5-hour road journey north of Vladivostok with a population of 60,000. It used to be a place where Russian helicopters were made, but now, with the closures of major plants and factories, most of the people in this town are poor and out of regular jobs. Young people are moving to bigger towns and cities in search for better lives. However, there are 10 evangelical churches in this town. ORTA held a Tutor Training seminar in Arsenyev 12-13 October, and that was the only Tutor Training seminar I attended personally during my recent trip to Russia.

However, ORTA faced a number of serious challenges in organizing the seminar in Arsenyev which almost forced them to call it off. To start with, Masha Vdovina, the key trainer of ORTA was taken mysteriously ill right before the seminar, and she eventually did not make it to Arsenyev. Nonetheless, ORTA pressed on with the seminar knowing that the situation could become enormously difficult. The absence of Masha does not only mean the lost of one key trainer but also of a much needed translator for Michael Huggins who would be teaching in English. This truly affected Michael's presentation on the first night of the seminar, but Lyuba, a Russian teacher friend of Michael, very kindly stepped in to interpret instead. A previous commitment prevented her from helping on the second day. Thankfully, with Masha's initiative, Olga, a first class interpreter, was called in from another town (Ussuriysk) for the next day's seminar.

Another major problem ORTA faced in Arsenyev was that the hosting church did not prepare well for the event and therefore the team initially faced some logistic and technical problems in organizing the seminar. Furthermore, some actions of the hosting church's pastor adversely affected the flow of the training. And sad to say, even though some members of the hosting church initially came for the early parts of the program, adverse circumstances beyond their control prevented them from meeting the minimum requirements to pass the course when they had to abandon it halfway. Eventually only six participants managed to complete the course successfully and none of them are from the hosting church.

Arsenyev is a town that is very precious to Michael. However it has indeed proven to be a critical spiritual battle ground but Michael had anticipated it and had prepared me for it when he asked me to intercede for the seminar well before the event. And with hindsight, despite the obstacles, to God's glory, ORTA produced six new soldiers for Christ in this tough ground. Two of the successful participants were husband and wife who pastor another church in Arsenyev. I stayed in their home for two nights and on Sunday (14 October) after the seminar I attended their church and saw them enthusiastically encouraging their members to join the

SEAN groups they were about to launch within their church. This is one encouraging evident that all was not lost in Arsenyev.

Arsenyev's seminar also held something special for me because I was graciously given the opportunity by Michael to take one teaching session apart from sharing about Central Asia with the participants. The session is on **"The Shepherd Heart of God"** which I had learned from Michael through his teaching sessions in Ugolnaya earlier on. However, the course which took Michael 10 hours to deliver in Ugolnaya, I delivered it in Arsenyev in less than 30 minutes! Obviously, due to the time constraint, what I have done was presenting the course in a summary form. I commend Michael for developing this special course and having listened to him lecturing it I personally feel that it is a much needed course today which would bring great benefits to all potential leaders of the church of God. And I thank him for giving me the opportunity to present the key components of the course to the participants of the seminar in Arsenyev.

Ussuriysk – The Northerngate and the Chinese

After the seminar in Arsenyev I needed to rush back to Vladivostok to catch the train to Siberia the next day. But while on the way back I decided to stop over in the town of **Ussuriysk** for several hours, and this took place on Sunday afternoon, 14 October. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, earlier on I met a Swedish missionary, P (due to the nature of his work, I have decided not to disclose his name), in Vladivostok. P and his Russian wife Olga (the second interpreter for the seminar in Arsenyev mentioned earlier) are working with a small team training Russian missionaries in a small center in Ussuriysk. Their ministry is named the Northerngate. Ussuriysk is about one-and-half-hour road journey north of Vladivostok. With a population of 180,000 it has 30 evangelical churches. P and his wife have chosen Ussuriysk to be their base due to the lower cost of operation for the center as compared to Vladivostok. Another major reason is its close proximity to China and it has a direct rail link to Suifenhe the Chinese town at the Russian border. From Suifenhe, one can easily travel to other major Chinese towns in the northern region like Harbin and Shenyang by train. The Northerngate aspires to serve as the "gate" for Christian workers to enter China from the north and meet the spiritual needs in northern China. I was invited by P to visit the premise of the Northerngate center, a recently-purchased modest house building, and I was warmly received by Olga there as P himself at the time was in China. To see their strategic work was an uplifting experience for me. Both P and Olga are good friends of Masha and I was made to understand that they help and support one another in their respective ministries. In other words, P and Olga are friends of ORTA too.

The second reason why I stopped by in Ussuriysk was that to meet with a group of Chinese believers there. Before embarking on my trip to Russia, I had prayed that I might have the opportunity to meet some Chinese Christians in order to learn about their spiritual welfare in Russia. As a Chinese, I felt that it would be regrettable for me not to visit these brothers and sisters who share blood lineage with me, especially knowing that many of them have suffered immensely in their homeland and may also be struggling in a foreign land. My Russian friends suggested that I visit Ussuriysk for this purpose simply because P and Olga have been keeping in touch with a group of Chinese believers there. In fact Olga has been learning Chinese language for four years with the eventual goal of having the ability to minister to them directly. The Chinese group has been using the premise of a Korean church to meet on Sunday in the evening at 7.00 p.m. I met them (about 30 of them) at their Sunday meeting and learned that they do not have a trained pastor to lead and teach them regularly. The Korean pastor preached to them through an interpreter on that particular Sunday. They were happy to see me and I

spoke to them for about 10 minutes towards the end of the service. They were touched by my presence and conveyed their hope to me that God may send teachers to them so that they may grow deeper in God's Word. It was a sensational experience for me to see this small group of Chinese believers in this outlying corner of the world craving to be taught and nurtured spiritually. According to them, in Ussuriysk alone there are 60,000 Chinese, most of whom are business people and students, and due to the lack of a proper Chinese speaking church there and the absence of Chinese speaking pastors and teachers, their spiritual welfares are virtually neglected. By the way, later when I was in Ulan-Ude (in Buryatia, Siberia) I also met with a Chinese believer, "Peter", who has been living there doing business for twelve years. He too gathers a small group of Chinese believers to meet weekly in a Russian church on Sunday evening. And he also lamented that due to the fact that they do not have a trained pastor, and without regular serious teaching on God's Word, their growth both in number and in spiritual life has been very limited. According to him, there are more than a few groups of Chinese believers spread all over the cities and towns along the trans-Siberian railway and that they could have been used by God mightily if only they had the opportunity to be properly and regularly taught, disciplined and equipped.

I am sharing this in some length with a specific aim of raising the awareness among the Chinese speaking churches in Malaysia that there are still many new fields, even among the Chinese, in this world which need to be explored, ploughed and harvested for the Lord. Chinese speaking churches in Malaysia already hold some advantages if there is a willingness to get involved in meeting the needs in such places: There is no need to learn a new language, and many pastors, teachers and lay leaders in Malaysia are well-equipped for the tasks of discipling believers and teaching God's Word in Chinese, and Malaysian churches today are relatively prosperous enough to financially fund such endeavors. I am not referring to sending long-term missionaries, as even the regular sending of short-termers who are capable and committed to the teaching of God's Word will definitely make significant and lasting impacts in these previously unexplored areas of work. This is a window of opportunity, and as always, we must never assume that such opening will continue to exist forever. And this is a challenge for churches and individuals who are ambitious, courageous and adventurous enough to venture out and win new grounds for the Lord before the opportunity is lost.

Buryatia – ORTA's New Venture

ORTA is now continuing to carry the work of SEAN beyond Primorye (in the Far East) region. In September 2007 they conducted SEAN Tutor Training seminar in Buryatia region in Siberia for the first time. They did it in Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia. The indigenous ethnic Buryats are a Mongol people who now comprise around 30% of Buryatia's population. Culturally there are two main Buryat groups. The western Buryats retained their shamanic animist beliefs, while eastern Buryats from the southern steppelands mostly converted to Tibetan-style Buddhism, maintaining a thick layer of local superstition. In recent years, missionaries have brought the gospel to the Buryats and now there is a growing number of them turning to the Lord. Some of them have even become church leaders and evangelists reaching out to their own people as well as to the Russians. For example Larisa Liao, a Buryat who was theologically trained in Vladivostok and Korea, has recently set up an evening Bible School in her church. Larisa and a group of Buryats went through the ORTA's SEAN training in September and are now leading several TEE groups in their church. There are now over 50 registered TEE SEAN students in Ulan-Ude (with over 30 new students being added very recently – after I left Russia!).

I was in Buryatia 18-21 October and during my time there I met up with Larisa and I stayed with a Buryat family who have come to know the Lord at the turn of this century. They recounted to me passionately how much blessed they have been since they came to know the Lord. They shared with me their moving testimonies, and their dedication to the Lord is clearly evident in the way they pray, worship and serve God in the church. On Sunday 21 Oct, very early when it was still dark and very cold in the morning I accompanied them taking the public minibus to the church to pray for about one hour way before the worship service started. The family also presented me with a Children Bible in Buryat language as a souvenir. (By the way, I also met some very committed Buryat Christians while in Vladivostok) Another highlight of my time in Buryatia was to go to visit the deepest freshwater lake in the world, the Baikal Lake, on my own. It is located about 3-hour drive from Ulan-Ude. Baikal holds the largest amount (20 %) of unfrozen fresh water in the world and the volume of water in the lake is greater than that of the five Great Lakes of North America combined. I stayed at the lake for one night.

ORTA's involvement in Buryatia indeed signifies the ongoing expansion of SEAN towards the rest of Russia (after the initial expansion to Amur and Yakutia regions back in 2006) especially to the west along the Trans-Siberian railway. From Buryatia may the work continue to expand to more regions, towns, and villages all across Russia.

Trans-Siberian Train Journey

Altogether I spent five days and five nights in the train along the Trans-Siberian railway with the break in Buryatia. Four persons may share a small room/compartment with 2 double-decker beds. Inside the train it was quite warm even when it was snowing outside. So the travel was quite comfortable especially during the first part of the journey from Vladivostok to Ulan-Ude when two nice Russians shared the compartment with me. Food in the restaurant in the train was very expensive though, so most passengers including myself would have to get our supply of food when the train stopped briefly at certain stations. But I got a much worse deal during the journey from Ulan-Ude to Novosibirsk when I had to put up with two very drunk guys. They once fought between themselves, but thankfully they never attempted to harm me physically. On the contrary they tried to be nice with me by offering me their vodka(!) and, like the guys in the earlier part of the journey, they tried their best to communicate with me during their more sober time despite my limitation in Russian. The train I discovered was a good place to pick up more of the language as virtually everyone speaks Russian. From the train I could also see how vast a country Russia is. However, the landscape does not vary that much throughout the journey. For example, you look at a certain scenery at one time and then go to sleep, and after you wake up the scenery still has not changed that much. The best view was during the few hours stretch soon after departing Ulan-Ude for Novosibirsk when the train traveled along the edge of Lake Baikal. And as I looked at the villages and settlements scattered all along the railway I realized that there were so many people living in these isolated places and I suspected that most of them were poor peasants and wondered whether they had had the chance to hear of the Good News of Jesus Christ. I was reminded of the words of our Lord, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, . . ." So the train was also a place for much reflection and prayer for me.

TEE Korea

A few words on TEE Korea for those who want to see the bigger picture. In January 2007 Michael Huggins was invited by TEE Korea for a short visit and was appointed their Honorary Director because of his earlier work with them. TEE Korea is ORTA's sister organization and their TEE program is also based on SEAN. The work has grown rapidly with over 10,000

registered students now. But their ultimate goal is to have churches truly mobilized, equipped through over a million TEE students from all walks of life training for service. For example, Michael was brought to the Korean Military headquarters to see the ongoing TEE work within the military. Although there are already a large number of TEE groups within the Korean Military (all pastors within the military now have to train in TEE, and by the way, many of the TEE students are high ranking army generals), TEE Korea have been tasked to train a further 120 tutors for service within the military this year.

Michael is also working on strengthening the understanding and working partnership between TEE Korea and ORTA, and therefore he was in Korea again more recently in September along with Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia. This effort has born fruit as seen in the latest development when TEE Korea generously agreed to provide financial assistance to ORTA towards the work of translating the rest of SEAN materials into Russian.

TEE SEAN Kyrgyzstan

TEE SEAN Kyrgyzstan will also seek to work closely with ORTA since, at the very least, we are, and will continue to be, using SEAN materials in Russian translated by the ORTA team. The TEE team in Kyrgyzstan was officially established in summer 2006, going by the name Kuch (“power” in Kyrgyz), to carry on the work of TEE in this country and beyond. As mentioned earlier, in November 2006 a group of Christian leaders and believers from Kyrgyzstan, including myself, were trained in the Tutor Training seminar conducted by Dr. Anneta Vyssotskaia. Since then Kuch team has been traveling to different parts of Kyrgyzstan to promote TEE program and to establish stronger links with local churches in order to further expand the work. Just recently, 21-23 November 2007, Kuch conducted a Tutor Training seminar in Kyrgyz language in the eastern town of Karakol in Kyrgyzstan. 14 participants from the town and nearby villages successfully went through the training that qualified them to become SEAN group leaders and certificates were issued to them. This was the fourth Tutor Training seminar conducted by Kuch in Kyrgyzstan.

I am confident that under the leadership of Lyn Pearson and together with our national colleagues, by God’s grace, Kuch will rise up to the challenge of discipling believers and empowering the churches in Kyrgyzstan and the rest of Central Asia. And we look up to ORTA as our source of inspiration and encouragement.

Closing Words

After seeing the work firsthand and having interacted with the people concerned personally, I wholeheartedly and sincerely commend the ORTA team in Primorye. They are truly faithful servants of God, serving selflessly often operating under very challenging circumstances and with limited resources. Their commitment and sense of dedication in usually restrictive conditions are truly exemplary. I pray that their great vision for Russia will be achieved in the not-too-distant future. Russia is so much blessed to have ORTA, and I am so privileged to have become a friend of this wonderful team. And my heartfelt thanks to all the members of ORTA team for making my recent trip to Russia a fruitful and blessed one. I also thank all other friends and colleagues of mine and churches who have supported and prayed for my trip. To God be All the Glory!

Timothy Wong
Kyrgyzstan
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