

An Open Door

**A summary of the Lutheran Hmong Ministry
Appleton, Wisconsin**

by

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“See, I have placed before you an open door.”¹ The Lord of the Church instructed the apostle John to write these words to the church in Philadelphia. One could also argue that these words were written to the WELS congregations in Appleton, Wisconsin. With the recent immigration of Hmong people to the Fox Valley area, our Lord has indeed opened a mission door in a city that is swarming with Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. How exciting to have a foreign mission field brought to your doorstep!

Who are the Hmong?

Although Appleton residents see their neighborhood streets streaming with little “brown” children, many do not know from where these people came. And, unfortunately, some of our own church members wish that their community and congregations would not change in color. As one member commented after hearing that sixty children attended the 2000 Hmong VBS, “We spend our winters in Texas and the Hispanics are taking over our church there. Now the Hmong are taking over our church here. Let them get their own church. This won’t work anyway.”

An initial reaction to this statement might be, “How can this person be a Christian?” Yet, we know that Satan rigorously works to put up barriers to the gospel message, even if it means he has to use “good Lutherans” to put up the barricades. If this attitude is seen in our churches, one can also be sure that it’s also present in the community. Tony Kubek (an active participant in the Hmong outreach of Appleton and member of the Northern Wisconsin District Mission Board) makes a good point when he is confronted with such attitudes. He says, “I will not call it racism or bigotry because I believe these people really don’t understand who the Hmong are and how they helped us in Vietnam.”²

Which leads us to the question, “Who are these Hmong people that immigrated to Appleton?” The actual origin of the Hmong is debated. Were they from China, Mongolia, Siberia or Mesopotamia? We do not know. This group of people does not have a Hmong nation to call their own. Hmongolia or Hmongland is not found on any map. All we know for certain, is that 40 years ago these people were mountain dwellers in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Thus, with the Vietnam War, suddenly the Hmong people were introduced to the United States.

A majority of the Hmong protested communist takeover, therefore the CIA recruited the Hmong to secretly disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was supplying Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army in South Vietnam.

¹ Revelation 3:8

² 1/23/01 Email correspondence from Tony Kubek

Under the leadership of General Vang Pao, the Hmong greatly assisted American troops. However, U.S. support for the Hmong would not be as faithful. For when America withdrew its commitment from Southeast Asia in 1975, the once-helpful Hmong were left unarmed in an area where they were viewed as a threat. Soon, the Hmong were “targeted by their former enemies for brutal reprisals, turning them into refugees who would soon be scattered across the world to Australia, Thailand, French Guyana, France, Canada, and even the United States, among others.”³

This is the background of many families that have arrived in Appleton over the past years. For example, Pafoua (Pam) Vang related her story of coming to the U.S. at age four. “She remembers trekking across Laos, stumbling on dead, mutilated bodies, and hearing the gunfire when crossing the Mekong River into Thailand. Her mother and three children made the escape. One sibling was a newborn. Her brother was older and was quieted by her mom with opium. Her father had been airlifted out earlier because he was an important officer that the communists would have wanted immediately dead.”⁴

Knowing this background is very important for our mission efforts to the Hmong people of Appleton. For it makes us aware that these people did not necessarily come to the Fox River Valley because they heard it was such a beautiful place. They did not come looking for something new and exciting. They are fugitives.

But not only are the Hmong physical fugitives. They also are spiritual fugitives, fleeing very far from the truth of God’s Word. The Hmong religious heritage consists of animism and ancestry worship. Pastor Pheng Moua of St. Paul, Minnesota gives a glimpse of this animistic belief in a *Forward/Northwestern Lutheran* article. He writes, “[While escaping to Thailand] we suffered much. We cried out to heaven and called to god, ‘O, Sky, please rescue us.’ My whole family was not Christians, and we did not know exactly which gods we were calling. We thought this god in the sky could help, so we called to him for deliverance.”⁵

The Hmong community is also very intertwined in Shamanism. Although a shaman sees himself more as a doctor than a religious leader, there is no doubt that the ancient practice is in opposition to the gospel. Through animal sacrifices and trances, a shaman passes from this world to the land of the spirits. And then “through the shaman, the spirits tell the person and his or her family what to do so the person’s soul does not wander.”⁶ The Hmong will call in a shaman on various occasions, such as: to heal the sick, bless a house or expectant mother, or

³ Vue, Mai Zong. “Voices for the Heart: Traditional Hmong Marriage Negotiation.” *Hmong Tribune*. Feb 1999, p. 12

⁴ Baumann, John. Hmong Outreach Report, April 9, 2000

⁵ Moua, Pheng. “From pure pagan to Christian.” *Forward/Northwestern Lutheran*. January 2000, p. 18

assist a dead soul to the “land of the souls.” What is perhaps most discouraging is that the Hmong see Shamanism as more than a part of an ancient religion. Many see it as an essential piece of their culture. As one Hmong gentlemen told after seeing a shaman performance, “It’s part of our history. You can’t just write it off. To get rid of it would be to lose our identity.”⁷

Such a mindset has become a barrier in evangelism to the Hmong community, for many Hmong see Christianity as a challenge to their identity and culture. And so one will want to be sensitive while presenting the truths of Christianity to a Hmong person. Pastor John Baumann, who heads the Lutheran Hmong Ministry of Appleton, highlights this as one of five evangelism differences between outreach to Anglos and Hmong:⁸

- | Evangelism Differences | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| ◆ | Anglos know something about Jesus. Most Hmong know little to nothing. |
| ◆ | Anglos feel connected to Christianity. Many Hmong see Christianity as American. |
| ◆ | Anglos see Christianity as a religion. Many Hmong see Christianity as a challenge to their Hmong identity and culture. |
| ◆ | Anglos can switch church bodies with ease. Many Hmong families will ostracize the convert because he/she is turning from his/her culture and family. |
| ◆ | Conversion can take several years with the Hmong. |

Despite these many differences and challenges set up by Satan, the gospel has broken down some of these barriers. And the WELS for nearly twenty years has had prime seats while watching the living Word of our Savior crush the enemy. Let’s take a closer look at history of the Hmong people and the WELS.

The Hmong and the WELS

The earliest formal outreach efforts of the WELS to the Hmong people occurred in 1984, as the Lord used Vicar Loren Steele to bring the light of the gospel to this spiritually dark people. While serving at First German Lutheran congregation in Manitowoc, WI, Vicar Steele had many opportunities to work with this people. And in his senior church history paper, Loren Steele vividly portrays the blessings and challenges of the outreach effort. Since he gives a first person account of the initial Hmong outreach⁹ I will not attempt to rehash his work. Although, I would like to touch on the current state of affairs in the Hmong outreach of Manitowoc.

⁶ Walsh Nufer, Kathy. “The little Shaman.” *The Post Crescent*. 7/16/2000, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Obtained from Pastor Baumann in a March 2001 correspondence

⁹ Steele, Loren. “A personal account of the beginning of mission work with the Hmong peoples living in Manitowoc, WI.” March 1985. EF 2220

Manitowoc is often looked to as the “big brother” for the Appleton Hmong mission. Being only an hour away, Appleton remains in close contact and can glean from the many experiences. Perhaps the biggest benefit is that Appleton is able to see the hand of the Lord working in our sister congregation, which serves as great encouragement for a fledgling mission.

By the grace of God, First German of Manitowoc has established a separate Hmong congregation. Recently, they started conducting Hmong worship services on an every Sunday basis. Their weekly average attendance now averages over eighty!¹⁰ How the Lord blesses! In addition to the worship opportunities, First German also offers weekly bible studies and fellowship opportunities, holding potlucks three times a year.

One of the greatest blessings for this Manitowoc congregation is that a Hmong gentleman, Nau Lee, has become an active member of the ministry team. After joining the church in 1996, Nau became involved in translating and the mission work moved forward quickly. Soon after, Nau Lee started studying for full-time ministry work. In January of 2000, Nau was installed as a full-time evangelist. I was fortunate to be in attendance at this installation service and I will never forget how awesome it was to observe a whole worship service conducted in the Hmong language.

Manitowoc is not the only place where God has blessed our efforts, though. In fact, it’s not the only place that the Lord used Pastor Loren Steele to bring the good news to the Hmong. In 1988, Pastor Steele’s daughter became a playmate with Chao and Joua Yang, daughters of a certain Ger Yang. One thing led to another, and suddenly the WELS, in 1992, had its first Hmong person studying for the full-time ministry. Ger Yang soon was actively spreading the gospel back in Thailand and Laos, as he made three missionary trips to his native people. The Lord richly blessed his efforts as nearly 1000 Hmong people were requesting bible study materials after his first trip back home.¹¹ Although he unexpectedly passed away in December 1995, Ger Yang had planted and watered many gospel seeds which were to be harvested after his death.

Pastor Leon Piepenbrink, now has the privilege of overseeing some of this harvesting. Stationed in St. Paul, Minnesota, Pastor Piepenbrink is currently serving as the WELS Hmong Mission Coordinator. In this position, Pastor Piepenbrink fills many roles. “As mission counselor, he assists pastors who are working with the Hmong people in other locations in the U.S. by providing Hmong language materials, sharing effective mission

¹⁰ Minutes from Appleton Hmong Task Force Meeting, 1/26/2000

¹¹ Schulz, Joel. “The ‘St. Paul’ who lived in St. Paul: a summary of the life and ministry of Ger Yang.” EF 2673

strategies, and occasionally making visits to the other mission fields.”¹² In addition to this, Pastor Piepenbrink also serves as associate missionary and teacher to Pheng Moua and Jay Lo, which brings us to another chapter in the Hmong outreach.

Previously, I stated that Ger Yang began studying for the ministry in 1992. However, due to his untimely death he never became a full-time pastor. Inspired to pick up where Ger left off, Pheng Moua and Jay Lo started their own ministerial studies in February 1996. After thorough training, these two men were ordained on Saturday, October 16, 1999, at Emanuel Lutheran in St. Paul, MN. Since “the most effective messenger of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to unbelieving Asians are Asian Christian missionaries and evangelists,”¹³ the WELS is richly blessed to have these two men as full-time ministers of the gospel.

Pastor Moua now serves at Immanuel Hmong Lutheran Church and Pastor Lo serves First Hmong Lutheran Church, both located in St. Paul. In addition to serving their own flocks, these men are also active in mission endeavors to Thailand where the Lord of Grace continues to bless our efforts. These pastors also are instrumental in providing translations and experience to other Hmong exploratories in the United States. For example, Pastor Lo and his wife Panyia assisted in the Appleton Hmong VBS in the summer of 2000.

Although Manitowoc and St. Paul are the largest centers of outreach, work is also being done in other areas. For example, Pastor Bob Edwards heads up a rather active program in Wausau, Wisconsin. And God-willing, more church workers will be provided to pursue outreach in the midst of the Hmong population in California and the upper Midwest. But now, let us turn our attention to the current Hmong outreach efforts carried out in Appleton.

The Hmong and Appleton, Wisconsin

When one hears Appleton, Wisconsin, “cross-cultural” is usually not the first thought that comes to mind. At least, it wasn’t my first thought when I heard President Karl Gurgel say in May 1999, “Joel Heckendorf... St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Appleton, Wisconsin.” And yet, soon after moving into an upstairs flat a few blocks away from downtown, I soon realized that Appleton was not a monochrome town. For just a few days after our arrival, I counted 28 Hmong children playing in the yard across the street.

¹² Pastor Leon Piepenbrink. “Asian Mission Plan.” Submitted to the WELS Board for Home Missions. April 2000, p.5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.1

But it wasn't only Lawrence Street that offered a potpourri of ethnicity. Approximately 8000 Hmong call the Fox Valley area, "home." Before I arrived, others had noticed this same growth of Hmong people and the mission-opportunistic people of Appleton realized that the Lord was planting a foreign mission field in their yard. And so area pastors such as Stephen Pope (Mt. Olive), Dennis Belter (Riverview) and Ken Frey (St. Paul) arranged for an initial Hmong outreach seminar to be held at Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in November 1998. Pastor Leon Piepenbrink and Pheng Moua (seminary student at the time) would present. In view of the good attendance and strong interest shown at this seminar, those involved pursued the idea, setting up a Hmong Evangelism Conference to be held at St. Paul Lutheran Church in March of the following spring.

"The idea for Hmong outreach came about naturally as we recognized where God had placed us and placed the Hmong people. The history of the Hmong, their emigration from Laos and Thailand, their immigration to America and the interesting fact that many settled in areas where WELS is the strongest seemed to tell us that God had brought this culture to us to evangelize. He placed them in front of us and we shouldn't pass up the opportunity."

--Rev. Ken Frey

In addition, St. Paul (located downtown, near the highest concentration of Hmong) had a vacancy in their ministry team, so they started calling from the field for a third pastor who would be involved in the Hmong outreach. St. Paul, simply by their location, would be taking the lead in this outreach, but by no means was the responsibility to fall solely on their shoulders. Northern Wisconsin District Mission Board Chairman Mark Gass advised the Appleton congregations, "This can't be a one church effort and it certainly isn't an effort that will produce results in our offering plates. It is an effort that will take time – years to gain confidence, trust and an understanding with the Hmong."¹⁴

Eager to move forward, the area congregations once again invited Pastor Leon Piepenbrink to present to a conglomeration of potential "foreign" missionaries. His presentation on March 6, 1999 consisted of three major parts: 1) Researching our Mission Opportunities; 2) Step-by-Step Evangelism to the Hmong; 3) Organizing our Mission Work.¹⁵ By now, the idea had taken root and plans were being laid to formally organize a mission strategy. Two weeks after the Hmong Evangelism Conference, Pastor Piepenbrink conducted a Hmong Mission planning meeting. Those present were Pastor Ken Frey (St. Paul), Pastor Stephen Pope (Mt. Olive), Mr. Chuck Luehring (St. Paul) and Mr. Tony Kubek (NWDMB & Mt. Olive).

At this meeting, Chuck Luehring accepted the key position of director. It was also established that Pastors Frey and Pope would serve as spiritual advisors to the task force. Pastor Piepenbrink (with assistance from Jay and

¹⁴ Letter from Rev. Mark Gass to area pastors. 11/27/1998

Panyia Lo and Pheng Moua) would advise in all areas of Hmong outreach. And Tony Kubek would represent the DMB, Mt. Olive congregation and “kind of hang around.”¹⁶

Although many areas were discussed, I believe that one of the most important decisions made at this meeting is that they set a goal of conducting a VBS in the upcoming summer. This goal forced the committee to move forward. Surely it would be a challenging goal to reach, but it was also an attainable goal. It was agreed that St. Paul congregation would host the VBS, although all area congregations would be urged to participate in this important ministry.

While all this planning was taking place, St. Paul was still calling to fill their vacancy, this time the Lord led them to call Pastor John Baumann from Duluth, Minnesota. The call was presented as 50% Hmong Ministry and 50% St. Paul. As he prayerfully considered the call, Pastor Baumann wrestled with questions such as: “Would that split hold true? Would the congregation want to honor the split? Would the regular work of a congregation with about 1500 members swallow the Hmong outreach? Am I the right man for the job?”¹⁷ By the end of April, Pastor Baumann accepted the call to head up the Hmong outreach effort in Appleton. However, he would not be able to arrive in Appleton until July 1. And so the planning for VBS and other outreach efforts needed to continue in his absence.

And that’s exactly what happened. On May 6, 1999, Director Chuck Luehring chaired a meeting of 21 people who expressed interest in this exploratory mission. Although some of those present were synodical officials, the large numbers were a foreshadowing of the number of volunteers that would step forward in service for their Lord. Volunteers included a person to manage a \$15,000 outreach grant from synod and students from Fox Valley Lutheran High School who would be instrumental in the upcoming Vacation Bible School. At this meeting, Pastor Dennis Belter assumed the role of VBS coordinator, which was scheduled to take place the week of August 16, 1999.

At 8:30 AM on Monday, August 16, the staff wondered, “Will any children come?” At 9:00, the first Hmong VBS started with eight children in attendance – 5 Hmong, 2 Korean and Pastor Baumann’s son. Reason to rejoice! However, what happened the rest of the week was mind-boggling. For on Tuesday, this small group of 8 children tripled in size as 24 children roamed the halls, classrooms and playground of St. Paul Lutheran school. As

¹⁵ Agenda for “Hmong Evangelism Conference.” St. Paul Lutheran Church, Appleton, WI. 3/6/1999

¹⁶ Hmong Mission Planning Meeting Minutes. 3/20/1999

¹⁷ Email correspondence from Pastor Baumann. 3/28/2001

friends invited friends, the inaugural VBS continued to grow, topping off at 33 students – 28 Hmong, 4 Korean and Danny Baumann. The week concluded on Friday evening with a potluck. Almost 80 people participated, including three Hmong adults and three Korean families. Thanks be to God, because through this VBS he opened the door to 15 Asian families!

What made it such a success? Obviously the guiding hand of a gracious God was at work. Some of the instruments that he used included the services of seminarians Jay Lo and Pheng Moua. Both of these gentlemen made home visits during the week which helped in recruiting children. Also, Tony Kubek and Les Kissel provided much needed transportation for students making it possible for the students to hear the Word.

One must also thank the Lord of grace for moving many Christians to serve their Lord. Dedicated teachers included Joy Leonard, Mary Hoffman, Jeannine Gorsalitz, Anna Kolander, Sarah Pope, Pastors Stephen Pope and Dennis Belter, and Cheryl Root. Also of tremendous help were the ten to fifteen Fox Valley Lutheran students who helped as teachers' assistants, craft helpers, video operators and general gophers. Finally, thanks also must be given to Joann Jacobson and her daughters for providing refreshments, Joan Mueller for developing the crafts and Jane Price and Chao Moua (Pheng's wife) for guiding the young people in music.

Pastor Baumann concludes his VBS report, "The Vacation Bible School of our Lutheran Hmong Mission was a great success because of the blessed efforts of Christians from the area congregations. We rejoice that the LORD Jesus has provided us this great opportunity and pray that he will bless us with spiritual success that more come to know Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord. Please keep this outreach in your prayers."¹⁸ In the weeks and months ahead, it was apparent that the Lord would indeed answer those prayers.

As the Hmong Task Force met to discuss the VBS, the resounding question was, "What should we do now? With this many contacts we have to do something!" And so it was decided to try a Saturday school session. On October 9, 1999, 18 Hmong students, one mother and two grandmothers showed up at St. Paul for the first Hmong Saturday school. After Pastor Baumann's opening devotion, the children were bussed over to Riverview Lutheran to play soccer and have a lunch. By 1:00 PM the students were all taken back home. As we (I was now a member of the Hmong Task Force) reviewed the day's events, concern was expressed at the lack of older boys present. Also it was suggested that future Saturday schools be held at different churches so the Hmong could identify WELS churches in their neighborhood. Thus, on October 23, 1999, twenty Hmong students were shuttled to Mt. Olive and

¹⁸ 1999 VBS Report by Pastor Baumann

on November 6, twenty-eight students met at St. Matthew for a session. (After giving students a chance to see other congregations, the Hmong Task Force wished to keep a consistency, so St. Paul hosted any upcoming sessions unless there was a conflict over space.)

These Saturday school sessions continued to meet every two weeks throughout the year, averaging twenty-five to forty students per meeting. A typical session included a group devotion, free time in the gym or outside, a snack, break-out classes (three to five groups depending on the number of students present), a craft and a light lunch. Once again, volunteers were crucial to the smoothness of a typical Saturday. In addition to the many volunteers that contributed to the sessions themselves, one must not overlook those who provided transportation for these children. For many of the volunteers involved, images of one child after another piling in and out of Tony Kubek's suburban have been imprinted on our minds (I believe he shuttled up to 18 children at one time).

As summer 2000 approached, the Task Force decided to conduct the second Vacation Bible School. And once again, "Satan's hold on a number of Hmong greatly slipped at the Hmong Vacation Bible School conducted at St. Paul Lutheran."¹⁹ The numbers of VBS 2000 reflected God's amazing grace, as 73 students registered from 33 families. In addition to the student increase, the mission also rejoiced that enthusiasm was still being devoted to the Hmong outreach. For over the course of the week, more than sixty volunteers helped lend a hand, including 51 students from Fox Valley Lutheran High School.

As with the 1999 VBS, we once again benefited from the presence of Pastor Jay Lo who taught the upper level classes for a few days as well as making home visits. Pastor Lo's wife, Panyia, was also a great help as she assisted with registration, allowing us to get an accurate list of names, families and contacts for follow up. Lord willing, the 3rd Hmong Vacation Bible School will be held July 23-27, 2001.

Following the 2000 VBS, Saturday school picked up where it left off, and again considerable growth has been seen. Most recent numbers (March 2001) showed an attendance steadily in the 50's. While the mission rejoices in this steady growth, more challenges needed to be met. First of all, the planning and organizational work (e.g. asking various people to serve snacks, teach, etc.) for these Saturday schools was consuming much of Pastor Baumann's time. In order to free him up for more face-to-face outreach, the Hmong Task Force requested that a part-time coordinator be hired. In September 2000, Mr. Jeff Ings filled this position and he has been a blessing to the Lutheran Hmong Ministry. Another on-going challenge has been transportation. Tony Kubek's suburban was

¹⁹ 2000 VBS Report by Pastor Baumann

big, but not big enough to accommodate 54 students. As a result, the Hmong mission looked into bus services. After considering the purchase of a used bus, the Task Force opted to hire a busing company. According to March 2001 reports, this works well for taking children home.

Yes, the Lord has bountifully blessed the Hmong outreach, especially to the children. St. Paul Lutheran Elementary School even has seven Hmong students enrolled this year. Unfortunately, inroads to the adult population have not been as dramatic. Slowly but surely, various efforts are being carried out to reach these lost souls as well. And as with any exploratory mission, trial and error is often implemented.

Part of evangelism simply is gaining exposure in the community. The Lutheran Hmong Ministry of Appleton realizes this and has taken steps to let its presence be known in the Hmong community. One step taken was to set up a booth at the Hmong New Year celebration for the past two years. Last year approximately 1500 Hmong filled the Appleton North High School gym to celebrate. Whether or not any souls will be won from

our presence there, we do not yet know. However, the Lord did allow many materials to be handed out, including thirty copies of the WELS publication, "The Promise."

Other exposure involves a bi-lingual Hmong newsletter, *Hmong Neighbor*, that is sent from St. Paul Lutheran Church to its Hmong neighbors. The first edition (Dec 1999) featured Pastors Pheng Moua and Jay Lo as well as information about the local Lutheran Hmong Ministry.

Other ideas being considered to get our name out to the Hmong community include hosting an information seminar (e.g. sessions on citizenship, health, insurance, etc.), setting up tutoring centers for students and establishing a food pantry.

The Lord opened at least one mission door at the 1999 New Year celebration when an active member of the Hmong Outreach team, Bob Weimer, took part in saving a baby's life. Pastor Baumann reports:

"An 18 month old was running a high temperature (105 F). She had a seizure and stopped breathing. Bob used his CPR (EMT training) abilities to get the lungs working before the ambulance arrived. The next day, he visited the family at the hospital. They were very glad to see him. The Lord put the right guy at the right location to help that family. Possibly the Lord will use that happening in some way."

(As follow up, Bob Weimer has kept regular contact with this family and they have joined us for some events.)

As far as personally witnessing to adults, language continues to be a big barrier. Hmong children are well-versed in the English language but many adults speak only Hmong. Although this presents a great challenge, the Lord has also used it as an avenue for witnessing. Currently, three ladies are conducting English as a Second Language classes for a few Hmong women.

The desire to learn English has also opened a door to the families of Tou Nou Moua and Nhia Chia Moua. Nhia is considered “pastor” of the Hmong Assembly of God church and he wished to learn English through the Bible. In May 2000, Pastor Baumann began reading through the Psalms with Nhia while Tony Kubek worked with Tou Nou using Luther’s Catechism.

This relationship has led to many interesting events, one which took place on July 8, 2000. As the day began, it looked like just another typical Saturday school session. Due to family commitments, numbers were down as only 13 students showed up. But then Tony Kubek informed Pastor Baumann that the Moua clan was having a picnic and may need an indoor facility due to the rain. As it ended up, 70 Hmong moved their picnic into the St. Paul gymnasium and invited us to join them. As far as the food was concerned, I’ll just say it was hot and “interesting.” Pastor Baumann recalls this day as one of the highlights of his Hmong ministry thus far. He remarks, “I was very impressed with the size of the kettles the ladies were cooking with. They are

The account of how the Lord led the Appleton mission into contact with the Moua clan is an amazing story. Tony Kubek relates it as follows:

“My initial contact with the Hmong in Appleton came about 3 years ago (1998) when we were thinking of selling our house. I stopped at the Hmong/American Partnership office and asked if they knew of anyone who might need some furniture, beds, etc. They gave me the number of Chue Vee Moua whom I called, then, visited and for whom we’ve provided beds, washer/dryer, fridge, stove, ping pong table, diapers, etc. It allowed us many reasons for visits to their home.

Tou Nou, Chue’s husband, worked at the H/A Office. There have been innumerable conversations about their family (10 children), their escape from Laos, interment in Thai refugee camps, etc. Five of their children are regulars at our Saturday school.

Tou Nou’s story is an interesting one. About nine years ago, while living in LaCrosse, two Mormons gave him a bible. Fast forward to November 1999 at North High School for the Hmong New Year celebration. Two LDS in full Hmong regalia and speaking fluent Hmong stopped at a booth we had set up. After they asked if they could have some of the literature that Pastors Lo and Moua had prepared for us they had a conversation with Tou Nou. The dialogue ended with Tou Nou telling them in English, “I don’t follow Joseph Smith, I follow Jesus Christ.”

Just yesterday (1/22/2001), I had a lengthy talk at his home and he brought out his well worn and marked up Bible and he explained how some of his clan had only been reading the Bible for a couple of years. Aside from their weekly Saturday church service, he wants the group of about 35 to start studying the Bible an hour a week. This afternoon (1/23/2001), Pastor Baumann and I went over with a basic adult information course prepared by Pastors Lo and Moua. Pastor Baumann is to begin teaching him in about a week. Tou Nou introduced me to Nhia Chai Moua and we pick up 12-15 of the children from his clan that live in his apartment complex. Pastor B has been reading the Psalms in English with Nhia for about 6 months. I’ve begun helping him read about Saul and King David, sometimes twice a week, 2 hours at a time.

four times bigger than anything I had ever seen used in an Anglo potluck or big gathering.”²⁰

Nhia has also invited Pastor Baumann and Tony Kubek to a few family occasions, which has served a double benefit. Not only are Pastor and Tony able to witness, they also gain valuable insight to Hmong culture. For

²⁰ Email correspondence from Pastor Baumann. 3/28/2001

example, in September 2000, Pastor and Tony attended the affirmation of Pa Moua's (Nhia Moua's daughter) wedding to Bon Xiong. Pastor asked the new groom, (who professes to be Christian, albeit, via the Assembly of God) where the line is between acceptable culture, and cultural items that must be dropped. He strongly asserted that any cultural item that contains any amount of spirit concerns must be dropped. It also appeared that his religion consisted of only two major teachings: 1)God can heal illnesses and; 2)he can speak in tongues. In reaction, Pastor Baumann writes, "One Biblical parallel has come to mind – when the disciples came across some people who only had the Baptism of John. It would appear that his teachings are short and not filled out. We will continue following this trail."²¹

A few weeks later, Pastor and Tony were invited to Nhia's to celebrate the birth of his newest granddaughter. Pastor was asked to give a brief message from creation before lunch. Pastor read Genesis 1 and used the text as a brief law and gospel presentation. As happened at the previous family gathering, the after-dinner talk dealt primarily with the differences between Christianity and spiritism. This group, being very fervent for Christ, has taken a strict stance against spiritism. Pastor Baumann summarizes the insights gained from his conversation as follows:²²

- The members have found that as soon as they stood up for Christ and against spiritism they were ostracized from their families.
- In one of the more recent marriages the groom wouldn't allow his family to sacrifice a chicken for the cleansing of his betrothed and the binding of their spirits. He would not allow the calling of a Shaman to officiate at their wedding or do spirit tasks for the union of the couple. His family has ostracized him.
- They asserted that the Hmong Alliance Church attempts to be Christian even while allowing the spiritism of the Hmong.
- Christian churches which minister to Hmong inadvertently allow spiritism because they do not understand Hmong nor what is going on at home.
- Hmong in America cannot see a difference between their culture as a people and the need to see that Christianity surpasses culture. To many Christianity is a part of American culture.
- The family pressures to remain spiritistic are tremendous.

With this cultural pressure, one begins to understand why evangelism is extremely difficult. Some even believe that the future Hmong congregation will be made up of current Saturday school students who become adults.

²¹ Hmong Ministry Notes by Pastor Baumann. 9/10/2000

²² Pastor Baumann's notes. 10/1/2000

And yet, Pastor Baumann urges that we not “write off” the adults.²³ Rather we must continue to build a trust with them through repeated visits, leaving room for possible Law/Gospel presentations.²⁴

Humanly speaking, the greatest need to overcome these cultural barriers is to find a Hmong man or family who comes to faith and is willing to become the core of the congregation. Having men like Nau Lee, Jay Lo and Pheng Moua visit Appleton area families is very valuable, but it is always on a temporary basis. Pastor Baumann lists as one of the goals for Lutheran Hmong Outreach, “If we really want this mission work to go forward and forward at a faster rate, pray that this person or family is found.”²⁵

As happened with so many other prayers for this mission, it looks like the answer to this prayer may be just around the corner (or maybe around two corners). As of March 15, 2001 Pastor Baumann was 85% certain that Appleton would receive a summer vicar, Pao Vang, who is studying under Pastor Piepenbrink in Minneapolis. The proposed plan is to have him present for two weeks each month during the summer. In addition, a second student would help during Hmong VBS week (July 23-27). Since WELS Kingdom Workers is paying the salary for these men, the financial burden on the Appleton mission would be minimal (approximately \$1500 for housing, transportation and food). If Pao Vang will be accessible, the Appleton mission plans to utilize him in the following ways:²⁶

- 1) Work with adults in the families with whom we already have contact (#1 priority).
- 2) Work with teens and do neighborhood canvassing.
- 3) Speak at the worship services of area congregations.
- 4) Sermon translation for a special one-time Hmong worship service.
- 5) Presentation for St. Paul faculty and FVL faculty.
- 6) Teach key Bible verses, in Hmong, to older children.
- 7) Help with language lessons for Pastor Baumann.

In addition to this short-term opportunity, the Appleton group is currently investigating the possibility of having Pao Vang continue his education in Appleton under Pastor Baumann. Although this is still in initial stages, plans are being made to request support from the Northern Wisconsin District “Lift High the Cross” fund, and consideration is being given to the change this would bring to Pastor Baumann’s responsibilities.

²³ “Goals for Lutheran Hmong Outreach” by Pastor Baumann.

²⁴ Currently the Lutheran Hmong Ministry has one 4-minute law/gospel video presentation developed by Pastor Pheng Moua. Vocal presentations are superior to the written since many adult Hmong neither read or write English or Hmong.

²⁵ “Goals for Lutheran Hmong Outreach” by Pastor Baumann.

²⁶ Minutes of Lutheran Hmong Ministry of the Fox Cities Meeting 3/15/2001

If the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, leads Pao Vang to be the next Hmong leader in Appleton, we will rejoice. If not, we will give thanks to the Lord for the work he has already blessed and we will continue to pray that such a leader is found.

In conclusion, I'd like to share some thoughts and experiences I had with the Hmong outreach during my time in Appleton. First of all, I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of Christian love that many of our lay people displayed for the Hmong people. To see couples like the Kubeks, Luehrings, Weimers and others dedicating many volunteer hours for their Lord was both inspiring and humbling. I will never forget driving around with Tony Kubek when all of a sudden he saw some Hmong teens hanging out at a park and asks, "Do you mind if we stop?" A few minutes later he's joking around with these teens and building bridges for future evangelism. For so many others, we excuse our lack of witnessing on the language barrier. And yet, as seen in Tony, the joy of the gospel can transcend such barriers so that he says, "I have found that the inability to speak Hmong has not been a deterrent. Hello, thank you and goodbye are it. For me, having the children interpret has worked fine."²⁷

It was so inspiring to watch others build relations with these Hmong children. And, fortunately, I was able to experience this myself. While walking home from church on a warm June evening, I stopped to talk to two Hmong neighbor girls who were sitting on the curb. Within ten minutes I had a flock of nine children huddled around me. After ten months of being "the new guy who always wore a tie and walked to that church down the street," I now was their friend Joel. *What a joy* it was to drive or walk past their run-down houses only to have them holler, "Hi, Joel!" *What a joy* it was to have them ask if they could see the new baby. *What a joy* it was to take a carload of those kids to a Hmong Saturday school. *What a joy* it was making two trips the following session because they all couldn't fit in my Mazda. *What a joy* it was to see them proudly wearing their Hmong VBS t-shirts day after day. *What a joy* it is to know that these same children are now being served by my successor, Joe Christina. *What a joy* it will be, Lord-willing, to see Mai Lee, Dai, Paul, Meng, Pa Nhia, Tim, Meng, Julie and Bee in heaven someday!

²⁷ Email correspondence from Tony Kubek. 1/23/2001

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