

2008 Report #1 from Sumatra, Indonesia

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I left SFO, 1:20 AM, March 31, on Singapore Airlines for the 14-hour flight which took us over the Pacific Ocean, South Korea, Japan, just east of Shanghai, along the coast of mainland China, over Macau and into Hong Kong.

With the stop over in Hong Kong, I was able to approve a Batak student's proposal of her thesis. She is a grad of the deaconess school where I am presently teaching and we are preparing her at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong to return to teach diaconal ministry and pastoral care with her Master's. Several other Sumatran Batak professors are studying at LTS for Th.D. degrees.

Then it was on to Sumatra, departing Hong Kong and flying over the South China Sea just west of Viet Nam and farther east of Manila, over Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, landing in Singapore (SIN). I then boarded a small plane for the flight across the Malacca Straits landing in Medan's Polonia airport (MES), where the Tsunami disaster relief supplies are centered..

I am now at the HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan) Deaconess School in the village of Balige where I have taught for a number of years.

As most of you know I am a Global Mission Volunteer and pay my own way. The ELCA pays for my health and other insurance. All the US money I receive goes for scholarships for my students. The institutions where I teach provide me room and board.

Here in Sumatra I mainly work with people of the Batak culture. They are one of the largest and best known minorities in this multi-ethnic country of Indonesia, which is the fourth largest population in the world (180 million). It does have the largest Muslim population of any country in the world.

These Bataks are a very dynamic and self-confident people. It is only in the last 100 years that their way of life and culture has undergone a great change under the impact of Christianity, Islam and colonialism.

I often get asked what it is that I find fascinating about them and their homeland, and why I return again and again. It is their great friendliness, openness and directness I have always experienced with Bataks.

Their homeland is the island of Sumatra at the western end of the modern Republic of Indonesia. It is the fifth largest island in the world, measuring 1750 km in length and 400 km across at the widest point. There are 31 active volcanoes on this island. The Batak live in the mountainous coastal region north of the equator and west of 100 degrees latitude.

The Batak consist of 6 ethnic groups: the Mandailing, Angkola, Toba, Pak-Pak/Dari, Karo and Simalungun. I work mainly with the Toba and Simalungun. These groups were increasingly Christianized by the German Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft from 1864 onwards. A German-trained

Dane is considered as "The Apostle to the Batak," Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen, who is the father of the missionary movement here. In our ELCA calendar we remember him on November 7, the day he died, after serving here nearly 55 years.

I am teaching here for the 6th time. This Deaconess School has about 50 students in its 3 year program, which prepares these beautiful "giants of compassion" - young women who come from the poorer villages with a weaker education, for an ordained ministry mainly in social services. I teach Homiletics to the second year class and Pastoral Care and Counseling to the entire student body including teaching staff. I also do some workshops on Conflict Resolution and work with the staff on teaching techniques.

Through Carol and I, about 10 partial scholarships are provided for these students each year. Many of the alums will walk miles from where they are serving to hug me and tell me all about their ministries. We have one graduate, Tioria, from this school in her second year in Lutheran Theological seminary in Hong Kong. We are preparing her to return here and take my place in teaching. So I am very much respected and loved by students and faculty who all call me "Ompung" (Grandpa).

I live in a comfortable guest house which has hot and cold water on part of the time and a flush toilet (by bucket). It is in the highlands of the island and thus cooler than where I will spend most of these two months at the HKBP seminary at Pematang-Siantar. The two months is all the Indonesian government give to Americans at the present time.

I teach 2 classes (two hours each) every day I am here - two days for Stewardship, two for Pastoral Care, two for Homiletics and two for Conflict Resolution. With a translator named Eleven, I teach using simple Batak language, often turning to her for help and frequently making humorous mistakes which they all enjoy. I use the time about half in drawing on the white board while lecturing and about half in holding practical exercises which demonstrate what we are learning. It takes a lot of effort to intentionally contextualize the lessons but delights the faculty and students.

After I preached in chapel this early Saturday morning the director of the school, Sister Serepina Sitanggang, took the staff and me to a restaurant on the south end of Toba Lake. They brought their own rice and salad. We watched the lad there walk out on some floating fish traps, catch some goldfish, kill them with a club, gut and clean before cooking over a wood fire and serving to us to eat. The left overs were gathered up, including the fish bones, and taken back to the seminary for their four pigs.

The pigs are housed in the well hidden "drying lot" where they all hang their underwear for drying on long clothes lines. Two years ago I was allowed in this out-of-sight place by promising to cover my eyes to help catch the pig for butchering. It was a scream with the students laughing and screaming and chasing the porker who seemed to recognize his fate. He was caught, bled carefully to preserve the blood, hair burned off, chopped into small pieces and then cooked all day in a wok over a wood fire. The blood was then added as were lots of chilies and spices. (This has been called spice Island for many, many years.) We ate the delicious traditional Batak Sac Sang that evening before dancing the Tor Tor.

Before going to the restaurant one of my students hired a motorcycle taxi and we went to Deaconess Mathilda Nainggolan's house for a visit. She is the Batak we brought to the US to do Clinical Pastoral Education at John Muir hospital near our home in California. Now back on this island, she is deeply involved in helping to develop a ministry to "sex workers" and HIV victims. Prostitution and drug use is big time here. The ELCA provides the funding for this program. Later that day Thilda held an assembly of nearly 100 sex workers. Later this week I will accompany her to a village where, with condoms and a banana, she will demonstrate to the people how to prevent the spread of HIV and STDs. I am so proud of her and her ministry...and of my ELCA.

Rice, a staple in most developing countries, is in very short supply. All food prices have risen dramatically in places like India and Haiti where they are rioting in the streets because of the high price and short supply. Here, this situation is driving more and more people deeper and deeper into poverty. Our US farmers raising and selling their corn for more biofuel for our gas guzzlers has not helped! I am embarrassed to shovel rice into my mouth with my right hand to satisfy my over-sized belly. The soaring price of gasoline also impacts the motorcycle transportation.

A large number of these students will marry (70%), many to Panditas (Pastors). They rise at 5 a.m., observing half an hour in silence and prayer. Then, while still in their PJ's, they clean everything that will hold still. At 6:15 they bathe and dress modestly in a white blouse and black skirt. At 7:30 there is daily chapel which they plan and conduct. At 8 o'clock classes begin. 9:30 is worship time again with lights out at 10. The first year I taught here in 2002, we had 5 students to a tiny room with only 3 mattresses. Now they have two to a room having their own bed.

This school is life together like I have never experienced anywhere in the world. The students shop for and prepare all the meals, do the grounds work, make up the schedule and clean, clean and clean. Like most Bataks they "take a bath" several times each day with cold water. Their ministries are mainly to the elderly, the poor, the ill, and imprisoned, as well as teaching the Bible. There is a heavy emphasis on health, social work and children. I call them tough - built square and close to the ground gentle giants of compassion. They wash and sing all day long in four-part harmony about God's love of them and their love of God and each other. They treasure me as their very own precious antique.

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