

**The Ministry to the Vietnamese at Christ the Lord:
A Worthwhile Endeavor**

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Preface

I remember it well. My family and I loaded up the moving trucks and drove north. I knew why we were leaving. At least, I thought I did. I knew that the Board for Home Missions had stopped subsidizing my Dad's work. I knew that a lot of love, a lot of memories, and a lot of efforts were being left behind in Houston. I knew that Dad had to pay the bills and his new job was in Watertown, Wisconsin. We were leaving behind the ministry to the Vietnamese at Christ the Lord.

Life moved on pretty quickly from there. I finished college and made it through most of the Seminary without ever sitting down to think about what happened in Houston. I guess I never really wanted to because, if I'm honest, it always made me a little sad. Then Professor Brenner suggested that I do that very thing. I walked into his office one day and asked him to suggest to me a topic for the senior church history paper. He said, "Why don't you write your paper on your Dad's ministry in Houston?" So I have and I have really enjoyed it.

I have learned many lessons that will benefit me both personally and professionally. I will take the time to list a few of them. Professionally, I have learned to see God's lay people as vital assets in ministry. They are a resource of incalculable value. I have seen the importance of using all the gifts of God's people in a congregation to move forward in ministry. I have gained a better understanding of the inner workings of the Wisconsin Synod. I have been confronted with the huge challenges of cross cultural ministry and have begun to formulate answers to them. I noted the significance of good communication among members of a ministry team. I learned that leadership means knowing where you are going, how you are going to get there, and inspiring everybody else to see it as you do. On a personal level, I was able to deepen in an appreciation for who my Dad is and the history of my own family. I also was made to rejoice because of the great love for Jesus that I saw in so many people with whom I talked. Finally, I was able to confront a question that had always troubled me: Did my Dad fail? In this paper, I have firmly answered that question. He did not fail. He taught many people about Jesus and teaching about Jesus is always worthwhile.

The Ministry to the Vietnamese at Christ the Lord: A Worthwhile Endeavor

The cross cultural ministry at Christ the Lord began with a simple observation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the demographics of the Alief area of Houston were changing. Asians, particularly Chinese and Vietnamese, were moving into the area in large numbers. The Vacation Bible School program in particular showed Christ the Lord the changing face of the community. Gil Novaez, a member of Christ the Lord, writes, “We could see clearly through the VBS program that God was calling us to serve a ‘different’ culture than a traditional WELS congregation had grown up in.”¹ Neither Pastor Glaeske, the pastor of Christ the Lord at this time, nor the congregation ignored it. Instead, they acted.

Their action began with education. Pastor Glaeske along with Glenn Wilson, a leader of the congregation, attended a cross cultural outreach seminar in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, hosted by the Wisconsin Synod. At the seminar, they were fully introduced to ethnographic surveying as a tool for planning cross cultural outreach to communities. They even had the chance to put what they learned into action. They knocked on doors in Milwaukee. During the down times of the seminar, they chatted, exchanged ideas, and made applications to Christ the Lord.² During these conversations a plan to move forward was conceived.

They reported their thoughts to the congregation and the ministry was set in motion. In 1992, the members of Christ the Lord gathered information from the Alief community through ethnographic surveys.³ Next, they pitched their idea to the District Mission Board (DMB) of the South Central District. They hoped that the DMB might be able to subsidize the manpower needed in order to continue moving forward. The DMB was inclined to the idea. In fact, the timing was such that it allowed them to participate in the Wisconsin Synod’s vision to open ten new cross

¹ Novaez, Gil. “April 6, 1999 Motion Re: CCM/CTL//BHM Relationship.” Email to Mark Hartmann. 6 April 1999.

² Vilas Glaeske, interview by author, interview by telephone, 30 November 2007.

³ Presentation to Congregational Meeting: July 9, 2000. Church Files, Houston, Texas.

cultural ministries in the United States.⁴ The synodical program allowed individual congregations broad latitude to define and develop goals, strategies, and methods. It was to be a “learn as you go” approach.⁵ So the congregation “put their ducks in row” and, in November of 1993, the DMB approved the congregation’s plan.⁶

After a series of six calls and fourteen months, the Lord through Christ the Lord and the District Mission Board called Pastor James Bourman to serve in Houston.⁷ In December of 1994, he accepted the call. Pastor Bourman had some solid background in cross cultural ministry. In fact, he had been specifically trained to reach across cultures. Pastor Bourman had been working as a volunteer with Pastor Loren Steele. Pastor Steele was a visionary missionary who initiated and pioneered a mission to Southeast Asians at Emanuel Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, Minnesota. It quickly became apparent that Pastor Bourman had the heart and abilities to aid in this work. Since there was so much work to be done, the staff at Emanuel came up with a plan. Pastor Bourman would become a full-time evangelist trainee funded by the Board for Home Missions. After a period of two years, the Board for Home Missions would take this highly trained missionary and plant him in a burgeoning cross cultural field. Pastor Bourman arrived in Houston with a healthy dose of optimism and a good deal of cross cultural background.

When Pastor Bourman arrived in March of 1995, he found that healthy ministry programs were already in place. For years Easter for Kids, Vacation Bible School, and programs like them had been solid programs. Ruth Grundmeier, an active member of Christ the Lord, was especially key to their success. She ensured that an evangelism team found the prospects and afterward nurtured them. The strategy was really very simple. Right across a small bayou from the church was a large apartment complex. Members regularly went and worked the apartments.

⁴ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁵ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁶ Glaeske, interview.

⁷ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

It made sense to Pastor Bourman to work within the framework of Christ the Lord's ministry. Together they would bring God's Word to whoever would listen. He remembers, "I was excited to work with a congregation that really wanted to meet lots of different people."⁸ Pastor Bourman would work with both previously established contacts and new ones within Christ the Lord's established ministry model. It was to be truly cross cultural work. Right across the bayou from Christ the Lord was a sea of cultures ripe for evangelism.

There was a sense of enthusiasm and confidence in regard to this ministerial direction. Pastor Bourman says, "I was hopeful and I believed it would work."⁹ Pastor Glaeske remembers that they thought they would have "their own little Pentecost."¹⁰ It was time to get to work. When Pastor Bourman arrived, he threw himself into preparation for the upcoming Easter for Kids.

Already at this event, the beginnings of a Vietnamese focused ministry were set in motion. Hong Nguyen, an eighteen-year-old Vietnamese girl, attended. Making use of her limited English knowledge, Pastor Bourman engaged her. He encouraged her, "Come back tomorrow. I'll be here."¹¹ And she did. She kept coming back and Pastor Bourman kept trying to teach her. It was a simple, yet effective connection. Pastor Bourman wanted to teach her God's Word and she wanted to learn English from a kind American. This illustrates the "we'll serve whoever we can however we can" attitude that characterized this phase of Christ the Lord's cross cultural ministry.

The Board for Home Missions of the Wisconsin Synod was not content with this approach. So Glen Thompson, a member of the Multi-Cultural Committee of the Wisconsin Synod, contacted Pastor Bourman saying "he wanted to see what was going on."¹² On that visit, it came as a surprise that the Multi-Cultural Committee was directing Pastor Bourman to pick a focus group. Initially,

⁸ James Bourman, interview by author, interview by telephone, 27 November 2007.

⁹ James Bourman, interview.

¹⁰ Glaeske, interview.

¹¹ James Bourman, interview.

¹² James Bourman, interview.

Pastor Bourman was disappointed “because it meant that I would have to ‘un-pick’ groups of people.”¹³ Yet he thought to himself, “Ok, I guess I have to do it.”¹⁴

This instruction was not a change in ministry style. The ministry paradigm remained the same. The ongoing vision was that all the members of the focus group won for Christ would integrate into Christ the Lord. It was thought that by means of a strong English as a Second Language (ESL) program the effects of any language divide could be minimized and integration achieved.¹⁵ The Cross Cultural Mission Statement of Christ the Lord stated its reasons for this approach clearly:

The rationale for this approach is that main-streaming the various ethnic groups into the existing congregation accomplishes the following:

- A. It demonstrates the oneness of our confession here at Christ the Lord.
- B. It makes transitions to our congregations in the country easier as people will certainly be moving on.
- C. It heightens the sense of walking together as a synod.¹⁶

The choice of a group on which to focus was difficult. There were four significant cultures in the immediate community, three of which had connections to Christ the Lord. A scan through the prospect list of Christ the Lord showed amazing diversity. The Chinese, Hispanic, African American, and Vietnamese groups were all real possibilities.¹⁷ By December of 1995, it became clear to Pastor Bourman which group was the most accessible. He chose the Vietnamese as a focus group. This meant that Pastor Bourman’s efforts were targeted at the Vietnamese and conversely he would not follow leads to other cultures. The rest of the congregation would pursue the leads to other cultures.¹⁸

¹³ James Bourman, interview.

¹⁴ James Bourman, interview.

¹⁵ Note from Pastor Bourman to Cross Cultural Committee of CTL. Church Files, Houston, Texas. 29 November 1995.

¹⁶ Cross Cultural Mission Statement of Christ the Lord. Church Files, Houston, Texas.

¹⁷ Note from Pastor Bourman to Cross Cultural Committee of CTL. Church Files, Houston, Texas. 2 August 1995.

¹⁸ Cross Cultural Mission Statement of Christ the Lord. Church Files, Houston, Texas.

The Vietnamese seemed to be a natural choice. Pastor Bourman discovered that they were a very porous culture. Indeed, their very culture seemed to lend itself to mission work. Pastor Bourman observes,

These people were weeks and months from living in the village in Vietnam. These were the people to whom we reached out. They were not hard core city people. They scratched out a living and none of them had any real hope of getting rich in Vietnam. They realized there was a ceiling. They lived a relaxed life. It was a culture focused on being together. We met a young woman named Mai early on. Mai had a 'small business.' She remembered making coffee and people would stop by and talk for quite a long while. They were very open to this. They would treat you as a guest just because you were standing there. That was their culture. They were open to one another. They welcomed each other. Keep in mind that in the tropical South Vietnam climate it was common to go in and out of each other's homes. Vietnamese people are very, very friendly. They like to get together. They like to be neighbors.¹⁹

Moreover, there were hundreds more Vietnamese arriving to Houston on a monthly basis in the 1990s. This wave of immigration happened because in 1991 the United States initiated the Humanitarian Operation (H.O.) program to welcome Vietnamese officers of the former Republic of South Vietnam Army. These 'H.O.' men were allowed to bring wives and unmarried children with them. The United States government felt responsible for them because, after the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese sent these officers to reeducation camps. Time spent in the jungle camps was relative to rank. The lowest ranking officers stayed three years. The higher ranking officers were encamped longer. Pastor Bourman knew a man who had been a captain in the military police who was forced to stay for thirteen years.²⁰ Those that survived sought the sanctuary of a new life in America. The potential to meet and reach hundreds of Vietnamese "just off the plane" was real.²¹

Pastor Bourman capitalized on his observations. He went out and met the people. He found that by reaching out to one person he could be introduced to an entire close-knit extended family. Pastor Bourman's gifts shined as he threw himself into this evangelism effort. He was good at meeting and talking with people.²² He relates a typical encounter,

¹⁹ James Bourman, interview.

²⁰ James Bourman, interview.

²¹ James Bourman, interview.

²² John Brohn, interview by author, interview by telephone, 30 November 2007.

The following I believe approximates my approach, "Our church is nearby. We learn from the Bible. The Bible is God's book. Do you know about the Bible? My #1 problem is my own sin. Your #1 problem is your sin. In the Bible God makes many promises. He promises forgiveness of sins. He promises eternal life. God loves us. Many people have helped us to know the Bible. We will help you to know it. You can come Tuesday and Thursday evening for ESL. You can come Friday for Bible Study. You can come Sunday morning at 8:00am for English language worship in which we listen to the Bible in English, sing, pray and learn from the Bible. At 9:15am we have many English language Bible classes for all ages. I will be the teacher for adult Vietnamese. I will teach in English and some Vietnamese. We will study the Bible."²³

These first encounters taught him a basic approach that characterized much of Pastor Bourman's later work. From early on he aimed to serve the Vietnamese people with "deeds of kindness interwoven with witnessing."²⁴ At times, he helped them with practical problems like advocating for their children at school, finding medical care, obtaining driver's licenses, filling out various forms, and providing ESL. Other times, he just witnessed. It was hoped that these points of contact would lead to teaching the Vietnamese law and gospel in Bible studies (group and individual), simple worship services, and ultimately in Bible information classes.²⁵

To carry out this vision, one thing was immediately necessary. He needed to learn Vietnamese. The Bi-lingual Institute in Houston provided the resources. The Institute put together a proposition for language study and the DMB agreed to fund it. A Vietnamese man, Dan Vu, became Pastor Bourman's teacher. Pastor Bourman met with him for an hour once a week for two years.²⁶ He progressed at a reasonable rate and soon was able to converse in Vietnamese at a low level. He worked especially hard to learn Christian vocabulary by studying the Bible in Vietnamese. Yet, he still yearned for greater proficiency in the language. "Dream about this brothers," He wrote to the District Mission Board. "How about letting me have a few months after I have completed my language training to travel to Vietnam?"²⁷ In the end, he knew just enough to teach God's Word

²³ Bourman, James. Letter to Myrl Wagenknecht. Church Files, Houston, Texas. 16 July 1996.

²⁴ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

²⁵ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

²⁶ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

²⁷ Bourman, James. Letter to Myrl Wagenknecht.

adequately and convey the key doctrines of the gospel. He would get lost when colloquial expressions were utilized.²⁸

Meanwhile Pastor Bourman struck evangelism's equivalent of a gold mine. One day Hong Nguyen, Pastor Bourman's very first Vietnamese contact, showed Pastor Bourman pictures of a Vietnamese wedding. Pastor Bourman asked Hong Nguyen where the wedding had taken place. It turned out to be an apartment complex on nearby Beechnut and Wilcrest. Practically speaking this complex was a Vietnamese village. At the time, well over 60% of that massive complex was Vietnamese. Moreover, this community was largely interconnected. They served as a vast safety net for each other in which they could find translators, doctors, dentists, and jobs. It was a prime evangelism target.

After Pastor Bourman learned about the complex, he was eager. He met a lot of Vietnamese people and quickly he became their friend, "Pastor Jim." Swiftly the missionary efforts took on a more formal nature. As often as possible, classes were held for small groups of Vietnamese on Christ the Lord's campus. The children and young adults in particular were willing to attend. The adults were more difficult. After arriving in the new world, their jobs quickly began to consume them. Yet the children of these busy parents were wide open to evangelism. The parents of these children rarely objected. Most were largely ambivalent that Pastor Bourman taught their children the Scriptures. They were just glad that their children were well occupied. So Pastor Bourman took the children to "the church" for Bible lessons. Gil Novaez, another member of Christ the Lord, worked hard with Pastor Bourman in this effort.

The program grew to the point that every Tuesday evening Pastor Bourman picked the Vietnamese up for Bible stories at church. The program followed a "VBS format," that included a time of proclamation, a craft, and a Bible story. Usually ten to twenty kids came and a handful of

²⁸ James Bourman, interview.

adults. Pastor Bourman remembers “it was looking good.”²⁹ It seemed as though the ministry was taking off.

Gil Novaez and Pastor Bourman realized that the program could grow with the benefit of more volunteers. For this reason, they decided to change the night of the program to Fridays. More volunteers added their efforts. Phyllis Hartmann organized the logistics of transporting the kids. Hope Bourman and Paula Novaez joined as regular teachers. Hope Bourman tightened the focus of the curriculum and brought vision to the program. Paula Novaez brought a great love for souls and a wonderful disposition with the children. They both brought considerable energy. Twenty or more Vietnamese regularly attended. Every week new faces as well as old heard about Jesus. As the program matured so did the faith of those in attendance. In fact, these gatherings were deemed so important and successful that a pre-fabricated building was installed on Christ the Lord’s campus to accommodate them in July of 1997.³⁰

Gil Novaez describes the impact of these gatherings well,

This method in my opinion was the most effective way to reach a large number of the Vietnamese, utilize the facilities that God had already given us, and to provide opportunity for CTL members to participate in this work... My entire family gave up our family night in order to make it easier for the Vietnamese children to attend ‘Friday School,’ and for CTL’s children as well as my own to serve.³¹

For two years, “Friday school” deepened and grew until it was possible to boast “Thirteen teens had been thoroughly instructed concerning baptism.”³²

Yet the Vietnamese students were not ready to be baptized. They had been well instructed. So they took baptism very seriously. They understood that it meant a break with the beliefs of their fathers. It took time for them to see their need for baptism and consequently a desire for the sacrament to take hold. Over time the Spirit worked. Bay Lam was the first child to be baptized on

²⁹ James Bourman, interview.

³⁰ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

³¹ Novaez, Gil. Email to Mark Hartmann.

³² Novaez, Gil. Email to Mark Hartmann.

September 20, 1998.³³ Pastor Bourman thought that after Bay Lam “broke the ice” many children would follow his lead.³⁴ They did not.

It took time. Each Vietnamese teen studied the same basic Christian curriculum two to three times. It was a slow, time consuming procedure. Paula Novaez recalls how difficult this was at times.

I noticed how hard it was to break through. There was one girl, Trang, who I was working with for many, many months. Then we talked about baptism. She was thinking about it, but she said she couldn't do it because she was a Buddhist. I cared about her very deeply and it broke my heart.³⁵

Instances like this drove Gil Novaez, the chairman of the Cross Cultural Committee at CTL, to grow frustrated. Indeed, he felt that a great deal of money was being wasted especially when in April of 1999 a fifteen passenger van was purchased with the express purpose of reaching out to the teen group. He writes, “There can be no other reason for avoidance of baptism, except in the case of obdurate parental opposition, other than fatal unbelief.”³⁶ He raised an excellent question: How much patience should they have?

Despite the difficulty, the Spirit broke through at the most unexpected times. After working for over a year with Vuong Truong, a teenage Vietnamese girl, the Spirit changed her heart. She understood the main truths of the Bible on an intellectual level, but she had never before expressed a desire to be baptized. Suddenly it all changed. In 2001, David and Jeanette Wagner brought Vuong Truong to a Good Friday Tenebrae service. After the service and almost in tears,³⁷ Vuong Truong confidently stated, “I want to be baptized.”³⁸ That very evening Pastor Bourman reviewed the teaching of baptism with her, gathered some of Christ the Lord's elders, and shortly after 8:30

³³ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. September 1998.

³⁴ James Bourman, interview.

³⁵ Paula Novaez, interview by author, interview by telephone, 2 December 2007.

³⁶ Novaez, Gil. “Refocus for CCM Suggestions.” Email to Pete Palmer. 26 January 1999.

³⁷ David Wagner, interview by author, interview by telephone, 2 December 2007.

³⁸ James Bourman, interview.

p.m. Vuong Truong was baptized.³⁹ Teaching Vuong Truong about Jesus had been well worth the effort.⁴⁰

Pastor Bourman noted with joy another such instance in the congregation report form dated June 1999.

On the way to one of our fellowship meetings one of the boys said he wanted to be baptized. This is Nhan whose father had previously not allowed it. Through his leadership four other boys also were led to be baptized. For these young people this represents a significant step of faith. None of them has vehement opposition at home but they still stand on their own-desiring baptism only for what it is – God’s washing and guarantee of citizenship and eternal life in Christ. They believe the Word of God. It is our privilege to have been the first to meet them, begin and carry on study in their homes and hear them confess their faith.⁴¹

Meanwhile the ministry to the children and young adults had changed forums. In September of 1997, Pastor Bourman decided to move “Friday School” to the Beechnut complex. The thought was that more Vietnamese could be reached if the classes were at the apartments. As a result many more contacts were established and nurtured. The work saw so much success that at one time they were working with about one hundred different kids.⁴² A typical Sunday afternoon saw four members of Christ the Lord teaching in the Beechnut complex. The format was simple. Each teacher would meet with groups of five to ten children. Often the parents of the children would sit in to listen. The teacher would teach a simple Bible story that presented law and gospel clearly. Then the group would pray and sing a song together.⁴³ Pastor Bourman depicts a rather typical month of these efforts like this:

There is another major influx of new families coming to “our” apartment complex. In April alone fifteen families moved in. Through our well established contacts we have met all but three of those new families. Our Sunday afternoon Vietnamese Sunday School gathered 38 elementary school children. Our middle and high school students add more than twenty.⁴⁴

³⁹ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. April 2001

⁴⁰ God’s Word is always effective and is always worthwhile to employ whether a person believes or not. How much more joy do Christians, and the angels in heaven share, when a sinner repents and receives this grace in simple childlike faith!

⁴¹ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. June 1999.

⁴² Jeanette Wagner, interview by author, interview by telephone, 2 December 2007.

⁴³ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁴⁴ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. April 1999.

Out of these ongoing efforts arose a group of Vietnamese teens who responded especially well to God's Word. Pastor Bourman describes the group in this way,

There is a core of our group of over twenty who show clear spiritual insight into that which only the Spirit can give. They are stepping forward to lead their fellow friends to be and stay a part of our group. They are beginning to 'pester' their friends the same way my wife and I do.⁴⁵

Pastor Bourman and Hope Bourman worked indefatigably to nurture these teens. They did so to great effect. These kids became a tight knit group. They shared an apartment complex, a language, a culture, and to an ever growing degree a new faith. This group loved to go on outings together. They went to water parks, rollerbladed together, cooked together, they ate together and they gathered at Pastor Bourman's parsonage. The key element at all these special events was a time of devotion and prayer. These young adults were also involved at Christ the Lord on Sunday morning, where Hope Bourman and Jeanette Wagner lead them in Bible study.⁴⁶

Meanwhile outreach to Vietnamese adults was continuing with slow results. Hong Nguyen and her friend, Mai Nguyen, met faithfully with Pastor Bourman in Christ the Lord's sanctuary. Pastor Bourman's thought was that, by asking them to walk through clusters of Christ the Lord's members to get to class, relationships would inevitably form between the two cultures.⁴⁷ He now calls this thought naïve. Pastor Bourman comments,

Realizing where they were at spiritually was so easy for me. I assumed that others could do the same with only a little prompting so I created a convenient Sunday morning opportunity. I met with a small group of Vietnamese young adults behind a divider in the sanctuary. Pastor Glaeske met with adult members of Christ the Lord while I met with the Vietnamese. They started at the same time and ended at the same time. They could walk out together and I could help initiate conversation as needed by introducing members to our Vietnamese people.⁴⁸

The members of Christ the Lord were generally cordial and kind, but their contacts with the Vietnamese women were mostly curt and uncomfortable. Members of both cultures had a tough time interacting.

⁴⁵ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. April 1999.

⁴⁶ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁴⁷ James Bourman, interview.

⁴⁸ James Bourman, interview.

Pastor Bourman's observation of this situation taught him a significant lesson. Positively, he noticed that there are unique individuals who by intellect or personality can live cross culturally to a certain degree. Huong Nguyen was one such man he knew who lived and moved among Americans easily. He and others like him were the kind of Vietnamese adults who could integrate into the mostly Caucasian congregation of Christ the Lord. Yet Huong Nguyen was a unique Vietnamese person among the people with whom Pastor Bourman made contact. So Pastor Bourman came to the conclusion that his vision of a fully integrated congregation was not possible.

This realization spawned a new direction in adult ministry. He worked hard to meet the adults "on their turf."⁴⁹ Practically speaking this meant that Pastor Bourman spent many hours with Vietnamese adults on an individual basis. During this time, he had a breakthrough. Pastor Bourman met Chien Nguyen. Chien Nguyen was an elementary school boy from the Beechnut complex. Through Chien Nguyen, Pastor Bourman met Chien Nguyen's father, Tai Nguyen. At first Pastor Bourman's attempt to make spiritual progress with Tai Nguyen was stymied. Tai Nguyen's English was too poor and his job was too time consuming. Then Tai Nguyen's brother, Loc Nguyen, came to America. He had received the training of a surgeon in Vietnam, which meant that he had also studied English. When Tai Nguyen introduced Pastor Bourman to Loc Nguyen, he immediately shared the gospel with him. After working through some simple Christian classes with the brothers, Loc Nguyen plainly confessed his faith, as did Tai Nguyen. Then when Pastor Bourman explained baptism both brothers said, "I want to be baptized."⁵⁰ In September of 1998, God washed away the sins of the first Vietnamese won by means of this effort.⁵¹ It had been worthwhile to bring Christ to Tai and Loc Nguyen.

⁴⁹ James Bourman, interview.

⁵⁰ James Bourman, interview.

⁵¹ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

Tai Nguyen's father, Bon Nguyen was next. When Pastor Bourman learned that Bon Nguyen had moved to New Orleans, he called Pastor Sternhagen, the local Wisconsin Synod pastor. Pastor Sternhagen instructed him and he became a member. Eventually, Bon Nguyen along with his daughter decided to move to Houston. When he arrived one of the first things Bon Nguyen did was to come to Christ the Lord. Thus, a core group of Vietnamese adults was born at Christ the Lord. Teaching Vietnamese adults about Jesus had been well worth the effort.

It took five years, but adult by adult the group grew until there were six Vietnamese men who looked to be the beginnings of a Vietnamese church.⁵² On Sundays they gathered to sing, read from the Bible, and learn a lesson for the day. They loved to study the Scriptures. Worship forms were simple and songs were easy. They grew together as a group. On a really good day there would have been ten people. Holidays were important to this group. Pastor Bourman, his family, and the Vietnamese would celebrate Christian festivals with special worship and a culturally eclectic dinner. This lay out of adult ministry was a stable paradigm for the core group of adults until November of 1999.

It naturally took years for this small group of Vietnamese adults to progress to a point where more formal worship was feasible. Preparations were extensive. Pastor Bourman developed worship materials and taught the people about them well in advance.

Our language teacher Dan Vu and I worked through Christian Worship, the Service of the Word, translating it into Vietnamese. We plan to introduce those basic features of corporate worship in conjunction with home Bible Studies so that corporate worship will seem more natural as the Spirit gives faith filled understanding of who our dear Lord is and how we can and must hear and approach Him in prayer and praise.⁵³

On November 14, 1999 the group participated in their first formal worship service.

The programs that Christ the Lord implemented for the Vietnamese are only a small portrait of the overall ministry effort. They do not account for the thousands of hours of knocking on

⁵² Hope Bourman, interview by author, interview by telephone, 17 November 2007.

⁵³ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. June 1999.

doors, personal Bible classes, and social interactions that were carried out. To a large degree this was a ministry that relied on “going,” to the people.⁵⁴ Pastor Bourman was constantly spending time with the Vietnamese as a friend, as an advisor, and as a pastor. He was serving a large number of souls. In 1999, there were 150 solid, active contacts. These were people with whom Pastor Bourman had a significant on-going relationship. In addition, there were one hundred people actively hearing God's Word, ten of whom were adults.⁵⁵ An average of ten of these people heard God's Word through separate Vietnamese worship on Sunday morning. Moreover, ten people had been baptized: two adults, five young adults, and three children. Five were ready to begin confirmation instruction. Clearly the ministry to the Vietnamese was showing significant results.

Of special note at this juncture was the evolution of ministry philosophy that occurred in the program. In 1995, the approach was complete integration. Then the next two years saw a gradual shift to a non-integrative approach. Finally, in September of 1998, the evolution was complete. Pastor Bourman in connection with the Cross Cultural Committee of Christ the Lord decided to conduct more activity exclusively in Vietnamese homes.⁵⁶ In August of 1999, the Cross Cultural Committee went even farther. They formally decided to make the Vietnamese programs separate from the mainstream programs at Christ the Lord.⁵⁷

This direction of non-integration was not undertaken lightly. Pastor Bourman sought the advice of others. In an e-mail to the chairman of the District Mission Board, Myrl Wagenknecht, Pastor Bourman asked him to:

Read and to react... Realism dictates that the chosen target group, namely recent Vietnamese refugees, must be met and served 'where they are at.' Among adults in this Vietnamese target group only a very few over many years will be able to accommodate themselves to the language and rich culture of our WELS Lutheran life. The goal of this mission effort is to establish a gathering of

⁵⁴ Hope Bourman, interview.

⁵⁵ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁵⁶ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁵⁷ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

Vietnamese Christians serving one another in Christ modeled after the Spirit's work so evident in Christ the Lord Lutheran Church.⁵⁸

This evolution of thought was formally articulated to Christ the Lord's church council in an e-mail dated September 12, 1999. Pastor Bourman writes, "Experience has taught us, however, that the road to integration into Christ the Lord is a very long one for young people and children and out of reach for most adults coming new to America."⁵⁹ The goal of this non-integration scheme was clearly stated.

The more Vietnamese we become, i.e. learning their language, customs, lifestyles, cultural perspectives, becoming like them as much as possible, the more widely 'doors' will open and the more pointedly we will be able to till the soil with Law and clearly communicate the Gospel of Salvation.⁶⁰

A fateful council meeting changed the face of this tender, young mission. Since this was an exploratory effort, every year both the local congregation and the synod, through its Board for Home Missions, had to recommit themselves financially. For this reason, Pastor Bourman presented his ongoing ministry plan to the church council. The plan was to continue on the present non-integrative course. He merely articulated to the council what had already been happening in increasing measure for the previous three years. The Vietnamese would form a distinct, non-integrated congregation from Christ the Lord. When this proposition was presented to the council, there was an immediate reaction. They did not want to recommit financially to a ministry that would not integrate itself into Christ the Lord and monetarily support the present ministry forms. The thought was presented that synod should be responsible for projects that were not immediately connected to Christ the Lord. It was said that supporting this mission was no different than supporting Victory of the Lamb, which was a mission congregation nearby supported completely by the Board for Home Missions.⁶¹ Christ the Lord decided not to ramp up their support of the

⁵⁸ Bourman, James. "Updated Introduction to Five Year Plan." Email to Myrl Wagenknecht. 10 February 1999.

⁵⁹ Bourman, James. "Christ the Lord Church Council Meet with DMB Chairman Wagenknecht." Email to CTL Church Council. 10 September 1999.

⁶⁰ Vietnamese Lutheran Mission Ministry Plan 1999. Church Files, Houston, Texas.

⁶¹ David Wagner, interview.

mission. This was a failure to follow through on their “5-Year Ministry Plan,” which envisioned a 10% funding increase by Christ the Lord starting in the fourth year of the ministry effort.⁶² Instead, they proposed that the District Mission Board continue subsidizing the ministry at their current level.⁶³

The impact of this decision was enormous. In May of 2000, the Board for Home Missions decided to discontinue funding the ministry in December of that year. The context of the decision was simple. Synod was facing funding cut-backs for home missions and needed to prioritize its programs. The rationale was logical. Since they needed to free up more money, they needed the funding to increase locally. Yet, there was no planned decrease in synod funding. Secondly, they disagreed with the goal of the ministry. The goal of the program was a separate entity, rather than integrating Vietnamese people into Christ the Lord.⁶⁴ They desired a program of integration.

When Pastor Bourman learned that the exploratory status of the mission was going to be revoked, he worked out a new proposal. He did not want to see the ministry end. He felt that for the sake of the gospel and the people who were gathering around the Word it was necessary to compromise. In conjunction with the members of Christ the Lord, a new proposal was formed that they felt could work. The proposal conceded to Christ the Lord’s desire for an integrative approach to Vietnamese ministry. It promised to develop the Vietnamese ministry within the framework of Christ the Lord’s Bible classes, worship services, and Sunday school program. Christ the Lord’s voters accepted the proposal on August 6, 2000. The Board for Home Missions put its stamp of approval on the revised proposal as well. Work would go on.

The change in philosophy was immediately implemented. Pastor Bourman notes in January of 2001, “We are aggressively preparing for Sunday School integration with Christ the Lord. We’ve

⁶² Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁶³ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

⁶⁴ Presentation to Congregational Meeting.

had a number of meetings planning who's going to get whom and who will teach whom and where."⁶⁵ The discussions led to the implementation ^{of} a new Sunday school model. The Sunday school would be led by three lead teachers instead of seven. The idea was that the best, most well-prepared teachers would be utilized to teach the opening lesson, then the groups would break down and "helpers" would continue the lesson with the application materials provided.⁶⁶

At first the integration of the children was done well and seemed to take hold. After all, the Vietnamese children were educated in American public schools. It was hoped that American Sunday school could work too. This writer, personally, worked with Jeanette Wagner and her daughter Katie Wagner to teach these classes. Jeanette Wagner recounts the experience well, "I thought we did a very good job of an integrated Sunday school. We started with a devotion and quick review of the story. We all had good experiences when we broke down into the three groups."

Yet, over time the weaknesses of the effort showed themselves. Some of the members of the congregation were not tuned in to the cross cultural effort. They did not seem to understand that a great deal of patience with the Vietnamese was needed in order to cater to their limited knowledge of Scripture and of English. They unwittingly pushed away the Vietnamese children and teenagers. In a matter of months the attendance of Vietnamese at the integrated programs of Christ the Lord dwindled significantly.⁶⁷ Pastor Bourman reflected:

Initially we felt good about the effort. But as the summer wore on attendance tapered off... We've learned more clearly from this experience that these different needs necessitate a more multifaceted ministry... This effort simply requires constant attention very much like the 'process' of raising children. We have here often spoken of a 'spiritual parenting' concept whereby adult Christians take a personal interest and involve themselves in the lives of their 'spiritual' children old or young. We believe that church-based programs targeted to outreach and evangelism can go a long ways but must be built upon vital personal 'spiritual parenting.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. January 2001.

⁶⁶ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. March 2001.

⁶⁷ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. September 2001.

⁶⁸ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. September 2001.

Progress in the mission had been slowed. At this critical juncture, Leon Piepenbrink arrived as a synodical consultant to help with strategic planning, advice, and assessment of the mission. He assessed the impact the same:

Greater progress in this mission effort has been hindered by the pursuit of a mission strategy that is not the most effective with new immigrants. The strategy that has been pursued over the past eighteen months has been towards integrating as many of the Vietnamese as possible into the regular worship and Bible study at Christ the Lord church.⁶⁹

Under the advice of Pastor Piepenbrink, the ministry regained its focus. They would continue to communicate with and involve the members of Christ the Lord and at the same time continue programs specifically geared to the Vietnamese.⁷⁰

The ministry to the adults did not suffer any setbacks. It alone had been immune to the design of integration. No attempts at integration had been done because it was obvious that they needed more time. Exciting things were happening. In June of 2001, there was a group of Vietnamese adults who were deemed ready for a Bible information class. Pastor Bourman and Loc Nguyen had prepared a bi-lingual curriculum based upon a course from the missionaries of the Wisconsin Synod in Africa called *Go and Teach*. Initial enrollment was eight for the class. "It's a great start," Pastor Bourman writes. "It's pretty exciting to see four to five men eagerly and regularly attending this study of God's Word."⁷¹ The classes proceeded.

The ministry programs and other outreach efforts continued unabated during 2002. Yet tough decisions had to be made by the Board for Home Missions. Missions had to be cut. After they had prioritized their ongoing missions, Christ the Lord was informed that they were no longer going to receive synod subsidy. In December of 2002, funding would abruptly end. At first there were thoughts in Pastor Bourman's mind of attempting tent ministry, but he concluded that there

⁶⁹ Leon Piepenbrink. Report by Consultant. Church Files, Houston, Texas. 11 April 2002.

⁷⁰ Piepenbrink, report.

⁷¹ Congregational Monthly Report Form. Church Files, Houston, Texas. June 2001.

was no feasible way to do it. In December of 2002 Pastor Bourman's service at Christ the Lord ended.

Pastor Bourman had accomplished a lot of ministry. He had had a meaningful relationship with 306 Vietnamese people in which he shared God's Word.⁷² Most of these people heard it consistently over a period of five years.⁷³ At the time of his departure, there were 172 contacts that he engaged on an occasional basis. There were 61 prospects that were promising, but not likely to seek membership immediately. In addition, there were also twenty solid prospects that were being actively served of which it was hoped most would soon seek membership. Finally, there were 28 Vietnamese people that made up the nucleus of Vietnamese believers at Christ the Lord. Other significant statistics are: five adults were involved in a Bible information class entitled *Let There Be Light*, eighteen total people had been baptized as a result of the ministry, and sixteen of them had been baptized at Christ the Lord.⁷⁴ All this had occurred in just five and a half years of Vietnamese focused ministry. The ministry had been worthwhile.

The ministry to the Vietnamese did not end with Pastor Bourman's departure. The Wagners continued to reach out to a core group of teenagers with whom they had been working. At first they attended church and then studied the Bible together. Normally six of the young adults would be there. Soon, they added lunch to their routine. While lunch was cooking they would often engage in a fun activity like completing puzzles or flying kites. After lunch they stayed around to read a novel together.⁷⁵ Three years ago, this pattern stopped because two members of the group started working weekends at a restaurant. The group still occasionally gets together. In fact, they all celebrated Thanksgiving together in 2007.⁷⁶

⁷² This number does not include people who had moved out of the area or for various reason he could no longer serve.

⁷³ Bourman, James. "Re: Your Paper." Email to author. 6 December 2007.

⁷⁴ Bourman, James. "Re: Your Paper." Email to author. 6 December 2007.

⁷⁵ Jeanette Wagner, interview.

⁷⁶ Jeanette Wagner, interview.

Work with Vietnamese adults was carried on as well. Brian Grundmeier was entrusted with this task. He faithfully instructed them until he followed his career over seas. The model that he developed was simple. They read the New International Version parallel with a Vietnamese Bible. In 2005 Ken Thompson took over. He currently has a three adults regularly studying with him. One time this past year he had six adults. The model for the Bible class set by Brian Grundmeier remains very much intact. Ken Thompson has found that the adults continue to enjoy studying the Scriptures. They read a chapter from the Bible each week alternating between the Old and New Testaments. His students never seem to tire of it. He says, "I have found that they are very conservative people and they get set in their ways. They see something that works and they like to stick with it."⁷⁷ Ken Thompson is committed to this ongoing effort. He even expressed the hope that when Brian Grundmeier comes back they can move this effort from one of maintenance to one of outreach.⁷⁸

The history of the mission to the Vietnamese at Christ the Lord is the fascinating voyage of a Wisconsin Synod congregation attempting cross cultural work for the first time. Questions were raised. Many issues were confronted and some answers presented themselves. Much could be said about what was learned and many opinions could be offered up as to how successful and effective the ministry was. Yet in the end, the nuts and bolts of the mission were just like the essentials of any other mission. The members of Christ the Lord faithfully employed the means of grace. Hundreds of people heard the gospel and over three hundred of them heard it on a consistent basis over a period of years. Many responded in faith to the message. Binh Trihn, a young Vietnamese boy, summed up that response beautifully. In a note to Gil Novaez, he scrawled this simple, yet profound message: "Thank you for teaching me about Jesus."⁷⁹ Binh Trihn's response is illustrative

⁷⁷ Ken Thompson, interview by author, interview by telephone, 2 December 2007.

⁷⁸ Thompson, interview.

⁷⁹ Paula Novaez, interview.

of a larger Vietnamese group. It demonstrates that the ministry is and was well worth the time, money, and effort. Truly, teaching about Jesus is always worthwhile.

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