



# URBAN CURRENT

## Almaty

**J**ust in from Almaty. Yes, Almaty. You know.... Albany, Atlanta, Almaty. Still not ringing a bell? How about Kazakhstan? Almaty, Kazakhstan. Is that helpful?

Okay, could you locate Kazakhstan on a map in three seconds or less? I probably would have needed 30 and counting.

Kazakhstan is the biggest landlocked nation in the world, sharing borders with Russia and China, in the region known as Central Asia. It was the last of the former Soviet republics to declare independence. Today it is known for its vast natural gas reserves. Unknown amounts of Chinese capitol are being invested there since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The country is enjoying a bustling, if not booming economy.

Under Soviet rule, Islam was largely cultural and nominal. Now it is arguably the religion of the nation, quickly gaining definition and fervor. Big money is flowing from nations like Saudi Arabia to build mosques and Islamic schools. The second-largest religion is Russian Orthodox Christianity. The country's constitution provides for limited freedom of religion. Protestantism and Evangelicalism are not welcomed, viewed as a western intrusion. Children 18 and younger cannot be approached directly for religious purposes.

Back to Almaty. Near Kazakhstan's southern border, 6,499 miles from Chicago, this population of 1.5 to 2 million is situated in a bowl surrounded by mountains, visible from most anywhere in the city. Though its environs have signs of habitation dating back to at least 300 BC, its most recent life probably began as a Russian fort. Today, city streets are a blur of vehicles and pedestrians. Stores, shops, and vendors of every description line these busy thoroughfares. In the huge brand-new Mega Center, as big and fancy a mall as anything in the States, the biggest brands in the world are

featured. Step from the marble corridors into the restroom to be confronted by an odor that curls straight hair, straightens curly hair, forces your eyes to water and your knees to buckle. Nope, this is not the West. While thoroughly modern, modernization is not to be confused with westernization. Parag Khanna writes in his piece "Beyond City Limits", September/October 2010, "While western cities have dominated the ranks of leading urban centers since the industrial revolution...a major shift becomes apparent. There is an accelerating asianization." He continues, "For these emerging global hubs, modernization does not equal westernization."

Almaty is comprised of Russians, Kazaks, and Uzbeks. The language is Russian. The dress is western. The sounds of American pop are being flavored more and more by emerging artists who are distinctly Asian.

While there are city buses, a new subway is under construction. However, it seems that a good number of the masses moving around the city are carried in Almaty's unique approach to taxis. Any private automobile can pull up to passengers waiting on the side of the street anywhere and negotiate a price to ferry them to their destination. It's efficient, accessible, and seems to serve the mobile public well.

This year Almaty is hosting the Asian Games. Called the Asiad, this event is held every four years among athletes from all over Asia. The Asian Games are the world's second-largest multi-sport event after the Olympic Games.

A handful of Baptist churches are struggling to emerge from the Soviet era and Russian ways to meet the challenge of a freer Asian-dominated urban center. I spent a week with our partner church, Bethany Baptist. Andrey Zhdanov is the pastor. The church was birthed in 1992 by Calvary Baptist, which was founded under communism. Bethany is made up

of members largely saved during the 90s. The church has a smattering of older Russian women and a fresh influx of Kazaks. Young families are well represented. Bethany is demonstrating that the baggage of the past can be off-loaded in order to be a viable witness in a new generation.

Two years ago, Bethany had its building taken by the government. In the States we would call it eminent domain. The city wanted the church building as part of a larger plot it is developing. The congregation had no choice but to be bought out by the government. Presently renting a small Presbyterian building, they have purchased property and have plans for a new complex which will fill the better part of a city block. Now the city is demanding a swath of one end of the rectangular property for utility use. The church is insisting it purchased the entire plot and needs all of it to meet their needs. Interestingly, they have begun to get some more favorable responses from city officials.

On Saturday night, we assisted with a ministry called English Club. Primarily late-teens and 20-somethings who are taking government-sanctioned English classes, they are looking for any opportunity to practice English. Almost 100 young people enthusiastically crammed into two small classrooms. It was an unfettered gospel opportunity. The hunger for English presents a wide-open opportunity for evangelism.

Almaty reminds me that God has re-urbanized His world in the last 100 years. There are burgeoning cities around the globe needing to be reached and leveraged for Christ's cause.

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