

TOUGH GRACE

I have to confess that the suggestion from my church's Missions Committee that I pay a pastoral visit to one of our missionary couples in Mongolia was met with less than total enthusiasm. Though I love to travel, and have especially loved visiting missionaries overseas, Mongolia has never been top of my '99 things to do before you die' list! In my mind I imagined either freezing cold or boiling heat, flat, featureless plains and less than welcoming nomads.

Worst of all, I had been warned about the delicacies of fatty lambs' tails, mares' milk with blood, and the smell of herdsmen plastered in yak butter. However, I knew that the couple, Steve and Lun Hae Howard (OMF), had gone through some rough times and so valiantly agreed, along with one of my Elders, to make a visit in early June.

From beginning to end the trip was a great delight, and none of my fears were even remotely realised. For a start, we chose a sensible time of year to travel, and the weather was perfect – blue skies almost all the time, but never too hot or cold. And far from being bland, the Mongolian countryside proved to be stunningly beautiful. As for the people, it is true that they can be 'inscrutable', but we found them gracious and hospitable in every way.

Though our main reason for the trip was to visit the Howards, we realised that Arhangai, where Mark and Gill Newham live and work, was exactly *en route*. We were able to make the necessary arrangements, courtesy of MAF, and it was a tremendous thrill to spend 2 full days with them and see their ministry first hand. We tasted the delights of the bakery (when the Lonely Planet Guide to Mongolia says that if you visit the bakery in Arhangai you will think you have died and gone to heaven, they are right!) and saw the progress on the guest house. But we weren't allowed to just 'taste and see' - we were soon handed paintbrushes and rollers and spent most of the day helping to get some of the rooms ready for use as soon as possible.

We consider ourselves very privileged to have seen Mark and Gill at work first hand. The ministry has never been easy for them, and even in the short time we were there some of the frustrations and challenges became clear. However, Mark and Gill have been given the precious ability to take the long view, and their patience, resilience, and sense of commitment to the town and its people, were unmistakable.

We then proceeded overland to the town of Uliasti, where the Howards have lived for the past 4 years. Uliasti is larger than Arhangai, though more primitive in some ways. There is no running water, and electricity was only available for a few hours. Things are slowly improving but daily living

is still a real challenge. The church situation is also reminiscent of the situation Mark and Gill have experienced in Arhangai, and it has proved very hard to discern the genuineness of many who have professed faith. However, Steve and Lun Hae's ministry has begun to develop, especially among teachers and pupils in two schools where Steve teaches Environmental Studies as part of a wider re-forestation programme.

Once more we felt humbled to spend time alongside those whom God has called to really tough situations, but who have also found grace to commit themselves to the ministry long term.

We were able to stop briefly in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, on the way home and speak to various missionaries there. The capital is like another world, and that would be true spiritually. However, the church there also has its many struggles, and like the church in the rest of Mongolia needs the prayers of God's people everywhere.

Probably this is the biggest impression we were left with as we returned home. There is no doubt that God is doing great things in Mongolia, but the work remains difficult in all kinds of ways. Only the consistent and determined prayers of the church around the world will see the fledgling church grow to real spiritual maturity. ■

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