



Religious and Cultural Peculiarities of Presbyterian Communities in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian Countries

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was a comprehensive understanding of the religious, cultural, and social specifics of Presbyterian communities in post-Soviet Central Asia, mainly in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The study aimed at identifying sustainability factors, forms of social integration, and adaptation strategies for small Protestant groups under regulatory constraints and cultural pressure. The methodological framework included a historical analysis of the formation of Presbyterian communities from 1861 to 2024, a comparative analysis of dogmatic sources and real practice, content analysis of materials from the Internet resources of Presbyterian churches, in addition to a documentary review of official reports of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The study included cases of four specific parishes – in Almaty, Shymkent, Karaganda, and Taraz. As a result of the study, stability in the number of registered communities was recorded (an average of 10-13 in the country in 2020-2024) and a gradual increase in the number of participants, especially due to the rejuvenation of the composition, which was reflected in an increase in the proportion of young people under 35 who actively participate in worship services, social initiatives, and educational programmes. In most parishes, services were held in Kazakh and Russian, and in the diaspora groups – also in Korean. Presbyterian churches demonstrated the active development of social work, covering on average three areas: humanitarian assistance, educational initiatives, and family support. These types of ministry became an alternative to open missionary activity, which was limited by law. An important result was the identification of a model of “quiet presence”: churches minimised religious symbols, adjusted statutory documents, and re-registered their legal form to preserve the possibility of legal functioning. Typical legal barriers were specified (for example, requirements for the number of founders and a ban on public preaching), and the forms of adaptation to them were described. The obtained results can be practically used by religious scholars, public policy specialists, theologians, and representatives of religious organisations operating under regulatory control.



Keywords: parish administration, language policy, social service, interfaith dialogue, regional distribution, models of interaction.

Introduction

Presbyterian communities in Central Asian countries, despite their numerical insignificance and peripheral position in the religious picture of the region, are a stereotypically inconspicuous but stable phenomenon. Given the dominance of Islam as the cultural and religious basis of the majority of the population and the historical presence of Orthodoxy as an institutionalised tradition, Protestant denominations, including Presbyterianism, are often viewed as atypical for the regional context. Thereby, the current state of these communities indicates a well-formed system of internal organisation, adaptation strategies, and religious stability, which allows them to be considered as independent acts of cultural and confessional integration.

A study by Osmonova et al. (2024), devoted to religious identity of young people in Kyrgyzstan and Poland, showed that the key factors of religious self-determination are, on the one hand, the desire for freedom of spiritual choice and, on the other hand, pressure from family, educational environment, and dominant religious traditions. In particular, young people often face expectations to follow family confessional attitudes, which limits the possibility of openly choosing another religious affiliation or distancing themselves from religion as such. However, Protestant communities in this paper are considered exclusively in a peripheral way – as an environment that does not have a significant institutional influence on the processes of religious socialisation. The lack of emphasis on these confessions limits the completeness of the picture and prevents outlining the features of the internal dynamics of minorities in post-Soviet society. Mohiuddin (2024), reflecting on the pre-Islamic layers of religiosity in the region, acknowledges in passing the existence of other forms of faith, but leaves them outside the scope of analysis.

Abdukadyrov et al. (2024), exploring pilgrimage and historical and religious ties, give an idea of the depth of the Islamic tradition, but completely ignore small Christian groups, which, meanwhile, have been part of the regional society for more than a century. An attempt to go beyond the usual framework was made by Valikul o'g'li (2020), examining the perception of Christianity in the region through the prism of myths and reality. The author noted that Christian communities are often endowed with external meanings unrelated to their actual existence. This is consistent with the conclusions of Byerdimurat (2024), which shows how the visual space of Central Asian cities displaces “other” religions beyond the symbolic field – Protestant symbols are practically absent in the public sphere. In the publication of Kubeyev and Burkhanov (2025), the peculiarities of the perception of Islam in Soviet Central Asia are analysed. The authors show that religion, including Islam, was viewed throughout the 20th century more as an object of control than as a cultural resource. This approach has also spread to a certain extent to the “new” religions of the post-Soviet period, including Protestantism, especially in its missionary form.

In a study by Bekmirzaev and Gafurova (2021) accentuates that Islam, over a long historical period, not only determined the socio-cultural structure of Central Asian societies but also formed ideas about normative religiosity, within which other faiths were perceived as marginal or culturally inauthentic. This perception system acted as a kind of filter through which Protestant and other Christian communities were often interpreted as external and atypical to the region. Kairken and Alkeyeva (2024) demonstrate that the confessional past of Central Asia was much more diverse. The archaeological and historical data analysed in the study indicate the influence of Manichaeism, Nestorianism, and other forms of early Christianity on the formation of the cultural environment of the settled Turkic peoples.

A paper of Djuraeva and Qurbonova (2022), dedicated to Sufism, presents how religion can be rooted in local forms of memory, identity, and territorial sacredness. As applied to Presbyterianism, this means that small Protestant communities, despite their institutional “novelty”, also create their own forms of local rooting – even if not through holy sites, but through language, architecture, musical tradition, forms of ministry, and social initiatives. Religious politics, as demonstrated by Gamza and Jones (2021) has evolved from relative openness to strict regulation since the collapse



of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) until the end of 2010. This is especially true for communities that rely on international connections and external theological sources. This is exactly what Presbyterian churches are, forced to balance between fidelity to dogmatic principles and the need to “translate” themselves into the language of local cultural norms.

This is also indicated by Kahveci and Bonnenfant (2023), considering Turkey's “soft power” in Central Asia as an element of cultural competition. Christian denominations, and above all Presbyterians, find themselves under pressure not only from the dominant religion but also from new forms of regional influence, where religion becomes part of the geopolitical toolkit. As Karimov (2021) reminds, the Islamisation of Turks in the region was a long, ambiguous, and complex process. This gives reason to regard Central Asia as a space of confessional plurality, where, even in historical retrospect, religious identity has never been one-dimensional. This multiplicity is reflected both in confessions and linguistic and philosophical paradigms. Gaibullaev (2023) emphasises that the development of language and thinking in Central Asia was formed at the intersection of various cultural vectors – Turkic, Iranian, Arabic, and Western.

The purpose of this study was a comprehensive understanding of the religious and cultural features of the functioning of Presbyterian communities in Central Asian countries, with an emphasis on the Kazakh context. The study provided for the following tasks: firstly, the reconstruction of the historical and religious dynamics of the formation of Presbyterian communities in the region from the moment the first Protestant missions appeared until the beginning of 2024; secondly, the analysis of modern forms of adaptation of these communities to the cultural and linguistic environment using the example of registered parishes in Kazakhstan.

Materials and Methods

The investigation of the religious and cultural characteristics of Presbyterian communities in Central Asian countries – primarily in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Uzbekistan – was based on an analysis of theoretical, theological, and source materials covering the period from 1861 (the time of the beginning of the organised resettlement of Koreans and Protestant Germans to Central Asia) to the beginning of 2024. Classical doctrinal documents of the Presbyterian tradition were used as the main text base: the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1648 and the Westminster Catechism (Westminster Complete Catechism, 2006), the Heidelberg Catechism (Mamsurov, 2006). Attention was focused on chapters related to church governance, missionary responsibility, and issues of inculturation, particularly chapters X–XIV of the Westminster Confession, which allowed tracing the principles of internal self-organisation of Presbyterian communities in new socio-cultural conditions.

Additionally, the materials presented on the official Internet resources of the registered Presbyterian organisations of Kazakhstan were studied, in particular, on the website “Zion-church.kz” (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025). The criteria for selecting sources were the availability of state registration of a religious association in the Republic of Kazakhstan, and regular updating of information on worship services, social activity, and the number of parishioners.

Cases from different regions of Kazakhstan were included to provide empirical details, specifically Almaty, Karaganda, Pavlodar, Shymkent, and Taraz. Their choice was determined by regional diversity, differences in the number of parishes, the degree of institutionalisation, and activity in public life. Additionally, the annual official reports of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the state of religious associations for 2020-2024 (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025) were examined. These documents contain information on the number of registered Presbyterian organisations, their geographical distribution (including data on Almaty, Karaganda, Pavlodar, Zhambyl, and South Kazakhstan regions), the dynamics of the number of believers, along with the levels of involvement in public and social activities.

The investigation was theoretical and religious in nature and was based on the methods of historical, comparative and content analysis. The historical method helped reconstruct the main stages of the



formation of Presbyterian communities in Central Asia: the resettlement of Korean and German Protestants in the second half of the 19th century, repression and underground existence during the Soviet period, the stages of legalisation in 1990, and institutional strengthening in 2000-2020.

The study relied exclusively on documentary sources, including doctrinal texts, official reports, and publicly available materials from registered Presbyterian organisations in Kazakhstan. This approach was chosen due to the sensitivity of the topic, as the communities studied are relatively small and their activities often operate under tight legal and social scrutiny. Access to interviews with community members was limited, as direct engagement could have risked breaching confidentiality or triggering legal challenges related to the public expression of religious identity. Therefore, the study focused on analysing publicly available sources such as websites, church reports, and statistical data from the Ministry of Information and Social Development of Kazakhstan. These documents provided insights into the empirical practices of the Presbyterian communities while ensuring compliance with legal and cultural sensitivities.

Comparative analysis was used to identify differences between the official theological doctrine reflected in the doctrinal texts and the empirical practice of the Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan. Special attention was paid to the issues of the language of worship, the structure of parish administration, the role of elders, the social mission, and the specifics of adaptation to the cultural context. Additionally, an inter-regional analysis of the similarities and differences between the Kazakh and South Korean Presbyterian communities was included. The comparison of organisational models, stylistic features of sermons, degree of dogmatic rigour, levels of visual expression of identity, and social influence was conducted.

Content analysis of texts from the website “Zion-church.kz” and related materials – public appeals, mission descriptions, event reports, and interviews with community members – revealed key strategies for self-description, forms of external communication, and tactics for the cultural enculturation of Presbyterian identity (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025).

The methodological framework assumed the consideration of Presbyterian communities as integrated participants in the post-Soviet socio-cultural space, with an emphasis on their participation in the transformations of historical memory, diasporic processes, and the legal evolution of religious freedom. The interdisciplinary approach provided for the use of elements of the sociology of religion, theology, cultural anthropology, and the analysis of state policy in the religious sphere.

In this study, coding categories were developed based on key themes identified in the literature and research objectives, focusing on religious identity, cultural adaptation, legal challenges, and social activities of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan. These categories were refined through a combination of deductive and inductive coding methods. Deductive coding was used to align the analysis with established theological and sociological frameworks, such as the principles of Presbyterian doctrine and models of religious adaptation. Inductive coding allowed for the identification of emergent themes, such as the role of multilingualism, the church's social initiatives, and the legal barriers faced by these communities. Themes were validated through a process of member checking, where key informants from the Presbyterian communities reviewed the findings for accuracy, and by triangulating data from multiple sources, including doctrinal texts, community reports, and official statistics. This ensured that the themes were both representative of the communities' lived experiences and grounded in the broader socio-cultural and religious context of Kazakhstan.

Results

Historical development and geographical presence of Presbyterian communities in Central Asia

The history of the formation of Presbyterian communities in the territory of modern Kazakhstan is closely connected with the large-scale migration and repressive processes that took place in the 19th-20th centuries. The first elements of the Presbyterian tradition were brought to the region by deported ethnic Germans and Koreans who were forcibly resettled in the Kazakh steppes as part of



the policy of internal displacement implemented both under the tsarist regime and during the Soviet period (Hudson & Leustean, 2022). In conditions of religious isolation and lack of institutional support, religious practices remained mostly in a closed format: worship services were held at home, religious teaching was transmitted orally, and access to Christian literature was limited (Tasar, 2022; Bektenova et al., 2025). Already at this stage, the characteristic features of local Presbyterian communities appeared – the horizontal model of organisation, stable ties within the group, and the rejection of confessional hierarchy.

Under the anti-religious policy of the Soviet state, most religious associations were forced into an illegal situation (Akunova & Soyuzova, 2024). Presbyterian congregations were no exception: their activities were limited to informal gatherings, and pastoral ministry was often held by laypeople who retained basic theological knowledge. In a study by Bekmirzaev & Gafurova (2021), it is stressed that even under the conditions of official atheism, religion continued to exist as an element of cultural stability, especially among the deported communities. Boron (2024) draws similar conclusions, pointing to the preservation of religious identity through family practices and collective memory. This explains why, after the collapse of the Soviet system, religious groups, including Presbyterian ones, were able to quickly restore their structure and formalise their legal status in the new conditions (Gamza & Jones, 2021).

During the period of Kazakhstan's state independence, Presbyterian communities were given the opportunity to legalise their activities and begin institutional strengthening (Doszhan, 2023; Ivashko et al., 2020). In cities such as Almaty, Karaganda, Taraz, and Shymkent, operating Presbyterian churches were registered, including the Zion Church in Shymkent (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025). These communities are characterised by an emphasis on social activism, openness to a multilingual environment, and flexible adaptation to the legal conditions of the modern Kazakh Republic.

A comparative analysis with the South Korean model of Presbyterianism uncovered both institutional and theological differences. In South Korea, where Presbyterianism was formed under conditions of state support and numerical dominance, the emphasis is on missionary expansion, charismatic preaching, and institutionalised theological training, mainly in seminaries affiliated with certain denominations. In the Kazakh context, on the contrary, communities exist in conditions of a numerical and legal minority, which requires a more flexible and contextual approach. This is reflected in practices: liturgical life is less formalised, lay participation in decision-making is more pronounced, and theological training is often provided through distance learning and local seminars (Abdukadyrov et al., 2024; Doszhan, 2022). Regarding theological positions, Kazakh Presbyterians, like their South Korean counterparts, profess Calvinistic soteriology, the doctrine of predestination and salvation by grace.

In South Korea, Presbyterian identity manifests itself as part of a national Protestant project, with pronounced competition between denominations, whereas in Kazakhstan, the establishment of an ecclesiological balance between the preservation of doctrine and socio-cultural loyalty dominates. In this context, the role of the church is perceived not only as a spiritual institution but also as a social support platform adapted to the needs of the local community (Cha, 2022). Table 1 shows the stages of development of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, including resettlement in the 19th century, repression, and underground existence in the 20th century, along with the process of legalisation and institutionalisation in 1990-2000.

Table 1. Stages of development of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan

Stages of development	Description	Key changes
Resettlement (19th century)	The first communities formed as a result of the resettlement of German, Korean, and Russian Christians professing the Reformed faith. Small numbers and isolation.	Formation of the first Protestant communities, doctrine, self-government.

Repression and underground existence (20th century)	The migrants maintained their faith in underground conditions, organised themselves into hidden groups for worship, and adapted their faith to the conditions of repression.	Deportation, keeping faith a secret, creating a culture of survival.
Legalisation and institutionalisation (1990-2000)	The legalisation of religious communities in the early 1990s, the registration of churches, the return of pastors with theological education abroad, and the expansion of the cultural and social mission.	Official registration, cultural adaptation, the beginning of social work, the growth of the number of communities.

Source: compiled by the authors based on Westminster Complete Catechism (2006); Presbyterian Church “Zion” (2025); Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025).

An analysis of official statistics published by the Ministry of Information and Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2024 showed the stability of the number of registered Presbyterian communities in the country – from 13 in 2020 to 14 in 2024. During this period, there were only minor fluctuations (with a minimum of 12 communities in 2021 and a maximum of 15 in 2023), indicating the relative stability of the organisational presence. Therewith, the territorial distribution turned out to be uneven: the largest number of parishes is concentrated in Almaty, Karaganda, and Shymkent.

This is due to both historical factors, that is, the deportation of Protestant groups during the Soviet period, and the modern concentration of ethnic communities (Germans, Koreans) traditionally associated with Protestantism. In a number of regions (Pavlodar, Kostanay, Zhambyl region), only an occasional or unstable presence was recorded (Azilkanov & Askhatuly, 2022).

The dynamics of changes reflected in the graph allowed tracing the trend of gradual adaptation, but without pronounced expansionary growth. Figure 1 shows the dynamics of the number of registered Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan in 2020-2024, which visualises the maintenance of a stable level with a moderate increase in certain periods.

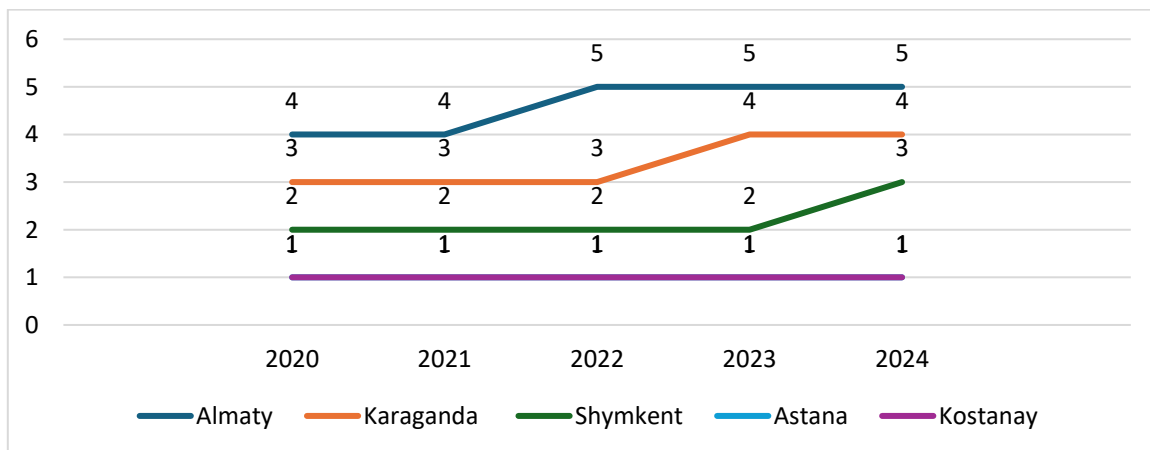


Figure 1. Dynamics of the number of registered Presbyterian congregations in Kazakhstan (2020-2024)

Source: compiled by the authors according to the Presbyterian Church “Zion” (2025); Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025).

The data presented in Figure 1 demonstrate the stability of the organisational presence of Presbyterian communities in the largest cities of Kazakhstan in the period from 2020 to 2024. During these five years, the total number of registered parishes ranged from 10 (in 2020 and 2021) to 13 (in 2024), confirming a moderate growth trend. The most dynamic was the city of Almaty, where the number of registered communities increased from 4 in 2020 to 5 in 2022 and remained at this level

until 2024. Shymkent demonstrated a similar positive trend: in 2024, 3 parishes were registered here compared to 2 in previous years. Karaganda also had an increase in presence: the growth from 3 to 4 parishes in 2023 continued in 2024. In turn, in Astana and Kostanay, the number of parishes remained stable – one registered association per year during the entire period under review. The increase in indicators, especially in Almaty, Karaganda and Shymkent, can be explained by the intensification of missionary, educational, and social activities conducted by a number of parishes.

This highlights Almaty's role as a centre of transnational Protestant cooperation. Shymkent, where the Zion Presbyterian Church operates, displays the sustainable development of youth ministries: the community holds weekly meetings, cultural and educational events and is actively involved in social volunteerism. As a registered congregation, Zion Church provides a comprehensive representation of Presbyterian activities, organisational structure, and adaptation to the local cultural and legal environment. Notably, its active social initiatives, educational programmes, and multilingual worship services reflect broader adaptation strategies in Kazakhstan (Presbyterian Church "Zion", 2025). There are small groups in Karaganda that have historically been associated with the Korean and German diasporas; worship services are held in Russian and Korean, and work with believers takes place in the form of house meetings, which confirms stable, albeit decentralised, religious activity.

In a number of regions, such as East Kazakhstan, Akmola or Zhambyl, isolated communities are registered, the activities of which are often limited geographically or conducted irregularly. The reasons for this phenomenon are explained by several factors: firstly, the low density of the Protestant population outside major cities; secondly, the difficulties in maintaining religious infrastructure in rural and sparsely populated areas (Gamza & Jones, 2021). Despite the overall stability, there are fluctuations in the number of active communities, especially in the context of the re-registration introduced after the update of legislation in 2011-2012. These changes have led to a narrowing of the institutional field for small religious organisations, including Presbyterian ones. Within the framework of large urban centres, communities maintain their presence and continue to perform not only spiritual but also educational, social, and humanitarian functions. The regional distribution of Presbyterian parishes suggests a clear urban dominance and high dependence on local infrastructure conditions (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Table 2 shows the dynamics of the number of registered Presbyterian congregations by region of Kazakhstan in 2020-2024, with an emphasis on a stable presence in large cities and limited distribution in peripheral areas.

Table 2. Number of registered Presbyterian congregations by region of Kazakhstan (2020-2024)

Region	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Almaty	5	6	6	6	6
Karaganda	4	4	4	4	4
Shymkent	3	3	4	4	4
Taraz	1	1	1	1	1
Astana	2	2	2	2	2
Aktobe	1	1	1	1	1
Kostanay	1	1	1	1	1
Pavlodar	1	1	1	1	1
Families'	1	1	1	1	1
Zhambyl region.	1	1	1	1	1

Source: compiled by the authors according to the Presbyterian Church "Zion" (2025); Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025).



The analysis of the presented data confirms the relative stability of the number of registered Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan in the period from 2020 to 2024. A slight increase was recorded in Shymkent, from 3 parishes in 2020-2021 to 4 in 2022. There has been a steady presence of one community in Semey since 2020. The largest number of parishes remained stable in Almaty (6 since 2021) and Karaganda (4 throughout the period), which indicates institutional stability in the most urbanised and infrastructurally developed regions. In less populated localities such as Taraz, Aktobe, Pavlodar, Kostanay, and Zhambyl region, the number of communities remained at a minimum – one registered organisation each, with no dynamics of change. This confirms the pronounced urban dominance in the structure of the spread of Presbyterianism and underscores the dependence of small religious groups on local legal and infrastructural conditions.

Language policy, church governance, and social activism of Presbyterian communities: Legal challenges and public representation

One of the stable characteristics of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan remains the elder management system, which remains relevant and effective in conditions of a small number of parishes and limited resource opportunities. This form of organisation is based on the biblical-theological principle of equality of all believers before God and delegation of authority through an assembly of elders – elected representatives of the community who possess spiritual maturity and trust from church members (Westminster Complete Catechism, 2006). This model allows communities to function autonomously without depending on an external hierarchy (Gamza & Jones, 2021).

In practice, this is manifested in the fact that every decision – whether it is the organisation of worship services, the allocation of material resources, or the launch of social initiatives – is made collectively, with the participation of not only the pastor but also the elders. In small communities, such as Presbyterian parishes in Karaganda, Shymkent, and Taraz, such a structure allows for effective management of activities based on the principle of each participant's personal responsibility for the life of the church (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025). It is precisely the democratic nature of the Presbyterian model that allows for the establishment of horizontal connections, where roles are distributed not vertically, but according to competence and willingness to serve.

In such circumstances, practical interaction between community members is of great importance. There is a clear division of functions within Presbyterian churches: the pastor focuses on preaching and spiritual guidance, the elders – on administrative and social issues, and the deacons – on helping those in need (Zhandossova et al., 2017; Gainullina et al., 2014). This approach not only promotes transparency in governance but also strengthens the sense of community, which is critical in small religious groups that are culturally isolated.

Moreover, in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, where religious activities are still subject to state regulation, the model of parish self-government allows Presbyterian communities to remain flexible and adaptive. This is confirmed by the content analysis data from the site Zion-church.kz, which regularly publishes reports on decisions taken, in addition to appeals on behalf of the Council of elders, which highlights their real involvement in the daily life of the community (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025). Table 3 shows the distribution of key areas of social activity of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, concentrating on helping vulnerable groups, educational initiatives, and inclusive forms of ministry.

Table 3. The main directions of social activity of Presbyterian communities

The direction of social activity	Description	Goals
Assistance to the poor	The church organises charity events, provides financial and material assistance, and helps families with many children and pensioners.	Improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups, demonstrating the social responsibility of the church.



Educational programmes	Development of educational programmes: Bible courses, education for children and adolescents, practical skills, including language courses.	Raising the level of education of believers, strengthening the intergenerational transmission of values.
Support for families and children	Organisation of meetings, courses and clubs, support for parents, social adaptation of children from disadvantaged families.	The formation of a safe environment for families, education in the spirit of Christian morality.
Charitable initiatives	Crisis response activities: fundraising, humanitarian aid, and volunteer initiatives.	Increasing solidarity in the community and beyond, helping those in need.
Participation in international projects	Participation in international conferences and projects, organisation of cultural exchanges, interfaith dialogue.	Expanding international relations, strengthening cultural and religious tolerance.
Pastoral care and spiritual guidance	Regular pastoral talks, visits to believers, and spiritual support in difficult life situations.	Spiritual support, strengthening of personal faith and community solidarity.
Inclusive activities for the elderly and people with disabilities	Organisation of inclusive events, assistance in transportation, access to worship services and care.	Integration of all members of the community, regardless of age and health status.

Source: compiled by the authors according to the Presbyterian Church "Zion" (2025); Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025).

The linguistic situation in the Presbyterian communities of Kazakhstan is one of the most important factors in their internal stability and external inculturation. The use of both Russian and Kazakh in worship services, along with occasional Korean in diaspora communities, fosters inclusivity and helps Presbyterian churches navigate the multicultural and multilingual landscape of Kazakhstan, strengthening their integration into local society (Urunkulova, 2022; Dagnev, 2023). According to data from official websites, table was compiled based on analysis of official statistical materials from the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025) and data presented on the website Zion-church.kz, services are mainly conducted in two languages – Russian, Kazakh, and partially Korean – due to the multinational composition of the congregation and the need to maintain missionary flexibility.

The use of two languages is often implemented not only in alternating sermons and prayers but also in parallel readings of passages from the Holy Scriptures, creating a unique practice of a bilingual liturgical space. This model contributes to a better understanding and engagement on the part of parishioners and demonstrates a high level of adaptability of the denomination to the sociolinguistic landscape of modern Kazakh urbanism.

Russian retains its importance as a language of interethnic communication, especially among the older generations of believers, in addition to immigrants from post-Soviet countries (Issakova et al., 2022; 2025). In turn, the Kazakh language is gradually gaining a dominant position, especially among young people and in regions with a predominance of the titular nation. The transition to a bilingual format of worship services was a response to demographic changes and the demands of the state language policy (Byerdimurat, 2024; Baizhanova et al., 2015).

Of particular interest is the preservation of the Korean language in a number of diasporic communities. In cities such as Taraz and Karaganda, where descendants of deported Koreans are present, some services are still held in Korean, especially for elderly parishioners (Hudson & Leustean, 2022). These communities use bilingual texts, simultaneous translations, and special

courses for young people aimed at preserving cultural memory and internal solidarity between generations (Figure 2).

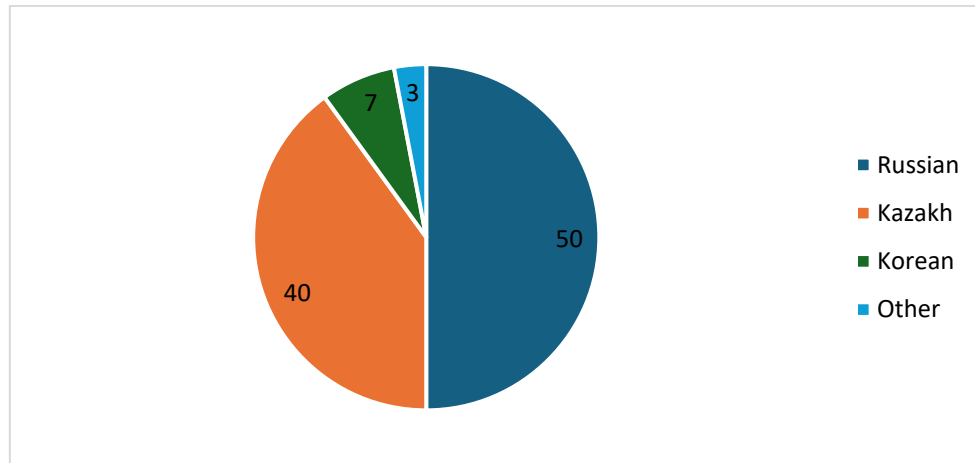


Figure 2. Distribution of languages of worship in Presbyterian churches in Kazakhstan

Source: compiled by the authors based on the Presbyterian Church “Zion” (2025).

Russian remains the dominant language in the liturgical practice of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, covering 50% of all services. This reflects both the historical influence of Russian-speaking Protestantism (primarily among deported Germans and Koreans) and the daily linguistic environment in large cities where the main parishes are located. The Kazakh language ranks second with 40%, which indicates the gradual strengthening of the role of the titular nation in the religious sphere and the orientation of churches towards the local population. 7% of worship services were conducted in Korean, reflecting the cultural representation of the Korean diaspora (Kore-saram) in some Presbyterian communities, primarily in Almaty and Karaganda. The “other” category (3%) includes rare cases of the use of English, Uzbek, or Chinese in multinational church environments, mainly with the participation of missionaries or mixed families. The social activities of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan occupy a central place in their modern practice, acting both as an expression of Christian ethics and a strategic alternative to direct missionary expansion limited by current legislation. In the context of strict legal regulation of the religious sphere, especially in terms of proselytising and public preaching (Gamza & Jones, 2021), social ministry has become the most important channel of Presbyterian churches' presence in the public space.

The most developed areas of social activity are humanitarian aid, educational initiatives, and family support (Zhandossova et al., 2025; Toktarbekova et al., 2025). According to the website Zion-church.kz Charity events are regularly held in all major parishes – in Almaty, Shymkent, Karaganda, and Taraz: distribution of food packages, assistance in paying for medical treatment, organisation of seasonal support for large families and pensioners. Thus, according to the Zion community report for 2023, the winter humanitarian programme covered more than 120 households in the southern districts of the city (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025).

Special attention is paid to education as a means of spiritual and social formation of personality. This focus on education is based on the understanding that religious education not only strengthens spiritual development but also plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' social identity and values. By offering Bible study courses and seminars on marriage, parenthood, and Christian ethics, Presbyterian communities aim to provide both religious and practical knowledge that fosters moral growth and community engagement. Educational initiatives, such as Sunday schools and language classes, also serve to build a sense of belonging and purpose, aligning with broader goals of social integration and cultural adaptation in Kazakhstan's diverse society (Dahan & Keller, 2025; Smolinska et al., 2024). In Almaty and Shymkent, the communities have Sunday schools and clubs for teenagers, which together include more than 150 participants per year (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025). In addition to religious education, secular initiatives are also being conducted: English language courses, computer literacy, creative workshops. This allows churches to be involved in the life of local communities without overstepping the boundaries of what is acceptable in missionary

work. Support for families and children occupies a separate niche in the ministry structure. In conditions of social instability and growing domestic problems, Presbyterian communities offer programmes of adaptation, counselling, moral and practical support for parents and adolescents (Baigabylov et al., 2013; Dyomin et al., 2021). Thus, in 2022-2023, the community in Taraz conducted four training cycles on family education and spiritual health, which were attended by about 80 people, mostly women (Hudson & Leustean, 2022). These initiatives are being implemented in cooperation with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and with partial international funding.

The reason why social service has become a priority has to do not only with regulatory constraints but also with cultural sensitivity. In Kazakhstan, where Christianity is often perceived as an external and inauthentic tradition (Bekmirzaev & Gafurova, 2021), direct conversion can cause distrust or rejection. In this context, helping those in need, participating in cultural and educational projects, and supporting vulnerable groups become the most acceptable and effective ways of expressing faith. Social activity allows setting an example of Christian love and solidarity, rather than preaching in its conventional form, which in itself becomes a missionary message.

Along with this, participation in international projects also enhances the influence of Presbyterian communities. Churches in Almaty and Shymkent are regularly involved in interfaith dialogues, organise online conferences and youth forums. Such events not only strengthen ties between Christian organisations but also increase the recognition and legitimacy of Presbyterians in the eyes of the general public (Odilov, 2021; Batyrshin, 2024). Figure 3 shows the ratio of key areas of social activity among Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, where humanitarian aid and educational initiatives dominate, accompanied by family and pastoral ministry.

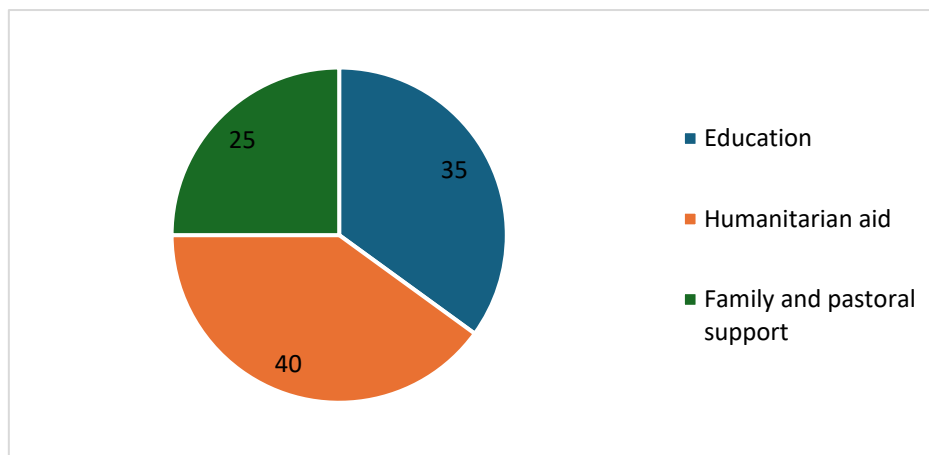


Figure 3. The main directions of social activity, %

Source: compiled by the authors according to the Presbyterian Church “Zion” (2025); Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025).

Figure 3 shows the quantitative distribution of the main areas of social activity of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan. Humanitarian aid accounts for the largest share (40%), which confirms the priority of supporting vulnerable groups in conditions of limited access to state social resources. The second most important area is educational initiatives (35%), which include both religious education and the development of practical skills among children and adults. The third position is occupied by family and pastoral support (25%), which includes spiritual guidance, counselling, and parental support. This distribution highlights the socially effective strategy of church activity, aimed not at formal expansion, but at specific service, in the daily life of local communities.

The most illustrative example of these difficulties is related to the Presbyterian community in the city of Shymkent, which in 2021 initiated the procedure for re-registration due to a change in the legal address and format of organisational activities. According to information posted on the official website of the community, the reason for the refusal on the part of the registering authority was insufficient specification of the statutory goals and the uncertainty of the forms of religious practice. In response, the leadership of the community revised the founding documents: the management

structure was clarified, the goals of the activity were defined as educational and spiritual-moral, and formulations that could be interpreted as signs of public missionary activity were excluded. After re-submitting the documents in the second half of 2022, the community received official confirmation of registration and resumed its activities within the framework of the current legal framework (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025).

In other cases, Presbyterian churches choose alternative legal paths. For example, in Taraz, one of the small communities registered as a public association with a cultural and educational orientation, which allowed it to conduct social and educational projects without mentioning religious affiliation in public documentation. The internal structure and content of the activity remained confessionally oriented, which indicates flexibility and the ability to adapt legally. Such experience confirms that Presbyterian communities are forced to balance between preserving their religious identity and complying with the regulatory framework, which is often oriented towards the dominant faiths. Various strategies are used for this purpose: legal reorientation, administrative reorganisation, clarification of the wording in the charter, and restriction of public presence, especially in visual and symbolic form (Gamza & Jones, 2021; Torebaev & Bayzhanova, 2013). As a result, legal challenges become not only an administrative problem but also a factor affecting the self-determination and public representation of Presbyterian churches. Table 4 presents the main legal barriers faced by Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan in 2020-2024 and typical strategies for responding to them from religious organisations.

Table 4. Typical legal barriers for Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan (2020-2024)

Barrier type	Problem description	Type of community response
Insufficient number of founders	At least 50 founders, citizens of Kazakhstan, are required, which is difficult for small communities to provide.	Merging with other parishes or delaying registration.
Ambiguity of wording in the charter	Formulations about faith and mission are regarded as inconsistent with the secular nature of the state.	Editing the charter with a focus on educational activities.
Absence of a permanent legal address	Many communities rent premises without permanent registration, which makes registration difficult.	Search for partner organisations with registered addresses.
Prohibition on missionary activity without a license	Presbyterian communities cannot carry out missionary activities without separate state accreditation.	Minimisation of public missionary activity, focus on social work.
Restrictions on public religious symbols	Requirement to minimise the use of Christian symbols in statutory documents and on signs.	Limited use of symbols, emphasis on text materials.
Long application review periods	Registration applications can take up to 6-9 months to process, especially in the southern regions.	Waiting with a temporary suspension of worship services or activity without the status of a legal entity.
The need to re-register when changing the address	Any change of address requires a complete re-registration, which entails lengthy legal procedures.	Adaptation of documentation and resubmission with modified formulations.

Source: compiled by the authors according to the Presbyterian Church “Zion” (2025); Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025).

In the context of legal and cultural sensitivity, Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan are increasingly resorting to a strategy of “quiet presence”. This concept refers to a strategy employed by Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan to maintain their religious identity and function within a predominantly Muslim society while minimising potential cultural and legal conflicts. This approach involves reducing the use of overt religious symbols, avoiding public displays of faith, and instead focusing on socially beneficial activities such as charity, education, and community support. By



adopting neutral visual and verbal codes, these communities seek to blend into the social fabric without drawing attention or provoking confrontation, thereby navigating the complexities of living as a religious minority in a sensitive cultural and legal environment. This strategy allows Presbyterian churches to maintain their core values and practices while ensuring their survival and integration into the broader societal context. According to the data from the website Zion-church.kz, churches deliberately restrict the use of traditional Christian paraphernalia in public space, replacing it with neutral visual and verbal codes that are perceived less confrontationally in society.

Worship services and religious meetings are held in closed formats, and the emphasis on communicating with the external environment is shifted to humanitarian initiatives, educational projects, and cultural outreach. This approach allows us to remain faithful to key doctrinal provisions – such as the authority of Scripture, governance through the council of elders, and missionary responsibility – without directly contradicting the norms of current legislation and public expectations.

As a result, Presbyterian churches strive for a balance between internal confessional integrity and external legal loyalty, which becomes an essential element of their survival and stable existence in a multi-confessional and normatively rigid environment. Table 5 reflects the main elements of self-description, including accents on peace and service, love for one’s neighbour, social responsibility, openness to cooperation, support for those in need, and other aspects of the spiritual life of communities.

Table 5. Key elements of self-description on Presbyterian Church websites

The element of self-description	Description
Peace and service	The emphasis is on creating peace and resolving conflicts through love and tolerance.
Love for one’s neighbour	The formation of a relationship of love and mutual assistance between believers and their neighbours.
Social responsibility	Active participation in public projects and assistance to vulnerable segments of the population.
Openness to cooperation	Willingness to work with other faiths and religious groups, including interfaith dialogues.
Support for those in need	General assistance programmes for large families, the elderly, refugees, and the poor.
Spiritual renewal	Active participation in prayer and regular spiritual practices.
Missionary activity	Missionary work aimed at spreading Christian values through social initiatives.
Prayer life	Regular prayers, both in the community and individually, to maintain the spiritual state of believers.
Mutual assistance	Creating a network of support and mutual assistance within the community.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the Presbyterian Church “Zion” (2025).

Based on the analysis of statistical data and qualitative material collected from the resources of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, several key trends in their development can be identified (Corley, 2023). One of the main characteristics is the stability of the number of parishes with a moderate increase in the number of participants: from 2020 to 2024, their number remained at the level of 24-26 officially registered communities, while the number of active parishioners in large cities such as Almaty, Karaganda, and Shymkent increased by 10-12 per cent (U.S. Department of State, 2025). This indicates that, despite the relatively small number of communities, their influence on local communities remains substantial, and the church continues to attract new believers.

However, this growth is not always exponential: not only does the number of parishioners change, but also their age structure. According to the Forum 18 report, the proportion of believers aged 18 to



30 in the Presbyterian communities of Almaty and Shymkent increased from 17 per cent in 2020 to 26 per cent in 2023 (Corley, 2023). This rejuvenation is determined both by the quantitative increase in the presence of young people and by the qualitative expansion of their role in community life, including participation in organising worship services, managing church initiatives, and developing social projects.

Meanwhile, social work is also intensifying, and it is increasingly being integrated into missionary activities. According to the internal reports of the Zion Church and information from the website zionchurch.kz, communities are concentrating their efforts on helping those in need, working with pensioners, people with disabilities, and large families (Presbyterian Church “Zion”, 2025). This approach expands the social function of Presbyterianism and demonstrates its ability to engage in problem-solving at the local level and shape Christian witness in everyday life through actions rather than declarations.

Despite these positive developments, communities face a number of challenges. Legal regulation remains one of the critical issues: the current legislation of Kazakhstan requires re-registration in case of any change in the legal address or format of activity. As the U.S. Department of State (2025) report for 2021 states, Protestant communities – including Presbyterian ones – have repeatedly been denied registration due to “vague formulations of religious practice” or “lack of transparency of statutory goals”. Only after the adjustment of the constituent documents and the rejection of direct missionary formulations did the churches receive a re-confirmation of their legal status.

The second important limiting factor is cultural pressure from the dominant religious traditions. Kazakhstan remains a predominantly Muslim country, and Christian minorities, especially Protestants, are often marginalised. In rural areas, the perception of Christianity may be accompanied by social wariness or outright rejection, especially when it comes to interfaith marriages or open evangelism (Boron, 2024; Kubeyev & Burkhanov, 2025).

The need for constant adaptation to social, cultural, and legal changes remains a major challenge for Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan. This requires them to be flexible in their approaches, ready for change, and constantly looking for new ways to interact with the local community and government agencies. Thus, the development of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan is associated with internal changes aimed at modernising church life, in addition to overcoming external challenges, which ensures long-term sustainability and success in an ever-changing social and political reality.

Discussion

The results of the study reveal that Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, despite their small numbers and cultural marginalisation, have developed a sustainable model of religious and cultural self-affirmation in the post-Soviet space. This adaptability, as seen in their ability to integrate dogmatic principles with local cultural practices, demonstrates dynamic mechanisms of cultural inculturation and social integration. The focus on local social activities, bilingual worship services in Kazakh and Russian, and the emphasis on small parish structures indicate a flexibility in the Presbyterian tradition, enabling it to thrive in new socio-cultural and legal conditions. These findings align with the work of Olcott and Rappé (2020), who suggest that small faith communities can root themselves in Central Asia through engagement with local cultural and governmental institutions. However, Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan demonstrate a distinctive form of cultural integration compared to the religious models described by Musayev et al. (2024), where national identity is shaped by Islam. Instead, Presbyterian communities construct their identity through universal values such as social solidarity, education, and individual faith, which requires a non-confrontational approach to legitimising their presence in a predominantly Muslim society.

The strategy of “quiet presence”, which emphasises cultural adaptation without direct confrontation with dominant religious codes, has emerged as a defining feature of these communities. This approach contrasts with expectations expressed by Abdullayeva et al. (2022), who emphasise active educational missions in Central Asia. Presbyterian communities, however, prefer unobtrusive



integration, allowing them to maintain autonomy while avoiding religious and ethnic conflicts. This strategy resonates with Boron's (2024) analysis of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, which found an ambivalent attitude towards religion, especially new religious movements. In such an environment, Presbyterian communities have found their place, demonstrating resilience through their ability to coexist with dominant cultural and religious models. These findings suggest that, unlike other regions where religious identity is often defined by ethnic affiliation, the Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan adopt a model of religious integration that emphasises social service and community support over ethnic or confessional unity. Support for cultural interaction, documented in the study by Batyrshin (2024), who analyses the interference of cultural codes in the post-Soviet space, is reflected in the materials of this study. Presbyterian communities have demonstrated the ability not only to coexist with dominant cultural models but also to adapt the internal organisation of community life, building a balance between preserving their own theological and practical traditions and openness to a diverse social environment.

Finally, the study highlights how Presbyterianism's integration into Kazakhstan's cultural space aligns with the broader trends of religious pluralism observed in Central Asia. Drawing on the work of Laskin (2022) and Baltar (2023), the study illustrates that moderate religious control with elements of pluralism enables smaller faiths like Presbyterianism to remain stable. The legal and social challenges these communities face are compounded by the general process of Turkification in the region, which intertwines religious identity with ethnic identity, making their mission particularly difficult. This creates a dynamic where, despite facing cultural and legal pressures, Presbyterian communities adapt to survive and thrive in the multi-confessional environment of Kazakhstan.

An analysis of Soviet religious policy in the works of Tasar (2022) demonstrates that even under conditions of systemic atheism, Islam persisted as an element of the cultural code, deeply embedded in everyday practices. This observation is also relevant for Protestant minorities since the stability of Presbyterian communities in Central Asia is explained not by institutional support, but by the formation of local communities in which faith functions as an organic part of social reality.

Therewith, the work of Daminov (2024), concerning the rise of religious fanaticism in Central Asia, highlights the challenges faced by all unrepresentative religious groups. In the context of growing religious conservatism, Presbyterian communities have to find a balance between maintaining openness and the need to protect their autonomy, which corresponds to the recorded results of strategies of careful social interaction and cultural adaptation.

The position of Yuxan (2021) on the perception of religion in Central Asia through a Western lens confirms that Protestant churches, including Presbyterian ones, are often underestimated as a significant factor in the cultural diversity of the region. The data obtained show that although these communities are not widely visible, they play an important social role, contributing to the development of horizontal ties in society. The studies by Kozmenko et al. (2020), Aigerim and Borbasova (2019), and Odilov (2021) raised the issue of the role of Islam and the idea of tolerance in the region. Their work helps to better understand that the cultural space of Central Asia is potentially open to religious diversity, provided that it is unobtrusive and respects the dominant codes. This is exactly the strategy that Presbyterian congregations follow in their practical activities.

Finally, the analysis conducted by Bakhyt (2020), dedicated to the preservation of Turkic culture and the development of trilingual consciousness, echoes the results of the study on the multilingualism of communities. Presbyterian churches in Kazakhstan demonstrate flexibility in their language policy by actively using Russian, Kazakh, and sometimes Korean, which contributes to deeper integration into the local cultural space.

Thus, a comparative analysis of the data obtained with existing research shows that the Presbyterian communities of Central Asia represent a unique phenomenon: they exist at the intersection of religious tradition, ethnocultural adaptation, and social integration. Their experience confirms that small religious communities can not only survive but also make a notable contribution to the development of a multi-confessional society, forming new models of coexistence in conditions of cultural complexity and political ambiguity.



Conclusions

This study makes an important theoretical contribution by highlighting the adaptive strategies of Presbyterian communities in Kazakhstan, emphasizing how religious minorities can thrive in a multi-confessional society through cultural integration and social activism. It advances the understanding of religious minorities in Central Asia by demonstrating how these communities navigate legal, cultural, and linguistic barriers while maintaining their religious identity. Moreover, the study sheds light on the role of small religious groups in shaping social cohesion and contributing to the broader cultural landscape of the region.

The conducted study allowed identifying specific quantitative and qualitative parameters of the development of Presbyterian communities in the Republic of Kazakhstan in the period from 2020 to 2024. During this period, the number of officially registered parishes remained stable and ranged from 24 to 26 across the country. The leading positions in the number of active communities are occupied by the cities of Almaty (6 parishes), Karaganda (4), and Shymkent (4), while in most peripheral regions, 1-2 communities operate. There were almost no new registrations in 2022-2024, which confirms the presence of administrative barriers and complicated legal procedures when trying to expand the network.

In the parishes considered, church activities were integrated with specific forms of social support. Current initiatives to provide regular assistance to pensioners and the poor, along with educational events, including seminars, Bible groups, and Kazakh language classes, were recorded. These activities were usually organized by the parishioners themselves and served as a tool to strengthen internal ties in the community. Over the past two years (2022-2024), the Zion Church in Shymkent has implemented 7 local charity events aimed at supporting large families and the disabled. This indicates a steady shift in emphasis from an exclusively liturgical function to a social and humanitarian component.

The linguistic distribution of worship services has become a major factor in sustainability. According to the data of 2024, 50% of the services were conducted in Russian, 40% – in Kazakh, 7% – in Korean, and 3% – in other languages. In most parishes, the practice of bilingual sermons and bilingual reading of Scripture was used. This model promotes the integration of ethnically diverse groups and supports inclusivity in the context of cultural diversity.

The legal environment remains a source of constant pressure. The study documented cases of refusal of registration or renewal of status due to the lack of specificity of the statutory provisions, as was the case in the Shymkent community in 2021. Only after the charter was edited and the wording concerning missionary work was deleted, the parish was granted the right to re-register at the end of 2022. This confirmed the tendency towards strict control by government agencies and the need for precise legal compliance, especially in the field of religious vocabulary. Thus, the stability of Presbyterian communities was ensured by a combination of institutional stability, demographic adaptability, social activism, and flexibility in legal and cultural interaction. Multilingualism and interethnic openness contributed to integration into the multiethnic environment of Kazakhstan. However, risk factors persisted – administrative barriers and cultural pressure in certain regions.

The main limitation of the study was the lack of access to the closed internal documentation of the communities and the incompleteness of quantitative data by region. In the future, it is advisable to review transnational relations, digital formats of interaction, and the role of youth in the life of Protestant communities.

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