



## **Unstoppable - The Church of God!**

Any church battling for survival should stop battling and disband - or start loving and giving and rise from the ashes to a new vision and mission. Siege mentality is death. All the precious energies we waste on moaning, appealing and battling down! I wish no one would listen to your swan song! Disperse if you want. God manages without you. *"He who seeks his own life will lose it while he who loses his life for Christ's sake will find it."* The Kingdom comes and conquers with or without us!

The Church of God is movement, not institution. Of course, NOW it's institution as well, and may have to remain that. But primarily it is "an ever flowing stream" - something growing, organic, unfolding, something dangerous, hurting, healing and compelling, like the Spirit. *"Do not quench the Spirit!"* It's easy for the Spirit to die in the concrete bunker of theological correctness, institutionalism, constitutionalism and committeeism in which we easily seek our refuge and strength.

I love the Church - the movement of the Spirit, powerful and conquering. I love the Lutheran Church as well. *We have a most important contribution to make!* We need to remain loyal but also inwardly free and unfettered. Never give up, not even on your own church! I am amazed what wonderful people we have in our church and what great things they are doing, also overseas. Mission is mighty. The potential is enormous. Asia is waiting. At least in a small way, Asia Focus is about grass roots, about motivating and empowering the people of God.

## **The Struggle of the Lutheran Church in PNG**

### ***A plea to face the real issues in a deteriorating situation***

"Is the Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea headed for disaster?" was the blunt and unnerving question asked by **Pastor Michael Wan Rupulga**, present scholarship holder and doctoral

student at the Australian Lutheran College, Adelaide. Hailing from Martin Luther Seminary, Lae, Papua New Guinea, Pastor Michael's pain, anxiety and stress was obvious.

Invited to be the guest of St Peter's Lutheran College, Brisbane, he had now come to church headquarters in Milton to address Queensland pastors. We all were invited "to the feast". Can you imagine the surprise I received when literally no one turned up apart from me from Gympie (2 hr/drive) and Michael's driver, Pastor Bill Narst and his son. I simply could not avoid the question, "Is interest in overseas mission in the LCA at an all time low?"

In his kind, mild mannered way, Pastor Michael felt he had no option but to paint a gloomy picture in spite of being told by some pastors not to be too negative. "Church leaders everywhere rarely address the real issues," he said. While he appreciates enormously the opportunity given by the LCA to study here and to preach in some parishes, he will still be at a loss as to how to help effectively his home church after his return to Lae because, according to him, the real issues and problems keep being avoided or ignored year after year. "I'm just receiving academic training here."

Pastor Michael says that the limited financial resources of ELC-PNG, our one million member strong sister church, are not being used wisely for the benefit of the whole church. The Church spends a great deal of money on public institutions (hospitals, schools etc.) and neglects the immediate needs of its workers so that it can't pay or support his pastors properly. As a result, church workers leave the service of the church in ever increasing numbers. The apparent 'head-in-the-sand' syndrome is deeply worrying.

For example: A High School teacher in PNG earns nearly 1000 Kina (\$450) a month while a church-paid Chaplain at the same school only earns the starvation wage of 80 Kina for the same period. "Many of our workers had to leave church service so that their families could survive. Or they had to find other ways of making money and so neglect their ministry. They simply have to consider the basic needs of their families."

"The overseas sponsors like Lutheran Church of Australia and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and others do not seem to understand.

They are bewildered when, after spending so much money on the training of nationals, they suddenly leave the ministry.

"In the rural areas things are even worse. The pastors, evangelists and other lay workers here hardly get any form of salary from the National Church ...Who is going to speak for them?"

"I am sacrificing my life and work (ministry) to present this issue to Christians here in Australia so that the Church in PNG can thrive and grow. If the Church does not address this issue NOW it is heading for disaster: decline in numbers of church workers and also Christians."

"How can we preach the Gospel when the people are hungry and when we ignore their plea? Body, mind and spirit need to be fed. There is a huge imbalance. Until this balance is restored, the church will remain helpless and impotent. Like in the days of the missionaries of old, the whole person must be nourished again."

The increasing poverty in church and society produces a harvest of many social evils: violent crime, murder, drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, corruption, general lawlessness – the very disintegration of society. "Even in the villages things are getting worse and worse."

Pastor Michael tells a depressing story. The first thing we may need to do is to face up to unpleasant facts, admit that we have a crisis on our hands – and also admit that wrong is being done. Only then can we truly join hands and work together for a better and brighter future. Without this starting point, can anyone really say, "I love you, brother?"

**Ed...***There are many complex and troubling issues facing the ELC-PNG and us as a mother and donor church. For the purpose of this article, Pastor Rupulga has mainly focused on financial problems. An informed reader may care to give another perspective in a later ASIA FOCUS edition.*

*I am wondering which members of the Affluent Race can truly appreciate the daily struggle for enough food faced by so many millions today. Which missionary would serve in PNG under PNG conditions? What gives us the right to feed ourselves in such superior fashion? This article needs an answer! Pastor Rupulga's full paper is available from the ASIA FOCUS editor or the author.*

## **In Search of Funds for Our Neighbouring Asian Churches**

Could **Australian Lutheran World Service** help? Maybe we could do some rethinking here. ALWS is doing an excellent job but is primarily a money collecting - and information sharing - agency for the Geneva-based relief arm of the Lutheran World Federation which exclusively works in a limited

number global crises spots with little reference to any local church. Not one dollar of our annual Christmas Action Appeal, for example, can presently go to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, China etc.

Subject to some constitutional and operational changes, could some 40% of the ALWS budget be made available for urgently needed relief work in our sister churches in the Asia Pacific region? In order to maintain our present level of commitment to LWF's work in Cambodia, Nepal etc, why not start involving our schools in a new and big way, by direction of Lutheran Education Australia, and also by initiating another annual high profile appeal in July each year? These are simply some ideas. Let's all try to think outside our square!

## **Townsville Church Struggles to take up the Challenge**

*"ASIA FOCUS has challenged me to struggle to find a way to integrate and encourage mission from our local congregation to our near northern neighbours. Last year we had a visiting pastor from West Papua, Agostina Korwa. We spent time chatting and praying. At the end of Pastor Korwa's visit our congregation made and presented her with a set of new stoles, which were sorely needed, but we wanted to give much more. I am now corresponding with her and the people here feel some sense of owner-ship. Your epistle has inspired me to think about taking some next step towards support for West Papuan churches – as in Townsville we feel close to that region of the world ...thanks for your energy..."*

**Pastor Matthew Thiele,  
Townsville Parish.**

## **Discrimination against Christians in Malaysia**

Here Christians are forbidden to use the word "Allah" (God) in their Bible translations which is linguistic theft. In Arabic the word used for "God" in the Bible is "Allah". Allah, in a way, is our God! All Malays (70% of the population) must get married according to Muslim law. In **Indonesia** the "Islamisation" of society is ongoing. In Java some congregations are not allowed to sing in church while others suffer continual harassment or can't even get their church built. Discrimination in public life, like the work place, is deliberate and common.

## *How to Empower Our People and Our Congregations*

### **Learning Mission from the AOG's?**

#### **"World Mission is a contagious thing..."**

The following contribution is from **Pastor Mark Vainikka** in Toowoomba. Before Pastor Mark became a Lutheran Pastor, he served for four years in the National Office of the ASSEMBLIES OF GOD as national communications director and also editor of their world mission magazine. Pastor Mark knows what he is talking about and his insights could help us greatly if we are prepared to listen and learn.

I agree with you whole heartedly about the need to mobilise people congregationally to missional thinking. While there are fundamental problems with fund raising issues and missional thinking in the AOG, it's not all bad news. In 1997, the AOG got a new president for their World Mission Department, Jack Hanes. One issue he understood ... the need for the parishioners themselves to 'own' the projects that are promoted.

This meant that the mission efforts that the denomination promotes actually start at a local level. So if a church in Upper Woop Woop creates a contact with Sudanese refugees, they start organising a concerted mission effort to Sudan, which will ultimately result in the sending of a missionary to that country. What Jack Hanes understood very early on, was that there doesn't need to be any competition between the national mission department and the local mission efforts of congregations.

This way, the *raison d'être* of the national mission department changes to be a 'support centre' for the local missionary efforts of congregations. Once local interest in a particular project or country has increased in a local area (with the help and assistance of the national mission department) to the extent that there are significant funds at hand, then the national department helps the congregations involved to identify possible candidates for full time missionary service. Up until this point, an active short term mission program, of course, would have been established and be running regular trips to the particular country.

What the AOG have in place, takes more resources than the LCA currently has at hand. This, however, can change. If the mission department in Adelaide would be able to motivate volunteers to work in the area of supplying resources to local congregations with promotional and other material to support their missionary efforts, I'm sure the funds would start rolling in. The AOG World Mission department works on a 10 percent

'commission' base in handling the affairs of the missionaries that are sent and any projects undertaken by such organisations as AOG World Relief.

This is not a considerable amount, considering that the local congregations are then left to do what they do best, mission motivation on a local level. Local congregations raise the funds required for a project or a particular missionary and then 'own' the needs of that project/missionary. The missionary returns to Australia every three years to share about the work in their country with the congregations that are supporting him/her. This is also an opportunity for local congregations to recommit to their pledge of supporting the missionary.

As you can see, I find it hard not to get excited about this topic... World Missions is a contagious thing and I pray you are able to spread your passion in this area to as many Lutherans as possible.

## **On Raising Money**

"I think we have aimed too low!" said Pastor Rob Erickson at a mission night at his church at **Murrumba Downs, Qld**, just before Easter 2004. Some 50 members of his church plus guests had assembled for an evening with Rev Willem Simarmata, Executive Secretary of the Lutheran HKBP Church in Indonesia. Guests were invited to help raise funds towards sponsoring a visit by two Indonesian teachers to their church and school for later this year. Target for the night: \$2000. By the end of the evening, \$3600 were given or pledged.

Last month I asked the local Catholic Funeral director for a donation towards an airfare to bring out a Christian lawyer from Indonesia. "Maximum \$500," I humbly suggested. Later he wrote out a cheque for over \$1000. I phoned him and said that this was too much. He replied, "Keep the rest for whatever else you are doing in East Timor or Asia generally." I had also asked my favourite dentist to contribute "a little". He too had doubled the suggested amount and spent big!

I know this doesn't happen every day. Sometimes it's hard to find \$100. We also appreciate greatly every single small gift! Or just prayer and goodwill. But if you are enthusiastic, and you believe in something, and you have established credibility, people are incredibly generous!  
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**NOTE: Pastors Noel Noack and August Fricke are talking about the possibility of organising A MISSION TRIP TO ASIA for 2005. Noel seems very keen and is an excellent organiser! August will be a guest preacher in his church in Gladstone in August this year...**

# Economic Crisis in Batak Land

Lutheran Bataks of Sumatra – now spread all over Indonesia – are our Christian brothers. Four million of them belong to our churches. But they are doing it tough. Their schools are poor. They are very bright and progressive and traditionally the best educated ethnic group in the country. Many of their children went to the best schools and colleges in Java. They have been proud Indonesians playing a vital role in government services, business and the military.

That's how it was only ten years ago. But now the money is drying up. Their farm produce is no longer very profitable. There are financial pressures from all sides. They can no longer afford to send their children to the good schools. Many of their own schools fall into a state of disrepair. "I think the government wants to keep us stupid," said Rev W. Simarmata (HKBP) in Brisbane, "Then they can do what they like and we are no danger to them."

Education and knowledge used to be the Bataks' secret weapon. Their church schools were excellent. But now with Islamic pressures growing, the Christian schools are being starved of oxygen. A German pastor's wife, working with her Indonesian husband on the Mentawai Islands off Sumatra, remarked that she thought that only after all the Christians had converted to Islam would the island get money from the government for public works, roads and services. Presently the island is a forgotten, poverty-stricken backwater.

## Christ is Coming to Cambodia!

Cambodia is a traumatised country trying to recover from Pol Pot's genocide only 25 years ago. Some two million people perished at the time and all religion was forbidden. Even Buddhism was annihilated. It was then that the country lost its faith, its rituals, its traditions, its family life and to this day it hasn't recovered. In Cambodia people know little about any religion – even Buddhism to which nominally more than 90% of the people belong (10 million). For generations Christians have been a tiny minority here.

However, in the last few years the church has started to grow fast in Cambodia. There is religious freedom and in contrast to nearly all other Asian countries, Western missionaries are allowed in. And they are coming in ever increasing numbers. They are coming except for "us".

The main churches seem to be the Methodists, the Baptists, the Catholics and Foursquare Gospel. Exciting is the rise of the non-denominational house churches that spring up all over the place. Mostly started by simple Cambodian Christians,

there rarely is Western or denominational involvement.

When you inquire, "How long have you been a Christian?" the answer often is, "for three years" or "for one year." Christ is coming to Cambodia!

This development presents a huge challenge. For unless some help is given, some sound guidance and teaching offered, sectarian and cultic features will distort the Christian message, the Gospel of free grace.

So one of my Gympie church members, Reinhard Tietze, who presently works for World Vision in Kompong Thom Province, invited me, supported by his local staff, to give basic Gospel talks to the local leaders of the all the different church groups. I sure will (with a distinctly Lutheran emphasis!).

There is a lot of "reformed" legalism around, says Reinhard. He is keen for sound theology to take root. While World Vision is a relief agency, it has a strong Christian commitment to be a witness for Christ in word and deed.

## Random Snippets

**Asian Church Growth:** The Christian Church presently grows fast in Asia in many countries including Singapore, Malaysia (among non-Muslims) and China but no longer in Korea.

**The Philippines:** With regard to the church in the Philippines, Derek Bernardson of Deer Park, Victoria wrote, "The non-Muslim Filipinos (85% of the population) are very open to the Gospel. As yet few have come to the Lutheran Church. The fields are ripe for harvest!"

**Baptisms in Dubai:** Pastor Noel Noack, Gladstone, will shortly be on Leave and will baptise some children of Palestinian-Jordanian parents in Dubai. It is believed that there hasn't been a Lutheran Pastor in Dubai for five years! He will also visit the Lutheran and other churches in Russia.

**Sudanese Refugees:** It only took a phone call from Pastor August to Pastor Keith Stiller of Nundah, Brisbane to tell him about the plight of a Sudanese family in a refugee camp waiting to find an Australian sponsor. Next thing, the Nundah Church had collected \$2000 plus and had arranged for their accommodation. Now all is clear for their arrival. Thanks Pastor Keith!

## The Plight of a Family in Sumatra *Who can help?*

Former Indonesian scholarship holder at our Seminary in Adelaide, Rev Mangisi Simorangkir, presently back in Sumatra, apologetically mentioned in one of his emails the following matter;

"About the ASIA FOCUS Mission Budget. I don't know whether you can still help some people in North Sumatra..."

There are too many poor people in Asia. Too many. But I have two requests, if you allow me to mention the following...

There is a **poor family of a young Pastor's widow** (Family of the late Pastor Sipahutar) in Lubukpakam. The Pastor died last year and left four small children. His wife asked me for help, but I cannot help. Her pension is only RP90000 per month (\$15). She works in sawah (wet rice fields) to support her children. She really needs help for her young children. Can anyone help her with around \$200-300 a year?

Sorry for my boldness, I am really afraid to mention it, but please understand me. Or they can make a request to you, writing a letter and tell their stories."

*Ed...I certainly would like to write up this story later on. The picture painted reminds us of the Bible stories in the Gospels. Rev Mangisi also mentioned another case of hardship, a pastor being unable to find the money for giving his son the education he deserves, but the need is just so endless...*

## East Timor action from our Burrumbuttock Parish, NSW

It was exciting to hear what people in Pastor Haydn Blaess' Burrumbuttock Parish are doing. They have developed an active, hands-on aid ministry in East Timor with work parties going there every year. There is enthusiasm and commitment and true Gospel motivation as well. I admire them immensely because I know how hard it is to work in East Timor. We in Gympie have lots of experience in that direction...

Here are some excerpts from their "EAST TIMOR REPORT TO THE PARISH" written by their chief organiser John McClelland:

**"2003 WORKPARTY:** The parish once again sent a small work party to East Timor. The 'boys' built a classroom at the orphanage in Dili where we have worked for the last two years. Congregational members sent over \$2000 with us for this project – the excess left over from the building costs

being left with the orphanage for their ongoing expenses. Children from St Johns school and the Chapel sent two suitcases full of toys for the children.

**2004 WORKPARTY:** You can be part of all this excitement and really contribute to an emerging nation. We are planning to be in Timor during the July school holidays. If you want to come and put in a fortnight and about \$2000 – we would love to hear from you. It is guaranteed to be an amazing cross cultural experience. If you can't come you may want to help the team with their expenses or with the projects..."

Then there is a report on the "**KIDS ARK**" ministries in Hera, near Dili, which they are also involved with. John McClelland closes with these lines, "Isn't God just amazing! I am just overwhelmed at how he blesses the work of people who get a vision from him and then just go for it in faith."

*If you would like to give some support ring John McClelland on 02 6025 5463. Our church is a sleeping giant that will rise when more of our laypeople become motivated to take initiatives like these...*

## Nommensen University Sumatra

Like Dr Martin Luther King, Pastor Fricke had a dream. "I had a dream... that one day there will develop a living interchange between the members of our Australian churches and the engaged, educated laity of Asian churches."

You see, there are lawyers, doctors, teachers, scientists, and also pastors, students, nurses, church workers etc. who love their church but would also love some support and encouragement in their trying, difficult environment. They have much to offer and give to us as well.

With the approaching global village, at a time when it only costs \$950 or so to fly to Kuala Lumpur and back, and with the tentacles of the internet wrapped around the Indonesian jungle, let's join the modern world and get communications going with our brothers and sisters in our own backyard. Our schools are a tremendous resource here.

A focus on supporting the educational endeavours in our sister churches deserves priority. Ultimately, education has to do with social justice and fighting poverty, with bringing hope and giving people a chance.

NOMMENSEN UNIVERSITY in Sumatra, with an enrolment of 8000 students, is the largest educational institution in our Christian-Lutheran world, at least in the Asia Pacific region.

Dr Pantas Silaban, in charge of the 2600-student strong Economics Faculty, says that Nommensen could play "a strategic role in education and in keeping the young people in good Christian Faith". He says there are two chief problems: 1. "Money" and 2. "Modern life temptations (drugs, gambling, bad habits, etc)." To start with, we can help a little with the money. We have just sent \$1350 to enable them to install a sound system for daily use at services, devotions, assemblies and especially also at their great Easter, Christmas and Semester Opening Services.

Up to now they had nothing, the quality of the services and Christian witness was affected significantly. The University is too poor to help. Apparently it gets practically no support from the Lutheran world. To complete the installation of the sound system of "moderate quality" they need another RP4,000,000. Four million rupiahs equals about \$650. This project may not sound exciting and doesn't save a life – and yet thinking about it, it just may! We ask you to consider supporting this cause...

Pastor Fricke will give talks on the Faith at Nommensen in June. He has a dream, "I want Pantas to visit us here with his fantastic Batak Choir!"

*PS...Minutes ago this note was received from Nommensen University; "Thank you very much for sending us the money just at the right time (prior to their special post-Easter Celebration Service). Now the choir and students can enjoy the service. We thank God that he has made (our friends in Australia) a blessing for us. May God help us to do the very best with our lives to glorify his Name." This says it all.*

## **Urgently Needed: Facelift for Indonesian Sunday Schools**

Here is a church in the city of Medan (population 2 million), Sumatra, with nearly 3000 worshippers a week but only a small Sunday School. The Indonesian children are now drawn to secular or Muslim TV Children's Programmes.

For one thing, Sunday School teaching is purely verbal Bible story telling – the way we used to do it in Australia 80 years ago. No visual aids, no pictures and no teaching aids of any sort. Like in great grandfather's day.

I had just attended a service (mid 2003) with some 900 worshipers present. The next service was soon to follow. Some Sunday School teachers approached me asking whether I could help them. "In Medan it's hard to buy anything for Sunday School work. Nothing much is available," said Nona Silotang, "Anyway, we don't have the money."

I sensed that in this religious society, which had *not yet* lost its youth, there was the danger of losing a whole generation.

"Your support for our Sunday School could have two effects," wrote their pastor Rev Simson Tarigan, "(a) to motivate the children to want to hear the stories of the Bible and (b) to help wake up our church as to the importance of visual aids as teaching tools."

Then came a letter from Lilay M. Sihaloho, a Sunday School teacher. "We have troubles teaching the children aged below 5. We really need a solution for this problem" (Many older children attend the Church Day School next door but here's news; at the school too, visual and other teaching aids are somewhere between primitive and non-existent. It's not their fault. The school is very poor even by Indonesian standards).

Lilay wonders whether we could help with "some books which contain pictures in order to spread the truth" and also with some "music tools, such as a guitar etc."

Who can help? Could someone for example, donate a good guitar? If money becomes available, we will ask the OpenBook and others to get involved.

## **The LCA's Scholarship Programme**

This programme sponsors further studies by PNG and Asian Lutheran theologians at our Seminary in Adelaide and supports them later on in their home churches. It is of great importance even though it costs our church an arm and a leg. There often is a theological vacuum in Asia, especially with regard to Lutheran theology. A Korean pastor once said, "Lutheran Mission has short legs." It is both frightening and encouraging to hear one of our own scholarship holders from Asia say, "Only at Luther Seminary did I come to understand properly the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone." The Asian churches, who can teach us a great deal, at the same time need our balancing presence! In all humility, we need to be there!

**Donations** go in full to projects supported by ASIA FOCUS. Administration and printing costs are not paid for from donations. Cheques can be made out to 'Asia Mission and Relief Fund'. Direct bank deposits and transfers are also welcome: Suncorp (Brisbane), BSB# 484799, A/C# 052531844.

ASIA FOCUS is a free publication distributed in printed and electronic (PDF) format.

ASIA FOCUS is a 'voice from the parish' encouraging comments, sharing, openness as well as constructive criticism.

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