

Easter Epistle from Indonesia

Colleagues,

The ThTh postings for the past two weeks have looked at Christianity “moving south.” Here’s a case study. Today’s ThTh is an interview that appeared in the current issue of THE LUTHERAN, the national magazine of the Lutheran Church of Australia [LCA]. Marie and I have been reading the magazine ever since 1994. That was our first year as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers. That first assignment was a guest lectureship at the LCA seminary in Adelaide for Ed, and work in the sem library for Marie. Through those links we’ve gotten to know and cherish Linda Macqueen, gifted editor of the magazine. She’s the interview-er. Now the interview-ee. Our last mission volunteer stint (2004) took us to southeast Asia. An Indonesian segment of that venture found us in the city of Medan on the Indonesian island of Sumatra mingling with students and faculty at the Abdi Sabda Theological Seminary. Even though the visit was short, my conversation with professor Mangisi Simorangkir was memorable. Why? He was just winding up his doctoral dissertation at the Southeast Asia Graduate School of Theology [SEAGST] and he wanted to talk-shop about Luther’s Two-Kingdom theology. Such a topic, such a conversation, I remember! Also the teasing title of Mangisi’s dissertation: “The Two Kingdom Doctrine of Martin Luther and its Relevancy in Indonesia.” I have not seen the finished product. If/when I do, I’ll doubtless want to tell you about it.

So you can imagine our joyful surprise when the Aussie LUTHERAN [Vol.40:2] arrived with Mangisi’s photo on the cover, and Linda’s interview with him as the lead article. In September 2005 Mangisi was elected bishop of Gereja Kristen Protestan Indonesia [GKPI], one of the several regional Lutheran churches in that country. The interview comes to you this Holy Week for

your Easter edification.

It's not theology of glory. Christian life in this country with the most Muslims in the world (somewhere around 160 million) is precarious—as you'll see in the very opening paragraphs. Christians dying for their faith is regularly in the news—even though such news seldom gets to the west. Though urban Indonesia is “modern,” the daily life of the majority is “third-world.” National policy may be one thing, local realities are often quite different. Marie and I experienced this first hand in our 1999 short-term mission assignment there.

So here's theology of the cross from an Indonesian co-confessor for Easter Sunday 2006. Linda asks him to compare Lutheran faith and life in his native land with what he finds among Lutherans “downunder” in Australia. It sounds much like what he would find if he'd ever visit us “upover” in the northern hemisphere. Linda chose these words to put alongside Mangisi's picture on the cover: “I am where God wants me to be . . . preaching Christ.” To hear what that means in Mangisi's context, read on.

Easter Joy!

Ed Schroeder

INTERVIEW

Mangisi Simorangkir is bishop of the 350,000-member Gereja Kristen Protestan Indonesia, a partner church of the Lutheran Church of Australia. Linda Macqueen spoke with him in Brisbane.

MANGISI SIMORANGKIR

Bishop, it must be a difficult time for you to be away from your people, especially for those in Tangerang. Can you tell me what happened?

I was in Adelaide, at Australian Lutheran College, when I received an SMS from Petrus Hutauruk, the pastor at Tangerang. He told me that his church had been bulldozed by a police unit, authorised by the government. Petrus was devastated. He SMSed that he cried when the bulldozer reached the altar. He said it was like Jesus being crucified again. The church seated about 200 people; they are without a place of worship now. It is very sad.

Was any reason given, or any warning?

They say it's because we don't have permission to have a church there. But it's been there since 1997 and until now there's never been a problem. Under the Indonesian constitution there is freedom of religion. But in practice it is not always that clear-cut; it often depends on the local authorities and how tolerant of Christianity they are. In some places there is persecution-in Tangerang (near Jakarta), for example. So far this year [2005], the government has authorised the demolition of 23 churches in West Java, including Lutheran ones. In that part of Indonesia, and elsewhere, local government is heavily influenced by radical Islamists. And sometimes they take the law into their own hands. Recently, in Sulawesi, a pastor and three Christian girls were shot by Islamic extremists. The worst place in Indonesia to be a Christian is, of course, Aceh. There are a lot of fanatical Islamic groups there; we call Aceh 'terrace of Mecca'.

If the constitution grants freedom of religion, is there some avenue through which Christians can object to persecution?

Yes, it is possible. But it is not necessarily wise. We are a

minority group; about 10 per cent of the population is Christian. (Mind you, that is 20 million Christians.) The vast majority of people are Muslim. When you are a minority, you do not speak up as much as you would like. It is better sometimes to suffer in silence. It is better if we work towards being friends with our Muslim neighbours and earn their respect, rather than stir up trouble with the government. We can demonstrate our friendship by assisting them through community development programs, for example, agricultural projects and training, and low-interest loans. We are not allowed to preach the gospel to Muslims, but we can show them the love of Christ in the way that we help them to improve their lives.

But there are also good relationships between Muslims and Christians, aren't there?

Yes, it is not all bad. In East Java there is a Muslim paramilitary group that helps to protect Christian churches. And in Medan there is a dialogue between Muslim and Christian leaders, in which I am involved. It operates at the leadership level only at this stage, but we hope that in time attitudes of mutual respect and cooperation will trickle through to the grassroots.

And in many places it is already happening. In northern Sumatra, where our church is based, relationships with Muslim people are very good. In Sulawesi there is a building that is a church on one side and a mosque on the other, so Christians and Muslims are worshipping literally side by side. One day the plumbing on the Muslim side failed and they didn't have any water for the ablutions that are part of their preparation for worship, so the Christians worked out a way to pipe water from their side across to the Muslims. There are many examples of good relationships.

But we Christians have to be careful that we don't upset the balance. If we are too successful in reaching into the community with our projects and programs, or if too many people are converting to Christianity, the Islamic leaders will get angry with us.

Also, there are some Christian groups that do not help us. Even though it is illegal, they actively preach the gospel all over the place: in the streets, in supermarkets and malls. I think that is not helpful. I think it is more helpful to the cause of Christ if we cooperate with the government and respect the local people and their culture. We can't, and shouldn't, impose Christianity on them. They have to be attracted to Christ because of his love that they see in us.

Your church is in the middle of an enormous mission field. How do you reach people who have no understanding of Christianity at all?

That is our big challenge and we wrestle with it constantly. Every church should be doing this, though, even churches in the LCA. All of us are working in a foreign culture and we need to contextualise the gospel so that it makes sense to the people we are trying to reach.

We can learn a lot from Ludwig Nommensen, who brought the gospel to the indigenous people (Batak) of northern Sumatra in the 1860s. Previous missionaries had been killed, but Nommensen won the people's respect by learning our culture and our language. And today there are millions of Christians in this part of Indonesia.

Nommensen gave us a good example of how to reach people: learn their culture and their language. (This is also what the German Lutheran missionaries did in Australia, with the indigenous people.) That is a big challenge in places like Indonesia,

though. In our church alone, there are seven different language groups.

Once you overcome the language barrier, you have to learn how to present the gospel in the cultural context of an ethnic group. We have to get rid of the western influences that are associated with Christianity. Indonesians don't like the West, and if Christianity is seen to be a western religion, it will not be accepted. Indonesian Christianity must be rooted in our own culture.

But it is hard to convince people of this, even many of our pastors. They think that a 'real' church is a gothic church (which looks so out of place in tropical Sumatra), and to be a 'real' pastor you have to wear a black gown and dog collar. Why don't we build Batak churches and wear traditional Batak gowns? No, we insist on looking like aliens. It is silly.

Your church has a membership of 350,000 in 1144 congregations. But you have nowhere near 1144 pastors. How do you manage?

Yes, there are only 207 pastors (30 are women) to serve all these people, who are scattered across Sumatra, Java and Kalimantan. And only 180 are based in congregations; others are in schools, in head office and so on. Our lay-people are very strong. Every Sunday about 1000 lay preachers lead worship. We have had to get away from the idea that you have to be perfectly and professionally trained in order to preach and lead worship; we have no choice but to rely on laypeople a lot more than you do in Australia and New Zealand. But we do our best to train them and prepare them. We have pastors in every region who prepare sermons and make them available to the lay preachers. Also, our magazine includes sermons that local lay leaders can use for home groups, women's groups and so on.

You might think that it is unfortunate for us that we do not

have enough pastors for all our congregations. But it is a good thing. It is good for laypeople to have the responsibility of leading a congregation; it gives them confidence, and totally involves them in ministry. It is not like they are just watching television, which can happen when laypeople sit back and leave the pastor to do everything.

Do you have a call system for pastors, as we do here in the LCA?

No, we assign pastors to parishes; they have no say in the matter. They are missionaries, and they will be sent to wherever the need is greatest. They understand that it will be this way when they enter the seminary for their training. It is the same for the women, even those with children. All our pastors are treated in the same way.

Generally they spend five years in one place, alternating between rural and urban congregations. In remote communities they are usually paid in padi (uncooked rice). We are trying to organise a centralised pay system, so that richer congregations can support the poorer ones. But we do not have many congregations with money to spare, so we constantly struggle to support our pastors properly. About 60 per cent of our congregations are based in rural villages; the people are peasants, surviving only on the food they can grow.

How do you communicate with your pastors in remote areas?

With great difficulty. Of our 208 pastors, 60 per cent don't have a telephone. Those with email I could count on one hand. There is only one email connection in our head office. A website is out of the question. You live in a different world here, where you can communicate with anyone, at any time, at the press of a button.

On the island of Nias we have a church in a remote area where there are no phones or electricity. It is like the Stone Age. After I've been there, I come back to our place and think that we are really modern!

What differences have you observed between Australian and Indonesian expressions of faith?

In Indonesia people come to church every Sunday, and I hope this tradition continues. They like to sing, even in home groups. Some pastors say that we sing too much. Typically we have nine songs in a worship service, and more than five choirs. I say, why not? If people like it, let it be part of our worship; it makes it alive.

Worship services are a bit shorter these days; now they are about one-and-a-half to two hours. On special occasions, they go to three hours. Sermons are at least 30 minutes; any shorter and people complain that the pastor didn't prepare enough. Up to an hour is normal. You will wonder how people stay awake for so long. Pastors in Indonesia get a lot more passionate about preaching than they do in Australia. They have a lot of energy in the pulpit; they get worked up and punch their fists in the air. Pastors here in Australia tend to be monotonous and too logical; they just entertain your brain and don't excite your emotions.

Another thing about our people is that they love their Bibles. In Australia people don't seem to care much about reading the Bible. Maybe it is because Bibles are cheap to buy here [in Australia]. In Indonesia they are too expensive for most people in remote areas. A Bible costs 70,000 to 100,000 rupiah (about AU\$10), which for a lot of people would be an impossible amount to save.

How do you see our churches working together in the future?

We will continue to learn from each other, not just at the church-leader level, but especially as your school students come to visit our schools and as your youth come to do voluntary work in our churches. Real understanding will happen when people at the grassroots meet each other and listen to each other's stories.

It is important that Indonesia and its churches do not get left behind. Globalisation is happening, whether we like it or not. We need to learn about the wider world, including the way the West does things, so that we can keep up with changes. When the LCA provides scholarships for our pastors to study at Australian Lutheran College, they are not only contributing to their training in theology, but are also expanding their way of thinking. Our pastors cannot afford to just sit in their own little world and culture, but must open up their eyes and ears to the wider world.

You can, of course, continue to support us financially, as you have in the past. But it is important for us to know that you support us in prayer, too-that you are aware of our struggles and are bringing our needs before God.

How do you feel, coming to Australia, seeing all this wealth and religious freedom, and then going back to your own church with all its challenges?

You have your own challenges and difficulties; they are just different from ours. Every church has its cross to bear. I don't feel envious of your church. There are many things our church can learn from yours, and vice versa. I don't want to change places; I am where God wants me to be. It is not important to be rich; if I want to be rich I will go on Eddie McGuire's Who wants to be a millionaire?

No, it is not important to be rich, not when we have something

so much better: we are saved through Christ, we have victory, a future in Christ. Preaching that, that's the important thing, wherever you are, whatever the challenges.

[As a sidebar to the Mangisi interview Linda added this paragraph from LCA mission director, Pastor Wayne Zweck, reporting on his recent visit with Lutherans in Indonesia, along with a photo of the wall-to-wall congregation he addressed.]

There were more than 1500 university students present and I preached from a pulpit high over the altar. It was an awesome experience, made all the more remarkable when I was told there were three other services that Sunday, including one in the evening which, if anything, was bigger. Hard to imagine, given the fact that the 8:00 a.m. service was literally full to overflowing. Apart from the wonderful singing, my abiding memory is of the moment we arrived. Wherever I looked there were streams of young people walking to church, all carrying their Bibles. The Sunday before I had seen something similar in Pematang Siantar. There were lots of people in town that morning and many were in their Sunday best. They were all carrying their Bibles. What a different world . . .