



Creating Interest in Foreign Missions

In the last few decades many Christian Churches have scaled back their overseas mission programmes dramatically. Yet our engagement with missions can be one of the most exciting and rewarding things for us as Christians and as members of our Church. New Guinea missions, for many years, not only made a dramatic difference in New Guinea but also kept the Gospel flame burning brightly at home among ourselves! This is the paradox of faith: the more you give away, the more you benefit and the more you get back. The more you do for yourself, at the expense of others, the quicker you die.

Clearly, we all must keep supporting our church wholeheartedly as before. Beyond this, our church needs to welcome, and does I believe, the various initiatives of pastors and laypeople in our church who have developed their own mission ministries. There is nothing like direct, personalized mission support if (a) it's done wisely based on real knowledge and insight and (b) in consultation with the appropriate authorities of the church. We really could unleash an interest in foreign mission like never before! Money is rarely the problem. We simply need to create enthusiasm. The Law only bears sour fruit. This first little mag wants to inform, share stories and invite your personal involvement with people and churches in our own, quite dynamic Asian neighbourhood.

Islam – A Challenge Unparalleled

Religion generally is on the march in many parts of Asia. Religion is a boom industry. Temples, pagodas and mosques go up all over the place, often in great splendour. But Islam stands out as the challenge to the Christian Church at this time.

The secular West's response to Islam, even that of the churches, has been timid and uninspiring. Generally, we keep doing our own traditional thing and let the world go by. Fundamentalists may utter a few dark and gloomy warnings and anathemas about Islam without understanding the dynamism and complexities of the problem while

the mainstream churches all over the world, including the Vatican, utter nice ecumenisms and follow a weak line of appeasement.

"You are decadent and hedonistic. We, on the other hand, are willing to die for what we believe, and we are a billion strong. You cannot kill all of us, so you will have to accede to our demand." (From a brilliant website called 'Asia Times'). This, in a nutshell, constitutes the Islamic challenge to the West. "Not a single Western strategist has proposed an ideological response to the religious challenge of Islam. Except for a few born-again Christians, no Western voice is raised in criticism of Islam itself. The trouble is that Islam believes in its divine mission."

The trouble is also that Islam makes no nice distinction between personal faith and public life, politics and religion. It's all one. Allah must rule over all aspects of life on earth whether in the personal, public or political domain. If our democratic values, our system, conflicts with Allah's law, democracy may have to be tipped out, by divine decree!

This is the environment in which the Indonesian Church, for example, struggles on from day to day. This is a challenge presented to us by at least a substantial portion of Australia's 300 000 Muslims as well.

What are we doing to answer this challenge? Are we at least trying to get ready for battle – in the spirit of love? Muslims are my friends too but we desperately need to support our own brothers and sisters in their struggles. In the last few years the 3 million member strong HKBP (Lutheran) Church in Indonesia had to close most of its schools. Do we care?

Focus Sumatra

Indonesia is our giant but troubled northern neighbour. 230 million people. Sumatra is the 'green island', rich in natural beauty, wildlife, jungles – both a fascinating, wonderful, heart warming place as well as a dirty, smelly, horrible one. I have been there now three times in three years. Slowly I start to understand. Here 4 million people belong to the family of the worldwide Lutheran Church – and millions go to church! It's

the Batak people of North Sumatra who are the Christians, our brothers and sisters. Malays and the Javanese are living there also but are largely Muslims.

I believe Christianity in North Sumatra faces three chief problems: (a) poverty; (b) traditionalism; (c) Islam. I could add corruption which has also infiltrated some people in the churches.

Poverty is increasing for many people partly due to the forces of globalism. There is big financial trouble. Schools had to be closed. Money never used to be a big issue with the Bataks but now it is. The stamp of the patron saint of the Bataks, Pastor Ludwig Nommensen from Germany, still marks church life: communion three times a year only, and the "ugly" black German gown. The young people tell me that the pastors preach too long and that lecturers often don't engage enough with their students. Many leave for charismatic churches. Some authoritarianism holds sway. Yet, they haven't lost their youth (yet), as we have, and some of the most wonderful people you can meet are Bataks, often fifth or sixth generation Christians.

Two needs come to mind: 1. There's one fantastic lecturer (he really is) at **NOMMENSEN UNIVERSITY**, a Lutheran University with 7000 students, by the name of Pantas Silobam, a man of vision, spirit and commitment, who wants to revitalize worship and music at the university. But they don't even have a good key board or similar aids! The whole university is a mission field. Can we help him?

2. Getting **SUNDAY SCHOOL WORK** going in a 3000-member church in the provincial capital Medan (population 3 million). The teachers have no visual aids of any kind and simply tell the stories... Nor can you buy materials in Medan... The children are now drawn to the secular children's programmes on TV and no longer grow up, like their parents did, with Bible knowledge. Yet, in the context of still very dedicated parents and a religious society, they could be won back in droves...

Meet the Shin people of Northern Thailand

Simon Mackenzie, Luther Seminary, will join Thai Lutheran Christians on a mission trip into some remote jungle areas in Northern Thailand quite close to the Lao border. Together they will visit the Shin people, an ethnic group of some 30 000 people of animist-Buddhist religion. They have largely been untouched. Three years ago the Thai Lutheran Church was invited to start working among them. The response to the Gospel has been quite phenomenal: more than 300 people have been instructed and baptized in the Faith already.

The Shin people are a rather neglected tribal group who suffer greatly from malaria and many other diseases. I saw a list of urgently required medication, yet at least a few months ago no one could help. The small Thai Church can't find money for this mission through budget allocations. That's why a call for help has quietly gone out... "The last time I preached there," said Rev Taweeop Oiwan, the former bishop of the Thai Church, "one service was attended by 170 people but the church could only hold 100. The rest had to stand in the rain."

Funds are needed towards extending and completing the church, the building of another church and for the construction of toilet facilities for villagers who may have to walk for one to two hours to get to church. Costs are kept low because of voluntary labour and \$1000 can go a long way. This amount is being made available by some of my friends here in Queensland while Simon, at the suggestion of the Thai Church, will be our postman. That's exciting. By June I hope to have found another \$1000 and then, God willing, may be the postman myself.

On my last visit I found the Thai Lutheran Church exciting in general; a church with 3500 members, 11 years old and made up of first generation Christians (*note my upcoming article in 'The Lutheran' February 2004 Edition*).

Remember the Shin people at Christmas time. On November 16th 2003 another 31 people were baptised. Like in Palestine, the nights are cool at this time of the year in those mountains. People are freezing, like Jesus may have been. There is no electricity, no roads, no motorbikes and not enough blankets and medication. But in spite of widespread illness, there is joy and gladness in those mountains because of the love of Jesus!

Meet Antoni of Medan a nameless peasant one of Asia's nobodies

Antoni works the streets of Medan, Indonesia's third largest city. If Bangkok is dirty, Medan is filthy. Pollution, blue smoke, smog, a darkened sky in the middle of the day. Antoni with his becah (tricycle, rickshaw) kills time, waiting for customers just down the road from the 'Guruda Citra Hotel', as nearly always from 8am to 8pm. He doesn't really make enough money to feed his wife and three lovely children (an average of \$4 a day net) but he can't do anything else. Begging or death would be the only alternatives.

Antoni is now my friend. I mean: friend, even though to him, somehow, I am much more than that. Antoni is incredible. No education, no money, no land - land often being the very basis of self-respect. But, amazingly, he speaks quite good English. "I learnt English by reading the Bible," he

explains. "I saved up for eight months to buy a Bible in English in 1994 and I am learning still."

When I came to Antoni's 'house' for the first time I was shocked: a bamboo mat for an outside wall with newspaper plastered against it to keep out (some of) the rain. A crowded, dismal environment. That's all they could afford. "The Landlord doesn't care," he sadly says but adds with a smile, "I am below the grass now but I had a dream that some day someone may come to lift me up to the sky."

Then he told me how Saurma became his wife. "Two o'clock in the morning one Saturday night I asked God to give me a wife and three weeks later he gave me Saurma." They met in church of course. "When I looked for a wife I always told the girls the truth. I said, 'I am a poor man. I have no money. My father is dead. I have no real job'. Then all the girls ran away... Not one cared for me, but God sent me Saurma."

Last week I received a beautiful letter from Antoni. Normally he couldn't afford the postage. "I am so happy, o my Lord," he wrote, "Please give me the power to love other people as Rev ... has loved me. I always remember what you have told me; 'Never ever give up!' This makes my spirit strong."

Marooned on the Mentawi Islands?

That's the impression you get when you read a letter by Heike Saguntung, wife of Panulis, a pastor of the GKPM (Mentawi Christian Protestant Church). If Indonesia is backwards, then the Mentawi Islands are twice as backwards; no power, no fax, no phone, at least not in the manse, not even water. "I have the impression," Heike writes, "that progress is being prevented here by the (Indonesian) government until most people have converted to Islam."

Then Mentawi Islands – 100km off the coast of West Sumatra – are rich in biodiversity, rainforests and rare animals but poor in every other way. The people are impoverished and the churches too. Unfortunately the church is in desperate need for renewal as corruption, according to reports, has not bypassed many areas of church life. In this environment Panulis – a former scholarship holder of our church – and his German-born wife Heike are doing faithful work of critical importance.

Yet a sense of discouragement and daily struggle leaps out of Heike's words, "When I arrived here in 1977, I thought it was romantic to have to use oil lamps and candlelight. But now in the year 2003 I find it not funny at all when I have to read in torchlight at night and when Panulis has to prepare his sermons next to hot oil lamps. Not only is there no power and no water but there is also no chair, no table, nothing. I cannot

remember having ever worked in such difficult circumstances. First I thought, 'No, I cannot survive here... but we do enjoy visiting every weekend our congregations by boat over the sea and by foot through the forests.'

Over the years Heike and Panulis have been house parents, carers and providers for large numbers of youth and received an annual allowance of \$2000 from our church for this work but now this last 'material' connection with the outside world has dried up (since 2002). It is the aim of Panulis, a man of outstanding calibre and integrity, to establish sound evangelical teaching in his church. However, it is now feared that he will be persuaded to go into politics, as he is being urged to do because of his qualities. Please pray for Heike and Panulis...

[quotes derived from a letter written by Heike Saguntung to Christel Metzner, Dr Ulf's wife]

Dear Friends,

Please consider the content and message of this booklet. I want to acknowledge the mission effort of our church and pray that it may grow, not decline, in the years to come. I ask you to support this mission effort. Also, please do your best to help avert a further decline.

I would like to encourage throughout the Lutheran Church of Australia, individual and group overseas mission initiatives that are well considered and well advised. This could be the dawn of a new day. However, if we are scared of making mistakes or feel too inadequate, it would be safer to do nothing. A local (of course, non-Lutheran) congregation will send a team of lay people to India in 2004 for an 18-day mission. Why can't we do similar things?

On the other hand you may wish to support some of the ventures mentioned in ASIA FOCUS. We have an official 'Asia Mission and Relief Fund', of which the treasurer of my church is a signatory. If you would care to support one of our projects, I would be thrilled. Incidentally, I am also looking for a sponsor at a cost of \$20 a month for Supunsa Sitiphapa (age 12), Sii Khiu, Thailand, who is being cared for by the ELCT (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Thailand). I have met her, have her details and also a lovely photo. She is a lovely but sad girl of drug addicted, alcoholic parents.

I wish to acknowledge the work quietly done by many individual pastors and members of our and other churches. If you are interested, I would like to stay in touch with you and include you on future mailings of ASIA FOCUS. God bless you.

Pastor August Fricke