

2008 Report #2 from Sumatra, Indonesia
Jerry L. Schmalenberger, ELCA Global Mission Volunteer

April 21, 2008

After finishing my teaching at the Deaconess school I preached and celebrated communion for them. This is a treat, as otherwise they have communion twice a year (whether they need it or not!) While they ordain deaconesses, they are not permitted to administer the sacraments. Leaning much more to the Reformed tradition, it is the same in the congregations.

We then traveled by car to the deaconess house in Siantar with the director and 3 students in back and the driver and I in the front. We let the students off along the way so they could walk back into remote villages to visit the elderly and ill. They carry only their Bible and a knap-sack for overnight essentials. They will be picked up along the road Sunday evening on the director's return trip to the school.

When we arrived in Siantar at the Deaconess house, much money changed hands. The Deaconess community has started a Credit Union and makes small loans to the poor so they can start their own business. So far they have a wonderful rate of pay back on the loans. My mother started the same kind of program in Honduras when she was in the Peace Corps.

On Sunday we celebrated the 30th anniversary of this school - STT-Huria Kristen Batak Protesten located in Pematang-Siantar - with over 3,000 assembled on the soccer field in front of the main building which used to be a hospital for a palm plantation. For the procession, many Panditas were in their usual black gowns while I, in a white alb and red Ulas stole, stood out while marching behind the Bishop in a very honored position. I gave a brief speech representing our Presiding Bishop, Mark Hanson and our Global Mission Area Program Director Barbara Lund. I then danced the Tor Tor with faculty and staff.

Later, communion for the 3,000 was chaotic. Bread dropped and wine spilled. At least there was no fighting to get in my serving line like last time. They believe that westerners have more "Sahala" (Power).

"Apostle to the Bataks," the German-trained Dane Ingwer Nommensen, was remembered in a hymn about his 55 years as a missionary here in Batak Land. (A week ago I preached in a large church where his picture was juxtaposed on one side of the altar with Jesus on the other.) It is always a thrill for me to see many women from the villages with 3 foot high cylinder-shaped woven baskets full of rice on their heads as their offerings. It was beastly hot and I sunburned my bald head again while distributing the bread. There were many speeches, long prayers and shouted, scolding sermons. The day seemed to last forever!

Vicar Sihar Gurning arrived to tell me that he did not get married as planned by him and his girl friend. When his mother and her parents met, they could not agree on the marriage plans and so it did not take place.. That is the way it is in this culture. My guess is the they could not agree on the bride price, which is that amount which the groom's parents must pay the bride's parents including

a lavish wedding party required by the Batak Adat (societal expectations). His intended is a mid-wife trained nurse and her parents could demand much even though Sihar's mother is a very poor widow. As an intern, he serves by himself a group of about 150 who have been trying to build a church; but the Muslim dominated government has blocked it.

The entire week of April 14-19 I worked in Medan for a new church - the GKBI. The event was sponsored by the United Evangelical Mission headquartered in Medan who brought there 35 Panditas and teachers of homiletics from as far as the Philippines and Java for retraining in preaching. I held 3 sessions totaling 5 hours each day. All they knew was to use the word Jesus often and scold and shout. The progress was slow and at times discouraging. They acted as if they understood but would regress to their old style. At the end of the week they were, for the first time, actually doing narrative grace-filled preaching in local congregations.

While in mostly dirty Medan where sewage flows in the street and garbage and trash is everywhere, I found a former Cucu of ours working for Pandita Sitorus, Omega's father who left the seminary. Upon seeing me she ran screaming, "my Ompung." hugging me around my waist and crying into my shirt. The church members out of whose meeting she had suddenly exited all came to the door to watch in amazement and then actually applaud. Before leaving I gave her 400,000 rupiahs which is about US \$21.00 for food. In the now pouring rain which washed the tears from my shirt, Morina held my hand as long as possible.

I stayed the week in a moderately clean "Bed and Breakfast." I had a good bed which I enjoyed so much! And on the ceiling above the bed was a large red arrow with the word: KIBLAT. I thought it pointed to the fire escape but learned later that it pointed toward Mecca so Muslims would know which way to face when they prayed. I will use this as a metaphor next week when I preach on "The Way for Christians."

A source of great satisfaction here is to see our Cucu Benny and Wilda contributing to this seminary's theological education. Both are married now to wonderful husbands who are also well educated. They live across the yard from me and carry a heavy load of teaching - Benny teaches Greek and Intro to the New Testament and Wilda teaches Hebrew and heads the library. Along with St. John's, Antioch, CA, Carol and I supported them all the way through seminary here and then brought them to Hong Kong for a Master's degree. I believe this is a major contribution to HKBP and also the position of women in the church here. Next year when Dewi Sinaga returns with her Th.D. to this seminary as the first female doctorate in HKBP and Tio Sihombing with her M.Div. to the Deaconess school, it will be another leap forward.

Kristus Do Hangolnan Di aku = Christ is our life.

Jerry L. Schmalenberger
Retired President, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, CA
Affiliated faculty, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong
Affiliated faculty, Huri Kristen Batak Protesten Seminary, Sumatra