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Mongolian Memorandum

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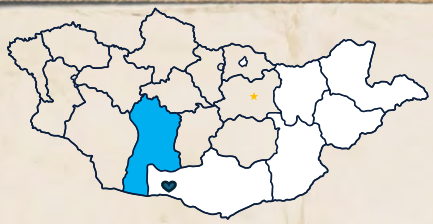
HOPE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS | ASIA



Dear Friends,

This summer has been a busy one! After several weekends of training, I joined a group of Mongolian teachers traveling to the countryside to hold summer school. It was a blessing to partner with the Vet Net organization and work with Christian teachers in remote areas where there are few Christians or churches.

I was assigned to the village of Bayanlig in the province of Bayankhongor. It is a large province, and I had formerly visited some villages in the northern area. But this time I traveled seventeen hours, on and off road, to reach a village at the edge of the Gobi Desert. The difference between the high mountain village I had previously visited and this flat, desert village was striking!

This area is renowned for its camels, which was evident through my frequent encounters with them. On my first day in class one young man presented me with a recycled two-liter bottle of *khoormog*, a sour drink of fermented camel's milk. I also sampled camel meat in traditional *khushuur* and *tsuvian* dishes, as well as enjoying real-life encounters with herds and photos of young calves proudly presented by students. I was informed that in March there is a camel race, and many of my students' life goal is to become successful camel trainers.

Praises

1) Safety in traveling to and from the village
2) Working permit granted and residence card granted!
3) Seeds planted in young hearts

Prayer Requests

1) New school year starting
2) Bible study and English Club outreach ministries
3) A new project possibility

Intestines anyone?

I enjoyed many of the dishes presented to me but admit I struggled when I was served *gedes*— boiled organ meat traditionally including heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and intestines/stomach. I politely declined the blood-filled intestines of the goat but tried small pieces of everything else. The varied texture and questionable sanitation of this dish make it my least favorite food in Mongolia, but I praise God for the endurance to eat it without offence or ill effect. The genuine hospitality shown by those offering it was, however, truly heartwarming.

One challenge that faced our summer school was the competition with the Naadam holiday, a week-long celebration of traditional sports and dance. This year just happened to be the 100th anniversary of the founding of this village, so extra time and attention were given to preparations. Every fence was stained bright red or painted in green and white alternating diagonals. Most amazing of all, a full open-air stadium was built in the span of two weeks! The day before the start of the celebration I watched under a pouring rain as men hurriedly laid out Astroturf on the stadium grounds inside the freshly-poured concrete. My fellow teacher shared a humorous story of another town whose 100th anniversary preparations were so last minute, on opening day the crowds sat down on newly-painted benches, only to find the paint had yet to dry!

Beautifying the

First day

The flurry of activity unfortunately caused a drop in our students' attendance. In the first two weeks our three classes had an average of fifteen, twenty-four, and ten students. However, as the young men were recruited for work crews and the young ladies had increasingly-long dance classes, the numbers fell by half. I found it a little discouraging as I sat in the classroom waiting to see who would show up. I felt God was reminding me to be faithful to do my best to teach those who came.

One morning in the upper-level class only a single student appeared. I definitely thought about sending her home and doing something "more productive" with my time. Yet I could not imagine what obstacles had stood in the way of her coming. I remembered another student years ago who was perpetually late who told me before she came to class, she had to milk forty goats. Class must go on! The young lady and I sat together at a desk. Neither of us had a textbook, so we practiced simple things: self-introduction and basic questions of likes and dislikes. She had been struggling to keep up with her classmates and welcomed the individual practice. It turned out to be one of the best classes.

Group project

Although the students could not come to class regularly, I found opportunities to interact with them only life in a small village can provide. Some of their families ran stores—of which this town had more than twenty! Most were a simple block building with a single room and the same items on their few shelves. Each day after class I would join the other teachers as we "went shopping"—which meant walking around the village, visiting two or three of these shops, greeting students, and buying a small item here or there.

A local store

Volleyball

A few times different groups of students invited me to join them playing volleyball, clearly the favored sport in town, as in most of Mongolia. They would call up their friends, and each person would hand over 1000 *tugrik* (about 28¢) to cover the fee to rent the "old" gym for two hours. It was fun to play with them, building a relationship as we laughed and encouraged one another.

We even hosted a volleyball championship during the final week and had five teams play several rounds, until the top three winners were awarded some special snacks to share among themselves. Other extra events included the students leading us on an in-depth tour of the town—complete with visits to a local farm, the village entrance sign, and the Buddhist temple. Another day we helped the town prepare for their celebration by collecting trash, filling over a dozen trash bags with litter before hauling them to the dumpsters.

On every occasion the students were bright and cheerful, and it was clear that just spending time with them, walking around their hometown, and greeting their friends and family meant a great deal to them. When I saw students who were not coming to class, they would run up and hug me, then tell me how sad they were that they were not able to come. Since this program will continue in this village for two more years, I am happy to think we developed good relationships and left many students excited for the teachers to return next year.

God also gave us the opportunity to speak with a small group of parents and one grandparent, who came to a special lecture about the summer school program and the character courses we use. The Mongolian teachers shared about the importance of child development and gave some advice on how to help their children develop mentally and emotionally. In return these parents took us on a picnic and tour of some nearby cave formations!

Bayanlig "White Cave"

The only Christian

Sharing the gospel

For me the most notable moments were the chances we had to interact with the community and represent Christ. The first opportunity came after several weeks of reaching out to a woman who was referred to as "***the*** Christian lady." As far as I could tell, she was the only believer in this remote place. She has no church to go to and had recently discovered the church she was watching online for some time was preaching false doctrine. She was very discouraged by this and was struggling spiritually. I am thankful that not only were we able to visit her and spend time encouraging her, but some church leaders from a country several hours away also came. Together we listened to her share about her struggles. One teacher played some worship music on a traditional instrument, and then we had a season of prayer with her.

The church leaders encouraged her to pick her Bible back up and spend time reading and praying. She has children and grandchildren living on the same plot as her. But with no one who understands her faith or encourages her, the loneliness of her walk is immense. So many people across the Mongolian countryside share a similar story. Far from churches or Christian fellowship they struggle to live out their faith in a world that rejects them. Pray for them!

The second opportunity to share came on our final day of school. We were able to give a short gospel presentation to the students. For most it was their first introduction to Christianity. Our senior teacher, Oyunaa, explained who Jesus is and that He died to save us. Then I shared my testimony, ending with my call to Mongolia. I am not sure what the students thought of this, but they listened respectfully, and I know this was a time of planting a seed. My hope is next year the summer-school teachers will be able to return and water this little seed, and in time we will see a harvest there.

Today I praise God that "the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world" (Colossian 1:6 NIV), even in the remotest corners of a desert village in Mongolia.

Giving thanks for your support,

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