

WELS AMONG THE HMONG

Senior Church History
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For the past five or six years the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod ~~is presently~~ ^{has been} active in conducting mission work among Southeast Asians. But the mission work I'm referring to ~~is~~ ^{has been} not taking place half way around the world. This mission activity ~~is~~ ^{has been} taking place in St. Paul, Minnesota and ~~is~~ ^{has been} conducted by Pastor Loren Steele and the members of Emanuel Lutheran Church in St. Paul. This paper will take a look at the brief yet important history of the WELS among the Hmong and other Southeast Asians living in the Twin Cities. We first of all want to consider the recent history of the Hmong people that led so many to the United States. We also will cover the difficulties Pastor Steele and the members of Emanuel have encountered bringing the Gospel to these people. And finally we will view the wonderful results the Holy Spirit has produced among a people who are "ripe for the Gospel" (Steele, p. 5)!

In order to understand why so many Hmong and other Southeast Asians are fleeing to the United States today, we refer back to Southeast Asia during the early 1970's. The Hmong were mountain tribes people living in Laos. They were hard working farmers who used primitive tools and lived in grass huts. During the Vietnam War the U.S. armed forces recruited the Hmong to fight against communist forces of North Vietnam. When the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, the Hmong were sitting targets for the Vietcong who sought revenge for the Hmong's participation in that war. During the years following the Vietnam War the North Vietnamese army gassed and bombed Hmong villages, burned their crops and machine gunned families. The Hmong were faced with two options:

either stick around and face the torture of these soldiers or flee in refuge.

The Hmong fled to refugee camps in Thailand. Seeing a very bleak future for these people, the U.S. government began airlifting them to America. Today this is still being done and large populations of Southeast Asians can be found in Washington, New York, Texas, Colorado, California and in the Twin Cities area. At the present time there are more than 37,000 S.E. Asians in Minneapolis/St. Paul made up of Hmong, Cambodians, Vietnamese and other refugees from Thailand.

Looking at a people racked by war, fear, hunger and death, Pastor Steele and Emanuel Lutheran saw a brilliant opportunity the Lord had placed before them. Pastor explained the urgency for doing evangelism work among the Hmong in this way:

The time is NOW! If these people are not evangelized in the next five to ten years the open door will be slammed shut with a resounding bang. What makes Hmong evangelism so urgent? Their hearts are ripe for it? They have been refined by the Lord in the furnace of heartbreak? Much of their life has been soaked in suffering and witnessing the most heinous atrocities. The scar tissue on their minds is still red and tender. And with their arrival in the U.S. has come a cultural shock beyond belief. A mountain tribe people has suddenly been plunged into the midst of fast paced twentieth century living. Cars, time, dates, light switches, toilets, packaged foods, and book learning are things the Hmong never imagined in their most extravagant day dreams... Typically after six or eight months, most of these people begin to realize they can survive in America. It's then they begin a period of depression and introspection, asking themselves: "What is life all about? What does the future hold for me? Why is there war, death, and sickness?" Their native religion, Animism, cannot give them the answers to these nagging questions. They're a people who are groping and searching, more open to new ideas than they ever will be again. They are ripe for the Gospel (Steele, p. 4,5)!

With the help of our Lord Jesus Pastor Steele and the members

of Emanuel began its "world mission at home."

Beginning with door to door visits Emanuel faced some difficulties bringing the gospel to these people. One difficulty was the Hmong culture and native religion. The gospel is foreign to the Hmong. There is nothing in their culture that relates to it. Christianity is foreign because their religion is Animism. Pastor Steele relates a visit in which he ran into this native religion:

At my knock a dusky skinned girl, with her long black hair knotted on the top of her head, opened the door a crack. We don't know each other and she hesitates.

"I'm Pastor Steele," I explain in Hmong. "I'm a friend of Pa Ma Yang's." My use of Hmong surprised and impressed her favorably. And, if I'm "ok" with Pa Ma, I'm "ok" to let in.

"Yes, come in please."

Inside the ghetto apartment there was no furniture at all except a soiled and lumpy mattress laying directly in the middle of the living room floor. On it lay a woman, obviously very sick. Beside her, kneeling on the bare floor was a "shaker" woman. The aged shaker drew back as I stepped forward and knelt beside the prone figure.

"Koj lub npe hu li cas?" (What is your name?), I asked.

"Kue," came the weak reply.

"Koj puas mob?" (Are you sick?),

"Kuv muaj mob taubhau." (I have a very bad headache)

"How long has she been this way?" I asked the girl.

"Five days."

"What is SHE doing?" I nodded toward the shaker.

"She is chasing out the spirit of Kou's husband," the girl explained. Kou's husband died two years ago, in Thailand. He wants his wife to join him in the land of the spirits. His spirit comes to her and makes her sick so she will give up the land of the living and come into the land of the spirits with him. When the old lady drives out the spirit, Kue will be well."

"Lord," I groaned. "They never taught me anything about this at the Sem! You have brought me here to offer these people eternal life. I'm facing the devil's servant in the flesh. I'm the intruder here. WHAT AM I TO DO???"
(Steele, p. 7).

Another important feature of Hmong culture is that its people are strongly family oriented and when a Hmong becomes a Christian there is a very strong chance that he or she will not be accepted by other family members.

One very strong barrier that faces all missionaries is the language barrier. This was no exception for Pastor Steele and the members of Emanuel. The Hmong language stems from Chinese and is very difficult for Westerners to learn. Hmong is tonal and some words are almost impossible to distinguish from others tonally. But the Hmong do (Steele, p. 9). Pastor Steele, who has spent the last few years learning the language, shares an incident in which he made a mistake trying to communicate in Hmong:

I remember with a red face one communication slip in a conversation with a woman named Ly Lee. You have to know that of all the different Asians, Hmong women are most endowed by the Creator with the physical equipment necessary for nursing the many children they bear. Ly Lee is no exception. During the course of that conversation I looked directly at this well endowed woman and in my best Hmong said, "I want to tell you about a nice big person..." When I had gone about that far Ly Lee got a rather startled look on her face and covered her mouth with her hand (Hmong women tend to do this when they are having a "shy" laugh). I knew by her gesture that something must be amiss. Seems I had gotten everything almost right. The word "me" means "person" or, with a slightly different intonation (miv), it means woman's breast. I had just looked Ly Lee in the eye and told her she has "nice big breasts!" (Steele, p. 9).

In order to break kown this barrier Emanuel today provides an ESL/Bible School (ESL = English as a Second Language). Interpreters

have also been used in many aspects of this cross cultural ministry.

Another difficulty that faced the members of Emanuel is what Pastor Steele calls "the hidden heart." Hmong people do not express their feelings well, especially to foreigners. The Asian refugees are a bizarre combination of a people whose hurting hearts are in need of the Gospel, while the old man of work righteousness and false gods has a firm grip on their minds. To meet their spiritual needs of Law and Gospel in a way that "rings their bell" is hard (Steele, p. 11). They are walking to an entirely different drumbeat than the American.

Other difficulties that Pastor Steele and Emanuel have faced center around the actual educating of these ^{people} in God's Word. One problem is that many Hmong have never had a day of school in their life. Many first need to be taught to read. They also don't think in the same logical way as we Westerners. Another barrier that keeps many from ^m coming to Emanuel's ESL/Bible School is the fear factor which most face coming to a new country and being thrown right in the middle of a new culture.

And finally, a very big difficulty that exists today involves syncretism, especially with Buddhism. Buddhists will accept our terminology and fit it into Buddhism. Nirvana equates easily with heaven. Jesus like Buddha is a great teacher of the "way." If you want to call him "Savior," fine, they will go along with that. Salvation? Sure, a Buddhist can and does use the word. It fits well. "Salvation," however is understood as "the escape from suffering by the suppression of desire." Sin? They use the term. But it means "anything which hinders man's progress toward his self-made salvation." They even fit our definition

of death into Buddhist thought. Death is the separation of body and soul, says the Christian. "Ok," says the Buddhist, "We see it a little different, but essentially it's the same." They believe at death there are five component parts of man that separate: The physical body, the sensations and feelings, perception, volition, and consciousness. the Christian says, "soul and body come together at the resurrection. "Of course," agrees the Buddhist. "We believe in re-incarnation too." (Steele, p. 14). Obviously it is the Holy Spirit that teaches understanding.

Despite all the difficulties that faced Pastor Steele and the members of Emanuel this has proven to be a truly fruitful mission field. Some forty people are involved in the Southeast Asian mission work on a regular basis. Others help in various special ways as Asian children flood into Pioneers, V.B.S., and Sunday School. Retirees are involved in weekly mission work projects such as teaching English and the Bible to assigned individuals. Younger members have become drivers bringing children and adults to God's house every week. Entire families have become "Adopters," adopting an Asian family as their special mission concern. Children are working to assimilate their Asian peers into Sunday School, Pioneers, V.B.S., and Sunday worship services. From juniors to senior citizens, Emanuel's members have rolled up their sleeves to be foreign missionaries at home. (Steele, ')

The Holy Spirit has truly blessed the efforts of the members of Emanuel. The first Hmong Bible class was held on November 11, 1987. The first Hmong worship service was held on Friday, September 9, 1988. Regular Sunday Worship started on March 11, 1990.

The attendance for worship and Sunday School on December 22, 1991 was 57 adults for worship and 62 children for Sunday School.

The following is a list that show the number of baptized souls since this ^{mission} ministry began:

- 3/24/89 = Joua Yang and Chao Yang
- 1/12/90 = Pang Vang, Lucky Vang, Ma Vang, Blong Vang, Mai Yer Yang, Pheng Lee, Cha Vang, Mai Houa Vue, Larry Yang, Mai Yang, Mai A Yang, David Yang, Yer Moua, Cha Yang, Kong Yang, Boonme Yang, Van Dee Yang, Chong Yand and Yia Yang
- 3/22/90 = Nancy Saattiaa Duong
- 6/10/90 = Pao Choua Vang
- 8/19/90 = Sea Xiong, Yang Ziong, Neng Xiong, Kue Xiong, Xai Xiong, Mai Xiong, Mai Thao, Ger Yang Ge' Lee
- 9/16/90 = Ger Yang, Kou Lee, Nhia Xiong, Zoua Xiong, Terry Xiong, Uda Xiong, Yer Xiong
- 9/25/90 = George Duong
- 12/16/90 = Yia Yang
- 3/12/91 = Sar Ngen, Keon Yoeun
- 4/30/91 = Chhuong Voeung, Her Thao
- 5/26/91 = Der Yang
- 7/7/91 = Chee Nu Xiong
- 6/30/91 = Nikki Vang, Judy Xiong, Joshua Xiong, Her Xiong and Kao Nu Xiong
- 10/27/91 = Sreng Kim and Lak Kim

The list of confirmands include:

- 10/21/90 Ger Yang Yer Moua and Ma Yang
- 5/5/91 Sochkea Kim, Chhong Voeung, Chao Yang, Pao Choua Vang, Cha Vang, Mai Yang, Yia Yang, Der Ynag and Joua Yang
- Adult 5/12/91 Sai Her Hang and Kia Xiong

This list helps give evidence that this is truly a ripe mission field. We keep Pastor Steele and the members of Emanuel in our prayers as they continue their "foreign mission at home".

Example of material used for a Hmong worship service:

KUV MUAB KUV LUB CEV RAU YEXUS 110

1. Kuv muab kuv lub cev rau Yexus
Kuv lub siab thiab tus ntsujplig
Nws yuav saib ntsoov coj kuv kev mus
Nws tsis tso kuv tseg ibtxhis
Kuv muab txhua yam tsav
Tso rau Yexus kav
Kuv lub cev lub siab thiab ntsujplig
Cia Tswv Yexus kav
2. Kuv zoo siab cia Yexus kav kuv
Kav tsev tibneeg kav nyiaj txiag
Kuv xav paub thiab mloog Nws Txoj Lus
Niaj hnuv ua raws Nws siab nyiam
3. Kuv zoo siab ua Yexus tub qhe
Cia Nws kav kuv ib sim neej
Kav kuv vaj tsev kav tej liaj teb
Qhia kom ua tibneeg ncaj ncees

AMAZING GRACE

- 1) Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.
- 2) YEXUS HLUB KUV, KUV ZOO SIAB KAWG
NWS LOS PAB PEB SAWVDAWS
NWS THEEJ KUV TXHOJ SAUM NTOO KHAUBLIG
CAWM KUV DIM KUV LUB TXIM.
- 3) Thru many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.
- 4) PEB NYOB SAUM NTUJ KEV TUAG TSIS MUAJ,
THIAB TSIS RAUG KEV PUASTSUAJ.
YOG PEB NTSEEG NWS IBTXHIS TSIS THIM,
YUAV TAU TXOJSIA IBTXHIS.
- 5) The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
His will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

LUB XYOO LAUS TAG LI NRHO 27

1. Lub xyoo laus tag li nrho
Xyoo tshiab tawm li plaws tuaj
Yus yuav tsum hloov dua yus lub siab
Mus txais koob hmoov xyoo tshiab
Thov Vajtswv nrog peb nyob
Peb thiaj yuav paub sib hlub
Peb thiaj ua npoj ua luag thawm xyoo
Thiaj yuav tsis raug puastsuaj
2. Lub xyoo laus tag li nrho
Xyoo tshiab tawm li plaws tuaj
Txhua yam txhua tsav uas tsis zoo nkauj
Yuav muab pov nrog xyoo laus
Yuav kawm lus hlub lus ntseeg
Yuav xyaum kev ncaj kev ncees
Yuav ntxuav lub siab dawb paug huvsi
Tos Yexus yuav rov los
3. Lub xyoo laus tag li nrho
Xyoo tshiab tawm li plaws tuaj
Tsa ncauj tsa lus thov Vajtswv Ntuj
Foom txoj koob hmoov rau yus
Txawm yog kev ploj kev tuag
Txawm yog kev ntsoj kev ntsuag
Yus yuav tso siab rau Vajtswv Ntuj
Vajtswv thiaj yuav pab yus
4. Lub xyoo laus tag li nrho
Xyoo tshiab tawm li plaws tuaj
Yus twb tsis paub tias xyov tagkis
Nws yuav zoo ua li cas
Tus Tswv Yexus yuav los
Tsis paub nruab hnuv hmo ntuj
Yuav tsum ceev faj txhua lub caij nyoog
Yus thiaj yuav ntsib Yexus

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Problems in Evangelizing Southeast Asian Immigrants Essay by
Loren Steele delivered to the St. Croix Conf. of the MN
District, 1988

A World Mission At Home A Video presented by Emanuel Lutheran
Church, St. Paul, MN, 1990