
Seen in a Different Light

A local Perspective on Missionaries in Kyrgyzstan

Gene Daniels*

Executive Summary

Foreign missionaries, like most people, tend to only see themselves through their own, culturally proscribed, glasses. This ethnography offers a different, and very valuable, perspective by exploring how missionaries are viewed by local Christian leaders.

Research Methodology

The paper is based on a series of in-depth interviews with respected Muslim-background Church leaders who were asked to share their honest opinions, thus giving significant insight into the current state of relationship between us.

Categories and Characteristics

The paper first attempts to unpack the local view of missionaries by demonstrating that the categories local Christian leaders use for us are often different from the ones we use when thinking about ourselves. Seeing this difference and understanding why it exists points toward their current estimation of missionaries.

Unfortunate Distortions

This section explores three issues that have a huge impact on local perceptions of foreign missionaries, issues that are so large they tend to distort other aspects of missionary identity. These are; Missionary Lifestyles, Murky Missionary Methodologies, and An Atmosphere of Control.

Not Everything is Negative

Local leaders also had some very positive and encouraging things to say about the missionaries they know and these comments help soften an otherwise harsh light that was cast by many research participants.

Advice to Ponder

Each research participant was asked what advice they would give foreign missionaries if given the chance. This section simply gives voice to their counsel.

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Introduction

Evangelical Christian missionaries have been working in Central Asia for more than 15 years, not a long time, but long enough for different groups of people to have developed their own well-informed, even nuanced, perspectives on us. This paper is the result of a research project aimed at understanding how one particularly important group, Christian leaders from Muslim backgrounds, view the missionaries that are serving among them. It is an attempt to help us see ourselves—not as we imagine ourselves to be—but as we are perceived by those around us.

One of the troubling things about seeing ourselves from another person's perspective is that it may expose us to things we do not wish to see. For example, consider this comment from a local pastor:

One of the biggest problems is that many missionaries don't understand locals at all. They are just too busy to have time for them. Busy at what? We don't really know... I'm not judging, each one will give his own account to the Lord, but I just honestly say that we don't understand what some of them are doing here.

This kind of remark will come as a complete surprise to some missionaries, to others it will not. Either way, it is one thing to be aware of a vague, local-foreigner tension, it is another thing altogether to understand why the tension exists in the first place. This will require a better level of cross-cultural understanding on our part.

This paper will explore what local Christians think about it us, the foreign mission community. It is a serious attempt to hear from them, in their own voice. That does not, however, imply that the author agrees with everything they have to say. But as both an ethnographer and a missionary, I consider it important to understand their views and then wrestle with the implications.

Research Methodology

This short ethnography is based on multiple, in-depth interviews conducted from May to September of 2007 with Muslim-background Christian leaders in Kyrgyzstan. The following criteria were used for selecting those to be interviewed:

- ✓ Muslim (ethnic) background
- ✓ At least eight years in some form of Christian ministry
- ✓ Good reputation with the foreign missionary community

The first criteria was due to my personal focus in ministry and existing relationships. The purpose of the second criteria was to capture the viewpoints of people who have had substantial interaction with missionaries over a significant period of time. The participants have been involved in a wide spectrum of Christian leadership roles—ranging from pastoral ministry, to Scripture translation, to NGO work in community development. The final, and very important, criteria was introduced so that the opinions obtained would, as much as possible, express a main stream perspective, avoiding any extreme opinions held by eccentrics or otherwise contrarian national leaders.

The population sample for this research project was a total of one dozen local Christian leaders. Some may object to this sample size being too small to allow generalization. However, it is not uncommon for ethnographers to use what are called “convenience samples,” groups of respondents who selected because of their accessibility to the researcher and who are considered “community experts” by those around them, particularly when the total possible group size is unknown. (LeCompte, Schensul & Schensul, 1999: 233, 240). As long as research findings are offered with the caution that the sample population may not represent *every* member of the entire group, this form of research construction is considered valid (ibid).

Furthermore, we may conclude that generalizations based on this sample size are valid because the research data quickly reached the point of “sufficient redundancy.” In the sphere of qualitative research (research based on in-depth interviews as opposed to large numbers of surveys) sufficient redundancy is reached when “multiple sources of data serve as sources of confirmation or corroboration for each other” (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999:131). With one notable exception¹, the interviews with local Christian leaders quickly ceased to produce any significant new data, allowing for slight differences due to personal experiences, the same negatives and positives were repeated. Clearly local Christian leaders have a commonality of experience in their dealings with foreign missionaries. This was inadvertently confirmed, and its scope broadened, by one local pastor:

The issues that come-up with missionaries are not just here [in Kyrgyzstan]. I went to the Central Asian Consultation some time back, and we had a discussion group—we local leaders—about this. Leaders from Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, from all over the region. We all have had the same kinds of problems with foreign missionaries.

One note of caution is order. I am not asserting that this ethnography represents “*the* opinion of national Christian leaders in Kyrgyzstan.” The group in question is too diverse to boast of such a consensus. More accurately, the contents of this report should be described as being “representative of the opinions of national Christian leaders here.” As such, I believe this short ethnography is a valuable “snap-shot,” significant yet incomplete, of how national Christian leaders in Central Asia view the missionaries serving among them.

¹ The exception to this rule was one person involved in NGO work. Her views were often significantly different from the other research participants. This, in and of itself, may point to something, but exploring that is beyond the scope of this research.

Categories and Characteristics

In a cross-cultural work or ministry environment, it is not uncommon for there to be a significant difference between the self-understanding of foreigners and the perceptions of the local population. This is an example of a classic anthropological issue, known as the difference between the *etic* (outsider) and *emic* (insider) perspectives (Goodenough, 1970: 108-9). Outsiders see situations and organize their thoughts according to their own cultural cues, and insiders do the same. But since each uses different points of reference, the two groups often look at the same situation and come away with very different pictures. This leaves us wondering how can we accurately see ourselves as we are seen by local Christian leaders?

Cultural anthropology offers an important tool for solving this kind of problem, we seek to identify the way other people classify and categorize aspects of their world (Spradley, 1979: 97-99). Applied to our situation, it means trying to understand how local Christian leaders classify *us*, the foreign missionaries who serve among them. Some might consider this a strange question and wonder how there could be different “categories of missionaries?” And even if there are such things, how could locals have different ones for us than we do for ourselves? I would like to begin to answer with a visual.

Our Categories

Although it was not part of my formal research, as a missionary myself, with ten years in Central Asia, I can fairly assess how most Evangelical missionaries categorize their colleagues here. Our mental map looks something like this: (see next page)



These groupings are not exact, and of course they overlap, but I think you will agree this is a generally accurate representation of how we normally organize the people around us in the mission community. The reason we do so is because these “categories” represent aspects of our identity that are significant to *us*—professional status, home country, and organizational ties. But it is critical to understand that much of this is meaningless to local Christian leaders here, they use different information hence produce different categories.

Local Categories

Local Christian leaders also organize foreign missionaries into categories, sometimes called cultural domains (Spradley, 1979: 107-112). As we shall see, some of these locally-derived categories are the same as the ones we use to describe ourselves, but others are very different from our own. We will begin by looking at categories that are very different from our own.

² To use some imaginary organizations.

Categories that are totally different

To understand local categories we must remember that there are two main reasons why local Christians construct categories that are different from the ones that we use for ourselves. First, they are often unaware of the information that informs our category construction, e.g. organizational affiliation or professional status, therefore local Christians instead use information that is accessible to them. Second, even when local Christians are well informed about the issues that form our categories, these are not meaningful to them. One local pastor said this:

I know these “categories” as you call them. Remember, I have been working with missionaries for 15 years now. I know what organizations you work with, your nationalities and your professions. But these things do not matter to me.

The categories for missionaries which are meaningful to local Christians are built around aspects of our identity that they see or experience in their dealings with us. To help grasp this difference in perceptions, below and on the next page are five locally-derived categories and the characteristics that respondents associated with each of them³.

<p>Missionaries who are Good Examples</p>	<p>Missionaries who are Rich</p>
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- + Generous with locals
- + **Spends lots of time with locals**
- + **Personally does EV**
- + **Is culturally sensitive**
- + Does not build church buildings
- + Does not go to lots to conferences
- + Does not try to be in control
- + Is not proud

<p>Missionaries who are Rich</p>

- Owns a house**
- **Goes to lots of conferences**
 - Tries to be in control
 - Is not generous with locals
 - Does not spend much time with locals

<p>Missionaries who are Too Busy</p>

- Goes to lots of conferences
- **Does not spend much time with locals**
- Does not personally do EV
- Is not culturally sensitive

³ Characteristics are linked to categories whenever they were noted as such by more than one half of those interviewed.

Missionaries who make us think, “**What are they doing here?**”

- **Goes to lots of conferences**
- Tries to be in control
- **Does not spend much time with locals**
- **Does not personally do EV**
- Is not culturally sensitive

Missionaries who are **Bad Examples**

- Builds church buildings
- Tries to be in control
- **Does not spend much time with locals**
- **Does not personally do EV**

A couple points of explanation are in order. First, you will note a category called, “What are they doing here?” *Every single leader interviewed* spoke of missionaries about whom they wonder, “what are they doing here?”⁴ Although this may sound like a strange name for a category, it was clear from the interviews that this is a distinct kind of missionary. One sister laughed when I questioned her about this:

Yes, for us this really is what you are calling a category. We know some missionaries that whenever we think of them we wonder, “why are they here?”

Second, note that characteristics which are in bold script were those which local Christian leaders stressed as strongly characteristic of that category of missionary.

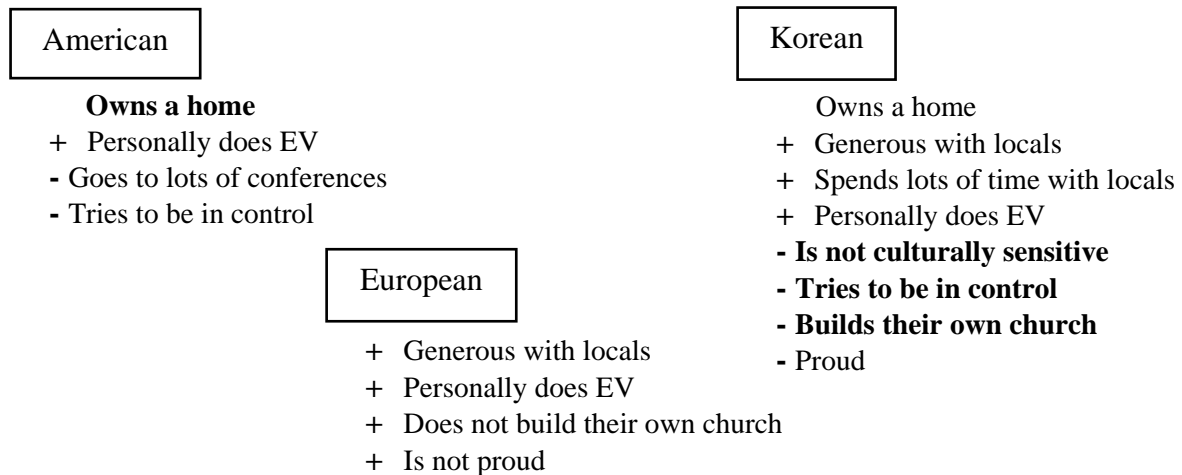
As you look at these categories, keep in mind what they are, together these represent one of the primary grids through which local Christian leaders see us, the foreign mission community in Kyrgyzstan. As such, each of us is placed in one of the above groupings, based on *what they see us doing* because that is what is observable and therefore meaningful to them.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to look carefully at the list of character traits under each domain and consider which list most closely parallels what locals probably see us doing. This potentially painful exercise is one way to gain some sense of how we are personally seen by the local Christians around us.

⁴ This is a phenomena that we will explore in more depth in a later section of this paper.

Familiar categories, but local interpretations.

Examining categories that are exclusively local is not the only way to understand someone else's worldview, cultural meaning may also be found by examining domains that have familiar names and structure. In this case, these familiar categories relate to the nationality of missionaries.



First, we should note that each of these categories do, of course, overlap with the previous ones. Second, there are a number of sending countries whose contribution to the mission community are obviously submerged into some other “national” category thus making these less than exact from our perspective. But please remember, it is not our perspective that we are trying to explore.

More important than strict accuracy is the fact that these categories based on nationality, or specifically the way certain traits are associated with these categories, potentially carry much more significance to post-Soviet people than they would for many of us. The Soviet education system taught that each nationality had its own “primordial national characteristics” and that these traits, good and bad, are an unchangeable aspect of the people born into that nation (Dukenbaev & Hansen, 2003:18). This means that the behavior of the missionary community in these last 15 years in Kyrgyzstan has inadvertently created more

than simple categories, it has produced powerful stereotypes. As such, for better or for worse, we may have to live with these for a long time.

Unfortunate Distortions

There were certain issues that repeatedly arose during interviews which are difficult to sufficiently emphasize in the section on locally-derived categories. It was clear that these have a huge impact on local perceptions of missionaries, looming so large that they tend to distort other aspects of missionary identity. As such, it would be wise for us to explain and analyze these separately.

Missionary Lifestyles

From a number of different angles, the matter of missionary lifestyle⁵ came into sharp focus during the research. Obviously this is a sensitive question, often treated as a taboo subject among missionaries themselves. Nevertheless, the issue was so significant to research participants that it requires our analysis.

It may help us grasp the problems created by missionary lifestyle choices if we think in terms of a progression. We begin at a place over which we have little control—the relative affluence of most sending countries as compared to Kyrgyzstan. One sister made this observation:

I know missionaries are not really rich. I know that in their home countries they are not rich, but here they are so much richer than our people.



⁵ By missionary lifestyles I mean issues like standard of living, use of leisure time, and personal spending habits.

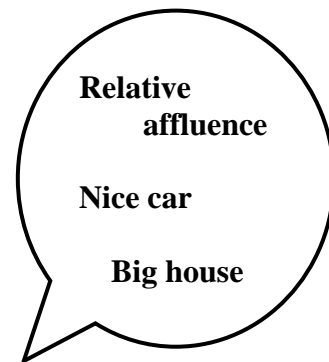
We might imagine this issue of “relative affluence” as a small balloon filling with air. By itself, it only causes a small amount of tension, inflating the balloon just a bit. But soon other things enter the picture:

Here is why Kyrgyz think all American missionaries are rich. Some Americans came to Kyrgyzstan and told everyone, “No, we are not rich, we are simple people.” But a little while later they started doing things that are exactly the opposite—building a big house, buying a nice car... So we have seen that many missionaries say they are poor, but really they have lots of money.

Can you imagine this causing the balloon to inflate?

Can you see how this would increase the underlying tension?

But it does not stop there. Many things that have slowly become normative in the missions community here have served only to increase tension over perceptions of financial inequality. A few more quotes will help construct the picture:

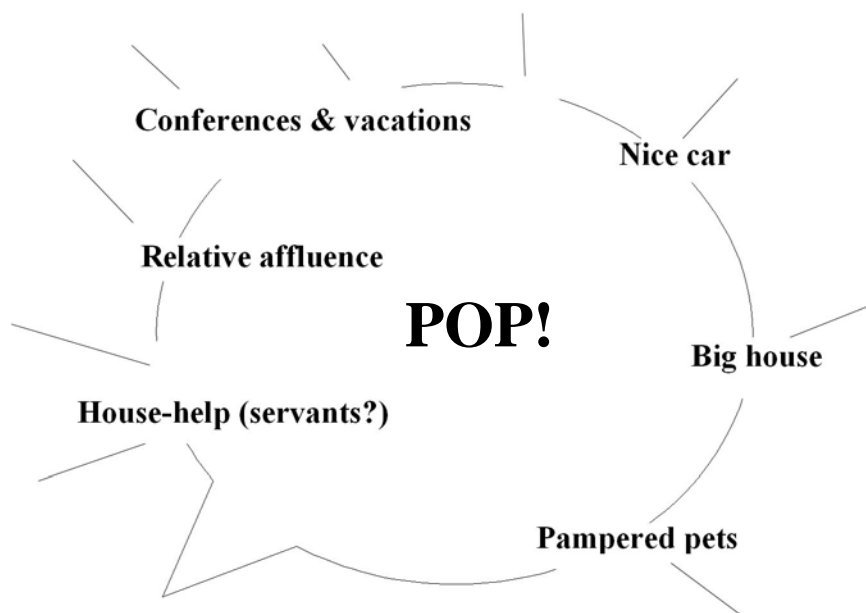


Did you know that whole teams of them [missionaries] go to Thailand every year for a rest?! First they go to Thailand, then they go to Issyk Kyl, then they take a few days here and there in the mountains for “fresh air,” they say they are so tired. We sit here and wonder, “what do you need a rest for? You are always on holiday!”

There is something strange about the way many [Western missionaries] treat their animals. Its hard to describe... [a] missionary once said to me, “oh, my little cat does not like to eat anything but chicken, so that is what we have to buy for it.” I thought to myself, there are lots of bums in the street who would think that little bit of chicken once a week was a life of riches! I don’t want to judge—its their money—but when missionaries do this in a place with so many poor people, it is really offensive.

[Some missionaries] have a person come two or three times a week to clean their house, then they have someone to cook their meals—some even have a man servant working in the yard. But if you ask them, they will tell you they are tired and need to go to Turkey for a conference and some rest!

If you will remember, we began with a simple problem that was outside our control, the relative affluence of our sending countries in comparison to Kyrgyzstan. But then *we* have added to this underlying tension with various missionary lifestyle choices.



Slowly and insidiously, these have raised the tension over socio-economic issues to the point where we are now losing respect in the eyes of local Christians:

If I may honestly say it, the authority of missionaries is falling quickly here. We used to think, “oh, they are a missionary, they must be a godly person.” But now, no. I hate to say it, but I hear this kind of talk all the time among local pastors, “Why did these foreigners come here anyway? Maybe it was too hard for them in their home country and it is easier and cheaper for them to live here.”

I realize that some people might be tempted to dismiss this analysis as nothing more than a sophisticated explanation of envy. However, the interviews consistently produced clear evidence to the contrary. One sister said directly what several participants only implied:

It should never be a problem about how much money a missionary has. It does not matter at all to me if a missionary lives in a big 2-story house and has a nice car, I really don't care. This should never be a problem, but...sometimes you are around certain missionaries and you just feel that they love their things and their animals more than they love you...the problem is not their riches, but it is a heart problem...We watch the way missionaries live and we see how they treat locals, we can tell a lot just by how missionaries spend their money.

Note the spiritual maturity of her response, does this sound like a person to be simply dismissed as struggling with envy? Yet this came from one of the harshest critics of missionary lifestyles that I encountered during the research. It would seem fair to say that many local Christian leaders understand the complexity of this issue, but they also feel that when missionaries really love local people they will consider local sensibilities when making lifestyle choices. Conversely, when we do not act this way, we inadvertently send the message that our things are more important to us than people we came to reach.

The problems associated with lifestyles choices has long been a major issue for the missionary community, it is nothing new or unique to those of us in Central Asia. Well-known missionary author Phil Parshall once observed:

It does matter what nationals think about the financial profile of the missionary community. Generally, they are appalled at the gap between the living standard of themselves and the Western missionary. (1992: C131-C136)

Murky Missionary Methodology

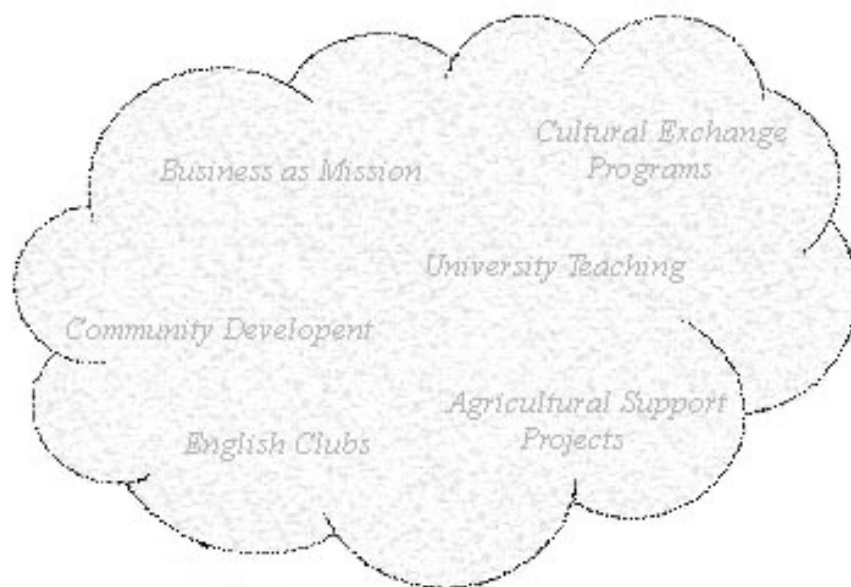
Another significant area of concern that arose during the interviews has to do with the category we labeled, "What are they doing here?" Due to a number of factors, Western

missionaries often use strategies such “business as mission,” cultural exchange programs, and community development. These provide many missionaries with a means of residence in Kyrgyzstan as well as a vehicle for effective ministry. What we have not realized is that these highly sophisticated strategies often fall outside the realm of what many local Christian leaders understand “mission” to be:

A person who calls themselves a missionary should be sharing the gospel, that is the main thing. Some missionaries tell the locals to witness, but they don’t do it themselves because they are scared of being in trouble with the police and getting kicked out.

I understand “tentmaking,” some are doctors, some are researchers like you, some are doing something else in order to get a visa. I am fine with that. But what is the result of their ministry? We really don’t know what kind of ministry they are doing here.

We might say that as far as local Christian leaders are concerned, there is a methodological fog surrounding many missionaries—they find it difficult to see or understand what we are doing here.



Just as a man gropes about in a dense fog, many local leaders grope about for some handle with which to understand some aspects of our methodology—they vaguely see something, but are not sure if, when, or how there is any substance to it. Several research participants even questioned whether or not such missionaries were actually doing “missionary activity” because what they see does not fit with what they understand. For any number of reasons, it appears that much of our methodology is incomprehensible to local leaders:

I don't want to be negative, but I will be honest. We are seeing people come here who consider themselves to be a missionary, and we receive them that way. But soon we realize that by our understanding they are not. They are more involved in business or something else than they are in the ministry of the Word [of God]. The Word gets left way behind in their daily life and the other things they are involved in. Personally, I don't consider such a person to be a missionary.

We should note that this problem is primarily connected to Western missionaries, not to Koreans:

We can better understand the Koreans because we can see what they do, there is fruit from their work. But Europeans and Americans, most of them we don't even know why they are here. Maybe many of them are doing something, but we can't see it.

Koreans build churches [physical buildings], we can see and understand that.

Although research participants voiced high regard for less visible ministries such as mentoring local believers, it was clear that some of our methods are making it very hard for local Christians to understand us and/or our ministries here. It might behoove those who use more complex strategies, such as community development or “business as mission,” to do a better job of explaining to local Christians the reasons behind what they do. However, we

must also ask ourselves if local perceptions have a measure of truth to them. Is it possible that in our missiological sophistication we have lost something of the simplicity of proclaiming Christ?

An Atmosphere of Control

The final matter we will examine in this section is the issue of control. Local leaders expressed a great deal of frustration and on this issue they were sharply critical:

Missionaries use their money to control people. I don't mean sometimes, I mean almost all the time.

Often missionaries come here and say, "I came here to help you, to grow the church with you." But then they quickly start taking over all leadership. This happens all the time...especially with Americans. "Love of control" is like the national disease of American culture.

Koreans come here and want everything their way.. Once some Korean missionaries came to me and told me they were going to do these certain things. But I have been a pastor for several years now, and I told them that I didn't agree with their plans, that their ideas would not work here. The Korean missionary said to me, "NO, this is how it is going to be!"

Now there is a growing anti-missionary feeling here these days, you have probably felt it or heard it. I don't agree with it, but it is [happening] because many foreigners have come here and acted in an authoritarian manner.

We in the foreign mission community may not have given this issue much thought, but local Christian leaders clearly have. The matter of missionaries controlling locals was often just in the background of the interviews. It was like ugly wallpaper hanging behind many other aspects of our relationship with each other.



This is clearly an emotional hot-button for locals, seeming to project something to local Christians that we foreigners are unaware of. Thankfully one brother, who happens to have a degree in world history, graciously explained why so many local Christians have an acute fear of foreign control:

You have to know that a lot was written in our Soviet textbooks about the European colonization of Africa and India. It was painted as overwhelming bad for locals. With the way some missionaries have acted here, lots of locals started saying, “hey they are trying to take-over our land and colonize us!”

Without meaning to sound alarming, the idea that missionary behavior in Kyrgyzstan is raising the specter of colonialism in the minds of local Christians should serve as a grave warning to anyone who understands world history.

Not Everything is Negative

To this point there has been quite a bit of negativity expressed in this paper, however there is more to the picture than this might imply. In fact, local Christian leaders had a number of positive and gracious things to say about foreign missionaries. Even the people who expressed the sharpest criticisms also had some very positive things to say. Therefore it is now time to turn our attention to some refreshingly positive statements.

Fruitful in Partnership

More than one leader reflected on the value they place in the times when they are able to partner with foreign missionaries:

There is so much that we can do when we partner together. There was a time a few years ago when several missionaries here in Kyrgyzstan wanted to partner with us local pastors. We did so much! We planted churches, we evangelized new places, there was a lot of good done in those partnership efforts.

Awareness of Sacrifice

Not surprisingly, the research participants who have visited the West tended to have very positive things to say about the sacrifice that missionaries make in coming to live in Kyrgyzstan.

I have been to America, three times now, and so I have a great respect for missionaries who come here. I know how much you gave-up to be here. I saw how comfortable life could be there, you could have stayed there and just raised your kids in a nice place. So I have high regard for you when you come here.

I've been to America, I studied there for one semester. I know how hard it must be for you to come here. Before I went to America I didn't understand. But now I do, I know what it is like being a foreigner in a foreign country.

Exceptional Cases

Whenever the conversation shifted from the overall picture to specific missionaries, local leaders expressed love and respect for many of the missionaries they know:

We know one family here that are a very good example. They give lots of their time to us and other locals. They don't give money, they sacrifice their time. They give us good council, they pay attention to how we are living, ask about our kids and really pay attention to how we are...It is clear that they are truly

interested in the locals here, and we have learned a lot from them, about how to really care about people.

There is a family that came to our church when they first moved to Kyrgyzstan. They were young, with young children. They immediately started to learn our ways, to learn our culture. I just love them! They are like us. I don't have to call a week in advance to come to visit them! I can just call and tell them I am on the way.

Generally Sympathetic Feelings

Sometimes the positive feelings expressed by research participants did not fit into any particular box, but were still reminders that despite the tension between us, there is still much to praise God for:

I know it is hard for the NGO worker here. It is hard to raise money for their projects, and the government is all the time checking them about their work and their visas.

I think some missionaries are being good examples here, and to me personally that has to do with character... [I see] integrity, honesty and walking with God... interact[ing] well with our people in humility and [being] respectful of local people... treat[ing] our people with dignity.

Praise God for the influx of foreign missionaries to Kyrgyzstan right now from Uzbekistan, this is a blessing to the nation of Kyrgyzstan.

If someone is really serving, really praying, really trusting God for fruit, we should eventually see that. I am patient to wait, even years...if there is even one person whose life is changed, that's wonderful and enough for me.

With this much good will expressed by the same people who are also critical of us, surely we can find a way to overcome the negatives which seem to haunt us as a community.

Advice to Ponder

At the close of every initial interview, I asked what kind of advice they would offer missionaries if given the chance. Some of their replies are worthy of somber reflection, therefore they will be offered without comment:

I would say that the most important advice for missionaries is to act like we are your equals. Don't see yourself as better than locals, trust us.

I would put my advice in the form of a question, "What do you believe has been your impact here? What will be your legacy?"

[Missionaries should] be a good example of the faith and love people. Without a love for the people here, how do you expect to see anything happen? If they will be a good example of love, even if it is only to one person, then they will see a good fruit.

I know that some [missionaries] opened themselves to locals, but the local believers used them. They were hurt and now they are closed to us. These missionaries judge all of us by what one or two people did. I ask you, please don't judge all of us by one or two bad relationships. You don't want us to do that to you do you?

Love those you have come to reach. Be honest and biblical in the way you live. If missionaries live such lives, not just saying they love the people, but really doing it, that will be enough. But missionary hypocrisy, saying you love people without really doing it, this ruins people's trust.

Please listen first! Take time to drink tea and talk. You will learn so much from us, and *then* we will be willing to listen to you.

Conclusion

Hopefully this paper has presented a true and clear picture of how experienced local Christian leaders in Kyrgyzstan view the missionaries they know. While it is not easy to see yourself through someone else's eyes, it is certainly worth the effort.

If you were not before, you are now well aware that there is an unspoken tension between ourselves and many of our local brothers and sisters. They see us differently than we see ourselves, and that view is not always flattering. We have also seen that certain issues loom so large over our relationship with local Christian leaders that they tend to distort their view of us. But thankfully we have also seen that not everything is negative, research participants had some very gracious things to say about us as well.

Nevertheless, I realize this paper has painted a generally negative picture about the relationship between local Christian leaders and foreign missionaries. This reflects a trend that was often mentioned by local leaders:

It is sad to see the attitude of many brothers [around the region]...Many of them are becoming against the foreign missionaries. They ask, 'What are these people doing here anyway? They live a good life here, spend lots of money, but what good are they doing? And then more of them keep coming!' I personally do not agree [this kind of thinking] and I am really sad to hear this kind of talk.

Probably four out of five people [local leaders] I know do not receive or respect missionaries very much now. Each has their own reasons, but each has been influenced by their experience with missionaries.

Facing such a trend, what can we do? Should we shrug our shoulders in resignation and go on? One brother strongly argued otherwise:

The relationship between locals and foreign missionaries must improve. We share the same values and spiritual goals. Cultural misunderstandings should be secondary to this. We must be able to overcome these differences or we should just throw the Bible away.

The question of how we respond to these negative assessments raises the issue of *responsibility*. Now that we are aware of their perceptions of us, in what way are we responsible? Are we willing to be held accountable by local Christians for the way we live among them? These questions are all the more urgent because those interviewed expressed serious doubt that the mission community would listen to their critique:

I am glad you are doing this research and it could be really good for missionaries to know these things. But most locals would say that it is a waste of time—the missionaries will not change. And even if they do hear all these things, they will only cover for each other's behavior, not challenge each other to change... I really hope there will be change but I still don't think it will happen.

Missionaries will do what they want to do, no matter what we say... I really don't have any hope that your research will change anything between us.

I used to get upset about this kind of stuff. I would get all excited and wave my arms around while I talked about it—but not now. I don't have much hope that your research will change anything ... I have told many of these same things to other missionaries but nothing ever changes because no one is interested in changing.

The fact is, words like the ones in this ethnography carry moral implications. Just by the act of undertaking this research I have committed to making sure the local perspective is clearly heard. By reading it you have become responsible to reflect on their words. This does not mean we will necessarily agree with everything our brothers and sisters have said, but it does mean we have a responsibility before God to honestly wrestle with the portrait of us their words have painted.

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