

## Central Asia: Endless Harassment

The family huddled at the train station as they tried to sleep on the hard floor. It was their second night sleeping there, because they had nowhere else to go. They were restless among the steady stream and busyness of travelers passing through the station.

“Andrei” watched his two-year-old son shift in his sleep, and wondered again if he’d heard God right. “Move to this strange village where we know no one? Move my family away from what is familiar? Is this really what you want, Lord?” he prayed.

### A Church in Hostile Land

In the morning, an old woman took pity on the family of three sleeping in the train station and invited them to stay with her. Every day, Andrei and his wife passed out New Testaments in the village. It was tough ground. The area they had been called to was particularly committed to Islam. The Muslim leaders were resistant to a foreign religion encroaching on their territory.

Little by little, a small band of those who believed in Jesus grew, and a church was established. Andrei completed the complicated legal process to have his congregation officially registered, so they could operate legally. More than 15 years ago, that was possible. Today, although laws officially permit freedom of religion, registration and censorship laws have closed many churches. Openly sharing your faith is illegal, and punishable by years in prison.



*Believers meet together in a home in Central Asia.*

In spite of his official status, Andrei has endured endless harassment in ministry. He’s a particular threat because his congregation worships in the language of the majority ethnic group rather than in the regionally accepted and widely used Russian language. His car tires have been slashed. His windows have been smashed. During church services, strangers have recorded the license plate numbers of those attending the church.

Three years ago while Andrei was in his car, a stranger suddenly got in and threatened him. Another time, two men assaulted his son and threatened to break his arms and legs. After Andrei filed a police report, the attackers told the police it was all a joke, and the charge was dropped.

In June of 2015, the church was raided by masked police after someone had falsely accused the church of being a terrorist organization. Officials swept through the church, rounded up the church members, confiscated cell phones and made everyone produce identity papers. The Central Asian governments are hyper sensitive to the threat of radical Islam and any religious

produce identity papers. The Central Asian governments are hyper-sensitive to the threat of radical Islam and any religious extremism. After more than an hour of interrogations, the police were finally convinced that Christians weren't plotting a terror attack. But the problems have scared some believers away.

The attack last Easter was the worst yet for the church. As the congregation celebrated the Resurrection, a stranger dressed in a suit and wearing running shoes entered, asked for the pastor and was ushered to a back pew. Uneasy, several of the ushers kept an eye on him, but they had no time to react when he did something strange. He pulled out two medical bottles and hurled them one after the other toward the front of the church, creating a chemical explosion that released a lot of smoke.

As the congregation reacted in shock, the attacker ran from the building. Police were called, but it took them more than two hours to respond. Seven people had to be treated after inhaling the gasses.

### **God at Work**

More than 15 years of attacks have not derailed Andrei's commitment to follow God's calling to share Jesus and pastor his church. He knew it would be difficult from the moment they arrived in the train station that first night. "All these years... we've seen evidence of God at work," he told VOM workers.

He's thankful for the support of Christians around the world. VOM is supplying him with Bibles for the church to reach out to the Muslim population around them. Christian brothers and sisters in South Korea and England have also helped the church.

And in spite of everything that has happened, he sees the hand of God guiding them. They now own both the church building and the land it's built on. The church has grown to about 50 members and is able to support four staff members with simple salaries. "In all these years [here]," he said, "My wife and I have seen so many evidences of God taking care of us."

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