

Central Asia (2): Investing in Young Believers

Background

The previous chapter shows how TEE is expanding in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan was the first country with a national TEE movement that started in 2006. Increase, together with others, brought together church leaders from Central Asian countries for a TEE workshop in 2012. As a result, new national TEE programmes in the other republics, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were established. One of these programmes now gives support for two of the team to serve more widely as Increase Equippers. In Azerbaijan TEE is also introduced, but there is no national movement as of yet.

Since those first years the teams have seen tremendous growth. The latest figures show that 94 churches throughout the region are actively using TEE courses. Compared to eighteen months before, this is an increase of more than ten percent. The number of active students is even more remarkable. At the moment over 2,200 students are actively participating in TEE courses in 316 groups. This is a growth of 76 percent compared to 2016. That means that within participating churches more people receive solid biblical training.

With this growth come many challenges and questions that need to be addressed. One of these challenges is the need for ongoing discipleship within the churches, where most members are first generation believers from a Muslim background. How can TEE provide courses that are relevant for the people in Central Asia and the challenges they face as Christians? This story is about meeting that need.

New TEE Courses for First Generation Believers

Alysa and Katarina* are both from Central Asia. They are part of an exciting new initiative launched by the Increase Association to train a new generation of TEE course writers in Asia for Asians. You can read more about this in Chapter 30. Alysa and Katarina are surrounded by others who support them with prayer, proofreading and other practical matters. The training has been provided through a series of three workshops spread over a year and a half, and there is ongoing support from an experienced mentor. The team in Kyrgyzstan hosted one of the initial workshops for Increase. Two teams are writing courses in and for Central Asia.

When Alysa and Katarina looked at their context, one thing specifically grabbed their attention. They realized that there were so many young people in the churches! And almost every one of these young people was the first in their families to follow Jesus – they were nearly all ‘first generation’ believers. So they have no Christian parents or other Christian relatives to teach them the ways of the Lord. They have no models of what it means to lead a Christian life.

An example of a first generation believer in Central Asia is Aiman*. Aiman is a young assistant pastor in a church in Kyrgyzstan, and a member of the TEE team in his country. He first saw TEE in action when one pastor who was part of the TEE team met with him. The pastor told him about faith in thoughts, words and deeds. This had a huge impact on Aiman. After some time Aiman started to work through the foundation level TEE course, *Abundant Life*. ‘The first lesson was amazing!’ he says.

My father died when I was just 12 years old. I spent a lot of time with my uncles and eldest cousins, they became my father figures. One of them received Jesus, and he would always tell me about Him. I got bored with his many visits and evangelising. One time I pretended to receive Jesus before him, because I was annoyed and hoped he would leave me alone, I also

did it because I didn't want him to treat me harshly as he sometimes used to do before he became a believer.

This decision, to receive Jesus just for my cousin, weighed heavily on my conscience for a very long time. I didn't just lie to my cousin and myself, but to God personally. This problem pressed me down more than 10 years, even when I served in a church in a youth ministry, because I was not sure about my salvation. But after first lesson I understood that I am a child of God, I belong to Him and nobody, nothing and never can take me from His family. That took away my fear.

In his TEE ministry, Aiman is now involved in printing materials and distributing them to the groups that need them. Besides that, he is taking care of the design and technology side of things. Most importantly, he trains new TEE group leaders. 'I love seeing how TEE builds a strong foundation of faith in believers. Pastors learn to use the Word of God every day, they learn to be a disciple every day.' He goes on to explain that TEE is a good tool to get deeply into God's Word and to train yourself in your daily life. 'TEE lessons help you understand how you can be guided by the Holy Spirit in your normal, everyday life and to show Christ to your family, friends, neighbours, church and community. And it is amazing to see the growth and change in people.' The TEE programme has a huge impact on churches and the people who are taught by pastors following the courses.

Investing in Young People

One of Aiman's desires is for young people to give their heart to Christ. 'It is important that they learn to be a real disciple of Christ when they are young, so that they don't live their lives in the ways of the world, but according to God's truth, full of wisdom and strength.' He leads a group of young teenagers. He finds it amazing to see their faith, strong as a rock. He says, 'They really apply the lessons in the course to everyday life. In that way it is not just me teaching them, they also teach me. And so we grow closer to God together.'

Alysa, Katarina and Aiman share the same vision and hope for young people to be disciplined by their local churches. For first-generation believers, it won't happen in their families! In fact, many young people in Central Asia, especially in the poorer regions, may have no parental example at all. As many adults seek employment in other countries, like Russia and Kazakhstan, they are forced to leave their children behind, sometimes in the care of grandparents, or an older sibling. This means that many children are growing up without parents. How can you learn to be part of a family, let alone a Christian family, if you have no one to show you?

Both Alysa and Katarina get many questions from young people about Christian behaviour and lifestyle. So when they were thinking about writing a new course, the needs of these young people came to their minds. They believed a course on pre-marital relationships would be very helpful. The course fits well within their wider aim of discipleship and lifelong learning. The aim of discipleship is to build strong believers, who can go on to build strong Christian families. This course offers a first step towards growing healthy, Christian families. If people can learn how to have good relationships with others, later on they will be better equipped to build a strong family and raise their children as Christians. This will help to strengthen the future of the church. This course is not meant to stand alone: the two writers see it as a first step to a series on topics as family life and marital relationships.

Growing in Christ

Something, perhaps unexpected, that they have found through writing this course is that God has used it for their own personal growth. Alysa said she used to be very nervous when people asked her

Hanna-Ruth van Wingerden, Tim Green & Graham Aylett (eds.),
TEE in Asia: Empowering Churches, Equipping Disciples (Increase Association: 2018), 81-85.

questions and afraid she wouldn't be able to answer. But God is teaching her that having all the right answers is not what it is about. What matters is that you are able to ask the right questions, questions which help you and others learn and grow. 'I need to learn to ask the right questions. The course writing is helping me to do this,' she says. Katarina agrees that she is growing through this course. She has found that when she is doing the work of God, she sees that God is working in her. She works to help others, and through that He changes her heart and mind, and He is growing His will in her life.

They desire that the course they are writing in Russian will be translated into other Central Asian languages. And they hope that more people will write courses specifically for Central Asia, so the church in this region will grow.

Pray and Connect

Please pray:

- for Alyssa and Katarina, as they write their course, for God's protection, and that they can stay strong in the Lord. They see that the devil is trying to destroy God's plans;
- for young people like Aiman and the teenagers he serves, that they may become a generation of believers through which Christ grows his church.

Would you like to know more about Central Asia and the work of TEE? The *Vision Group for Central Asia* prays for and supports the teams in this region.

General Enquiries: centralasia@gzb.nl

Please send an email if you want to subscribe to the prayer letter issued in Dutch and English

This chapter is based on 'Theological Education by Extension in Central Asia: An Evaluation of Recent Trends and Future Trajectories through the Lens of the Religious Markets Theory' by Richard Brown, and testimonies and information provided by the teams in Central Asia.

* Names names have been changed for security reasons.