

God's Kingdom in... Mongolia

Come, come away with me to the wind blown land of Chinggis Khan and the Gobi Desert – Mongolia. 2.8 million people. Vast. Landlocked. Mysterious. Ignored. Forgotten.

"Mongolia, sandwiched between China and Russia, has often been forgotten by the rest of the world," writes Purevdorj Jamsran (Puje) Chinggis from Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital. Puje is a Lutheran pastor, leader, lecturer and the Dean of the only internationally recognized and accredited theological college in the country - the interdenominational "Union Bible Training Centre".

"Lutheran?" How many of us knew that there were Christians, let alone Lutherans in Mongolia? Not long ago a secluded, ex-Communist dictatorship with literally not a Christian in sight, the country is now awaking to a new dawn. "Mongolians deserve to know of the love that God gave us on the Cross through Christ Jesus, our Lord," says Pastor Puje.



Pastor Puje at work in his office.

At a time when Christian churches already flourished all over Asia and Africa, Mongolia had none – until 1990. It was then that the first missionaries arrived to share the Gospel with the Mongol people. "I actually became a Christian at that time in the very first Mongolian Church. Originally I was Presbyterian."

Those were the days. With his extraordinary, God-given talent for music and song writing, Pastor Puje shyly started to compose Christian songs for the Lord in his own Khalkha Mongul language only to be told that he may be writing "Satanic verses". In fear of being rejected by the God of the Bible he now loved, he originally destroyed quite a few of his early songs and poems.

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But times and attitudes changed. In 2004 Pastor Puje founded the "Mongolian Songwriters Fellowship" which now is producing CDs for worship and praise. I am sure that this is the kind of thing Martin Luther may have done had he been a 21st century Mongolian!

Lutheran witness in Mongolia began in 1994 when the Norwegian Lutheran Mission established a post in Ulaanbaatar. With their support and after learning more about Lutheranism in Singapore, Pastor Puje started in 1995 the first Lutheran congregation in the country, Bayariin Medee (Good News) Church in the capital.

By now there are three congregations and a preaching place in a remote region. A further church is now in fellowship with his churches. As well, the Finnish Overseas Lutheran Mission has begun work in Mongolia so far establishing a congregation and two home groups.

Things are happening. "I am so delighted to see that our young church has sent our very first missionary to the countryside, last August. His name is Otgonbaatar. He has a family of one daughter. They have gone to a remote village near the Russian border to evangelize and plant a church there," says Pastor Puje.

Traditionally Mongolians are Buddhists (of the Tibetan type) but years of Communist oppression produced a secular, corrupt and impoverished society, with people longing for light and salvation.

Pastor Puje's church and his Bible Training Centre are keenly evangelistic. Hopes are to spread the Gospel from Mongolia to Siberia and North Korea - the last hidden, forbidden society on earth! The many millions of Christians of South Korea have no chance of doing this but Mongolia may just become

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It's time for A Paradigm Shift in LCA Overseas Mission

Dr Ulf Metzner - LCA Mission Director 1993-2001

In the November 2005 edition of *ASIA Focus*, Pastor August Fricke argued the case for a new approach to carrying out the LCA's overseas mission ministry. While his voice is – fortunately – no longer a lone voice in the wilderness, the LCA still appears to be a long way from accepting that a radical paradigm shift – i.e. the manner in which we organise, fund and carry out this important ministry – is essential. Such a move is essential because of ever decreasing funds available to the national office for overseas mission. It is essential also because this ministry is a must for us as Christians of the Lutheran tradition – if we are to remain faithful both to our Lord's commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8) and to our own heritage.

Lutherans in Australia have a long history of dedicated involvement in overseas mission. The will for mission in our church is undisputed and reflected in various church statements. But it is also an undisputed fact that support for this high priority ministry on a national level is declining at an alarming rate. And so the harsh reality is that, at the current rate of decline in funding, it is only a matter of time before the LCA can close the door on its national world mission office. We will, of course, still have our statements and our history and the conviction that world mission is not an option – words that sound increasingly hollow in the face of reality. For those of us who hold fast to our heritage and to our Lord's last will and testament, expressed to his disciples in Acts 1:8 just before his ascension, this situation is not only serious but intolerable. It's time to stop shifting the deckchairs around on the sinking LCA world mission department! It is not surprising that the world mission dreams of so many of our people are of a nostalgic mode only. Gone are for them the futuristic Pentecost dreams and visions that Joel spoke about (Joel 2: 28+29). *That is, in all brevity, our reason for calling for a paradigm shift in our world mission ministry.*

A complex set of circumstances has led to the decline in support for the LCA's overseas mission ministry. One of the most important reasons is without doubt grass root disenchantment with centralised administration, including the so called unit budget. Over the years this had led to a lack of ownership of several centrally funded ministries in the LCA, including overseas mission. The people of the church have a sense of disempowerment in the decision making process and in carrying out this ministry as a genuine cooperative venture. This in turn has led to a lack of loyalty by many to synodical decisions, particularly also in financial matters.

The crucial question now is: *how can interest in and support of our overseas mission ministry become revitalised?* There are no simple solutions to complex issues. However, two things are fundamental to any solution to the problems facing us here. The first is

that we must accept the theological premise – not only in theory but also in practice! – namely that world mission is the responsibility of the whole church and is, therefore, not an optional extra for anyone among us. It follows that the *structure* enabling us to carry out our Christ-given commission to evangelise 'to the ends of the earth' must be funded by the whole church, i.e. by each and every one of its congregations. No exceptions! By structure I mean our national world mission department. The second important point relates to *programme/project funding*. While current LCA practice attempts (unsuccessfully and with ever decreasing staff and projects) to fund both the structure and the programme, the proposed paradigm shift would give the department no LCA funding for projects at all. Raising funds for overseas projects would be the sole responsibility of the world mission department in close cooperation with the people of the LCA. This would result in a dramatic reduction of the LCA budget contribution to the world mission department in Adelaide, while guaranteeing that the department would no longer be plagued by the problem of financial survival. The individuals in the LCA, fellowship groups, schools, Sunday Schools, whole congregations, perhaps even Districts would determine which projects they would support and the extent of their support. And they would then also have direct responsibility for ensuring adequate funding for the project of their choice and for ongoing contact with the recipients.

For its part the LCA world mission department would, amongst other things, be responsible for all official international mission matters such as meetings with world mission partners, visiting overseas staff and scholarship holders, as well as issuing general guidelines to and developing visions for congregations and coordinating the totality of the ministry, having national oversight (not control!) over all projects and their funding. It would stimulate interest in and ownership of projects, provide information to sponsors on a regular basis, visit congregations and resurrect the once vibrant mission festivals within the church on an annual basis in each parish of the church. Obviously, the department would need to be adequately staffed for such a task – including at the very least once again with a full time director.

These are just a few dot points and much detail would still need to be spelled out. But first the LCA must have the will to change and to venture in faith into a new direction. There are signs that many in our church are determined to implement such change and it is to be hoped that the responsible leaders of the LCA will find it possible to walk hand in hand with its people in search of a revitalised world mission commitment. We must all be courageous enough to have inspired dreams and visions (Joel 2:28), for the church that has no vision will perish. We do well to remember that the 'church exists by mission as fire by burning' (E Brunner) and that the grim alternative 'evangelise or fossilise' (AJ Gordon) is valid for every church that does not give Christ's commission to evangelise the world top priority in its agenda and budgets.

At the Frontiers of Christian Mission in Central Sumatra

What if God had appointed you to spread the Gospel in the hostile environment of the vast plains of Central Sumatra far away from anywhere and barely gave you the means to do it with?

"God has sent me here to spread the Gospel," says Pastor Sihol Hutagaol, "but there is no church here, no electricity, no water. I have no motorbike and we have no manse. I take the bus to visit my people who live up to 200km away. Trips take up to 5 hours. Sometimes we have to walk. I have presently a total of 50 families, plus some new members, meeting in homes in four different locations." In summary he says, "It's a bad situation here *but I enjoy it.*"

Actually, Sihol is quite a character, likeable, bright, engaging. Unlike most Indonesian pastors, he speaks good English. He and his family live on a church salary \$140 (1 million rupiahs) a month which is extremely low. Regularly there are school fees to pay, bus fares, medical bills ...

While his Batak homeland of North Sumatra has large areas that are overwhelmingly Christian, Sihol works on the frontiers in solid Muslim territory far away from home – in Riau Province near the border to Jambi, jungle country now turned into endless oil palm plantations as far as the eye can see. The oils are sold around the world for dyes, soap, make-up, cooking and dozens of other products.

Sihol wants to concentrate on two things: the spiritual development of his people and outreach. He plans to establish a Christian ministry/church centre in the region that is viable and self-funding and that is to serve as launching pad for an intense outreach effort focused on the local Malay population (Muslims) as well as displaced tribal jungle people, the Sakai Talang Lakat.

But how do you develop a Christian ministry centre when you have no money, no resources, and only a few poor people to support you and when you are poor yourself? "There is only one way," says Sihol, "You establish a commercially viable business that will produce regular income for the church of the future."

He is sure that it can be done with the help of caring friends, some borrowed money, some donations and the moral support of the GKPI, the Lutheran church body he belongs to. In fact, it's starting to happen already: On leased land they are about to plant 6ha of oil palms that should get to the production and profit stage within 5 years.

ASIA Focus would normally be most reluctant to support enterprises such as these but, after a lot of thought and discussion, has decided to do so in this case. The Bishop of the church, Rev Mangisi Simorangkir, has also been consulted. \$1000 for this potentially exciting and rewarding project has just been forwarded.

Pastor Sihol is a man of faith, vision and energy with a remarkable story to tell and needs our support.

ASIA FOCUS: "Pastor Sihol, what do you expect to be the most important event in the life of your family this year?"

Sihol: "The birth of my second child in April."

ASIA FOCUS: "And what is your greatest need?"

Sihol: "Frankly, a motorcycle so that I can serve better."

ASIA FOCUS cannot supply a motorcycle but if one of our church groups or other people would like to make this their project, who knows, maybe a miracle will happen.

This is my Story

From abject poverty to pastor of the Lutheran Church

Rev Sihol Hutagaol, Riau, Sumatra

From childhood on I had wanted to be a pastor. However, my parents were very, very poor. I didn't go to school for years because there was just no money. One day I had an idea: I would clean shoes and sell newspapers at the local bus station. So that is what I did. For half a day I went to the bus station to shine shoes and sell papers – from 5am to 11.45am each day. From 12noon to 6pm I went to school, first elementary, then Junior High, then Senior High. Yes, in Indonesia you can attend some schools in the mornings or afternoons.

After I had finished Senior High I left for Duri City to find work. By chance I ran into an expat, an American, who looked for a labourer to work on his ranch. I agreed and I worked for him for three years along with four other people. One afternoon he asked me what I wanted to do with my life but I didn't answer him because I was too embarrassed. Two weeks later he again came to me, this time with his wife, and asked me what my wishes were. They pushed me to give them an answer. They said if I wanted to go to university they would sponsor me and cover all costs till graduation.

What an offer! None of the others received an offer like that. Well, at last I told them that I wanted to be a pastor and go to the Seminary in Jakarta. That's what happened: He and his wife paid for everything. I will never forget this.

I am sure God is working in my life. God is working through all kinds of people, also through this expat. He told the American to choose me so that I could become a minister, to spread the Gospel in Riau, Sumatra.

By the way, I'd like you to know my confirmation text, Matthew 10: 32, and my seminary graduation text: Joshua 1: 7-8. Please pray for me.

God bless you all, my Australian friends.

Cambodia

Continued Ministry and Mission

1. Preah Vihear Community Centre and follow-up trips

Cambodia just refuses to lie down and die in the minds of so many of our people, particularly those who had something to do with our 2005 Mission Trip to Preah Vihear. The baton, for the moment, has passed to Light Pass Parish, South Australia, where under the guidance of Pastor Roger Whittall and his wife Lois another \$4700 have been raised to complete our 2005 "Christian Community Centre" project with the building of two dormitory blocks for students from outlying villages.

As Lois wrote, "The fund raising for this project just "happened" – it didn't really need any organising beyond telling the story at our parish mission service, and it just flowed on from there ..."

"Why didn't you raise this amount for LCA missions generally, Lois?" I enquired. "The point is," she responded, "It wouldn't have come." It was the personal involvement of some of their own people and the privilege of having taken on ownership of this project which has enthused the people and made the money flow. This is different from just sharing information *about* some excellent mission project of the LCA.

This is exactly the point ASIA Focus is trying to make repeatedly.

However, Light Pass Parish is extremely loyal to LCA missions and the Mission Department and supports it generously as well, as ASIA Focus tries to do too. It is just that we all can do so much more for missions if and when congregations take initiatives and ownership of projects themselves.

As these words are being written, the Whittalls are up in the skies somewhere between South Australia and Cambodia on their way to Preah Vihear to do more work there. Roger is on long service leave, for many of us a more honest way than of saying 'recuperative leave'. Roger will be teaching and sharing The Faith while Lois will teach management skills to World Vision staff.

They will also organize another Mission Trip to Preah Vihear for late June 2006. This trip will be South Australia based and, generally speaking, involves attending some introductory sessions first.

2. Lutheran Mission – Preah Vihear

An exciting development is the prospect of longer term, if not long term Lutheran Mission in Preah Vihear, initiated by ourselves. We are invited. There is a challenge. There is a need. There really is a vacuum of sound, clear Christian Gospel teaching. See ASIA FOCUS Dec. 2005 "The missing Dimension of Grace".

We are consulting. We are getting as much information as possible. We are making contact with other groups to get the big picture. We try to cooperate with others as best we can. It is a big project that needs careful thought. But, subject to a few more clarifications and a little more homework, *we should be ready to go in the near future.*

Cambodia is a new, wide open mission frontier, a big change from only five years ago. The word is slowly getting around. Now the Lutheran Neuendettelsau Mission in Germany also may start work in Cambodia.

Please pray. If personally interested in this, please make contact with ASIA FOCUS for more details. Your advise as well as support is much appreciated.

3. Update on our ASIA FOCUS evangelists at Preah Sdach

Our involvement with the Lutheran "Abundant Life" Church in Preah Sdach, Prey Veng Province, near the border to Vietnam, is not connected to our Preah Vihear activities. Preah Sdach is located nearly at the opposite end of the country but is just as poor, needy and underdeveloped.

"AbundantLife" Church arose out of the work of a Danish Lutheran Aid organisation called DanMission. They believe that helping materially and sharing the Gospel goes hand and hand together.

With the blessing of DanMission ASIA Focus is paying the monthly honorarium of two evangelists now working there. See previous editions. Here are a couple of stories about them.

"Our" evangelist NIEM HOK conducts Bible Studies in Roussey Chok village. He asked his audience if the children who were born after Pol Pot knew what happened during his regime. They answered him, "No." So he asked a follow up question, "Do you think then that it is important that there should be records of what happened so that future generations will know what has happened?" They answered, "Yes, records are very important." Then Hok holding up the Bible said, "Here is the record from the very beginning. It tells about how God created the heaven and the earth and all things that are in them." Then he read them the creation story.

"Our" second evangelist LOK SAMOUEN, after sharing the Gospel, was told by one of the village leaders, "Even if you give me a million riel (Khmer money: \$250) I will never believe in your God". Then one villager piped up and said to him, "Pay me \$100 a month, then I will believe in your God." Samouen replied, "Money is nothing compared to eternal life in Jesus Christ."

ASIA Focus is privileged to be able to support these two men.

Stories written by the supervising pastor, Rev. Juanito Basalong, Phnom Penh, a Lutheran pastor from the Philippines



Cambodian evangelist Lok Samouen and his wife.

Medan has come on board too. Slowly the word spreads. Apart from an earlier gift, ASIA Focus has recently made \$1000 available.

“Right now there are four shelves and four reading tables. We have also bought 110 books to add to our collection and hope that the total number of books in 2006 will rise to 1000,” writes Hotlin Sitorus, one of the key organizers alongside of Linda Sianturi some of us know quite well.

Efforts are being made to put this enterprise on a sustainable footing by sooner or later renting a number of computers for the purpose of offering computer training classes. Trust the young people, as long as they are open to good advise and receive support from their elders, there is no stopping them...

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the launching pad for this exciting, so far near-impossible endeavour.

Presently there are some 40 000 – 45 000 Christians in Mongolia but the goal is to have won 10% of the Mongol people for Christ by 2020. Pastor Puje, however, thinks that they can do significantly better than that.

These days Christians are not persecuted in Mongolia. In fact his church is closely working with government offices in matters of social work, support for the poor and disadvantaged, church-based English and computer classes.

“Our church is also starting to facilitate four micro-enterprises (sewing, bakery, green house and carpentry) and a day care ministry. These are big challenges for us. Please pray that all those business and ministry initiatives are funded and will be successful and effective. With all these we want to improve both the lives of our people and help the church with its ministries and missions.”

What a witness to the way Pastor Puje’s Lutheran Church tries to meet the material and spiritual needs of the people of his land!

One last thing. His work as the head of the “Union Bible Training Centre” is absolutely crucial. “I am so blessed to be able to serve the future leaders of the Mongolian Church,” he says, “The leaders are coming from all over Mongolia and they are going back to serve their people. What a blessing to be part of a vibrant church at this time of history!”

Our Value System: “I understand that in our world much more money (in subsidies as relief to farmers) is spent on one British cow than on more than a dozen African families.”

Comment by Phillip Adams on ABC Radio National

Indonesia

Rumah Baca keeps youth off the street

Rumah Baca is Indonesian for *Reading House* - the Youth Library in Medan, Sumatra, the brain child of dedicated Christian youth that ASIA Focus helped to call into being.

In a country in which there is so much dishonesty, self-service and corruption, sometimes even in church ranks, the commitment and self-sacrifice of some of the young people is awesome. To get this project up and running, a small group of young people dedicated 10% of their meagre income to this project. That is, apart from all the other things they give to. No wonder they are always broke (but won't say so, never asking for anything).

Rumah Baca is a place to read, to relax, to inform and educate yourself, to borrow books on many issues and also a place for meetings and discussions. *Rumah Baca* has struggled through 2005 but now secured a better and more expensive premise in a good, accessible location. For the official opening on 4th March 2006 some 300 youth were invited from different churches. A lease has been taken out for two years. What confidence!

Lots of voluntary work has been done, making shelves, painting, keeping the door open every day 9am – 9pm. An amazing effort. But as usual, it's just the few who do all of the work. While making positive statements, the official church does not seem to take a lot of interest. The Batak Churches do not appear to excel in social engagement. Of course, there are the orphanages etc supported by overseas funding.

ASIA Focus has been the main outside donor but now the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) in

The Lutheran Church in the Philippines

"The Philippines. What calamity! I wish this country would just go away." Thoughts like these still cross my mind. Yet in other ways it's a fascinating place full of wonderful people, friends I love and cherish. But tormented the country is.

If you ever want to see the devil at work, look no further but observe what unfolded in the Lutheran Church in the Philippines since 1988: personal clashes and theological disagreements resulted not only in the split of that church but also in harassment of pastors, occupation of manses, cutting off the water supply from church workers' homes, posting of security guards to keep officials of the opposing faction out of the seminary and church offices, endless litigation, actual violence and death threats. In fact, the Lutheran Hour Office in Manila was closed down late in 2004 because of threats to staff and instability. A former Lutheran Hour director had in fact been murdered. 'Lutherans' murdering Lutherans?

With all the bitterness and accusations of corruption, it's a continuing nightmare. It's not clear whom you can trust. It is clear though that God is not in league with one side out to squash the other. The miracle is that his people are still actively working on both sides doing his work, spreading the Gospel, and trying to overcome hate and schism with love and forgiveness and working hard towards reconciliation – now a real possibility.

I can't think of a more mixed up, muddled church. It's hard to believe but the split may actually have spurred the growth of this young Lutheran Church. "This sense of heightened competition made our congregations eager to evangelize more and establish more congregations," said a friend.

Dr. Ted Bawang and his family, converts, baptised as Catholics, thought of leaving this pretty hopeless church but Ted said recently, "When we returned from Nepal after a few years of service there, our home congregation had grown. Many more people now came to church. We were so surprised. Obviously God is blessing this church. We are now committed to it."

The Lutheran Church of the Philippines (LCP) with its two parallel administrations was started by the Missouri Synod in 1946 and has now 28 000 members, more than 200 congregations and mission stations and 165 church workers including pastors (63), lay ministers, deaconesses, evangelists. It is led by a number of bishops and presidents.

While there are expanding churches in Mindanao and many other islands, the heart country of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines is Northern Luzon, the Cordilleras with its tribal, somewhat Chinese-looking mountain people. To this day most of the villages in which our churches are located can only be reached by hiking for three to four hours! To this day not all villages have been reached by the Gospel! Such isolation is extremely rare anywhere in Asia in this day and age!

The Country

The state of the church in many ways is a mirror of what is happening in Philippine society in general – a society marked by disunity, poverty, infighting, disillusionment, corruption, coup d'états, scandals, dictatorships and a real sense of hopelessness.

"Today, 2006, Philippine democracy is little more than a ruthless contest among rival clans with such names as Aquino, Arroyo and Marcos. Political parties are largely irrelevant ..." writes Alan Sipress in the Washington Post. He also deplores the country's slide into poverty.

While officially "only" 35% of the Philippines' 85 million population live on less than \$2 a day, well under the poverty line, nationwide surveys show that more Filipinos rate themselves as poor. According to the latest poll of Manila-based Pulse Asia Inc., 75% of 1,200 respondents nationwide rate themselves as 'very poor' or 'poor' and felt that their lives have worsened in the past 12 months. Government records also showed that 43.4% of the country's population had no access to permanent shelter(!). These are some shocking comments by "Deutsche Presse Agentur".

There is also the loss of values in a society that mimics American values, TV Talk Shows, Hollywood, trash. "We have become a society that has become addicted to instant gratification. You don't have to look far just open the pages of any Philippine newspaper and you won't fail to notice this proclivity of Pinoy (Filipinos) for anything instant, like fast-food, instant noodles, lotto and jueteng numbers game, fast cars, instant sex, drugs, and so on. Sometimes, we even bribe officials to get our documents this instant." (Louie, a correspondent)

Poverty: The scourge of the church

While many in the church deplore this, church workers too are in danger of being compromised. Any wonder when you realize that church workers mostly receive wages from their congregations below the poverty line? "Poverty has effected Filipino attitudes and has also effected the attitudes of not just a few of our Lutheran workers. Sometimes their attitude makes them forget their ministry and who they are as Christians," writes a Lutheran informant.

"The wages of pastors and other church workers often cannot sustain their families. So they look for other work, part time work, anything, leave the country in search of greener pastures, or even give up the ministry altogether. We even hear of church workers joining cock fighting and gambling contests in order to get instant cash, just because they don't get paid for their church work properly."

Before anyone judges let him walk in these people's shoes first! And remember: In the midst of all the pain and human failures, God's church lives.

The poverty of congregations

Some congregations seem to lack literally everything and can't even afford song sheets to sing from. Verses are being written on old blackboards and then rubbed off to make way for the next verse quickly written up. Even in the northern regions' "richest" and only English-speaking church, St. Stephen's, Bagio City, the poverty shines through: torn and tattered pages in the Order of Service booklet, printed 1941 at St. Louis, Missouri, USA. It should have been replaced 25 years ago.

The church administrations of whole districts that should care for the many needs of church workers and thousands of members have no offices, no photocopiers, no computers, no literature, no church papers. They can produce no literature and no newsletters. They have to run to commercial printers to get printing jobs done spending money they can ill afford. And for the local Bishop to respond to an email from Germany or Adelaide, he has to visit an internet café! I have not seen such poverty in most other Asian countries.

What is compromised here is the proclamation of the Gospel itself, the spiritual nurture and development of the faithful. When congregations have no pastors or only ill equipped lay workers, when elders and evangelists have to hold the people together, when training has been minimal, the availability and distribution of Christian literature is absolutely vital!

Therefore ASIA Focus has decided to do *something*. Please keep reading...



Jeruel Basalong and Dr Thomas Batong.

Jeruel Basalong - a young man to the rescue:

Hoping to give a voice to the Lutheran Church in the Philippines

Meet Jeruel, 29, essentially unemployed like most Filipinos but capable and bright, a man of initiatives, a professional 'computer technician', very often having to repair computers for little more than a free sandwich.

(next column)

(from previous column)

A member of United Lutheran Church, La Trinidad, Northern Luzon, Jeruel is trying hard to give a written "voice" not only to his own congregation but also the whole church, particularly the thousands of Lutheran people living in the Northern Luzon region. In the absence of church literature far and near, Jeruel started to publish "The Voice", an excellent Christian information medium and 32-page newsletter.

Suddenly congregations started to take notice, the laypeople and the pastors right to the bishops. The word of "The Voice" spread even to remote villages on little more than bush tracks, cut off from transport, newspaper and the like.

Last year "The Voice" became the official magazine of his church district, the poorest and at the same time the largest with its thousands of members. Before that there was nothing. Now even the national church has started to take notice of Jeruel's work. Even here on this level nothing much had been happening in the line of publishing.

You should see the primitive conditions under which Jeruel works! His "office" is the smallest room (by Australian standards) in an old shabby, dirty looking building (Australian prejudice), in size probably as large as a king size bed. There's a chair, a small table, a couple of shelves, and a computer with printer. The computer is actually connected to the internet! Exceptional! The room has been made available rent free by a kind church member who also owns the computer.

Yes, Jeruel can use this computer but it's only a temporary arrangement. He and basically the Lutheran Church of the whole region really need their own computer. The truth is that they need a decent office, a photocopier and other things.

Bishop Marvin Paas of the district, the North Luzon Autonomous Diocese-Lutheran Church in the Philippines (NLAD-LCP) agrees, "Mine is the largest as well as the poorest of all the three Dioceses of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines. We would welcome your help."

ASIA FOCUS is not able to supply a whole new office for Jeruel and his church in spite of their need. A suitable photocopier able to print small song books, Sunday School materials and church papers would cost around \$1800 alone. However, we will try to find the money for a computer.

At this point general funds cannot be made available for this purpose but it is hoped that a group, or some individuals, are willing to make this their project. Some \$900 is required for the purchase of a suitable computer together with the necessary soft and hardware plus chair and table. All technical data have been supplied. In Australia a comparable computer would cost significantly more. Please consider! Please get in touch if you may be able to help.

Thailand

Desperate for Hope and Healing

They come for prayer any time, even at 10pm at night. They come quietly, shyly, secretly, in ones and twos, shadows slowly emerging out of the dark of the night. Remember Nicodemus?

It's a cool winter's night at the end of January 2006 in the mountains of northern Thailand as we are warming ourselves around a camp fire. "Would you pray for me," says the shadowy figure whose features are barely recognizable, "I don't feel well. I hurt myself today."

He is Lua, a tribal person like everyone else here. He speaks Lua but the Thai evangelist next to me knows what he wants. He touches him and prays with him in Thai. And I join in too, in English. That's what they like to see. Understanding anything does not seem to be the point.

The Luas have come here across the mountains from Laos in the last 10 or 15 years – disenfranchised, poor, landless, stateless, and somewhat 'religionless' too. They are animists of sorts who live in fear of demons and spirits. But they are very welcoming and open to the Gospel. Only a few years ago they used to be immensely shy with kids running away and women hiding.

Prayer is in the air. Praying is everywhere – the number one responsibility of an evangelist here. They pray with the people day and night, in the open, in their huts, and in great numbers after church.

Indeed, after the service the preacher can't simply pack his bag and go home but has to keep praying for his people. They line up, or kneel down individually or in small groups, 30 or 40, that is. They wait until someone has personally prayed for them. They are like Jacob saying to God, "I won't let you go, until you bless me."

The people at worship here in Na Pong settlement had come from five different villages. Some had come from Houay Mee Village, 3 hours walk, others from Houay Tone, 4 hours walk. The latter had left at 6am in the morning to arrive in time for worship at 10am – four hours on the road to church! The Houay Tone folks have been begging for an evangelist to come to their village and share the Gospel. Only two families are Christian right now but the whole village would welcome them!

Houay Ton Village lies high up in the mountains practically on the Lao border – beautiful scenery, lovely people but no facilities, no health care, no school. Hardly anyone can read or write, not even in Na Pong. So forget about Bibles and hymnals ...

You can cross over to Laos if you like, 30min walk maybe. But there is no actual border. Just guess work. If you do run into a Laotian soldier, I am told, your body will never be found! One day though I'd like to go because rarely you meet anyone.

The Thai Lutheran Church is dead keen on evangelising the people. "The Great Commission (Matt. 28: 18-20) is always on my mind," says Rev Tawee Oiwan, a kind of a mission secretary in the church. "I would like to help to bring the Gospel to the whole world."

Sponsorship of evangelists by ASIA FOCUS

For the year 2005 ASIA Focus sponsored the evangelists Tawee and Keng working in this region. See previous issues. Both have done very well and for 2006 the Thai church has committed itself to fund both of them through their own budget. It seems that they have passed their apprenticeship with ASIA Focus. Tawee, around 50 years of age, just got married and more youthful and bouncy Keng is being transferred to another area. (Remarkable but they even made Tawee's wedding celebrations an occasion for outreach in the town where the ceremony took place.)

For 2006 ASIA Focus has been asked to sponsor a new church worker: TOSAPOL LAPIMOL. He has some theological training and has already proven himself in many ways. A good poet, musician and singer, you can listen to some of his songs on a CD that the church has produced.

Like most Thai Christians, Tosapol is first generation. He was converted some years ago while working in Singapore. He is 41, married with two children. Occupation: "purchaser of used materials," a kind of a Thai rubbish merchant. Now he has started to serve the Lord full time. Though anything but rich he has an old car that he is willing to sell for a 33% discount if it is being used for the Lord's work. ASIA Focus happily agreed to sponsor this humble and talented person.



Tosapol and his family.

Rev Oiwan has also politely asked ASIA Focus to consider sponsoring a further evangelist, a man by the name of WICHAN. Only our sponsorship would enable the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thailand (ELCT) to employ him. They do not have the money for him but "the fields are ripe for harvest," writes

Rev Oiwan. "And there is a lot to do. Wichan has a real burden to serve the Lord."

We are told that if we can find the money for Wichan, it's just a matter of a phone call to him – and he can be on his way to do prison ministry and also work in the north.

While committed to Tosapol at \$3500 for the year we had to stall for time on Wichan saying, "ASIA Focus will tell you by early April. We have to carefully look at all other commitments made, watch the level of donations being received and then decide what funds are available."

Maybe some group wishes to sponsor Wichan for 2006. For various reasons, the total amount required is "only" \$1600 and the money does not all have to be paid up front!

Finally we need to acknowledge our LCA's commitment to the Thai church by having sent our own Pastor Simon McKenzie there through the Mission Board. It is a big investment. I am convinced that Simon will be an invaluable asset to the Thai church and a credit to us all here.

Dr. Banjob Kusawadee

Long term Australian Lutheran College, Adelaide, scholarship holder Banjob Kusawadee is now busily teaching at LITE, the Lutheran Seminary in Bangkok. A true scholar and confessional Lutheran thinker, he also has the heart of a parish pastor, missionary and evangelist. In fact, he would like to start a new congregation, initially a house church, 100km east of Bangkok in the city of Chonburi. He already conducts Bible study there and hopes that with the help of a seminary student or evangelist, sooner or later a proper congregation will develop. What a spirit!

But there is more. Apart from lecturing at LITE for much of the week, he has also been assigned as pastor to a church. On top of this, Dr. Banjob has been put in charge of a whole church district, a region east of Bangkok right to the Cambodian border. "I am now wearing three hats," he writes. Plus a fourth hat, actually, a hat he has made himself – the house church initiative.

Dr. Banjob is keen to do social and mission work near the Cambodian border. Most people there speak Khmer (Cambodian), not Thai. With the evangelist of the area he has already developed a plan how to work with and look after many of the homeless children living there. "Those children are from Thai/Cambodian relationships," he writes, "All they do is beg and play and no one takes care of them."

My mind boggles when I think of the work now being done by Dr. Banjob Kusawadee. What commitment! What energy! "Please pray for us," he appeals, also hinting that there are many problems that have to be tackled.

Stuart Betlem from **Integrity Travel**, Brisbane, supports ASIA FOCUS. He would love to assist you in all your travel plans including mission trips, holidays and business travel.

Please contact consultant Stuart Betlem:
Ph: (07) 3375 7201
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From Pr Simon McKenzie, Bangkok – *with a smile*

On December 18th I had my first baptism. I was told only 15 minutes before the service that they needed me to baptise someone. For the life of me I can't remember the guy's name. I was only told the guy's name 2 minutes before I was to baptize him. My sermon preparation that day was 10 minutes into the service when the evangelist asked me if I could preach, about 4 minutes before I was meant to actually preach through a translator who could barely understand English! Hmmm, this is very basic ministry! Worlds away from the LCA and the ALC. Yes, practice and theory can be very different.

*Pastor Simon McKenzie, January 2006
(LCA missionary in Bangkok, Thailand)*

Thai Evangelist says thanks to ASIA FOCUS

Thank you for your financial support which gave me the chance to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. I am satisfied to serve God according to His will. I am happy to visit our members' houses every day. We had 26 baptisms (mostly adult) in my church during 2005. In January 2006, 4 new believers from Houay Tone Village (see article – a distant village) and one from Houay Kha were baptised. Please keep praying for us.

Tawee Boonrasri, evangelist

Buderim Mission Festival

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Indonesia

Helping to bring Hope and Relief to the struggling Poor

- The story of three widows in Sumatra that ASIA FOCUS was able to assist late in 2005

The introduction of micro-credit schemes has brought gladness and rejoicing to thousands of villagers all over Asia. Impoverished suitable persons are granted loans to start a small business, for example, a shop, to lift them out of poverty and to help them generate incomes for themselves. Many schemes are very successful, 95% of loans are usually repaid, and participants have never looked back. It is suggested that Indonesian churches in the big cities look at introducing similar schemes in view of the poverty that exists in many of their congregations and in this way move beyond traditional charity giving.

ASIA Focus got involved with the poor of one church in Medan in the hope that such a micro-credit scheme may emerge. ASIA Focus asks for help from "the experts in the trade", both in Indonesia and here, in setting up such financially self-sustaining schemes in cooperation with the congregations there.

Whatever may or may not evolve, it is heartening to hear the response of the three widows who were able to receive late last year 1 million rupiahs each (\$170) from ASIA Focus. They belong to a congregation of the Lutheran Church of Indonesia (GKLI) that is pastored by Aladin and Dame Sitio.

Mrs Sihombing

is a heart broken grandmother of 68. "I have five children. One of them died two months ago (Dec 2005) and another one just disappeared. I don't know where she is. I felt shattered when I saw my children marry non-Bataks and non-Christians." She also looks after two grandchildren. "I dream of a better life but I don't think that it will ever come. However, I will do all I can for my children and grandchildren. I thank ASIA Focus for helping me. I remember Pastor August and his kindness. I keep praying for him." She is too old and sick to work and used the money to cover family expenses.

Mrs Simanjuntak

is only 40, still young and energetic, with three children. They all call her Mama Novi. She has had to borrow money just to be able to send her children to a basic state school. "On receiving the money, I immediately went to buy underwear from the factories for selling them at a friend's place. Sometimes I can sell many pieces, sometimes nothing. I complain to no one except to my God. He gives me strength for my struggle in this world. Thank you so much to ASIA Focus for helping. Please keep looking after poor people like me."

Mrs Hutagalung

is 60 and is struggling with three (grand)children. She sells drinks and collects rubbish to survive. "Sometimes I have felt desperate when day after day life was so hard for me but I believe that God will never leave me alone. He is always by my side and looks after me. Thank you to ASIA Focus." Then she called Pastor August "a kind and social soul".

These reports from February 2006 are the result of a visitation by an Indonesian ASIA Focus friend in Medan. "I learnt many things from these widows," wrote Hotlin, a university student, herself struggling financially, "I learnt especially about their spirit and their faith. That was wonderful for me. Thank you for giving me the chance of meeting people like these." Indonesians themselves benefit from a more personal and deeper exposure to the rampant poverty around them which they too can easily overlook.



The three widows with Rev Dame Sitio, wife of Rev Aladin. Though very poor, no one goes to church poor.

Mission Trips

are going to be more and more in demand in the future as people catch the vision and are offered personal engagement. For example, one of our Adelaide congregations plans a trip to the Philippines mid 2006. ASIA FOCUS is not offering a regular mission trip for 2006 but wants to draw your attention to the following endeavours:

- the ASIA FOCUS related mission trip to Preah Vihear, Cambodia, mid 2006, organized by Pastor & Mrs R. & L. Whittall (*see article*).
- the possibility of an "English Teaching Camp" fairly late in 2006 in Thailand. Duration around 10 days. A general request has been made and some people are interested.
- the proposed retreat (see previous issues) at Lake Toba, Sumatra, together with Indonesian pastors, has been postponed to 2007. A number of pastors expressed interest.
- there are always openings for doctors and nurses with some knowledge of tropical conditions. A proper medical mission should be attempted some time.

One year later

The current situation in tsunami and earthquake devastated Nias Island, Indonesia

"During my visit to Nias I didn't see any significant progress. Up to now my brothers and sisters have not received any help from any social organization (NGO) who claim to do rehabilitation and reconstruction work in Nias. A lot of data and information has been collected but no help has been given so far.

A group called BRR (Badan Rekonstruksi dan Rehabilitasi) just put their stickers on the houses which have been rebuilt by the owner themselves. I don't understand what they mean to achieve by doing that. However, I saw a lot of brand new luxury cars (by Nias standards) owned by the relief people. I can understand that they need that kind of strong car but the question now is; 'What have they done so far?'

Most of them go and 'help' the people in the small villages which were not actually affected by the earthquake. They have been living in poor conditions even before the disaster. I believe God has a plan to show to the people of the world the true, impoverished living conditions of the Nias people."

Gan Seng Bun, Riau, Sumatra, January 2006

(Gan's family on Nias suffered total devastation and 9 family members were lost)

From ASIA FOCUS Scholarship Holder

Luther Matheus Saogo

"About my study, everything is just fine although my marks didn't satisfy me. But I try to do my very best and I am not worrying about that because I have surrendered it to GOD and I believe I will be successful. Now I'm having a holiday and I'm just staying in Salatiga. I'm not going home to Mentawai before I have succeeded and have graduated from my studies."

Luther Matheus Saogo, January 2006

*Mentawai Island, Indonesia, (studying in Java)
The LCA officially funds two other Mentawai students.*

Malaysia

Morality Squad to prevent 'sins'

The Islamic religious authorities have formed a team of volunteers to patrol Malaysia's administrative capital [Kuala Lumpur] to prevent indecent behaviour such as hand-holding among Muslims. The 75-member Islamic Council Volunteer Squad will be on the lookout for offenders – like Muslim couples showing mutual affection in public, including holding hands, according to Che Mat Che Ali, a high-ranking government authority. The patrols started in late January 2006. The volunteers, all in blue vests and white caps, cannot make arrests but will alert the official law enforcement officers.

The Strait Times, Singapore, January 2006

Indonesia

Christmas 2005: It was a wonderful moment for me to joint together with the villagers (in a region of Aceh) and they gave me their Christmas greetings even though they are Muslim. They honour other religions and respect my faith. I won't forget this moment and respect them always.

Linda Sianturi, church worker, Banda Aceh

Hope in Christ when life is bleakest: When my father passed away three years ago I was so sad and desperate. At that time we faced family problems... until my friends and relatives gave support and told me to have hope in Christ. I tried to survive and surrendered myself and my family to God. God is great. Nobody knows about his plan for our lives. Even though my father has passed away, I am still able to study and my needs are met. We are nothing without Him. We just hold onto Him who gives us strength and hope.

That's why, one day, when I am ready and God permits, I plan to help poor people, especially the fatherless children or orphanages. I want to teach them about the Bible and hope in Christ. Please pray for me, Father August. Your testimony and your efforts give inspiration to me.

Dewi Simatupang, university student, Medan

Philippines

Coup d'état: Lots of funny but serious things happen in our country now. Like yesterday - another coup d'état attempt.

Jeruel Basalong, February 2006

(on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the People's Revolution in the Philippines in which President Marcos was ousted)

Evangelising through print media: Print media is one of, or perhaps even the most effective way of evangelising. While the congregations of (my church district) are autonomous, they all look for ways to meet their needs. Some think they can't afford it, but I have seen and experienced that if a need is real then there are ways of meeting that need.

One day I visited Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Kasibu. The church walls were rotting and their songs were written on the blackboard and then wiped out for the next song. With a heavy heart, I reluctantly suggested that we raise some funds for a songbook. We raised a good amount and produced a songbook for that congregation. They picked their own songs for inclusion. Most of the donations didn't come from the Lutherans but from my friends *(with no photocopier every small printing job has to be paid for dearly)*.

Jeruel Basalong, February 2006 (see article p.6-7)

Change resistant: "Groups (organisations) resist change with all the vigour of antibodies attacking an intruding virus."

Prof James O'Toole

"Leading Change" - a lecture on Radio National

Current ASIA FOCUS projects in brief

Thailand

Sponsorship of evangelist Mr Tosapol Lapimol.

We are also looking for funds, or sponsorship of, Mr Wichan. *(see article p.8-9)*

Sponsorship of two students in Sii Khiu.

Cambodia

Sponsorship of two evangelists Niem Hok and Lok Samouen. *(see article p.4-5)*

We are looking to send our own missionary to Preah Vihear, our continued field of special action.

Indonesia

1. "Rumah Baca" (Reading House) for Christian Youth. *(see article p.5)*
2. Relief to the struggling poor in Medan – social fund. *(see article p.10)*
3. Supporting the Nias people in Riau Province with their church plant.
4. Sponsorship of blind student Ida Rosari's theological education at STT Abdi Sabda.
5. Sponsorship of Luther Matheus Saogo, Mentawai Islands, for studies in Java. *(see p.11)*
6. Sponsorship of the post-graduate studies of nurse Dewie Pima to prepare her for joining the faculty of the Christian Nursing Academy, Medan.
The story of Rev Sihol in this issue illustrates how crucial sponsorships are.
7. Helping a frontier parish in the wilds of Central Sumatra to develop a Christian Mission & Ministry Centre. *(see article p.3)*
8. Other needs arise regularly, like the needs of a church on earthquake-devastated Nias Island which still has received no help.

Philippines

Subsidy for an official church organ. Also, helping to meet the most basic publishing needs of a district of the Lutheran Church with 58 congregations. *(see article p.6-7)*

Trying to find funds for a computer and possibly other office equipment – or sponsorship of the same. *(see article p.6-7)*

Projects are chosen with care after a great deal of research and consultation.

Nias churches in ruins still: We reported previously that over 600 of Nias Island's 1000 plus churches were badly damaged or totally destroyed in the 2005 Easter Monday earthquake. While a great deal of relief has finally arrived mainly from German sources, a Batak congregation on the island seems to have been forgotten. Therefore a church leader is in touch with ASIA Focus about the possibility of making funds available to this church as well as helping impoverished church members. Details should be available shortly.

Donation of a special computer for Ida Rosari - see December issue of ASIA Focus. A wonderful large donation was received recently to enable Ida to have her own computer (for the vision impaired). Up to now, Ida had to rely on fellow students to help her study by reading books to her for hours. Can you imagine? - Thanks so much! Another milestone in the life of Ida Rosari!

Sister congregations are requested by overseas churches, including the Philippines (probably easiest to manage because of absence of language barrier) – an exciting but also difficult undertaking. For details get in touch with ASIA Focus or LCA Mission Office.

A Big Thank You to All Donors!

ASIA FOCUS does not appeal for money but its projects depend on a continual flow of donations. ASIA Focus offers to all an engagement in the venture of faith.

Our treasurer is Mrs Karen Schiefelbein of Zion Lutheran Church, Gympie, Queensland.

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