

# **A Different World**

**DON FLEMING**

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## Preface

The idea for this book came during a few days I spent in Bulgaria in the mid nineties. I was staying with a local Christian family and, in the course of conversation, recounted the story of some Solomon Islanders who attended a week-long workshop for pastors and evangelists on one of the islands. The Bulgarians, having been isolated from much of the world for half a century, were so gripped by the story that they asked me to write it for a local Christian magazine. I did so, and told them other stories as well, which they also asked me to write down.

On the plane home, I decided to use my travelling time to write further. The few days with my friends in Bulgaria had reminded me that the world in which I moved was different from theirs; different, indeed, from the world of most of my friends. And so the pattern was set. From that time on, I have used my many hours in planes and airports writing the articles collected in this book.

Chapters are not in chronological order, nor are they grouped according to subject. They are spread randomly over many topics, many years and many countries, with the hope that they will inform, encourage, amuse and challenge the reader.

In one chapter I speak of some who have been partners with Gae and me in our ministry 'from the first day until now'. One of these, Philip Juler, has kindly read the manuscript and, as always, made perceptive and helpful comments. I am also grateful for the generosity of the person who, while remaining anonymous, has paid for the printing of this book. But we have agreed that all proceeds from its sale will go to help Christians in countries from which the stories come.

Don Fleming

## Noise

When people ask me about life in other countries, two topics they invariably mention are food and climate. But food can be one of the bonuses, especially in a country like Thailand, where my wife Gae and I spent most of our overseas years. Compared with Thai food, much Western food is unappealingly bland. As for the climate, it was certainly hot and oppressive, but we found the best way to deal with it was to tell ourselves it was not likely to improve, so we might as well forget about complaining and get on with what we were doing. For us, the most trying physical difficulty was not food or climate, but noise.

Nothing we had heard or read beforehand had prepared us for the noise level we had to live with in Bangkok. To this day I have rarely found a book about life in developing countries that mentions noise as a potential problem for Western expatriates. This may not be an issue in some areas, but in the part of Bangkok where we lived it was a 24-hour-a-day problem.

### From night to morning

In those days Bangkok had nothing that might be likened to the suburbs of a Western city. Nor did it have anything that could be identified as the city centre. The whole place seemed to be city – roads, shops, lanes, people, factories, markets, traffic, houses, concrete and bitumen. The place never went to sleep and never became quiet.



*The main road, behind which was our lane*

This was especially so where we lived, in a lane that ran off a busy main road. Our home was one of a group of unlined wooden houses, mostly unpainted, clustered around the end of the lane – which by now was an unsealed track just wide enough for one vehicle. About one hundred people lived within twenty metres of the perimeter of the house, and these generated a lot of noise (and sewage).

Many of these neighbours were hawkers of cooked food. Some returned late at night and talked loud and long about the day's events. Others began preparing their food in the small hours of the morning, accompanying their sizzling cooking with the energetic washing of pots and pans. They had to be ready to leave by 4.00 a.m., when a lot of workers and school children were already on the road in the hope of beating Bangkok's horrendous traffic jams.

The cluster of houses was also well stocked with barking dogs, howling cats and crowing cocks. These, along with the hawkers, prevented the night from ever lapsing into quietness. If, perchance, there was the possibility of unbroken sleep, the self-appointed nightwatchmen soon put an end to that.

Self-appointed nightwatchmen were to be found in almost every neighbourhood. They stationed themselves at selected points to guard the residents against intruders, and then visited the residents once a month to collect money for their unsolicited

services. Any who refused to pay were solemnly warned that the nightwatchmen could not guarantee the security of their houses at night.

The nightwatchmen equipped themselves with a steel rod and a piece of metal suitable for a gong, and then belted out the number of strokes per hour, on the hour, from 10.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. This warned potential intruders that watchmen were on duty, and at the same time woke up watchmen in neighbouring precincts who might have gone to sleep. As the sound of gongs far and near bounced around the city, residents who had not adjusted to the routine were awakened, so that they might know the time of night when the watchmen awakened them.

Among our neighbours were also a number of tuk-tuk drivers. A tuk-tuk is a small motorized three-wheeled open-sided taxi that takes its name from the sound it makes. (It is known also as a *samlor*, meaning 'three wheels'.) Between 9.00 p.m. and midnight the tuk-tuks, usually from six to eight in number, returned home and parked in the one-vehicle-wide lane that ended outside our house. This blocked our car access and meant we had to find the drivers to shift their vehicles if we wanted to get in or out late at night. Alternatively, if arriving home late, we simply added our car to the growing line of tuk-tuks in the lane; but then the drivers had to wake us early in the morning when they wanted to get out. They woke us anyway, because the sound of several tuk-tuks firing up is like the sound of several jack-hammers. And it was right outside our bedroom window.

### **From morning to night**

The period from breakfast to lunch was relatively quiet, the main noise coming from radios, dogs, neighbourhood chatter, traffic along the street behind and the regular stream of amiable but shrill-voiced hawkers. About the middle of the day, other neighbours unfolded their metal chairs and tables and set them up along the muddy lane where it did a right angle turn around our house and was inaccessible to motor vehicles. This part of the lane then became an open-air eatery. The surroundings were often flooded with a mixture of household effluents, and people sometimes pulled palings off our fence to put on the ground to keep their feet out of the water. But inconveniences never seemed to daunt them as they tucked into the tasty food.

On average, three to four hundred customers came and went between mid-afternoon and midnight, and this again generated noise. Mostly this was just the noise of people talking and laughing while eating and playing cards, but if a radio started up, customers might produce a percussion rhythm by tapping spoons on their metal plates. By the time the last customers left, our hawker friends and tuk-tuk drivers were arriving home and, as mentioned above, kept the 24-hour cycle of noise going.

Whether or not the eatery customers provided our evening music, the neighbour immediately behind us often did. He was a pleasant man who liked to sit out on his small landing (which virtually abutted the rear of our house) and serenade himself on a sort of oversized bamboo mouth organ. Although we grew to like certain kinds of Thai music, this man's renditions were not among them. His repertoire was not large. But playing relaxed him, even if it did the opposite for us.

One other problem we had with this neighbour's house concerned people who urinated against the rear wall of our house. Because our walls were unlined, urine came running down our side of the wall. If we called out or banged on the wall, they usually



*Our Bangkok home: neighbours crammed in both sides, front and rear*

called out an apology and resorted to some alternative procedure. We had the same problem at times when opening the paling gate in the front fence. We sometimes got wet and occasionally found someone squatting on the ground doing what he should not have been doing – at least, not there. But the perpetrators were invariably apologetic.

Three metres away on the opposite side of our house to the open-air eatery was a timber house identical to ours that served as a brothel. This may sound as if we lived in a red light area, but that is not so. It seems that most lanes and streets in Bangkok have a brothel of some sort, though, like the house next to ours, there is no sign or other outward indication of the line of business carried on there. Surprisingly, the noise from this side was minimal, apart from the occasional ‘incident’ – which is best left out of this story.

### **One more thing**

We lived in this house for three and a half years, and during that time planted the local church and produced the initial Thai publications referred to elsewhere in this book. The incessant noise no doubt contributed to the physical wear and tear that caused a few crises some years later. By that time we were in another house and, through the kindness of friends in Australia, had air-conditioned the main bedroom, which at least muffled the noise and enabled us have a better sleep.

But it was not noise that drove us from our first house. Noise is everywhere in Bangkok, at least in the sorts of areas we were likely to live, so we had no expectation of being rid of it. What drove us from that first house was the sewage problem.

Bangkok has no public sewerage system. The city is flat, virtually on sea level, and flooding is a constant problem. We were used to tropical storms and the flooding that followed, but when the surrounds of the house were already affected by foul water, the problem became acute. (One other problem with the waterlogged ground was that it attracted masses of toads, and these could produce a brain-piercing din. One night the racket was so bad that I went outside with a torch and a machete and quickly chopped up thirty-four of them. It reduced the noise but added to the moisture.)

Drains were constantly blocked, and the discharge from broken septic-tanks-cum-cesspits created large under-house cesspools that frequently overflowed. Drainage pipes were supposed to carry effluent into a broad but stagnant canal two houses away, but these pipes were blocked repeatedly. The City Council’s way of unblocking drainage pipes was to insert long bamboo poles at one access hole and pull them through at another. The clearance barely lasted a few days. In the end I paid for a new line to be run from our house to the canal, so that at least the surrounds of our house could be drained and we could walk on the ground instead of on planks.

After a few months, however, this new line also became blocked. The reason was that the canal was full of garbage, which people had been dumping there, illegally, in increasing quantities. The garbage mound, now two metres high, stretched across the canal’s width and about ten metres along its length.

A City Council health officer came to inspect the problem, but when I explained my theory that the garbage was clogging the drainage line, he disagreed. To prove his point, he climbed on to the top of the garbage heap and with much vigour jumped up and down on it. The huge mound rose and fell slightly, making encouraging sloshing noises. ‘There’, shouted our health inspector triumphantly, ‘the garbage is floating. There’s water underneath. Your drainage line is getting into the canal. No problem.’ With that he climbed down and, with a smile that said ‘mission accomplished’, departed. The mountain of garbage did not even bother him.

## Nigerian officials

A number of years after my first visit to Nigeria, I saw two episodes of a six-part television documentary that someone made about Lagos airport. I was sorry to have missed the other episodes, but what I saw was in a sense reassuring. At least I now knew that I was not the only person who saw this airport as being in a class of its own.

### Hostile officials

After an overnight flight from Bulgaria, I arrived at Lagos airport at about 4.00 a.m. As usual, the first official one meets is at the immigration counter. Other passengers were moving through in what appeared to be the normal routine, but when my turn came, the official thumbed through my passport and then disappeared with it into a neighbouring office. This had not happened in any country before, and as I had obtained the required Nigerian visa before leaving Australia, I was puzzled. My puzzlement turned to apprehension when the official reappeared, asked for my air tickets as well, and then called me into an office.

I was grilled about who I was, what I did for a living, why I was in Nigeria, where I intended to go, who were the people I would meet and so on. Over the previous thirty years I had either lived in or visited dozens of countries, and I had long ago learnt some basic rules when dealing with officials. Always be polite, never show impatience, never try to insist on your rights (these local officials hold *all* the cards – and my passport!), always tell the truth, but never tell them anything more than they ask for.

In answer to their questions, I had told them I was a teacher (they did not ask what sort of teacher) and that I was visiting friends around Nigeria. They then gave me a piece of paper and asked me to write on it the names and addresses of three people I would visit in Nigeria. As best as I could remember, I wrote the names and addresses of people in three Nigerian states, but I was not going to open my brief case and bring out the sheaf of correspondence to check the accuracy of my memory. After a long delay, I was taken to another room for further questioning, followed by further waiting and then more questioning.

By this time more than an hour had passed since the plane landed, and I had not yet had the chance to collect my checked-in luggage. In response to my request, they allowed someone to take me back to the baggage area, where I retrieved my small suitcase, went through customs, and was taken across the empty terminal area, heading for another door. Just then I saw an agitated Nigerian running towards me, excitedly waving papers. I did not know who this person was, but I guessed he was the one sent to meet me at the airport.

### A welcome advocate

I had come to Nigeria at the invitation of the well-known leader of a Nigerian mission. This man had organized everything on my behalf, but currently was out of town. However, he had sent strict instructions to me in Australia about arrangements for my arrival. I was not to go with any person who was not carrying three items of identification – a letter of welcome typed under his mission letterhead and signed by him, the ID card of the person nominated in this letter to meet me, and a Bridgeway brochure that I had sent to him.

At the time, I was amused at such extreme caution, but later I was to learn that the army of crooks who hang around Lagos airport have an impressive record of side-tracking trusting travellers. A person is never more vulnerable than when arriving at the entry point of a foreign country. For the moment, however, I was relieved to see this paper-waving Nigerian. He introduced himself (I shall call him Jacob), and asked what



on earth was going on. I said I had no idea, and his enquiries to my escort were met with a stony silence.

Jacob decided to come along with us, and did his best to find out what the problem was, but received no satisfaction. Twice, when I was called into other offices, he came with me, and both times was ejected.

The same questions were put to me and I gave the same replies. When asked where I had met these people, I told them at a Christian conference in Manila. I thought it wise to let them know that my friends and I were all Christians. They asked if I was a missionary, to which I replied 'No', which at that time was true, for I was pastoring a church back in Australia.

In yet another office, I was again given a piece of paper and told to write on it the names and addresses of three people I would visit in Nigeria. To the best of my ability, I repeated what I had written before. This was followed by lively discussion between someone in the office and another whom I recognized as a person who had interviewed me earlier. They were speaking in a local language and I assumed they were checking to see if my two lists corresponded. But as the argument became heated, I reached the conclusion that the first person was resentful that the second person was checking what he had done. The argument became so loud and angry I thought they would come to blows. By the time I had been in the country a month and seen this sort of behaviour every day, I gathered that this was a fairly common way of exchanging views.

### **The chief**

After being marched from one place to another, I was eventually escorted to another building, where I was taken upstairs and brought before two impressive looking officials. Both were decked out in gold braid and other indications of high office. Jacob stuck with me and so did my luggage. One of the officials looked particularly hostile and in the interview that followed was most unfriendly. But the senior man, who did most of the talking, was more inclined to be gentlemanly. He spoke and acted in such a well-bred English manner that he could have been educated at Eton. We found out later that he was the airport's chief of immigration.

This man then carried out his own interview. He began by enquiring of my health and asking if I had had a good trip. Four hours had now passed since my plane had landed, but I managed to maintain my 'be-nice-to-the-officials' manner. He said I might be wondering why I had been detained ('Yes, it had crossed my mind', I felt like saying), but he assured me it was all for my own good. Nigeria was a dangerous place and if I was travelling around the country I could be at risk. If I went to New York, he told me, I could be mugged, and Nigeria was a bit like that. He would not like anything to happen to me in Nigeria such as could happen in New York. I thanked him for his tender loving care, but did not ask why I had been singled out of one hundred and fifty passengers for this special attention.

He then went through the question routine – what is your work? (teacher); what do you teach? (simple communication); what sort of simple communication? (for those who are non-technical or who use English as a second language); have you been to Nigeria before? (no); where did you meet these Nigerian people? (at an international Christian congress in Manila); are you a missionary? (no); and so it went on.

Turning to Jacob, the man continued: who are you? (Jacob); what is your occupation? (I'm a doctor); what sort of doctor? (doctor of education); ah . . . education . . . teacher . . . so that is your connection with this visitor (I've never met this man before); who do you work for? (an international welfare organization); what is its name? (Omega); is it a Christian organization? (yes); so you are from the same church as this man? (I don't know what church this man is from); and so it went on.

The officials then told Jacob to leave the room. I became increasingly apprehensive, but then, to my surprise, the chief said they would stamp my passport to

give me permission to stay for a month. I expressed appreciation, but asked that he make sure it was a calendar month (which I knew I was entitled to) and not four weeks, because my departure flight was twenty-nine days after my arrival flight. Most certainly, said my obliging Etonian. He then threw my passport to an underling sitting in the corner, and after an uneasy minute or two my passport and tickets were returned. Jacob and I were off.

## Drivers

Jacob had a Peugeot 504, 'the car that conquered Africa'. Wherever one goes in Africa, this is the dominant vehicle. Jacob's car seemed to have a lot of dents, but so did most other cars that I saw – and so it was throughout Nigeria. Some are so comprehensively dented it would be difficult to find a place anywhere on the metal body where one could place a hand without touching a dent. I had to sit in the rear seat, as the back of the front seat would not stay vertical if the passenger leant on it. Jacob apologized, saying with all seriousness in his quiet, educated voice, 'The African has no maintenance culture' – a wonderfully concise euphemism.



*The ubiquitous Peugeot 504*

Soon we were into the horrendous Lagos traffic. The road was frightfully broken, but slowly we made our way along. We lurched over ruts, bumps and potholes, only narrowly missing vehicles on either side that never lurched at quite the same angle as us and so never collided with us.

Then a VW beetle in front of us decided he wanted to turn across the slow-moving lines of on-coming traffic into a side street on the opposite side of the road. This greatly annoyed a person in the middle of the road who seemed to be some sort of traffic controller. He was a huge man who blew a whistle with much gusto, but he was dressed in rough civilian clothes and wore an American baseball cap. He yelled abuse at the VW driver, but when this had no visible effect he stormed around the car, yanked open the front door, grabbed the driver by the arm and hauled him out into the narrow space between the passing lines of traffic. There was much pushing, shoving, shouting and gesticulating, but no one seemed to treat this as an exceptional event.

As the traffic warden pushed the protesting VW driver back into the car, Jacob decided to manoeuvre his car around the back of the VW. I thought to myself, 'Don't do it; he will reverse into you.' Sure enough, just before Jacob was clear, the VW began to reverse and collided with our car just behind the back wheel. We lurched with the thump, but Jacob just put his head out the window to see what had happened and, again apparently seeing nothing exceptional about the event, drove on.

It was a relief to arrive at last at Jacob's home, a simple house with the barest minimum of furniture and facilities. I was shown how the water would not run and what to do when the electricity failed, which would happen several times a day.

By now I had learnt that Jacob, like the person who had initiated my visit, was head of one of the many Nigerian missions. These vigorous ministries have a commitment to local and world evangelization that is beyond the understanding or experience of most of us in the West. As I saw the poor conditions in which he and his wife lived, I reflected on the cost of this to one who spent the years of his doctoral studies in the affluence and convenience of America.

## Theories

My experiences at Lagos airport were the subject of much discussion among the local Christians. The most common explanation was that the officials were looking for a bribe. A common practice in many places is to give people the run-around till they decide it is quicker and easier to slip the officials some money and be off.

Jacob was pleased with the outcome. He is one of those Africans that I find very impressive – dignified, well-spoken, intellectually sharp and of unbending integrity. I said I thought the officials might have refused me entry and put me on the next plane out of the country, but I would have accepted that rather than pay a bribe. He said he would do exactly the same. ‘The price we pay is not the bribe, but the inconvenience of being honest. Every time we resist corruption, we make it easier for the person who comes after us and harder for the official. Every time we acquiesce, we make it harder for the person who comes after us and easier for the official. It’s a long and slow process, but it’s the only one for the Christian.’

There were alternative theories of the reason for my detention. My passport was almost full of visas and other stamps that revealed my widespread travels, and this could have aroused suspicion. Also, the officials may have thought I was an itinerant Pentecostal preacher of the kind who had recently created much unwelcome publicity. One other possibility concerned the route I was travelling. I had been to Bangkok before Bulgaria, and the Bangkok-Lagos connection is notorious for drug trafficking. What’s more, I was an Australian, and travel guidebooks tell us that for some reason Australians are not popular with Nigerian authorities.

One thing is certain. The official’s statement about Nigeria being a dangerous place was accurate. I had been a little embarrassed when I first learnt that my host had arranged for a local person to be with me throughout my journeys. I had travelled in many countries and always managed to get around by myself. ‘But this is Nigeria,’ he said. Hijackings, armed hold-ups, muggings and robberies were daily occurrences, and he and his colleagues had experienced them all. It seemed that every day I was there I saw violent arguments, fights, and other evidence of the chaos that characterizes Nigerian society. The country was like a seething mass of social, political, economic and religious tension.

I also found why it was that, before I left Australia, my host seemed to take so long to confirm my itinerary. Once I was in Nigeria, I found that both the telephone system and the postal system were close to useless, nothing was reliable, and the only way he could make arrangements was by sending messengers on buses around the country.

## Departure

After four weeks around Nigeria, the day came when I was to leave. Never have I been more thankful to have made it safely back to the airport for the journey home. This is not because I enjoy airports, especially in some developing countries where hassles, searches, delays and petty officialdom can make departures, as well as arrivals, very stressful exercises. (On one trip, Gae and I amused ourselves on the way home by recording some statistics. We had flown 62,000 kilometres, been to sixteen countries, lived in eighteen time zones and had sixty-eight changes of sleeping accommodation, but most trying of all was to have been through airports sixty-two times.)

Check-in time at Lagos airport is six hours before departure, but after check-in there is nothing to do in the decrepit shell that once housed a modern air terminal. So I just sat around and talked with the local Christians who had come to see me off.

When the time came to go through the immigration and customs procedures, I paid the \$US20 departure tax (and, as in most African countries, they wanted the payment in hard currency) and then moved on to the passport official. I expected this to be the usual stamp-and-return procedure, but instead I heard, ‘Where have you been in

Nigeria?’ Oh, no, not again! ‘Why have you been here? What have you done? Who have you seen?’

The man seemed satisfied with my short answers, but then surprised me by asking, ‘What have you got for me?’ I replied that I had just given him my passport. He said, ‘No, I mean money, American dollars.’ I kidded dumb by saying I had just paid the twenty American dollars to the person at the previous counter. ‘I mean American dollars for me.’ I kept up my pretence by saying that I was not aware that he was the person who collected the departure tax, but I had legally paid it, and showed him the receipt stuck to the boarding pass. He looked at me as if to say, ‘I don’t know if you are trying to be smart or just plain dumb’, but said nothing more. After an awkward silence, he frisbeed my passport to an underling, who dutifully stamped it and returned it to me.

I passed through three more check points before boarding the plane, and at each point an official asked me for money. ‘No harm in trying’ seemed to be their attitude. I was flying out on Balkan Airlines, which is not among the classiest international air carriers, but this day it seemed to offer sheer bliss.

## Bible schools

When we speak of Bible schools, Bible colleges, Christian training centres, theological institutes, theological seminaries and the like, people in developed countries naturally have a mental picture of good-looking buildings with well-appointed facilities. In the hundred such institutions where I have given lectures, that is the exception rather than the rule.

### Buildings and facilities

Across countries of the non-Western world where the church is growing vigorously, buildings and facilities of most Bible training institutions are poor. I prefer not to give details country by country, but I can at least give a picture of conditions in general, especially outside the main population centres.



*Crowded student accommodation*

In Pacific Island countries, a building may have bamboo walls, palm-leaf roof and a dirt floor. In Africa it may have walls of sun-dried mud bricks, a roof of beaten-out oil drums and again a dirt floor. In the poorer countries of Asia it could be a variation of either of the above. Students may be crammed into sleeping quarters where any number from ten to thirty may have to share one room, and sleep on the floor or on double bunks that barely

allow enough room to walk between them. Rarely are there cupboards or wardrobes. Clothes and other personal items must be kept in a carton or backpack.

A sleeping room at times doubles as a lecture room. During the night, students sleep on the floor, and during the day their bedding is rolled up to make way for wooden benches or folding chairs that are moved into the room. There are usually no private study facilities. Students must use the lecture room or 'library', a high-sounding word for a small area that may have a few shelves but rarely has many books. Blackboards in some places are so broken and lacking in surface paint that the chalk writing is difficult to read. And the chalk itself is invariably rationed.

Meals may be adequate but have little variety. In saying that, I am not falling into the trap of judging other people's food by the food I like. (I once heard a Western visitor to the Middle East remark on our Lord's self-sacrifice in living like the locals. 'He had to eat their food!' But Jesus, having been brought up in that environment, probably thought 'their food' quite good. It is *our* food that he might have found hard to take.) But many students will privately acknowledge that the food is not as good as they usually eat.

Some schools, through lack of funds, have been forced to survive on food received from aid programs that was thoroughly unsuited to the local diet. I have been in some Bible schools where no one knew where the next day's food was to come from. In place after place, I have been at daily prayers with staff or students where the need for food was a repeated item. In affluent countries where we have well-stocked cupboards, refrigerators and freezers, Christians who pray 'Give us this day our daily bread' rarely mean it literally.

The above story of the Westerner who could not appreciate Middle Eastern food reminds us that, in looking at conditions in other countries, we should not always judge by what is normal in our own. Many Bible college students in these countries come from a local environment where they do not expect facilities of a Western standard. But that is no reason to think they would not appreciate such facilities. The point I make is not that they are indifferent to the need for better facilities, but that they do not allow the absence of such facilities to stop them from getting on with their work.

Unlike many Christians in the affluent countries, Christians in the countries I speak of do not consider they have a *right* to convenience. But where the possibility of convenience presents itself, they are as appreciative as we are. In one church-owned campsite where Gae and I were living with one hundred and fifty church leaders for a five-day conference, we were given an upstairs room that had two metal beds for the honoured guests. Next to ours was a room that had three beds (for camp leaders) and another room that had three double bunks. Apart from that, the only sleeping accommodation was the huge semi-open concreted area beneath us that was used for meetings. There were no beds or mattresses – but then, some might say, people were used to sleeping on the floor. However, when a camp leader announced that three double bunks were available upstairs, there was such a rush that people almost broke their legs getting up the stairs!

I have been to many bush Bible schools where there is no electricity, phone or running water, so it is hardly surprising that people survive without them. What is surprising, and upsetting, is to go to towns that have such facilities, yet the Bible schools must function without them because they cannot afford them.



*Principal's office, with lecturers*

Some Bible schools are still using typewriters, Gestetner machines and spirit duplicators that should be in a museum. Most students have no books and, to make matters worse, many teachers have no way of reproducing notes. This means that the teacher must spend a lot of time writing on the blackboard, and students must spend a lot of time copying the notes. Several institutions that use my books as curriculum material have asked for twenty or more books, so that two or three students per book can copy into their own notebooks and so reduce time spent transcribing from the blackboard.

### **Seizing the opportunity**

Not all who want to study the Bible are able to become full-time residential Bible college students. I have much admiration for people who, already living with the demands of a secular occupation and family support, make time for formal Bible studies. Bible classes may operate one or more nights a week, or perhaps over a weekend, but always the study course demands several years of constant and demanding work. There are also periodic Bible schools that run for several weeks once or twice a year to fit in with local patterns of farming or education.

Most of the Bible colleges I teach at are what we would classify as evangelical, but every now and then I land at some place that is, let us say, different. In one country, I was taken two hundred kilometres to a theological seminary on the edge of the desert. The location seemed to be spiritually symbolic. For years the seminary had been theologically liberal and spiritually dead, but a year or so earlier an evangelical arrived on the staff. She had discovered my books through the national Scripture Union book outlet, and introduced them to staff and students. While some lecturers were not wildly



enthusiastic about the books, the principal was more accommodating and allowed some of them to be used as set texts. He even allowed the evangelical lecturer to arrange a scheme that equipped each graduating student with a set of *Bridge Bible Handbooks*.

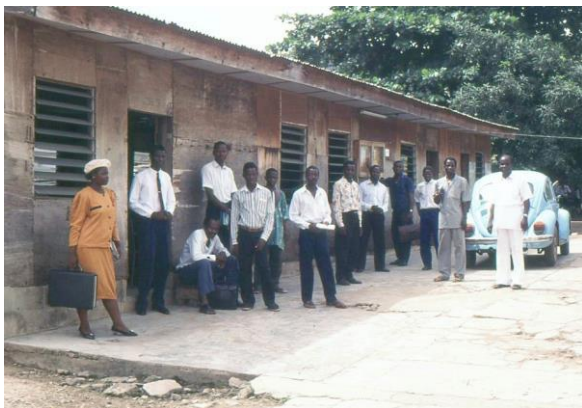
In countries not favourable to Christianity, many Bible schools are not registered as such. They may consist of twenty or thirty students crammed into a small anonymous house. But there are risks in such places, and entire households have been forced to flee at short notice when unfriendly officials have decided to take action.

Soon after my arrival at one of these houses, I was standing with the principal in his tiny office and observed a small shelf of seven or eight books. Wanting to know the extent of his library (I had already learnt that the school itself had no library), I discreetly asked whether he did his lecture preparation here or at home. 'I couldn't do it at home,' he replied with half a laugh, 'my wife and myself along with our two children and my mother all live in one small room. I have no place to do preparation there.' He told me what I wanted to know. That small shelf of books represented his entire resource centre.

### **Bible study resources**

The above story illustrates the situation in many countries, and demonstrates why we set up the ministry of Bridgeway Publications. We want to direct biblical resource materials to places where they are desperately needed.

At the beginning of my time in one African country, I was introducing my ministry to the student body of a large Bible college with an explanation of our choice of the



*Bible college and staff*

word 'bridge' in our publications. First, we want to bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and the world of today. Second, we want to bridge the gap between the technical reference works and the ordinary reader. Then, in a rare flash of inspiration, I offered a third point: we want to bridge the gap between the West, where most of the resources are, and the rest of the world, where most of the Christians are. The building

erupted in loud applause, cheers, amens and hallelujahs. Recognizing my quip to be a winner, I used it often during the rest of my time in the country. It usually attracted a similar response.

### **Unpredictable results**

Audience response may be encouraging, but it is not always a reliable measurement of our effectiveness. In one Asian country, the national Evangelical Fellowship had invited me for a two-month lecture tour of Bible colleges. The executive who organized the tour happened also to be a board member of a leading theological seminary. Of all the institutions I lectured at over the two months, that was the place where I sensed least response. My talks, I felt, had been 'flat'.

During the debriefing at the end of the two months, the organizing executive was keen to know how I had found his favourite college. I had to disappoint him by telling the truth. But what was true of my impressions did not turn out to be true of other people's impressions.

Five years later I was in Manila for the Second Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. During a conversation with some international participants, one person

introduced himself to me along the following lines. ‘You don’t know who I am, but I was a student at such-and-such a college when you gave lectures there in 1984. One was a lecture on the passing of Israel’s monarchy from David to Solomon, and it helped change the way I read the Bible. I knew you had written some simple mini-commentaries, so I got myself a set and began using them. I now head a TEE (Theological Education by Extension) program in my country, and your books are my chief source material.’

Ten years further on, when *Making Sense* was published, I sent a complimentary copy to many of the Bible colleges I had visited over the years. Among those who sent letters of acknowledgment was the principal of the college just referred to. I could not recall his face, but he said he was a junior lecturer when I visited and he recalled the impact of my lecture. It reminded me of what the apostle Paul, and every true preacher since, has found, namely, that though our presentation may be personally disappointing, God can use it to change lives. Conversely, those presentations that satisfy our ego may accomplish little in the cause of Christ.



*Building better facilities*

Another experience I have found common among Christian speakers is that within days of delivering a sermon or lecture, I am tested in a particular issue I spoke about. God seems to be saying, ‘You have taught it, but do you yourself live up to it?’

### **More than knowledge**

In various Bible colleges I have found that students are required to do practical work around the campus, not just to help subsidise their own fees and maintain the property, but also to teach them the value of manual work. One Bible school principal in Myanmar said that whereas most such institutions were training people to be leaders, he was training people to be servants. His observation was that too many students wanted mainly to be the leader of a church, and too many leadership courses were based on models taken from the business, professional, or academic world. He wanted his students to take their model from Jesus, who came firstly to serve.

A Bible college principal in the Philippines had the same approach. The college grew most of its own food on the property. He said, ‘The reason we have the students work is that we want them to be known not just as Bible scholars mighty in the Word, but also as ones who labour without being embarrassed by dirty hands. We are preparing them not to become a burden to the people they will serve’. These ideals were reflected in the formal results for graduating students, with a percentage mix between academic proficiency, assignment achievements, servant character and ministry involvement. This practical hands-on approach brought evident results in the subsequent ministry, where new churches were regularly planted in previously unevangelised areas. In some cases a new church had even planted a daughter church before getting a building of its own.

### **Student concerns**

While Bible colleges clearly produce some outstanding servants of God, not all students are models of Christian character. One principal complained that Christian parents send wayward youths to Bible college in the hope that they might ‘get straightened out’. Some do, in fact, get converted, but others become a source of trouble. Even good Christian students do not always behave as such. In one place, the



students had gone on strike because they considered the food sub-standard and inadequate. The principal of another college, when asked what was the greatest need for the students, thought for a long time and then said just one word, 'Grace'.

In one Bible college, I had obviously arrived at the wrong time, at least in the eyes of one group of agitated students. One of them had read the words 'darkest Africa' in some old missionary biography, and asserted that this was 'typical of the offensive attitude white people have to Africans'. He and one or two of his friends grilled me with questions clearly designed to make me uncomfortable. There was not a lot I could say in reply, other than to agree that whites sometimes make statements that are insensitive; but Christians should be forgiving rather than take offence – just as I had to be forgiving rather than take offence when I encountered Africans who made statements that were insensitive.

In most cases, however, I have found students to be wonderfully responsive and gracious. Many would have good cause to be resentful of Westerners, whether because of imperialistic practices of colonial masters, patronizing attitudes of expatriate missionaries, or exploitation by commercial interests. But they seem to have a remarkable capacity to appreciate the good and forgive the wrongs that have been done to them.

For all that, there is a widespread concern in the developing countries about justice in human affairs, and this usually gives rise to the sorts of questions that ask, 'Why is it that . . . ?' But the Bible rarely gives answers merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity. When the disciples of Jesus asked him why a certain man was born blind (was it because of the man's own sins or someone else's), Jesus responded not by satisfying their curiosity but by healing the blind man. An intellectually satisfying reply would have made little difference to the disciples or the blind man, but a practical response helped the blind man, enriched the disciples and glorified God.

There are no simple answers that explain why in some countries people live with an abundance of food, but in others suffer starvation. Christianity may not solve a puzzling question but it does demand a response: if people are hungry, feed them. Citizens of countries torn apart by war are not more deserving of suffering than citizens of countries without war. When confronted with this uneven distribution of suffering, the Christian response is not to theorize but to do something, namely, to ease suffering by giving practical aid and working for reconciliation and peace.

The difficult questions come with a variety of emphases, depending on local circumstances. Among the most commonly asked questions is one that confronts all of us at some time. It concerns the eternal destiny of people who have never heard the gospel. As usual, the Bible does not answer the question as we might wish, but turns it back upon the questioner with a blunt challenge: 'If they have not heard, go and tell them.'

## Catching a bus

Nepal is one of those countries where the church has grown dramatically in recent years. From a mere twenty or so believers in 1960 it had grown to 50,000 in 1985, and at the time of my visit there in 1997 had reached 350,000. This growth was resented by the guardians of the national religion, Hinduism, and brought increased opposition to the church.

The Nepalese Christian who invited me, looked after me and interpreted for me was Timothy Rai. Three years later he was the subject of international publicity when he and three colleagues were attacked, arrested and imprisoned for preaching at a provincial church conference. During their imprisonment of several months, Timothy's patience helped keep their spirits calm. My own experiences with Timothy had taught me that he is not easily panicked.

### **From Kathmandu to Pokhara**

Timothy had bought tickets the previous day for us to travel by bus from Kathmandu to Phokara, a seven-hour journey. The bus would leave Kathmandu at 7.00 a.m., and since we should allow twenty-five minutes to get by taxi from Timothy's place to the bus station, we should leave home at 6.30. Those were Timothy's arrangements. Just to be sure, he said, let us be ready to leave at 6.15.

At 6.10 I was ready – dressed, packed and waiting. Then I saw Timothy, still in his pyjamas, grab a backpack and start assembling some gear. His wife brought us each a cup of tea. Timothy passed the morning greetings, reflected on the work we had to do in Pokhara, and continued poking around as he selected a few more pieces of clothing. He was still not packed, but thought it time to take a bath. After his audibly enjoyable morning ablutions, he headed in his bath towel for the bedroom. The time was now 6.25. Soon after 6.30 he was dressed and he and his wife had finished packing his bag. Well, almost. 'Here, put this in . . . Just a minute, there is something in the other room I want you to give to someone . . . ' Then, just when I thought we were about to leave, Timothy decided to clean his shoes. Out came the polish, brushes and rags, and after an effort that would have pleased the Royal Guards, he was ready. He saw I was worried that it was now 6.40, but he assured me we had plenty of time. 'A taxi can do the trip in twenty minutes.'

When we went out to get a taxi, I began to head for the main road, but Timothy knew a quick way to get a taxi. 'Go down this lane to a side street.' I thought this a risky option for a random taxi at such an early hour, but I knew enough of travel in strange lands never to instruct the host what to do. We waited . . . and waited . . . and no taxi came. 'That's strange,' said Timothy, 'I thought we would find a taxi here. Perhaps we should go to the main road.'

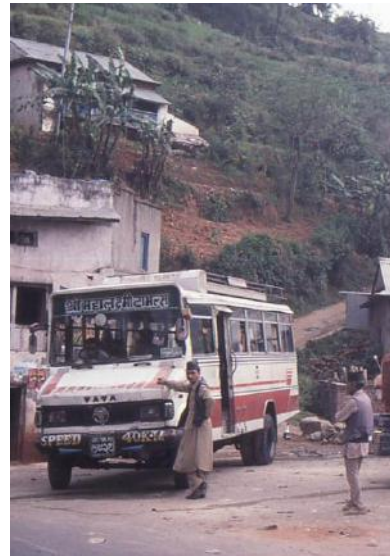
But now that meant a longer walk than would have been needed had we gone there in the first place. Timothy has only one pace of walking – slow and measured – and I had learnt earlier that there is no way of increasing his tempo. But, with a mixture of desperation and optimism, I walked about a metre in front of him to try to drag him on. No success, and soon I had to fall back and fit in with his pace. 'Don't worry; the taxi will only take fifteen minutes if we ask him to go fast.' But still there was no taxi. We trudged on . . . and then we spied one! It was now 6.50. 'Don't worry; the bus is usually late,' said Timothy.

I was relieved to be speeding down the road, while Timothy and the taxi driver conversed in Nepali. Timothy then informed me that this taxi was not licensed to cross the river. We would have to stop and hire another taxi across to the bus station. 'I think there will be another taxi where this one stops,' said Timothy. And there was.

At 7.15 we arrived at the bus station, where there were lots of people but no buses. Timothy wandered around asking any likely looking person where the bus to Pokhara departed from and had it left yet. Inconclusive evidence suggested that the bus had not yet come. Timothy then pointed out that this was not really the bus station. The proper bus station was a couple of minutes away, but was too crowded and dusty, and anyway the bus came this way and would stop to pick up extra passengers if we waved it down. We already had tickets so we had nothing to worry about. There would be seats on the bus. But was there a bus? Yes! At 7.20 it arrived. 'I told you it is often late,' said Timothy.

### **From Pokhara to Kathmandu**

For the return trip to Kathmandu I thought there would be less likelihood of stressful adventures to catch the bus. Again it departed at 7.00 a.m., but this time things would be straightforward. We had no domestic responsibilities to delay our departure (our sleeping place had been the floor of a spare room over a church), so could be on our way to the bus station without hindrance.



*Along the Kathmandu-Pokhara road*

Again we aimed to leave base at 6.15 a.m., and although I suggested we go by taxi, Timothy insistent we use the local bus. It left the terminus just down the road and took only twenty minutes to reach the bus station. Also, it would cost us only ten cents each, whereas the taxi would cost almost a dollar – hardly a prohibitive amount in my view, but a significant waste in the view of a Nepalese. Timothy enjoyed his morning ablutions, and by 6.30 we were on our way to the local bus terminus. Again I tried the ploy of walking a metre ahead to drag him along, but I should have known better.

As we rounded a corner, I could see the local bus, two blocks down the lane, waiting on the road the lane led to. Well at least a bus is there, I thought with some relief. As we crossed an intersection on our way towards it, I saw a taxi pull up and several people get out. 'Why not grab that taxi?' I asked with some optimism. But Timothy can be very stubborn once he has set his mind on a cheaper way of doing things. So it had to be the bus. Then he noticed that one of those who alighted from the taxi was a co-worker, David, returning from a few days' ministry up in the mountains. I had met David the previous week, so waved to him, but Timothy insisted on going over to greet him, ask how his weekend went and tell him about ours.

I deliberately stood my ground, peering hopefully at the waiting bus while Timothy and David occupied themselves in hearty conversation. At length Timothy said he had to go, so ambled back to join me. He began to tell me about David's great weekend when we saw the bus slowly move off. 'Oh, it's going', said Timothy. We were too far away to call out or run for it. 'Never mind, there will be another bus soon.'

Sure enough, another bus pulled in almost immediately, so we climbed aboard. But this was the terminus, so the driver disappeared for a cup of tea, while we sat and waited. Some minutes later another passenger boarded . . . then another . . . and with four passengers the driver thought it worth starting the trip.

At last we were on our way. But it was now 6.45. 'I think the bus should take only fifteen minutes,' said Timothy. During the previous few days, I had been on four local buses in Pokhara and not once had the bus got into top gear. The roads were so badly broken up that buses could merely amble along, negotiating the ruts and potholes. So we jerked our way slowly down the street, but at least we were mobile. Then the bus

turned into a petrol station. After all, this was its first trip for the day, so it had to fill up with fuel. But another bus was ahead of us at the sole pump on the site, so we pulled in behind, and waited.

When the fuelling of the first bus was finished, the pump boy wrote the number of litres on a piece of paper and took it to a man seated at the cash table. The man brought out a calculator and worked out the amount, whereupon the driver then began searching for the money. He retrieved a few notes from his left trouser pocket, a few from his right trouser pocket, a few more from his wallet ('How much? Is that enough yet? What, another twenty?') and after a poke into his shirt pocket, the account was settled. He began walking to his bus ('Hurry up', I'm silently urging him) but then turned back to the man at the cash table. He needed a receipt. So out came the receipt book, in went two pieces of carbon and in due course the receipt was produced.

The driver ambled back and boarded his bus – and then it would not start. So out went the call for help – the pump boy, the man behind the cash table, the ticket boy, our bus driver, our ticket boy, and after much heaving and pushing the monster slowly began to move.

Our bus driver quit the exercise and rolled our bus to the pump. Fuelling complete, the pump boy wrote down the number of litres, the man behind the cash table got out his calculator, the bus driver ferreted around in his left trouser pocket, right trouser pocket, hip pocket, shirt pocket – still not enough. He called out to the ticket boy, who climbed into the bus, found a box under the driver's seat, took out a few more notes and took them to the man behind the cash table. The man behind the cash table then took out his trusty receipt book . . .

We rumbled on and at 7.05 a.m. reached the centre of town. But the bus station was three stops on the other side of town. Timothy, optimistic as ever, said the bus to Kathmandu would probably be late. But even he became concerned when our driver turned off the motor, got out and lit a cigarette. Passengers who had boarded during the journey had all alighted, and Timothy and I were again left sitting, waiting for a few more to board before the driver felt it worth his while to move on.

The cigarette allowed time for a few passengers to board, so the driver started off once more, bouncing and rumbling down the road. Coincidentally, it was again 7.15 when we reached the bus station, again there were lots of people but no buses, and again Timothy informed me that this was not really the bus station. The proper bus station was a couple of minutes away, but was too crowded and dusty, and anyway the bus came this way and would stop to pick up extra passengers if we waved it down. We already had tickets so we had nothing to worry about. There would be seats on the bus. Then, at 7.20, it arrived. 'I told you it is often late,' said Timothy.

## Dogs

Animals of all kinds add colour to one's international experiences, and even add colour to church services, especially when they invite themselves into a building and start honking, crowing, chirping, barking, or making whatever other noise comes most naturally to them. But my most colourful stories concern dogs.

### **The dogs of Thailand**

I am not what is commonly called a dog-lover, which is just as well, otherwise I might not have been able to bear living in Bangkok. In those days it was a city of myriads of horrible, diseased creatures that would make any compassionate person want to put them out of their misery. But with the Buddhist abhorrence of killing animals, the poor things were just left to linger on.

Mind you, some of the dogs knew how to get their own back. On two occasions we read newspaper stories of people being killed by packs of dogs that roamed the streets at night.

In the years that we lived there, the statistic was that one person died of rabies each day. Both Gae and I at different times were bitten by dogs, and when that happens there is no point waiting to see if the dog is rabid. By the time you know, it is too late to begin treatment. There is no alternative but to go to the rabies unit at the hospital and suffer the fourteen-day course of injections.

No one enjoys this fourteen-day routine, but at least I did not have the daily vomiting reaction that Gae had. We also learnt that the smart thing to do when going for the injections was to wear clothing that made for easy baring of the midriff while standing in the open. The queue stretched down the garden path, and staff found it easier to move along the line of patients than to move the line of patients into the surgery. There were usually twenty to thirty people in the queue ahead of me, but it took only a few minutes for the jabber to move along the line and fill the belly with good things. They treated hundreds of people every day.

At a Thai seaside town, an official dog-chaser had been installed in a government-run holiday camp to protect people from stray dogs. The man spent his time moving around the small huts waving his arms and yelling at any dogs that wandered in off the street. When I first saw his antics, I thought he might be an eccentric who imagined himself to be a warden of some sort, so I thought I should compliment him on his fine community spirit. This had nothing to do with community spirit, he replied in a sane, well-spoken manner; he was employed for this job. Curious to know more, I asked if it was combined with his work as a watchman or cleaner. No, he replied, this was his full-time job – and off he went to expel another intruder. He was the most conscientious dog-chaser I have ever met.

### **Dog fights in church**

In several countries I have been interrupted while preaching because of dogs that have started fighting, sometimes inside the church and sometimes outside. Usually, some person with suitably strong voice, arms, legs or feet gets rid of the offending animals.

Malawi has provided some rich church experiences, though not always. In one church the intervention of dogs was but one element that seemed to diminish the seriousness of proceedings. One gets used to the intrusion of outside noise, but this was rather more than usual.

The church building, which was of mud brick with a dirt floor and no seats, was mixed in with all sorts of similarly humble buildings where the absence of fences meant that people felt free to treat all land as common property. Hordes of children



*Scene of a sermon, a dog fight, children and footballers*

were screaming around on one side of the church and a gang of youths was playing football on the other, so there was plenty of noise. And since the building had no doors or windows in the door and window openings, there was no way of keeping the noise out. But the hundred or so people congregated inside had an advantage – a microphone. So while I spoke moderately without a microphone, the pastor interpreted vehemently

with a microphone, which enabled him to drown out the children and footballers outside and, more importantly, two dogs that insisted on coming inside to carry on what appeared to be a fairly serious squabble.

I am not sure how correctly the pastor interpreted my sermon, because he called upon the audience for a Hallelujah or Amen at the most inappropriate points. But people responded on cue, the dogs reappeared through one door and then disappeared through the other, and I managed to finish the sermon.

When I had finished, the pastor was a bit nonplussed when I did not make an altar call for conversions. I began to explain that I had not given a gospel address but, when I saw that he was not comprehending, I decided to avoid the hassle and make an altar call. No one came out. 'Never mind,' the pastor said, 'these are all Christians anyway. But make an appeal for healing, because some of them are sick.' So I asked if any sick people would like prayer and the whole congregation came out! I prayed an appropriate prayer, and then everyone filed out, with warm handshakes at the door. The screaming children came across for a handshake as well, and even a couple of the youths joined in. But the dogs had learnt their lesson and disappeared.

### **Travelling dogs**

Gae's misfortunes with dogs took a different turn on a flight in a small MAF plane in Tanzania. Because she was the smallest, she was squashed into a back seat where she shared the limited room with lots of cargo and a large dog. Unlike the rest of us, the dog became air sick, and kept spilling its unwanted stomach contents over Gae's feet. There was not a lot anyone could do, other than offer sympathy.

Dogs seem to enjoy more privileged treatment in European countries than in Australia. We have been constantly surprised to see them in restaurants and the living areas of hotels. There are signs on the London Underground telling patrons that dogs on escalators must be carried, and in Italy we saw a sign on a ferry stating that dogs occupying a seat had to pay full fare. All over Europe we saw the owners of small dogs carrying them in special bags slung over the shoulder so that the dog could be nursed against the chest.

But my best dog story comes from Russia, when I was with a colleague on a train from St Petersburg to Viborg, the location of a Russian publishing venture. Many people had their dogs with them, some in shoulder bags, some on leashes, and some seated comfortably on the seats along with passengers such as us. The woman opposite had a large dog, and a large ice cream. She had a lick, and then gave the dog a lick. Slowly they worked their way through the ice cream, lick for lick. Gross.

## Preaching and teaching

In the life of a healthy church, many elements interact with each other to ensure a good balance. These include outreach to the lost, pastoral care of believers, instruction in the Scriptures, fellowship in worship, commitment to prayer, partnership in world mission and help of the needy. Many of these elements should be reflected in the meetings of the church, though no single element in itself is an indication of a healthy church.

Some elements, however, may be an indication that certain things are out of balance. When we meet a church that gives the words of men and women a higher place than the Word of God, we sense that something is amiss. The sovereign God may, in his grace, choose to use visions, signs, revelations, feelings, hunches and prophecies, but these are the exception rather than the rule. They are not higher revelations than the Word, nor are they a substitute for it. We can be sure that, if a church is in good health, it will at least assign an important place to preaching and teaching the Word of God.

### The whole counsel of God

When invited to preach in a church in Nairobi, Kenya, I was encouraged about what to expect when the pastor asked if I would speak on Nahum Chapter 3. This was part of a series through the book, which in turn was part of an overall plan of teaching in the church.

How different this was from another Nairobi church I preached in, where no one had any notion of an arranged speaker or topic. What's more, no one seemed to care. Significantly, the quality of worship in the two places bore no comparison. In the first-mentioned church, not only was the worship more Christ-exalting and edifying, but after church we went for lunch to the pastor's home where, with six or seven other Kenyans, we enjoyed a stimulating afternoon of informed discussion.

My greatest encouragement in Kenya came from a senior pastor in a mainline denomination. He had fourteen preachers in his region and, when Gae and I visited him, these men had been using *Bridge Bible Handbooks* for more than a year. It was clear from the stream of people that kept interrupting while we were in his office that he was a people's person, a feet-on-the-ground, hands-in-the-dirt pastor-teacher who loved those to whom he ministered. He had a delightful no-frills attitude and did not mince words in giving us his views on pulpit preaching.

'I want to tell you,' he said, 'that since the men have been using these books, the standard of teaching in these churches has gone up. That is my testimony. Now they are not preaching, but teaching. They are not just shouting and telling stories, but explaining the Bible. I told them that if they want to preach in fiery style they should go outside where all the sinners are, and shout and tell their stories there. But in the pulpit I want them to teach the Word of God. So I gave them your books, one each, and told one man to teach Exodus, another to teach James, another to teach Isaiah, and so on. The people like it and church attendances have gone up. That is my testimony.'

This enthusiastic response to the straight exposition of the Scriptures is what we meet in most countries we visit. Local people have a heart for evangelism but struggle in their teaching. They do not feel confident in the Old Testament, or even parts of the New, and so stick to well-worn stories from the Gospels and favourite sections of the Epistles. Church leaders are concerned about the lack of growth beyond the initial stages. They know that such growth requires teaching in the Word, and that is where we try to help. We begin by sending resources to the leaders, and supplement these resources through training courses, lectures, seminars, camps and other means.

## **A consistent request: expository teaching**

My first night in Nigeria was in Lagos, where I was asked to speak at a church Bible study, preferably on an Old Testament book. Could I do Habakkuk at such short notice? Gladly, I replied. I was given a full hour, though I must admit that I had to leave the building during the singing beforehand, because the sound system was so loud I feared my eardrums would burst. But the audience response to the Bible teaching was wonderful. They understood my English, caught my light humour, and in general were so responsive that I thought, 'If all Nigeria is like this, I am going to have a great time.' I was not disappointed.

At another Nigerian church, in Ibadan, I was asked to preach at consecutive church services, about eight hundred people being expected for the first, and four hundred for the second. On a number of occasions, I have been asked to give the same sermon at consecutive services, but I have difficulty being properly enthused the second time round. So I asked if I could preach a different sermon at the second service. 'Up to you,' was the reply, 'but don't tell anyone. The only reason for two services is that we can't fit everyone in. If people from the first service hear you'll be preaching on something different in the second service, they'll stay on and there'll be no room for the others.'

In another part of the country, a well-known Nigerian preacher and I were to speak at a weekend convention attended by over a thousand people. As always, I asked what time was allotted for each talk. 'An hour and a half. Is that enough?' I thought it probably would be! Admittedly, all the talks at this conference had to be translated.

My fellow-speaker and I decided beforehand that we would both give expository teaching, he from the New Testament and I from the Old. As he moved through several chapters of John's Gospel, I was edified by his teaching. But I have never preached in such atmospherically oppressive conditions. The poorly built and poorly ventilated church accommodated about five hundred people, and the combination of body heat, perspiration and tropic humidity made the air so heavy I felt as if I had to bite it, chew it and then swallow it. After the first session I decided that, when not speaking, I would join the other five hundred who sat on the ground outside.

At the end of the conference, the chairman (a leading pastor in the region) gave a five-minute lecture to all present, especially the pastors and teachers, on the necessity for expository Bible teaching. 'You have had examples throughout this conference of how to do it. Now go and do it. Never mind about all the stories and visions and miracles and illustrations and experiences that fill up so much preaching time. Just go and expound the Bible and show its application, and people will grow. Feed them on the Word, not the chaff.' As I heard him speak, I reflected on his emphasis compared with the entertainment element of much preaching in the modern church.

## **All sorts of challenges**

Stories about Nigeria abound. Never in my life have I been more challenged, inspired, encouraged, awakened, or whatever the word is when one sees Christians who seem closer to the Christianity of the New Testament than many of us are.

That does not mean all Christians or churches in Nigeria are exemplary. Though 20 million out of a population of 120 million claim to be born-again evangelical Christians, not all are fired up to the extent I have suggested. There is much nominalism, extremism and unspirituality, but down the middle of the broad, sometimes shallow, stream of evangelical churches is a deep channel of mature, enlightened, godly and motivated believers. Nigerians in general have lots of drive, even aggression. Among non-Christians this has produced many thugs and scoundrels, but among Christians it has produced some of the best Christian leadership in Africa, and indeed the world.



But I must record one more story of Bible teaching in Nigeria. I had given an exposition of Matthew Chapter 23 to an assembly of about one hundred and fifty evangelists, pastors, elders, teachers and bishops. ('Bishop' is one of several biblical words taken over by some African missions and denominations to denote people in certain senior positions within the organization.) At the end, after comments from members of the platform party, one of the bishops decided to say something.

This bishop had an impressive appearance in his traditional Nigerian garb, and a booming voice to match. His presence filled the room. His remarks, in part, went something like this. 'I have never in my life heard Bible exposition such as we have heard today. As you know, I am a bishop, and we attend lots of functions such as this one today. Usually, we go

through the introductions and speeches, and then we leave. ('That's true,' whispered my Nigerian host sitting beside me.) But today, look, not one of us has left. After hearing the introduction to our brother's talk, I thought I would hear a little more. Then it so gripped me that I would not have got up and left for anything. And now he is finished, and I still want more. I have had a feast, but I am not satisfied. This is what

true Bible exposition does to us. We want it more! We want it more! You know what I feel like? I feel like a young man, and standing before him is a beautiful naked young woman, and I feel in myself, I say to myself: I want her, I want her, I must have her. Please give this to me.' Even my host admitted he had never before heard an illustration quite like that.



*Nigeria: with 'bishops,' 'apostles' and other leaders*

### **Different ways to teach**

Not all Bible teaching generates such enthusiasm. Neither is the greatest reward to receive accolades after a performance at a big function. Some of my most rewarding experiences have been regular teaching, one to one. In Thailand, the thing that brought most personal pleasure was not the spread of my books, but the one-to-one teaching that helped shape the lives of individuals. One was a policeman who became a gifted Bible teacher and elder; the other, a soldier who became a zealous evangelist and church planter.

From Zimbabwe, years after I had visited there, I received an unexpected letter from a man who said, 'I am one of three young men you came to visit one night to my poor house to teach us the Bible for more than three hours. That teaching helped to change my life.'

Often ones or twos, even groups of five or six, have given up several hours or perhaps a full day and come, unscheduled and unannounced, to seek help in knowing God's Word better – half a dozen new converts in Bulgaria, a group of Bible students in north India, three pastors in Vanuatu, two Aboriginal elders in northern Australia, some Bible school lecturers in Myanmar, a group of street evangelists in Italy, a pastor in Malawi, four university students in Sudan . . .

### **Choice of subject**

When invited to preach in church, especially for a series of talks, I usually like to discuss with the conveners what might be suitable. In most cases, we can reach a happy agreement. Sometimes, abroad or at home, I am asked to speak on a certain topic or book, and this is always heartening, because it shows that people are thinking seriously

about how to feed the church. I have already given examples from Kenya and Nigeria of invitations to speak on less popular parts of the Bible. But there have been many similar requests: for Deuteronomy in Bucharest, Romania; for Ezra in Kanchanaburi, Thailand; for Leviticus in Delhi, India; for the inter-testamental period in Tirana, Albania; for Joel in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

What I find puzzling, however, is to have given talks on an unusual biblical book that have brought appreciative comment ('that was helpful,' 'I didn't know that book could be so interesting,' 'I wondered beforehand what we'd get out of that book, but it has turned out to be very relevant'), and then be asked, 'But why did you choose to teach such a book?' I would have thought that the person had already answered the question. Another answer would be, 'Because it is part of the Bible.'

In spite of what the apostle Paul says, some people seem to think that the Old Testament is not profitable for instructing and equipping God's people for everyday living. Interestingly, these disconcerting attitudes to the Bible's lesser-known books have appeared more among established churches than among churches that are new and growing. Perhaps those two features, life and growth, are significant. Where they are present, there we shall usually find a hunger for the Word.

## Getting around Myanmar

When we are living in one country, we find it hard to imagine that things are not the same in another. In spite of my many travels and strict packing list, I still have to fight the tendency to put in items that will be useless where I am going. For example, because I am packing during winter at home, I feel I should put in at least some warm clothing, even though I am going to a country that is always hot. I know things are different there, but my current environment distorts my view.

The same problem applies to ticketing. Because at home I just pick up the phone and make a booking, I think that someone in the other country can make some internal transport bookings for me. Rarely is it as easy as that. When I was planning a trip to Myanmar, that pathetically run-down country that was once the thriving nation of Burma, friends wrote to say they were not able to book internal flights for me. My initial reaction was that they were making excuses. I misjudged them badly.

### First of all, the currency

No nation that I have visited has a currency system quite like that of Myanmar. To start with, every international passenger arriving at the place of entry is required to change \$US300 before proceeding further than the immigration barrier. This is especially tough on travellers such as a married couple staying three or four days at a downtown 3-star hotel in the capital, Yangon (once known as Rangoon). Wages are so poor and prices so cheap that to spend \$US600 in three or four days would seem impossible – and unspent money cannot be changed back.

Actually, the money one gets for the US dollars is not really money. The government takes the US currency and gives in return a sheaf of Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs). These look like the play money used in Monopoly, and are in US denominations, the largest being \$20. All expenditure that the government can control, such as hotel bills and internal air travel, must be paid for in FECs.

The government has fixed an official exchange rate for the local currency unit, the kyat (pronounced *chat*), of 6 kyats to the dollar, though in reality anyone can exchange FECs for kyats at a street-side rate of 350 per dollar (at the time of writing this story). By forcing people to pay in FECs, the government ensures it receives from imported foreign currency many times what it is entitled to. But that does not work as simply as the government hoped. The United Nations stepped in and tried to impose a rate of 200 kyats per dollar. Nevertheless, once a person has FECs and that is the only payment the government accepts, the rate can be just about anything the government imposes.

Kyats come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 45, 50, 90, 100, 200 and 500. With a 500 note worth less than \$US1.50 in real terms, even a little money means a very fat wallet. A lot of money requires a bag to carry it.

The reason for the odd sized denominations, such as 15, 45 and 90, is that numerology is one of the many superstitions of Burmese Buddhism. The government is especially superstitious and has a particular liking for the number 9 (and therefore 6 and 3). So the explanation for the 15 kyat note is that  $1+5 = 6$ , and for the 45 note that  $4+5 = 9$ . The 90 note is the luckiest of all. Some Burmese joke at having to be clever mathematicians, but they do so in a cautious, soft voice, and only when they are confident nobody else is within earshot.

### Costs for foreigners and locals

I had been to Myanmar before and was familiar with all the above. But this time I was to go up-country to Kalay in Chin State. There are many Christians among the Chin people, which means there are many churches and Bible schools. Since some of

my books have been translated into Falam (one of several widely used Chin languages) leaders were keen that I speak in as many places and see as many Christian ministries as possible. Only when I arrived in Yangon did I learn that travelling to Kalay was not as easy as I had imagined.



*Yangon, capital of Myanmar*

For various reasons the two Chin people expected to go with me were not able to, but even if they were, I still needed to be accompanied by an official 'tourist guide'. The government will not allow foreigners into Chin State without a guide. The stated reason is to protect the foreigners, but the actual reason is to protect the government. They do not want people to see anything they do not want them to see. I then discovered that not only was I required to pay the government's fixed rate of \$US30 per day for the guide (paid in FECs), but I had also to pay for the guide's fares, accommodation and meals. My Chin friends had a Christian friend, also Chin, who was a guide, and were confident that with him there would be no problems.

In my ignorance I had expected a day-long road trip to Kalay, but was told the roads and buses were so bad the overland trip took three days. However, a plane flew the journey in two hours, four times a week. A return ticket was \$US260.

Two tickets at that price was enough to make me cancel the proposal, but then I was told that I need not pay that price for the guide. I could pay his fare in kyats, which at the streetside exchange rate would cost me only \$US34. That is what my own fare would have cost had I been able to pay at the streetside exchange rate of 350 kyats to the dollar, but the government forced me to pay in FECs at a rate they had fixed, in this case 45 kyats to the dollar. Likewise I was forced to pay my hotel room in FECs. This time the rate worked out at 100 kyats to the dollar, compared with 350 that I got along the street to pay the same tariff in kyats for my guide.

I thought I was beginning to see how the money market worked, but subsequently I heard about or met so many other circumstances that I never did arrive at any formula that could be relied upon consistently. The endemic corruption and injustice keep people constantly looking for ways to bypass the system.

When told about all these costs, I began to debate in my mind whether it was worth going to Kalay. I was angry at the official discrimination of which I was the victim. My inclination was to remain in Yangon, and give the local Christians the money that the government would take from me through the airline and the guide. I told my Christian friends to go home and talk about it and then let me know their views the next day. In the morning they returned to say they appreciated my thoughts for them and could indeed use the money, but said my visit to the Chin people would be worth more than money could buy.

As usual, I was humbled by the attitude of the local people. Often, Christians with very little are so unmercenary, while we in affluent countries can measure only in dollars. On reflection, I concluded that the price I had to pay for injustice was small compared with what the local people had to pay, day after day, year after year.

### **Applying for a ticket**

Now that I had agreed to go, I decided to buy the tickets. But it is not as easy as that. First, tickets can only be bought the day before the flight. Second, the guide must

buy his own ticket and I must reimburse him. Third, everyone has to lodge an application for a ticket, and only after that is approved can the ticket be issued. This applies to foreigners (who pay in FECs) as well as to locals (who pay in kyats).

My guide could not help me through this process, because he had some other business to attend to, but he gave me a photocopy of his official guide's permit so that I could present it as evidence to the airline. My local friend, Lincoln, a dedicated servant of God, volunteered to go with me and help me through the process.

We were to go to the airline office at nine o'clock the morning before the flight. It was a decrepit building covered with fungus and peeling paint, but with a small sign that said 'Myanmar Airlines – Domestic Section'. We ascended a dozen steps to a woman seated behind a grill



*Office of Myanmar's national airline*

who sold the forms upon which we had to write our application. The form cost 30 kyats. It was of the kind one meets in many poor countries – printed on what looks and feels like thin brownish blotting paper made from badly recycled newsprint. It was torn off about one third the way up a foolscap-size sheet, and printed crookedly with ink that was fuzzy and blotchy. The entire text was in Burmese, all loops and circles, but Lincoln filled it out for me.

With the completed form we then went around the corner and down a lane about one hundred metres to another entrance, where all applications were lodged. Again we ascended a dozen steps, and these opened on to a huge room of the threatening kind one sees all around poor countries. The floor was bare, and the wall was painted from the floor up to one metre with a dark brown sludge colour that must be specially manufactured for government offices in such countries. Above the dark brown was light blue grubby paint to the ceiling. Against the walls were stacks of files, all brown with age, tied with tape, piled higgledy-piggledy, and apparently undisturbed for years.

Behind the high counter that separated this area from the public sat inhospitable government officials, well protected from the public by a steel grill that stretched from the counter to the ceiling. Scattered around the huge expanse of floor on the public's side were three or four bare wooden tables, crudely made, but the only facility available if one needed to lean on something to write. There were no seats. Nine of the sixteen fluorescent tubes were alight, the others either missing or broken. One of the eight ceiling fans was working.

Dutifully, we handed in our application to an official. Not enough; we needed a photocopy of my passport. Off we went up the lane in search of a shop that had a photocopying service. When we eventually found one, the operator eyed the passport for size, and then searched through a pile of blank paper that seemed to have every standard and non-standard size one could imagine. Having found a piece that was no bigger than required, she pulled it out, straightened out the wrinkles and corners by 'ironing' it on her sarong-clad thigh, and then photocopied the first page of the passport.

I decided we should take a copy of the visa as well, so the woman searched through the pile again, found another suitably sized scrap of paper, 'ironed' it on her thigh and fed it through the machine. Soon we were heading back to the airline office.

Without any fuss, the official accepted the application and photocopy. But that was all for now. They would have to process the application, and I was to come back at 11.00 a.m. to another entrance, 'around the corner', to see if the application had been approved, and if so to pay for and collect the ticket. Lincoln had to leave me at this point, as he had lectures to give at a Bible college, but he assured me there would be no problem. So I filled in time by reading a book I had knowingly brought with me.

### **Issuing the ticket**

At eleven o'clock I entered the huge room where I was to pick up the ticket. It was almost identical to the former room, except that the upper part of the wall was light green instead of light blue, two of the eight fans worked and there was no steel grill separating the officials from the public. No other customers were there. Of the five people behind the counter, one was asleep, two were reading newspapers and two were playing chess. But they gave me prompt and polite attention.

Although the people behind the counter had virtually no English, they knew what I was there for, because issuing tickets to foreigners was apparently all they did. I had come to the conclusion, from a faded KLM poster and a small English-language advertisement on the wall, that this office must have been exclusively for foreigners. Locals collected their tickets by joining the rugby scrum in another office.

My ticket, however, was not yet ready, so I was told to wait twenty minutes. But when I returned after twenty minutes, I was told to come back at 12.30. When I asked the reason for the delay, the two people discussed in their own language how to respond and then, pointing upstairs, said something of which I understood only two words, 'manager' and 'do'. Having lived in Thailand, I knew what this meant. It meant that the manager (probably an army general) was the only one who could approve the ticket, but he was playing golf, running his taxi company, organizing his restaurant, attending a function, or engaging in some activity essential to national security. He had not yet arrived at the office, but he would turn up in due course.

When I returned at 12.30, the people behind the counter greeted me with smiles and triumphantly produced the papers that showed my tickets had been approved. But first I had to pay for them. I was given a piece of paper, of the same horrible kind as before but at least printed in English, upon which I had to repeat the details of my passport, lodgings, visa and foreign exchange authorization (the one received at the airport upon arrival). Then I had to list the numbers and denominations of all the FECs with which I was paying the \$US260. All the FECs had 9-digit numbers, not in consecutive order, and I had to list all thirteen of them. They then checked all my FECs against the paperwork and wrote out the tickets.

They had to issue two single tickets, one for the outward journey the next day, and the other for the return journey, but this second ticket was not dated, because I could only book a seat the day before I flew back. Everyone assured me I would have no trouble securing a seat on the flight, as I had already paid in dollars. Locals have great difficulty getting on flights and consequently great difficulty in planning ahead. Sometimes they must wait days, even weeks, and then must pay up to twice the price, because army people (scalpers) buy up tickets in advance to sell to the highest bidder. Later, when I reached Kalay, I met people who had been waiting around for a week till a flight had a seat available for them.

### **The guide and his preacher**

Upon arriving in Kalay, I had to report to the police and military. At last my guide seemed to be of some use, because he took my passport and did everything for me. There seemed to be no problems, though I was not allowed to go more than four miles from the town centre. The first place at which I lectured was a theological seminary, and almost immediately the Military Intelligence (MI) people turned up to check things



out. I did not know this at the time (because I was lecturing), but was told later that they caused no trouble.

Although the MI people did not bother me, they did bother my guide. Each day he had to give them a written account of where I had been, what I had done, who had been



*Street in Kalay*

my interpreter, and so on. As the Saturday afternoon was free, my guide went to visit some friends while I worked in my hotel room. He said there was nothing to stop me going for a walk down the street by myself, so I strolled four hundred metres past the unpainted timber shop-houses that lined the street, turned round and came back. I attracted lots of attention, because Chin State had only been opened to foreigners a few months earlier and I was something of

a novelty. I had also been the only foreigner on the 76-seater plane, in spite of there being an entire government office devoted to issuing tickets to foreigners.

That evening the MI were around to question my guide why he allowed me to walk down the street by myself. My guide was angry and had a bold encounter with the MI, but he paid them nothing – though they were round again the next morning to ask what we intended doing for the day.

### **The return flight**

I was planning to return to Yangon on the Monday morning, so while I was preaching in churches on the Sunday, my guide tried to book a seat on the plane. But late in the afternoon he had the sad news that the plane was cancelled and he would have to try again the next day.

After hanging around the airport all day Monday, the guide succeeded in getting me booked on the next day's flight. (He himself was to return to Yangon later in the week.) On Tuesday morning he took me to the airport and shepherded me through all the examinations and searches, but then I faced a delay because the plane had not arrived. So, along with the other passengers, I sat for four hours sweltering in an unlined tin-roofed shelter that served as a confinement area for travellers. As the only foreigner there, I was under the watchful eye of the MI, so rather than do anything that would rouse their suspicion (such as talking with other passengers or writing notes), I spent the time reading.

Finally, we were airborne. The plane made its halfway stop at Mandalay and various people disembarked, including a group of military 'brass'. When we were about to take off, a man came and sat next to me. I recognized him as a Christian I had spoken to after one of my meetings in Kalay. I was surprised to see him on the plane and asked where he had come from. Kalay, he said. He had seen me at the airport there, but dared not speak to me, otherwise the MI would be around to hassle him and his family indefinitely. He apologized for this, but said learning how to live with the MI was the only way to survive. Now that we were leaving Mandalay, he felt it safe to talk to me.

I have not talked here about my work in Kalay, but I had a highly profitable time lecturing in Bible colleges, preaching in churches, meeting key Christian leaders, speaking to a variety of Christian groups and working out arrangements with translators and publishers. But I was pleased enough to be out of the place. One must be careful even in Yangon, but Yangon looked free and open after Kalay.

## Occasions

When in a country other than my own, I find it embarrassing when my hosts, perhaps out of politeness, ask me to speak at some ceremony for which I am not suited. Sometimes I manage to persuade them I am not an appropriate speaker, though other times I feel it right to accept their invitation. But it has landed me in some unusual situations.

### Awards and speeches

In my so-called home countries, Australia and Thailand, I am comfortable enough with the cultural environment not to be ‘thrown’ by sudden invitations to do the unexpected. But I had just begun to have some experience beyond those two countries when I found myself invited, on the day of my arrival for the first time in India, to present awards at a leading Bible college. To add to my unease, it was India’s national independence day, so the occasion served two purposes. I protested to the principal that I was not an appropriate person to have a prominent role on such an occasion, and after some discussion he was partly persuaded. We reached agreement that I would make no speech and present only one of the minor awards. Seeing I was an Australian, we settled on the sports awards.

A pleasing aspect of the ceremony from my point of view was the generous attitude that speeches and prayers displayed towards former colonial masters. The foreign rulers had no right to be there in the first place, and the Indians were glad they were now gone, but they were grateful for benefits that resulted. Moreover, they prayed God’s blessings upon those who had once subjugated them.

Presenting awards at Bible colleges becomes a predictable activity for a person doing my kind of work, so I shall refrain from further stories – except for one. This was at a big-name seminary in Nigeria that was operated as a joint venture by the Anglican and Methodist churches. I had met the principal the day before, so thought I knew what to expect.

The service, which was for graduating students, was on a Sunday night and it began with a standard Prayer Book service. I have been at such services where there has been a fine spirit of worship, but this was not one of them. There was no life in anything that was said or done, the hymn singing was terrible, and everything seemed to be culturally out of place, especially when contrasted with the vibrant, full-on worship at the church where I had preached that morning.

Then, at a certain point in proceedings, the place erupted. It seemed as if someone had suddenly given a signal, blown a whistle, or perhaps set off an electric charge hidden under the white gowns that draped the graduates. They suddenly went leaping and shouting and praising God – or so it appeared. While catcalling and dancing, they moved themselves into single file, each grabbing the waist of the person in front, and set off on an exuberant crocodile march (or Chinese lion dance, if that conveys the picture better). They headed outside, around the building, back through the main entrance and down the central aisle towards the adorned altar, which by now also seemed out of place.

My Nigerian guide beside me got the giggles. ‘They’re like Pentecostals,’ she said. I found this an interesting observation, because the church she herself belonged to might appear to conservative churchgoers from my own country as being ‘like Pentecostals’. But, as I have found in many parts of Africa, Christians whose style of public worship is more expressive than mine make a distinction between Pentecostalism and mainstream evangelicalism, whether labelled charismatic or not.



I was wondering how I would get either myself or my hearers into the right frame of mind for the homily I had prepared to follow. My unease worsened when selected graduates read short stories and ditties they had composed in celebration of the seminary life they were about to leave. Even the presentation of book awards was accompanied by interjected puns and quips from the audience. Everyone was, to say the least, uninhibited.

A hymn and a prayer settled things down (yes, the Prayer Book was still there) and then I arose to speak. I opened my mouth and with the very first word the lights went out. Power failures were a regular occurrence all over Nigeria – and by ‘regular’ I mean every few hours, not every few days. No generator was available but they gave me a torch, which helped me to read but not to speak. I just had to shout as loudly as possible. We should never under-estimate what the preached Word can do, but on this occasion I felt excused if my faith was small.

### **Births, marriages and deaths**

In my country, a person has to be a registered marriage celebrant to conduct weddings, but in many countries no such requirement exists. A marriage is registered at a government office, much as a birth or death is registered. Officialdom is no more concerned with a public wedding ceremony than it is with a celebration for a birth or mourning for a death. In Thailand, for example, I may conduct a Christian wedding service much as I would in Australia, but the service has no legal relevance.

Christian leaders may enjoy conducting wedding ceremonies for Christians they know and love, because of the personal relationships involved. But something is lacking when I am asked to give the pastoral address at a wedding mainly because I happen to come from a far country. For the same reason I have been asked, in various countries, to give pastoral addresses for the blessing of a new baby, the celebration of a birthday and the burial of the dead, always for people I have never known. I realize that some pastors are doing this sort of thing all the time within their own communities, but when one is no more than a foreign visitor, the exercise lacks something important.

In Zambia I felt very out of place when asked to speak at the funeral of two men who had just died in tragic circumstances. A group of us had driven out to a bush village for a special conference, but upon arrival found the place in mourning.

A local Christian, a farmer, had decided to deepen a dried-up well, but before going down the well had dropped in a quantity of dry grass and sticks, and set it alight. The purpose was to kill any snakes that might have been lurking there. The son was then let down the well, but sudden cries from the deep indicated something was wrong. After a long silence, the father decided to go down to see what had happened, but soon he also began to cry out. Then, again, silence. Not wanting to risk another life, the bystanders sent to the nearest town for the fire rescue service, which arrived several hours later. The firemen, having concluded that the burnt rubbish had left the bottom of the well full of deadly carbon monoxide, put on oxygen masks, descended the well and brought up the two dead bodies.

Preparations for the funeral began immediately. The man who was the chief elder turned out also to be the chief organizer, coffin-maker and gravedigger. He insisted I speak at the two morning sessions of the conference as planned, if only to keep the villagers out of his way and put their minds on to something else. It was a sad day, and preaching under such conditions was a tough assignment.

Late that same afternoon all was ready for the funeral. Organizers insisted that I be the speaker, and I equally insisted that a local person would be better. We compromised by agreeing that I would have a short time to say something reassuring from the Bible, and the local chief elder would have a longer time to say something suitable to the grieving family and the assembled villagers.

By this time the number of villagers had grown to several hundred. The non-Christians among them resorted to the customary wailing as a public display of grief, but the Christians knew by experience how to deal with this. They began singing hymns, loud and long, to drown out the wailers. (I was told they would use the same tactic throughout the night.) The chief elder managed to get silence before I began to speak, so I proceeded uninterrupted, but when he began to speak, the wailing started up again, first in one place and then in another. He was not going to tolerate this.

I could not understand what the man was saying, for he was speaking in the local language, but his tone and manner enabled me to interpret him: 'Shut up! Shut up, I said! Bag it! You over there too, shut up! Shut up!!! Cut the racket! Just shut up, the lot of you!!!' If results were any indication, I interpreted him correctly. He moved from one section of the crowd to another, shutting them all up till he was able to proceed with his sermon uninterrupted.

The tragedy of losing a husband and son (or husband and father-in-law) was bad enough, but the two widows would lose even more. The father's relatives were not Christians and, according to their custom, the brothers of a dead man had unhindered right to plunder his possessions. The widow, and indeed her widowed daughter-in-law, would have their houses stripped of everything worth taking, even kitchen utensils, and they would be left with little more than the clothes they wore.

As usual, the Christians would come to the rescue and, so far as their scant resources allowed, try to re-equip the grieving women with the necessities for living. Such occasions highlight, in more ways than one, the differences that Christian faith brings to individual life and community values.



*Elder, coffin-maker, crowd controller*

## Dangers

It is disappointing how people often assume, without any rational basis, that when we are in strange places or among those of different appearance or language, we are in some sort of danger. Many people are untrusting, even fearful, of those who do not look like them or speak their language.

### **Streets and lanes**

People's fear of things that are strange was driven home to me one night through a question that was interjected while I was showing pictures to a group of Christians in Australia. The pictures were of Kathmandu, Nepal, where I had been lecturing each day at a number of Bible schools. I had made myself familiar with the system of quaint lanes, so that with some brisk walking and a good memory for landmarks I could cover a lot of territory and get myself from one venue to the next each day.

At this point someone from the audience interjected the question. Was it really safe to walk all these lanes? I was a little taken aback, because until the question was asked I had never really stopped to think about it – other than to take the sorts of precautions I would take anywhere. The thing about the question that jolted me was that it showed how people view with suspicion those who look different from us.

The only place where I have ever been threatened with a mugging was in my own city of Brisbane. I had arrived late at night at the interstate rail terminal, phoned Gae to come and collect me, and while waiting on the footpath was menaced by two youths. The only things that saved me were some desperate prayers, cool talking, quick footwork and the arrival of Gae with the car just as they were closing in for the kill.

Gae and I have often said how much safer we felt at night in Bangkok than in Brisbane – or any other Australian city, for that matter. In many parts of Asia, whether day or night, there always seem to be people around – eating, selling, talking or just coming and going. Greater numbers give a feeling of greater safety.

Throughout my ministry in foreign countries, only twice have I ever felt in danger of my life. On neither of these occasions, however, was the threat from street lawlessness. That is not to say that there are no dangers or that everyone can expect a trouble-free ministry. Some of my expatriate missionary friends have been attacked, shot, imprisoned and even killed in the course of their ministry. The church worldwide may be growing at a greater rate than ever before, but it is also at greater risk than ever before.

But my two experiences have nothing specifically to do with suffering for the sake of the gospel, and involve no heroic activity. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

### **Escape from Laos**

The first of the two experiences I refer to occurred in 1968, when I was conducting Bible teaching meetings in the south of Laos. The Thai and Lao languages are so closely related that careful preaching in Thai is readily understood by the Lao congregations.

It was the time of the Vietnam War, and the pro-American government of Laos was under attack by the Pathet Lao, local counterpart of the Viet Cong. I was based with an American missionary couple in Kengkok when news arrived that several hundred Pathet Lao had taken control of a town about 10 km east. Over the next two days, while we continued our ministry in the local area, news arrived of two further conquests by the Pathet Lao, one in a town 7 kms to the south-east, the other in a larger

town 25 kms to the south. According to our original plan, we should already have been in that town, but the missionaries' Jeep had broken an axle, which prevented us from going.

Late the next day, villagers brought news that an estimated six hundred rebels had been seen only 6 kms away and were heading towards our town. It seemed they were planning to take the town that night, and local church leaders advised that we leave immediately. But the broken axle that prevented us going into one town now prevented us from leaving another.



*Kengkok main street*

Only one other vehicle was available, a beaten-up Jeep used as a sort of tractor in the USAID storage yard. We made radio contact with the USAID base at Savannakhet on the Thai border, and a helicopter was put on standby to evacuate

us if the rebels moved any closer. We packed bare essentials, prepared the Jeep for a rendezvous on the safer side of town, and prayed. As night fell, planes from Thailand began flying over the area, dropping flares that lit up the region in the hope it would prevent the rebels from moving under cover of darkness.

This was the first time the missionaries had been forced to prepare to evacuate and, as if refusing to believe such a thing could happen, they decided everyone was over-reacting. The best thing to do was go to bed and get some sleep. At sunrise we piled into the Jeep and headed for Savannakhet.

As things turned out, nothing happened. But a year or so later, when a similar crisis arose, the outcome was tragic. This time the attack was so sudden and vicious that my American friends had no way of crossing the rebel-held town centre to rescue two single women missionaries who lived on the other side. My two friends barely escaped with their lives, the two single women were shot dead, and two single men missionaries were marched off to Vietnam, where they remained prisoners till the end of the war.

### **Wild seas in the Solomons**

The only other time I had the feeling I might not see the next day was in the Solomon Islands in 1983. Michael Maeliau, perhaps the Solomons' best-known church leader, was taking me, along with a New Zealand missionary, from one part of Makira island to another for a teaching program with local pastors. The journey would normally be a six-hour ride in a 'canoe' – a six-metre aluminium shell without seats or roof and driven by an outboard motor. The canoe driver, a local man who knew the seas well, delayed departure because of bad weather, since much of the journey would be through the open sea from one headland to the next. In the end he could wait no longer and, with what we thought considerable optimism, decided to set off.

Very soon the man's optimism began to disappear – though I marvelled at his skill in handling the frighteningly wild sea. He knew exactly when to open the throttle and burst forward to climb the waves, and exactly when to throttle back as we settled into the troughs. But my admiration gradually turned to apprehension and then to outright terror. Each wave looked like a mountain as it towered six to ten metres above us, and each trough looked like an abyss as we peered into its distant depths.

The driver seemed to know when to take us close to rocky headlands in search of less turbulent waters, and when to take us so far out to sea that we could barely see the land. The canoe was filling with water as the waves crashed over its shallow sides, and we and all our gear were soaking wet; but no one spoke. We just kept frantically

bailing out the water as best we could, all to the accompaniment of the 'throttle-on, throttle-back' sound of the brave driver.

Finally, Michael spoke. Did the driver think we should go on? 'No!' He was as scared as we were! But he held his nerve, maintained his skilful manipulation of this aluminium shell, and headed for a distant shore where we could see the outline of huts through the rain. As we edged closer to the shore, we became aware that the village people had seen our plight and were running up and down the beach, waving madly in an effort to direct us to a safe place where we could beach the canoe. But by now the waves were breaking like surf. Only a miracle, it seemed, could prevent the canoe from capsizing as the driver manoeuvred it towards the spot designated by the villagers.

When we eventually beached the canoe, the villagers seemed almost as relieved as we were. They took us into their bamboo huts and gave us clothes to wear while we hung ours out to dry. They also gave us food and drink, one of them having shinned up a towering palm to pick two coconuts for us.

We were all so exhausted after four hours of battling the high seas that we lay down and slept. When we awoke, the sea had calmed considerably, and an hour or so later the driver decided to set out again. We were still only half way to our destination, but our immense gratitude to God for bringing us this far led easily to faith that he would carry us safely for the remainder of the journey.

Only when we were back in the canoe and heading for our goal did Michael tell us that, over a lifetime of canoe travel through the seas of the Solomons, he had never before been in sea like that. 'To be honest,' he said, 'I thought we were not going to make it.'

## From Bangkok to books

Writers are readily identified with the books they write and, because of this, some might think that my main work has been writing books. This is not so. Writing books has been only a small part of my ministry, and even then has come about as a by-product of something else – evangelism, church planting, Bible teaching.

The starting point for my publications was not, ‘I would like to write a book’. My ministry is part of the joint work of two people, Gae and me, and our starting point has always been, ‘We want to make known the gospel to those who do not know it’; or, ‘We want to plant a church where there is none’; or, ‘We want to build a church out of converts, not out of people who transfer from other churches’. This was what took us to Thailand and later engaged us in Australia.

### **Starting in Bangkok**

When we arrived in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1965, we were an energetic young couple who had been enthusiastic workers in churches in Australia. We had not thought in detail about how we might carry out our work in Bangkok. Our assumption was that we would spend some time learning the language and then go about our work as we had previously – start a Sunday school, youth group, women’s meeting, and so on. But during our two years of language study, we had to re-examine not only the way we thought and spoke, but also the way we went about things in general. Probably the most effective way to enter the world of others is through their language, and in doing this we had to rethink all our former Christian activities.

Language learning is not something confined to the activities of a schoolroom. From the time of our arrival in Bangkok, we had got to know Thai people, some of whom were Christians we met through fellow missionaries, and others non-Christians who lived in our neighbourhood. Within days of starting language study, we were using whatever Thai we had with these people. In truth, we had little alternative, because English was so limited in Thailand that if we could not communicate in the local language, we were not likely to accomplish very much.

### **A new mode of expression**

I was determined to be so saturated with Thai that I could speak, think, read and write Thai as fluently as I could English, though I had no idea at the time what a tough assignment this would be. For the first year, I decided to read no English but my Bible and the mail that came from overseas, and to speak no English to anyone but the family. Little did I realize that the discipline I had committed myself to was extremely difficult, almost impossible, to maintain and, worse still, meant being brainwashed. It was a painful exercise.

In contrast to many Indo-European languages, where chief difficulties for native English-speakers are with structure or grammar, the chief difficulties with many East Asian languages lie with pronunciation. They have many more sounds than we are used to, and these are overlaid by a system of fixed tones that speakers of non-tonal languages have great difficulty understanding and articulating. If words are not articulated correctly, the sentence may be meaningless, even if grammatically correct. In comparison with pronunciation difficulties, reading and writing the complicated script of some of these languages might almost be considered straightforward.

Learning to hear and reproduce sounds with precision was of benefit not only for Thai but also for English, and proved helpful when I moved among a variety of languages in the years ahead.

By nature I tend to have mental images of what I read and hear, and this helped greatly in learning to read Thai. Almost from the day of my introduction to the Thai script I found myself trying to read whatever writing crossed my path – signs in buses, advertisements on shops, notices along the roadside, print on wrapping paper. Years later I learnt that I had become a curiosity to teachers at the language school because of my early attempts to write ‘essays’ – rather like a pre-school child whose first attempts at writing amuse the parents. At that stage I was not aware I was doing anything unusual, and had no idea that God might be directing me towards a ministry of Thai writing.



*Signs along the roadside*

Language study was a full-time occupation, with four hours at school each morning, another four hours of exercises at home in the afternoon, and an hour or so of conversation with local people each night. The work was habit-breaking and mind-bending, but after seven months I was able to preach my first sermon in Thai. It was only a five-minute discourse, written out and corrected by a teacher beforehand, and then memorized and delivered with as much naturalness as I could fake.

After further short discourses, and employing the same methodology, I embarked upon public prayer, usually the most difficult exercise for non-native speakers in any language. In time I was able to preach and pray more frequently, at greater length and without memorization, but by this time I had learnt that writing helped towards clarification and precision.

## **Telling others**

During this time of language study, I had begun conducting Bible study classes with interested people, both Christian and non-Christian. This involved a lot of conversational interaction, which meant there was no place for memorization. But I still wrote out the essence of what I wanted to say, and found it helpful to put this on paper that I could give to students. I also used what I could of the available Christian literature in Thai. It was, however, fairly meagre, consisting mainly of gospel tracts or booklets translated from English.

The notes I prepared for our non-Christian friends set out to explain the Christian understanding of subjects such as God, sin, Jesus, repentance and faith. Through repeated use, the notes were refined and expanded, till one day it occurred to me that we could produce them, inexpensively, in booklet form for easier use in our evangelistic outreach. The usefulness of this booklet encouraged me to write a second, explaining what the Bible is and how we can read and understand it. Other booklets followed, all of them aiming to explain Christian belief for non-Christians or new Christians. In time a local ministry published the material in five books to become known as the *Basic Christianity Series*.

We were convinced, however, that the best way to explain the gospel was to use the Bible itself, and our *Basics* material was used mainly to prepare people to read the Bible. In general, we chose one biblical book, moved through it in a relaxed kind of explanation, and then trusted the Bible to do its work in people’s hearts – admittedly, with challenging questions from us at appropriate points. Through systematic house visitation, literature distribution and recommendations from those already interested, the number of Bible teaching sessions grew.

These sessions operated on a weekly basis, varied from six to fifteen a week, and were held in any convenient place – our home, another’s home, a school, university,





*Small Bible study group*

police barracks, hospital, shop, factory or army camp. By this time our home had become a centre of care and hospitality where the local Thais came and went freely and constantly. Gae seemed to be always involved with people who were eating with us or staying with us, all of which helped enlarge and prepare our field of pastoral evangelism. (The development of this ministry in other

countries is discussed in the chapter 'Reaching neighbourhood families' in *Making Sense*, and in the chapter 'Teaching non-Christians' in *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*.)

To give people further background to the world of the Bible, I began writing notes on Acts and other biblical books. The reason for choosing Acts was that, though we had used a Bible Society *Selections from the Gospels* to introduce people to Jesus, the book of Acts focused their attention on the need to respond to the gospel. Acts goes on to show how churches start, grow and function, which was what we were concerned with in Bangkok. It also introduces us to Paul's writings and so prepares the way for an introduction to the entire New Testament.

I kept writing notes to help eager learners understand these things, and in time the notes became a book. I did not expect it to be anything more than a helpful background, but as I taught other New Testament books I wrote further notes, and these grew into further books.

### **A self-functioning church**

The above account spans the four-and-a-half years of our first term in Bangkok, but it deals more with the origins of my books than with the origins of the suburban church we planted in Bangplut. We wanted to evangelize, make disciples and plant a church that would be self-functioning before we reached the end of our first term. The period of language study, interwoven with the early evangelistic efforts outlined above, was a period of re-thinking many issues, and these included the church.

For the first time, we began to look at the New Testament in a setting different from what we had been accustomed to in Australia. Only then did we become aware that many of the things we assumed to be part of church life were not in the Bible at all. There were no buildings specially erected as meeting places, no programs for church activities, and no order of service to designate the number or length of songs, prayers, readings or sermons. What's more, there were no Sunday schools, youth groups, gospel meetings or women's meetings.

This is not to suggest that these things are unimportant or unbiblical. They may indeed be relevant to the essentials of church life, but they do not constitute the essentials. We began to see that it is possible to spend so much time and effort trying to get the mechanics of things right – evangelism, prayer, teaching, fellowship, worship – that we spend little time actually doing the things themselves.

We saw also that the more activities we started, the more those activities would depend on our presence, know-how and finances. Consequently, the more difficult it would be to hand over those activities to the local believers when we left. So we started no formal activities – no Sunday school, no youth group, and no special meeting other than the once-a-week meeting for worship, communion, prayer and teaching. The point is not that we considered such activities to be wrong; merely that *we* were not the ones to start them.



Our focus was on evangelizing and making disciples through individual contacts and small groups, something that local believers also learnt to do. They were taught how to preach in church, and in due course elders were appointed. When the local believers decided they wanted to start a children's or youth work, we gave whatever help we could, and where necessary took them to appropriate training agencies.

As a result, any formal church activity that the local believers started was theirs from the beginning. The question of our having to 'hand it over to the locals' never arose, because it was never ours in the first place. When the time came for us to leave, the leadership and functions of the church carried on as they had before. (Further comments on the role of expatriate missionaries are recorded in the chapter 'A look at missionaries' in *Making Sense*.)

In case this short account of our work in Bangkok sounds more successful than it really was, I should point out that I have dealt here only with the *progress* of the church. We had many failures, reversals, problems and even the threat of collapse. Satan does not allow the work of God to proceed smoothly. Nevertheless, we ought not to be turned aside easily when God has set a task before us. And the task of proclaiming the gospel, making disciples and planting churches is surely at the heart of New Testament Christianity.

### **Writing commentaries**

The person-to-person teaching that was a major part of our evangelism did not stop once people came to faith in Christ. We continued the teaching through one book of the Bible after another. This gave opportunity not only to enlarge people's understanding of the Word but also to help them prepare and give Bible studies, both privately and in church. I wanted these Christians to have material they could use by themselves at home rather than rely upon our person-to-person teaching indefinitely.

In those days, about the only Thai material on the books of the Bible was in the form of correspondence courses, and while these had a valuable ministry, they were available only to enrolled correspondence students. The success of my Acts volume prompted me to improve and publish my notes on other biblical books, and this led, over a number of years, to fifteen mini-commentaries covering the whole



*With the printer*

Bible. Years later these were published in English. Later still they were revised and expanded into the eight-volume *Bridge Bible Handbooks* and then into the one-volume *Bridgeway Bible Commentary*.

### **Writing a Bible dictionary**

When asked to write a Bible dictionary for Thailand, I had difficulty knowing where to begin. My source material was all in English, so I went through whatever Bible dictionaries and similar reference books I could find and wrote down all the subjects that looked to be possibilities. I wanted to concentrate on subjects that readers were likely to use rather than try to cover every place or person mentioned in the Bible. Names had to occur in more than one or two places to warrant an article. For example, I chose to write articles on Megiddo and Caesarea, but not on Jokneam or Patara; articles on Rahab and Apollos, but not on Nabal or Syntyche.

The list of possible entries came to about one thousand, and these were collected in five categories: God and man, Christian life and behaviour, religion and culture,

peoples and places, characters and books. I then chose a group of subjects in one of these categories and wrote as many related articles as possible, so that one lot of research embraced a number of entries.

For example, the articles on tabernacle, altar, sacrifice, priests, Levites, feasts, firstfruits and related subjects occupied me for many weeks, and when completed were filed according to alphabetical position in the proposed book. To give myself variety I then moved to a different category and wrote, for example, on love, mercy, compassion, grace, forgiveness and related subjects, and again placed each completed article in its alphabetical slot. In this way I moved from one category to another, in cycle after cycle for almost five years, till all articles on my initial list were finished (though with many additions and deletions as I moved through).

There were, of course, many technical concerns, such as the preparation of maps and line drawings, typing of manuscripts, vetting by editors, typesetting, proofreading and the like. As always, my concern was to produce a reference book that was credible in content but understandable to those not likely to read the more detailed technical works. The aim was to simplify the communication, without treating the subject simplistically. (These matters are discussed later in the chapter entitled *Plain Language*.)

The straightforward style of the Bible dictionary, like that of the commentary and other books, facilitated translation, and soon the books began to appear in a variety of languages in all sorts of countries. This range of languages and countries posed few difficulties, because there is little cultural colouring in the books.

People of any culture or language can understand the Bible, and therefore I felt no need to adapt my writings to a particular culture, whether Thai, Australian or any other. Our first concern should not be to accommodate the Bible to the local cultural setting, but to explain it in its own setting. The Bible is God's Word and, once understood, it can penetrate a person's innermost being and convict in a way that nothing else can. It has its own way of making its impact on people, provided they understand it. And that is where I try to help.

## Let us pray

In the countries where our ministry takes us, our time is usually spent entirely with local people. In probably only three or four countries have we found ourselves taken to an international church where expatriates meet for Sunday worship. The expatriate churches are run for the benefit of Christians who are temporarily in a foreign country, and usually follow procedures similar to churches in the home countries. This in turn draws attention to the contrasts with churches of the local people. And the biggest contrast is prayer – not just the way people pray but also the place given to prayer.

### **With mouth and mind**

Praying in church has a variety of expressions, far wider than most people expect. My first experience of something startlingly different was in a Pacific region country where I had just arrived for the first time. The occasion was a mid-week meeting attended by a hundred or so people, and before the meeting I joined the pastor and six elders in the back room for prayer. After a brief conversation, the pastor said, 'Let us pray.' I started to bow my head, when it was jolted upright by what sounded like an explosion, as all seven burst simultaneously into their own loud prayers. 'What a racket,' I thought. Coming from a church where people prayed one at a time, usually with a discreet pause between prayers, I wondered what I had struck.

When the public meeting opened and the chairman said, 'Let us pray,' there was an incredible din. I sneaked a look, and was most impressed with a man in the front row who looked as if he was shadow boxing and sounded as if he was selling fruit in a crowded market. He certainly out-shouted everyone else.

Soon I became used to this all-pray-at-the-same-time routine. It seemed to be common throughout the country, though there was no sign that the churches were what are popularly called charismatic. As I travelled in other countries, I found that this practice was fairly common. It is no indication that people have Pentecostal inclinations.

I have tried to go along with this practice, but invariably find concentration difficult. For me, intelligent audible expression is difficult when I am surrounded by the din of hundreds of people talking (sometimes shouting) at once. I have observed that other people apparently have similar difficulties, because I have often heard people nearby saying nothing other than, 'O Jesus, yes Jesus, hallelujah, hallelujah, praise your name Jesus, O Lord, hallelujah . . .' and so on repeatedly. On the other hand, I have heard some people nearby pray beautifully, pouring out their hearts to God in intelligent and impressive prayers, unconscious of the surrounding noise.

When the noise begins to die down, people soon realize the prayer time is about to end, and the prayers are brought to a speedy conclusion. But quietness does not always come easily. In a church in one country, the pastor had a huge bell (like the great school bells of fifty years ago) that he grabbed with both hands and rang loud and long when he thought enough was enough.

In non-Western countries, most churches of my experience give a prominent place to public prayer (though I have met some where, as in the West, public prayer has given way to prolonged singing). In meetings mainly for Bible teaching, there may be several prayers before and after the teaching. Even in traditional Lord's Supper services where time is given to 'open worship', there is more prayer participation than we usually see in my country. Two meetings that come to mind, neither of which was in a language I understood, were in Yugoslavia and Pakistan. In the first, about ten men, young and old, prayed one after the other before the breaking of bread. In the other, about five women prayed one after the other, and then five men.

Some meetings, however, have been woeful. In one country, after spending several weeks among a variety of churches, I landed one Sunday in a Christian Assembly where everything dragged on so lifelessly that I felt as if I never wanted to go to such a church in that country again. But that would have been an unfair judgment, because I have had some wonderful times of worship in Christian Assemblies there. Also, if such a judgment was applied universally, it would eliminate all denominations. The next Sunday, for instance, I was speaking at a charismatic church where repetitive and frivolous activity lasted two and a half hours, prayer was minimal, and the sermon was squeezed into the last twenty-five minutes.

### **Wholehearted commitment**

In spite of the exceptions sometimes met, prayer is still the strong point of churches in many of the countries I have worked in. It is perhaps the area where we in the West have most to learn. I find it humbling and instructive to be with people whose prayers seem to have a greater sense of submission, dependence and urgency than mine do at times.

Yet these people are invariably gracious with their foreign visitor. In two countries, one where I was at a Bible school and the other at the headquarters of a local mission, I was told that because the next day was to be their day of prayer and fasting, they had made arrangements for someone to bring my meals. They did not want to impose their obligation on the visitor. While grateful for their thoughtfulness, I insisted that I be part of their exercise. There seemed to be something wrong if the teacher did less than those he taught.

I have been enriched by many wonderful times of prayer in church services and conferences, but among the most memorable was the final night of a four-day residential conference for evangelists, pastors and teachers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The conference embraced the three countries of former Indo-china, but Cambodia alone was free enough and safe enough to stage such an event.

In addition to the three hundred who were there from Cambodia, twenty-five from Vietnam and seven from Laos risked arrest and imprisonment to negotiate dangerous travel routes and unofficial border crossings to be at the conference. In the closing session, the representatives of Laos were invited to the front, so that the conference speakers and leaders, along with representatives of the other two countries, might lay hands on them and pray for them. I had difficulty not feeling a hypocrite as we prayed for those kneeling in front of us. They knew more about prayer than I did. The exercise was then repeated for the Vietnamese and the Cambodians.

One really feels cut down to size ministering to people who, in each case, were part of a church that had recovered from virtual extinction and was now multiplying at a rate previously unheard of. And, in the cases of Laos and Vietnam, this was happening in countries that were among the most dangerous in the world for local Christians. People in such countries are not repeating pious platitudes when they say that prayer is chiefly what keeps them going and accounts for their growth.

## Driving in strange places

Like many travellers, we have plenty of stories to illustrate the adventures of getting to addresses that taxi drivers never seem able to find, or trying our luck on local trains and buses where no one speaks English. But what I have found much more stressful is driving in Europe.

A driver finds it unnerving enough to be sitting on the 'wrong' side of the car and driving on the 'wrong' side of the road, but what is far more unnerving is not being able to read road signs written in 'foreign' languages. We quickly learnt a few German, Italian and French words to help us through some countries, and drew upon studies in biblical languages to help us read signs in Greece and Israel. But nothing can help in a country such as Hungary, whose language has no resemblance to any of the mainline languages.

Local people are well-meaning when, knowing we are to travel to an unfamiliar place, draw a diagram on the back of an envelope. 'It's easy', they say. But what we imagined from the lines drawn on a piece of paper is nothing like the reality – congested streets, densely settled residential areas, prohibited turning, prohibited stopping, trams, signs we cannot read, and honking motorists who lose patience with a driver who does not seem to know what he is doing.

### **An apartment in Budapest**

Among our most memorable experiences was arriving in Budapest, Hungary. Our directions, as usual written on the back of an envelope (and not even with a diagram), were to take an 'obvious turnoff to the left' a number of kilometres before reaching the city centre. But Budapest is large, and we saw no signs to indicate how many kilometres we were from the centre of the city, nor did we know which of the many turnoffs to the left was the 'obvious' one. We finished up in the centre of Budapest, so turned around, returned the city's outskirts and drove in again – not the only time we have been forced to do that.

On our second attempt, we took what we guessed to be the correct turnoff, went a number of kilometres to what we judged to be the Shell petrol station we had been told about, and turned into the road beside it 'going off at an angle'. Two more kilometres brought us to a promised roundabout that had five roads radiating from it. We were to take one of those to the right, though which one we were not told with certainty. 'But the building where Peter lives is obvious.'

For the next hour we went up and down every street in the vicinity, and could find nothing in the street naming or numbering that led us to Peter's house. By now it was almost dark, we were getting worried, and after some desperate prayer we worked the area over again. Oh, the joy when I went to the entrance to an apartment building and saw among the names 'Peter Vohmann'. Press the button! A woman answered the door and clearly indicated that we were the expected foreigners, but the only word we understood in all that she said was 'Peter'. By putting her hands together beside her face, she conveyed the information that Peter was asleep, but she gestured to us to come inside.

This was the first time we had been inside one of the housing apartments that the communist governments of Eastern Europe inflicted upon people. Our first impression was that the room was very small, the furniture spartan, and everything horribly cramped and cluttered. Admittedly, this was not helped by the piles of books, all wrapped in brown paper, stacked around the walls, under the table, and in any other available space.

We were invited to squeeze in behind what looked like the kitchen table, and then left to ourselves while Peter's wife resumed her household chores. She clearly had no intention of waking Peter, so we filled in the time by talking to each other and thanking God that we had arrived at the right house. Half an hour later Peter emerged. He spoke a quaint but understandable form of English, and took us to a nearby 'bed and breakfast' where he had booked us in.

But do not think ill of Peter and his wife. I heard from people in several countries that this man had been one of Hungary's most courageous Christians through the decades of communist oppression. Though constantly watched, often interrogated and always in danger, he just kept printing and distributing Bibles and Christian literature. Hungarian Christians throughout the country and beyond its borders readily acknowledge how much they owe Peter for his courageous work.

At the time of our visit, communism in Eastern Europe was in the process of disintegrating, and the dangers to Peter and to us were not what they would have been a year earlier. The social and political changes in Hungary have not been easy for an individualist and activist such as Peter Vohmann. His ministry is as vigorous as ever (among his publications is the Hungarian version of my five-book *Basic Christianity Series*) but he has not found it easy to move out of the underground into the open. Accountable business practices in a democratic society cramp his freewheeling style.

### **The way to Brno**

Lasting relationships with Eastern European Christians have come out of other strange street directions. A German friend told us how to reach a house in Brno, second city of the Czech Republic. 'Just take the turnoff that says 'Bratislava', go about two kilometres, pass under a railway bridge, turn right, go several kilometres and then take the road that goes left to Ostrava.'

So we took the turnoff that said 'Bratislava' (capital of the neighbouring country of Slovakia), went two kilometres, four kilometres, six kilometres, till we thought we might indeed end up in Slovakia. We retraced our route, rejoined the main highway and drove on. The next turnoff that said 'Bratislava' did not look any more promising so we ignored it, and took a gamble on the third turnoff. Within one kilometre there was a railway bridge, beyond it a road to the right, and a few kilometres further a sign that said 'Ostrava', though it went off to the right, not the left. We took it anyway, and soon found that it curved back to pass over the main road, and after a certain number of intersections, turns and tram crossings, led us to our lodgings in Brno.



*Near our lodgings in Brno*

The couple we stayed with spoke good English, having taught themselves, in spite of the communists' opposition to the 'language of the enemy'. We sat and talked in the living room, which we later learnt was also our bedroom. It was, in fact, our hosts' bedroom.

Throughout the communist countries of Europe, we found that the divan on which people sat during the day became the bed on which they slept at night. The living room became the bedroom. It seemed like living permanently in a caravan, where furniture was changed from bedroom to dining/living room and back to bedroom each day. But in house after house we were embarrassed by the hospitality of those who vacated their divan/bed for us.

We did not usually find out where our hosts slept while we were there, but I imagine it was always in uncomfortable conditions. In one house, we know that all six slept in one room, and in another they slept in the kitchen (barely big enough to stand in, let alone sleep in). Others slept in the houses of neighbours or relatives.

### **Travel hassles worth the effort**

In spite of these restricting living conditions, the hospitality of the Eastern European Christians has been among the most memorable features of all our travels. And by 'hospitality' I mean not merely 'bed and breakfast', but generous self-giving, and wonderful talk about things that really matter. Through many lengthy conversations we learnt that they had experienced the living Christ in a way that we knew little about.

Not all Christians, however, are models of Christlikeness. Indeed, some people in these countries are so legalistic as to be more like Pharisees. But we found a refreshing and natural spirituality among those we came to know. They were all church leaders of one sort or another, some of them very brave in using the newfound freedoms to pursue innovative ministries that did not please the legalists.

We have particular admiration for a young couple in the north of Czech Republic who broke into the non-Christian community and started a vigorous new church. This was in the face of bitter opposition from the traditional church, which resented such initiative.

In the south of Poland we stayed with another much-loved couple, who, during twenty years of communist rule, had run a weekend Bible school. This ministry proved to be an important factor in the development of churches that were more open and outreaching than in some other Eastern European countries.

During our stay with a family in Slovakia, we were given some insight into another aspect of the tensions that surface in post-communist countries. Parents and their teenage offspring may see the need for change, but at the same time feel loyalty to a church that faithfully resisted communism for half a century. The church, however, may not see the difference between resisting the impositions of an atheistic state and resisting legitimate change within its own fellowship.

Throughout these countries, we were invariably humbled by the love and kindness of our hosts. They all lived in poor circumstances, yet were very welcoming and hospitable. Many had taught themselves English and, though at times they struggled, they graciously made the effort to use *our* language, even when talking to each other.

### **Peniel, house with a difference**

I shall resist the temptation to tell other motoring stories of successful arrivals in strange places, except for one. In this case the country was not in Eastern Europe and the people were not your normal Christian churchgoers.

On one trip to Eastern Europe, some arrangements had been made by Wiedenest Missionhouse in Germany, the service agency of the Christian Brethren mission with whom we had established strong links over the years. We became associated with Wiedenest first through their work in Pakistan and later in Tanzania, where their translation of my books into Swahili produced one of Africa's most successful publishing ventures. We stayed with Wiedenest missionaries in both these countries as well as in Germany, and found them to be real soul-mates. Now, at the end of our Eastern European trip, we returned to Wiedenest for a debriefing before leaving Europe.

The plan was to drive from Wiedenest to Amsterdam, stay overnight, have the next day free, and then fly out at five o'clock the following morning. Someone at Wiedenest gave us the address of a guesthouse in Amsterdam called Peniel, where they had arranged for us to stay.



Again we had no map; just ‘take the exit marked such-and-such and ask someone for such-and-such a street’. There were, of course, several exits marked ‘such-and-such’ – north, south, central – so after a while we simply took pot luck. We landed in the mess of Amsterdam’s peak hour traffic, and were carried by a flow of vehicles along a tram route whether we liked it or not. We had been told to ‘follow the tram line’, but tram lines went right, left and centre. When an opportunity arose, I pulled into a petrol station, found someone who could speak English, and was directed back along the route we had come and told to look out for various landmarks.

We saw one nominated landmark, then another, so began looking for the street. By this time we were in a grid of narrow streets where all the buildings looked the same. But Gae, who is among the world’s sharpest spotters, saw the street we were looking for. We turned into it and, more astonishingly, saw the name ‘Peniel’ on a small painted notice no larger than one might see on a front door or letterbox. This must be the guesthouse.

Two bare wooden doors, like the doors of a warehouse, barred entrance from the street. We were wondering what to do, when a hippy-like person approached us and asked if he could help. He spoke good English and, yes, it was Peniel but, no, it was not a guesthouse. It was a Christian colony, mainly for alternate lifestyle people, former drug addicts and other assorted non-conformists. He was a resident, so he took us inside and called the manager. The manager did not speak English but our hippy friend interpreted. The manager was clearly uncomfortable about our presence, and quizzed us at length to make sure we were in fact Christians. He had never heard of Wiedenest, nor had anyone else he spoke to. Reluctantly, he let us in.

The room he put us in would vie with one we had in Uganda as the smallest into which a double bed could fit. The rear and left side of the bed were hard against the walls; the front and right side were about one foot from the walls. But it was somewhere to sleep and we were thankful to have arrived, as it was now dark. We even scored a meal – one enormous basin of gruel for communal feeding.

There was much variety among the residents. Some were normal, others decidedly not. Some conversed ably and others were incomprehensible. Some were impressive in their desire for a worthwhile Christian life, but others were just about off the planet. Some were reading good Christian books, but one person thought he was Billy Graham.

On the second of the two nights, we had to let ourselves out of the building at 2.00 a.m., load our gear into the car and head for the airport. Amsterdam airport is among the world’s largest and we found it very confusing. I dropped Gae and the luggage outside the check-in area while I drove around – and around, and around – in search of the drop-off point for hire cars. Gae was getting anxious when forty minutes passed and she had no idea where I was. In the end, I left the car in a public car park, drew a diagram which I tied to the key, and then dropped the key on the floor behind the desk of Budget’s hire car office. I assume they found the car, because we never heard from them.

### **German precision**

Most of the arrangements made from Wiedenest were pleasantly successful, which is what we had come to expect from German efficiency, but in one place where we were to stay, our Wiedenest friends had not told us that the couple did not speak English. They had told us to phone a certain number from a nearby village and we would receive directions. From the stream of words at the other end of the phone, we picked out a familiar surname, but then came a long pause, which we interpreted to mean that the person had gone looking for someone to speak to us. In due course a girl came on to the phone and, using her school-taught English, told us to drive into town and meet her father at a prominent church. He would be driving an Opel Kadett – but so were fifty thousand others in Germany.

We set off for town, but became confused when we reached an intersection that gave no indication which road led to town. We were about to head along the more likely looking route when we saw a red Kadett heading in the opposite direction. Without much logic to our decision, we turned around and followed the Kadett. To our surprise the Kadett led us into town and, though we soon lost it in the traffic, we landed in the right part of town, parked the car and found our way to what looked like the prominent church.

When we reached the church, two men were standing outside. We soon discovered that one was the father we had been told to expect, and the other was his schoolboy son, who had come to interpret. And when they showed us the car we were to follow home, it was the very car we had followed into town.

Our evening in this home was indeed memorable. We have maintained contact with this family, and have had chance meetings with two of the sons when, at different times, I have given lectures at Wiedenest Bible School. A special thrill was to receive a photo from the daughter many years later when she was engaged in missionary work in Tanzania.

The parents still write occasionally, always in their own language (which is fair enough, seeing we write to them in our language). We cannot read each other's letters, but at least we know who they come from. In God's vast international family, we may not always be able to talk to each other, but the bonds of love are strengthened as we pray for each other.

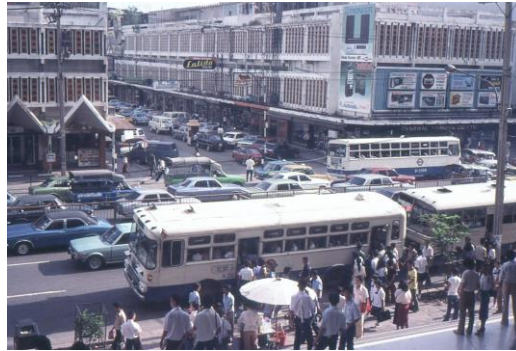
## Locks and keys

We all know that keys are important, and we become very distressed when we lose them. But in many of the countries I have been in, they are often symbols of authority and ownership that many aspire to but few possess. They can also be the cause of much conflict and confusion.

### The person who has the key

In Thailand, as in other countries of Asia and Africa, ‘the person who has the key’ is crucial to an enterprise’s existence and function. And usually there is only one

person and one key. When we needed a replacement part for a bedroom air conditioner, I went to the company in Bangkok from which we had bought the unit, one of the largest and best-known companies in Thailand. I headed for the sales and services section and spoke to the person on the counter. He went looking for the part, but after a while returned empty handed. He said he was sorry, but that particular part was in



*A Bangkok business precinct*

a separate cupboard and the only person who had the key to the cupboard was on leave. There was nothing anyone could do, so could I please come back in two weeks.

Something similar happened at the local police station where I had gone to pay the annual poll tax for foreigners. Only one person had the key to the cupboard where the receipt book was kept and he was out playing golf. I would have to come back the next day.

In the Royal Thai police band, a unit of about two hundred policemen, the one man chosen to hold the key to the instrument storeroom was the one Christian in the unit. So many musical instruments were disappearing that they decided he was the only one who could be trusted with the key.

Almost every shop has one particular person who sits behind the cash box and controls the money. If that person happens not to be there when you make a purchase, the shop assistant must go and find him or her before the transaction can be finalized. Because of technological advances, that practice is changing in Thailand, but it is still common in many other developing countries.

### Locked out

On a return visit to Thailand, Gae and I arrived at Bangkok airport at 11.00 p.m., after a ten-hour flight from Brisbane. Three local Thai Christians had kindly come to the airport to meet us and squeezed into the car with us and our luggage to go to the guesthouse where we had booked in. The time was well past midnight when we arrived, which, taking into account the change in time from Brisbane, was after 3.00 a.m. for us.

The Thais were all interested in enjoying the night out and, above all, in investigating everything in our room that was capable of being opened, shut, felt or moved. Then, finding something of interest on the balcony from which we had entered, they called us out to take a look. Bang! The door swung shut behind us. Who has the key? No one. It was locked inside.

Never mind, the locals always know how to negotiate these problems. Go to reception. But no one was there. The manager, knowing the late hour of our arrival, had left our room key with the watchman, who had already let us into our room. He had no spare key. With much patience, however, he tried every other key he could find, but nothing worked.

Then our friends had an idea. ‘Wake the people in the room next door, and see if someone can climb out of their window, along the ledge, and get into your window.’ The man next door was remarkably cooperative for someone awakened at 1.00 a.m. and asked to go climbing out a window, but the window was barred anyway.

Back to the watchman. He found a key that opened a vacant room downstairs, so suggested we sleep in there till the day staff came on duty. All our luggage was locked in the room upstairs along with the key, but this was better than nothing. At 1.30 a.m. (make that 4.30 a.m. for us) our Thai friends went off laughing at this comedy of errors, while we kicked off our shoes, dropped on the bed and tried to get some sleep.

We were awakened at 6.00 a.m., rather earlier than we had hoped, when a maid knocked on our door. She had keys to all rooms, including our upstairs room, and asked that we move up there *now*, as quickly and quietly as possible. She was very apologetic about it all, but the story was that she was supposed to have been on duty during the night. When, however, the reception manager had gone home, she decided to sneak out and have a night off. The trouble was she had taken the keys with her, and if the manager found out about our adventures, the maid would be in deep trouble. So we relocated, as quickly and quietly as possible. By now we too began to laugh. We were, after all, back in Thailand.

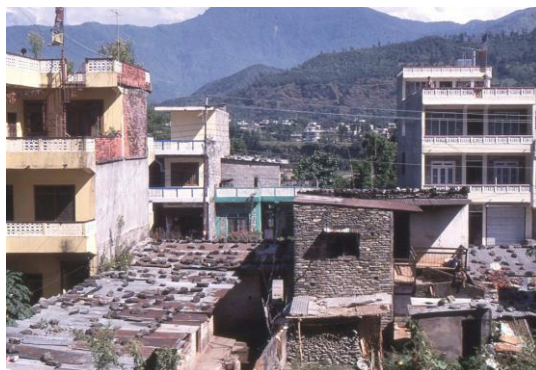
### **Locked in**

In many countries of the developing world, door locks and latches are not like those we are more accustomed to in the West. Our doors are usually opened or closed by a kind of lock or latch that enables the door to be secured or released by a handle from either side. But in developing countries many doors have no such apparatus. They are secured on the inside by a simple sliding bolt (which means that if a door is secured from the inside, nobody can open it from outside), and secured on the outside by a metal plate through which a padlock can be locked (which means that if a door is secured from the outside, nobody can open it from inside). This leads to all sorts of frustrations.

The most critical occasion for me was when my Nepalese host and I were sleeping in a spare room above a church in Pokhara. The door was not hung properly, and kept swinging open. This presented no problem provided we were both inside the room or outside the room at the same time. But one morning I awoke to find that my friend had gone for his morning ablutions (a long hike up the back yard to a semi-open toilet block) and locked the door of our room from the outside.

I was desperate to go to the toilet. But my friend was one of those people who enjoy taking a long time for their morning ablutions, and I had little chance of alerting him to my plight.

While he was up the back yard, singing lustily, I was far away in a locked room, feeling desperate. After half an hour he returned, still singing – and then, when he saw my plight, laughing. Hours later, he was still laughing.



*From our lodgings above the church in Pokhara*

But he was not laughing when we arrived back at the church one night after being caught in a storm. We were drenched, the town was blacked out with a power failure and, worse still, when we tried to unlock the padlock on the front gate, we found the key did not fit. The pastor had given us two keys, one for the front gate and one for our room upstairs, but during the day someone who had been to the church had put the wrong padlock on the front gate. (We found out later that she had mistakenly switched the padlocks for the gate and a nearby shed.)

We went searching for the pastor, but could not find him. Somebody else knew somebody else who might have some keys, and after half an hour we were let into the church yard. The person went home and we went up to our room – only to find that someone had done it again. The padlock on our room had been mistakenly switched for the padlock on the back door of the church beneath.

Back we went to the person who had just let us in the gate, but this time he was not home. He had apparently gone to visit someone else. So a search party was sent out to find where he might be, while we returned to the church. Half an hour later another key arrived to let us in. At least by this time the lights had come back on.

## Crisis in the Philippines

The situation was ‘life-threatening’ – that was the way the doctor referred to it after normality had returned. At the time, we were on the Philippine island of Cebu, where I was conducting studies at the week-long annual conference of the Philippine Missionary Fellowship, a mission consisting entirely of national Filipino missionaries. We, along with three hundred Filipino missionaries, were living at an out-of-town Christian high school that had the necessary facilities.

### **Something amiss**

During the week, symptoms developed that indicated not all was well in the region of an ileostomy operation Gae had undergone the year before. Initially, we dealt with the problem as if it were the sort of surface irritation one sometimes meets in the tropics. When, however, it appeared to be something more serious we consulted local doctors. They were helpful, but it soon became evident that the problem was worsening.

We phoned doctors in Australia who had been involved with the surgery, wondering whether we should come home. They consulted and then phoned back an hour or two later to say it was too late to come home. Gae had to get into hospital for immediate surgery – that day, if possible; if not, tomorrow.

This meant flying from Cebu to Manila, and the earliest flight was the next morning at ten o’clock. As it turned out, this was the flight we were booked on anyway, so I was able to finish my teaching program at the conference as scheduled. In the meantime we phoned Joel Alviar, a Filipino pastor who had organized seminars for us among the pastors of his region for the following week. He lived 300 km north of Manila, and had arranged for someone to meet us at Manila airport and drive us up. But when he heard of our plight, he decided to drive to Manila and meet us himself.

Although people in Cebu had phoned the hospital and alerted them to expect us, Joel appreciated the difficulties we would face in negotiating the system of admission to hospital in an Asian city where we were strangers. He volunteered to pick us up at the airport, take us to the hospital, see us through the system and put us in contact with Rose Brooks, an American missionary of our own age who had been born and bred in the Philippines. Rose would prove to be of invaluable help. It turned out that, in God’s providential care, the hospital the people in Cebu had booked us into was only ten minutes walk from Rose’s home, which was to become our base for the next three weeks.

### **Getting out of Cebu**

First, however, we had to transfer from the conference centre to Cebu airport. We were to check in by 9.00 a.m., an hour before departure time, and were to allow at least half an hour for the taxi journey from the conference centre. To be on the safe side, our friends at the conference would arrange for a taxi to collect us at 8.00 a.m.

We were ready and waiting at 8.00 a.m., but no taxi arrived. We waited with patience for fifteen minutes, and then with diminishing patience for another fifteen minutes, repeatedly being assured by our friends that the taxi would come.

Someone then decided to check, but the person who had booked the taxi was not to be found and no one was sure which taxi company he had phoned. Never mind, they would phone a friend who lived nearby and owned a car, and she would come to collect us.

After several unsuccessful phone calls, they made contact, only to find that the friend and car had gone somewhere, and nobody knew where. They now decided to commandeer the school bus, but it had disappeared with a load of conference participants to the bus station. 'It will be back soon', we were told, but by now the time was approaching 9.00 a.m. We insisted something be done immediately, so they phoned for another taxi. It arrived at 9.10, ten minutes past the time we were supposed to have already been checked in at the airport.

With much agitation, we made sure the taxi driver was aware of the urgency of the situation. Within a short distance he ran into a traffic jam, so decided to take an alternative route. This looked good for half a kilometre, but then he ran into another traffic jam. No alternative route was available, and with much cursing from the driver and much prayer from us, we inched along – five minutes for one hundred metres, another five minutes for another hundred metres. 'Please, Lord . . .' We had to be on that plane. Gae had been booked into the hospital for 1.00 p.m., to be prepared for emergency surgery. After almost fifteen minutes, we reached the cause of the bottleneck, a broken-down vehicle in the middle of the road.

By now the time was past 9.30, which was uncomfortably close to the deadline that airlines allow for a late check-in. After much hair-raising speeding and weaving, the taxi drew up at the airport at 9.45. We left him with a handful of money ('keep the change'), and bolted with our luggage for the door headed 'Departures'.

Oh, no! There was one of those x-ray machines that all luggage had to pass through before it could even be checked in. I left Gae to supervise its passage through the queue and through the machine, while I ran to the check-in counter to let the people know we were at least there and request that the plane not go without us. 'But I cannot check you in and give you a boarding card till we have checked in your luggage.' I knew that, but was just making sure they did not lock us out. I then rushed back to collect the luggage, which by this time should have cleared the machine.

What next! The official on the x-ray machine had spied a piece of electronic medical apparatus that Gae must carry and insisted we open the suitcase. Where are the keys . . . ? Fumble, fumble . . . Found them . . . Zip open the case . . . Blow it! Some cloth is stuck in the zip . . . We kept talking, explaining to the official what the apparatus was, but she insisted we open the case. Finally, we got it open and unearthed the offending item. She had never seen one before and wanted to refer it to her supervisor. I felt like doing a 'John McEnroe' and saying, 'You cannot be serious!' Instead, in words of one syllable, I assured the official we had never been questioned about this article in all our travels. What's more, our plane was scheduled to leave in a few minutes, and we still had to check in the luggage.

Whether it was the terror on our faces or a divine visitation that persuaded her, the official suddenly said OK; we could go. Our well-packed suitcase was now in disarray, but somehow we managed to stuff everything back and even succeeded in doing up the zip. We checked in, ran all the way through corridors and check points where airline personnel were, patiently or otherwise, waiting for us, the last passengers. With much relief and thanksgiving to God we flopped into our seats. Barely a minute or two later, the plane began to pull out.

### **Arriving in Manila**

A new element of desperation now entered our prayers – had our luggage made it on to the plane with us? With more relief and thanksgiving, we received it without drama when we arrived in Manila.

We then looked for Joel, but he was nowhere to be found. We resisted the temptation to go looking for him, choosing instead to stand in a prominent place where he might see us. After fifteen minutes, anxiety began again; then, a further ten minutes later, Joel arrived. For some reason the plane had come in at a different terminal from



the one announced, and he had been waiting in the wrong place. Never mind, he reassured us, we would be at the hospital within an hour.

Manila, like many Asian cities, has chronic traffic problems. But Joel knew a good route that would avoid the worst of the snarls. Things went well till we ran into a huge traffic jam. We inched along – five minutes for one hundred metres, another five minutes for another hundred metres. ‘Please, Lord . . .’ We had to get to that hospital, and time was running out. Then Joel’s car began to cough and splutter and finally stopped. He succeeded in starting it again, but when we reached a slight incline, it coughed and spluttered and this time gave up completely. So out we got and pushed the car out of the traffic on to the road shoulder.

Still, no need for panic. Joel knew the engine’s problem; it needed a new petrol filter. And he just happened to have one in the glove box! He did not have the best tools for the job, but he had enough to fit the new filter, and half an hour later we were on our way.

### **Into hospital**

We shall always be thankful for having Joel with us when we arrived at the hospital. We knew enough of Asian hospitals to expect much red tape and long delays in securing admission, but largely through Joel’s initiative (or cheek, if you like) Gae was through the preliminaries, and subsequently examined, x-rayed, tested and installed in the pre-op part of the hospital within two hours.

Our big prayer had been that we might have the right surgeon. This was to be a critical operation, and from what we had ascertained, specialists in this field were few. The night before we left Cebu, Nonilo Sanchez, the leader of the Filipino mission, had assembled the three hundred people at the conference for a special prayer service, where Gae and I sat at the front and the entire congregation stretched out their hands towards us and prayed in a moving demonstration of faith that God would heal. No one knew at that time the exact nature of the problem or how it might be healed, but we believed that God would direct so that the right surgeon would be found.

There was some consternation when we found that the initial gastro-enterologist we were referred to was out of the country. We were then referred to another, only to find that he too was out of the country. We were left with a ‘third string’ person who, quite frankly, did not seem to have much idea what to do. But at least he saw that a surgeon was needed urgently, and the surgeon he called in proved to be the right person for the job.

Even the surgeon admitted he had not done this kind of surgery often, but after phoning the surgeon in Australia, he went ahead and satisfactorily carried out the corrective surgery. Whatever deficiencies were later revealed (and most of Gae’s subsequent problems have come from that surgery in Manila), he did what was necessary at the time. He was God’s instrument to preserve Gae through a crisis that threatened to be fatal.

### **Carers and friends**

In most countries of the non-Western world, nurses do not provide the sort of service that we in the West normally associate with nursing. In general, their job is to dispense medicine, measure blood pressure, give injections, and the like. General care, such as attending to the patient’s bathing and toilet requirements, is carried out by relatives or friends, one of whom sleeps on a small bed beside the patient. In Gae’s case, that person was me. The staff nurses in Manila had no experience in post-operative care for ileostomy patients, which meant that Gae had largely to teach them (and me) and in effect look after herself. Her recovery was therefore much slower than it should have been.

Nevertheless, we were deeply moved by the care and concern of many people, especially some of the Filipinos who were at the recent conference. One day a pastor arrived in our room after a six-hour bus journey. When I asked if he had other work to do in Manila, he replied 'No'; he had just come to pray over Gae – which he did most lovingly, and then left. He had stayed only fifteen minutes.

One day a group of six Filipinos arrived (also after a six hour bus journey), five of whom had been at the conference. The additional person was a 'maid' who they thought could wait upon Gae in hospital. In view of my developing skills, we considered this not to be necessary. Joel and his wife Rechel twice came to see us, entailing a 600 km return journey each time. Various expatriate missionaries visited us, but the person who was God's special provision was Rose Brooks.



*Joel and Rechel Alviar visiting Gae in hospital*

Rose looked after matters with the immigration people (concerning extension of visas) and the airlines (for change of travel), but above all saw us through the complications of hospital administration, payment of accounts (required daily), payment of doctors (she even bargained down the fees) and above all, the discharge. Every account, even those for the surgeon and five other specialists, had to be paid before the hospital would issue a discharge certificate; and there was a guard at the door, complete with AK47, to make sure nobody left without a discharge certificate.

### **Out of hospital, but . . .**

After two weeks in hospital we spent one week at Rose's place before the surgeon would issue a clearance for Gae to fly home. But just when everything seemed to be going according to schedule, a mini-typhoon struck Manila. Three days before departure, we received notification that our passports and the re-issued air tickets were ready to be picked up the next day, but when the day dawned, floodwaters had made much of the city inaccessible. The area of the airline office was flooded and the office closed. So was the airport.

As the day progressed it seemed that things would return to normal the next day, which would enable Rose to go and collect the required documents. She had worked the system well to produce the desired results, and as she was the only one who knew the full story of our complicated immigration and travel affairs, she was the one to finalize things on our behalf.

But late that night, when Rose went into her flooded office to answer the phone, she slipped on the wet floor, fell heavily and knocked herself out. She was found twenty minutes later and rushed to hospital. Next morning she was brought home, but she was a dreadful sight – badly bruised, swollen, shaken and barely able to pass on to others what had to be done to retrieve our passports and tickets.

Late that afternoon, the day before we left, we had all our documents in our hands and were packed ready to leave the next day for home. And, in view of past experiences, we doubled the time we were told to allow for the trip to the airport.

## Solomon Islanders

It was midday in the Solomon Islands, a tropical nation of 300,000 people scattered over many islands in the Pacific Ocean. I was on a large outer island, waiting for the arrival of an expected thirty pastors with whom I would live for the next week while conducting a course of Bible studies. At this stage, fewer than ten had arrived. The rest, who were from the far north of the island, had been expected the night before, but so far nothing had been seen or heard of them.

These pastors had been contacted three weeks previously when someone had visited the northern region to tell them of the proposed studies. In response, they said that seventeen men would come. But there were no reliable communications to the region – no telephones, not even roads. We had no way of checking whether the men were still coming, because the only way of sending or receiving news was by someone who happened to be travelling to or from the region by canoe.

### Studies begin

My islander friends decided we should not delay further, so we had the first study and then ate lunch. We had just begun the second study (it was now 2.00 p.m.) when a few others straggled in . . . then a few more . . . and a few more. The seventeen pastors from the north had arrived. The study was interrupted as people exchanged greetings and talked about the journey.

These men had been awake since 4.00 a.m., and had set off in their canoe before 6.00 a.m. This was the standard metal canoe used in the region, five to seven metres long, without seats or roof, and driven by an outboard motor. For the last eight hours they had been travelling in the open sea under the hot sun, and had not eaten since they left home. I therefore suggested that, as we had only just begun the study, we stop for a while, allow the men to eat, and then recommence the study.



*Solomon Islands canoes*

The men discussed the matter among themselves and asked when the evening meal would be.

When told it would be about 5.30 p.m., they said, 'That's only three hours more. We can wait. We have already missed the first study, so let us go ahead with the present study.' They sat down, pulled out their Bibles and notebooks, and I recommenced the study.

### Keeping at it

This was a remote island and we were in crude surroundings. The study centre was a semi-open bamboo-and-palm shelter, set on the edge of thick jungle. A few roughly made benches were virtually the only facilities available. But the dedication of these men motivated me more than if I had been giving a lecture to a congress of Bible experts in some big-name theological institution. I wanted to give them my best.

What a contrast, I thought, between these men and people in my country, where many are ready to complain at the least inconvenience. Some cannot even survive a few hours without a cup of tea or coffee. I recalled the words of Jesus who said of an

Italian soldier something like, 'I have not seen such faith among my own countrymen'. And I had not seen such commitment among mine.

These men were aged between mid-twenties and mid-fifties. The studies were all conducted entirely in English, which was not their first language, and by Wednesday afternoon I could see that some were finding things a bit tough. They were all what we might call 'bush pastors'. They lived and worked in jungle areas of the island, and were not used to sitting, studying, listening and writing for hours on end, morning, afternoon and evening, day after day. We still had two days of studies to go, so on the Wednesday afternoon I made the suggestion that perhaps they might like to have the night off.

Again they discussed the matter among themselves (in their local language) and again they surprised and humbled me with their reply. 'No, we want to keep going. This is what we came for. We don't have opportunities like this very often.' Again I mentally contrasted this with attitudes in my country, where some people will only consider participating in such events if they are assured that the Bible studies will be few in number, entertaining in style and, above all, brief.

### **Committed to prayer**

Another contrast in attitudes appeared at a Pacific region prayer convention held near my hometown in Australia. The convention consisted of four days of prayer, session after session, day and night. Participants came from smaller Pacific Island nations as well as from the larger nations, Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

About seventy Solomon Islanders participated in this prayer convention, among them some of my friends mentioned in the previous story. I also was a participant, and offered to use the only free time of the weekend (an hour or so on Sunday afternoon) to take a carload of these people on a brief tour to see the beautiful mountain scenery around the convention centre. But during the Saturday, one of them came to me and said they could not go, because the entire Solomon Island group had decided to devote the remainder of the convention to prayer and fasting on behalf of Australia. It had become obvious to them that the neediest country in the Pacific region was Australia, the country from which the gospel had gone to the Solomons one hundred years earlier.

Something within me felt sorry for these people, because this was the only opportunity most would ever have to visit Australia. Also, though they had paid \$300 each for this trip (a subsidized price, but costly nevertheless), they were willing to go without the meals they had already paid for. Then I reflected: even my 'value for money' approach showed the difference between my thinking and theirs.

One other incident from that weekend is worth mentioning. At the beginning of the evening session that Sunday, a representative from an Australian mission group made a public apology for being the cause of some discontent an hour or so earlier. The reason for the discontent was that he and some colleagues had met for mission discussions, but the meeting had gone on longer than expected and they arrived back at their lodgings late for the evening meal. The people in charge of the lodge delayed the mealtime for them, and it was this delay that created the discontent for which the man apologized.

I felt like crawling under the seat in shame. Here were people from the Solomon Islands (a poor country) who were going without their meals because they were fasting and praying for Australia (a rich country), while the grumbling Australians were making big complaints because one meal was not served on time. The two groups may not be representative of all Australians and all Solomon Islanders, but there must surely be something in the story that makes us think about the things we see as important.

## Goal-setting

In almost every country where the church is growing, I find that the local leaders have goals. There is always the danger that this could take on features of the success-oriented culture of the modern world, where activity is driven by market research instead of by devotion to God. On the other hand, it could be consistent with what we find in the record of missionary work in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul usually followed the main Roman roads with the apparent goal of planting churches in strategic cities, from where the gospel could spread into the surrounding countryside. His strategy worked, but only because the churches he planted were spiritually alive and healthy. Once the churches were established and oriented towards the same goal, Paul moved on, always aiming to evangelize in places where the gospel had not been heard.

Paul's goals were international as well as local. He was constantly moving into regions farther west, with the aim of reaching the end of the continent and establishing the church in Spain. Whether locally or internationally, Paul did not always reach his goals. After all, he had no way of determining people's response to the gospel. Also, he was ready to change his plans if God directed him to do something else. But it was better to have plans that were not fulfilled than to have no plans at all.

### The world today

In the year 1800, no more than 1% of Christians (committed believers, as distinct from nominal adherents) were to be found in the non-Western world. By 1900 this had grown to 10%, by 1950 to 30% and by 1970 to 50%. For more than 150 years, much of the growth had been the direct result of the work of missionaries from the Western world. But the scene had begun to change, and soon would change radically. The energy for evangelism and church growth was coming not from expatriate missionaries from the West, but from national Christians within the non-Western countries themselves. By 2000, about 75% of all Christians were to be found in the non-Western world.

This does not mean the number of Christians in the West has declined. On the contrary, it has grown, even if slowly, but the growth in the non-Western world has been spectacular. Whereas the growth in Western countries can be measured by figures such as one or two percent, the growth in non-Western countries can be measured by one or two *hundred* percent, or even one or two *thousand* percent. And in all the countries where this spectacular growth is taking place, I have found that church leaders, on the whole, think strategically, have a biblical orientation and are spiritually dynamic. I am challenged not simply to see the goals they set themselves, but to learn that often they exceed those goals.

### Examples from Asia

Perhaps the first example I met of the goal-oriented approach was the 'one-one-one' program of an Indonesian mission. Having surveyed the country to determine which villages still had no church, the mission leaders then established the aim, all over the nation, to plant one church in one village in one year.

The last decade or so of the twentieth century was a time of spectacular church growth in several Asian countries. In the Philippines, an indigenous mission that began in the 1960s planted about ninety churches in its first thirty years of operation, but in the next ten years it planted over two hundred churches. The same mission has established farming projects so that income can be generated to help support the ministry. In other countries of Asia, as well as in Africa, this sort of income-generating

initiative is a consistent feature of missions and churches that have a vision for growth. The income-generating project may not necessarily be agricultural. It could be a shop, a bakery, a taxi or a professional enterprise.

In Nepal a local mission had noted that churches in Kathmandu tended to be clumped in certain areas. It identified fourteen urban regions along the ringroad that had no churches, and set out to work these regions systematically till each had at least one church.

Myanmar, like Nepal, is a poor and difficult country where there is some lively church growth. Conditions in one Bible training centre where I lectured in Myanmar were among the poorest I had met anywhere, yet the prime concern of this place was not to build itself better facilities but to plant at least ten new house churches each year. And the forty students backed up their studies and outreach with a day of prayer and fasting each week.

Countries like Myanmar, however, have suffered decades of enforced isolation from the rest of the world, and Christians have few opportunities to visit other countries or even get news from them. The same was once true of Albania and the communist countries of Europe, but slowly they are broadening their vision. When we visited some of these countries during the 1990s, we found little knowledge of the state of Christianity around the world, but at the same time a desire to learn.

### **Examples from West Africa**

In the African country of Chad, visionary church leaders initiated a program that brought impressive results. Driven by prayer and a burden to reach the lost, they surveyed the country according to its regions, with the aim of evangelizing all villages and planting churches in those that had none. Each year they concentrated on specific regions. In one year, for example, they evangelized 1,743 villages out of 2,904 planned. In one sub-region of 172 villages they discovered 35 villages that had no church, but by the end of the year all 35 had churches.

Chad is a poor country, always in the world's poorest ten, no matter what index is used, but the church leaders are able to mobilize thousands of church members in systematic evangelism. Rene Daidanso, a leader of this movement, said to me on one occasion, 'The one resource we are not short of is people.' And in evangelism, people are the most effective resource of all. The program was so successful in Chad that it soon spread to other French-speaking countries of Africa.

In Nigeria, a goal-setting pattern was to start an outreach with a goal to plant, say, ten churches in the first five years, each with its own leadership, and to have five missionaries from these churches breaking fresh ground in unevangelized parts of the country. Within the next three years these numbers were to double, and the outreach was to expand by sending five missionaries to the unreached people of other countries. When I was in Nigeria soon after one mission's ten-year thanksgiving, it had exceeded all its goals. It had fifteen missionaries in foreign countries, and within the next seven years had more than eighty, plus an additional eighty within Nigeria itself.



*Rene Daidanso*

When missionaries from this Nigerian mission went into pioneering work in other countries, they took such thinking with them. In Central African Republic they set



goals for three years, five years and so on, and largely saw those goals met. In Gambia they also set goals, but did not see them met. The setting of goals was no guarantee of success, but they no doubt did better by having goals they did not reach than by having no goals at all. Also, their failure to reach their goals brought some healthy examination of personal spirituality and mission strategy.

I saw some of this Nigerian goal-setting strategy at work at an international conference on evangelism in Côte d'Ivoire (once known as Ivory Coast). Although local people were responsible for many of the seminars and workshops, Nigerian missionaries were the ones who had done analytical surveys of Côte d'Ivoire. The results surprised participants when they discovered a high concentration of Christians in some areas but only a scattered representation in others. People were stirred as never before to reach the unreached, especially the Muslims.

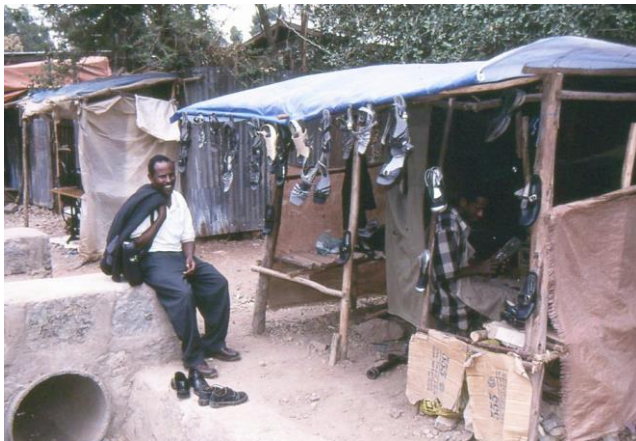
### **Initiatives in Ethiopia**

At the time of my visit to Ethiopia, the country was listed by the United Nations as the world's third poorest. Yet all churches that I visited had goals and strategies. They had programs to help their communities with such things as food, water, education, 'house' repairs, clothing, health services, sanitation facilities and even garden plots to brighten otherwise barren streetscapes.

Though desperately poor, the churches were well organized, keeping track of day-to-day operations as they proceeded towards their goals. They had charts on their walls to record the dates distributions were made, the commodities distributed and the people who received them.

One church also had on its wall a drawing of nine stylized houses (in pink, of all colours), each representing thirty non-church families. The church was then divided into nine groups, so that one church group was responsible for one non-church group of thirty families. No wonder the church grew. And, as in other parts of Ethiopia, the

growth was in spite of constant opposition from the entrenched Orthodox Church.



*Micro-enterprise – shoe-making*

Some churches helped members become self-sufficient by giving or lending money to set them up in small businesses such as tailoring, shoe-making or retailing. They referred to these projects as micro-enterprises, which sounded sophisticated till I saw them in practice – people sitting under makeshift

shelters by the roadside, one man mending clothes, another making shoes (some out of shredded tyres) and another selling a few small items of household hardware. But the initiative was working.

I wondered how the churches paid for this welfare ministry, and as usual was amazed at how people in poor countries do so much with so little. Certainly, some received help from churches and agencies in the West, but much also came from the tithes and offerings of local believers. As is often the case, people who are poor help others who are poor, whereas those who are better off are less inclined to be generous.



## **The Arab world**

At a conference of Christian leaders from the Arab world, I was introduced to an up-market variation of the micro-enterprise strategy. This conference, held in Cyprus just as the second Gulf War was about to explode, involved about seventy Arabs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf, along with about thirty non-Arabs who were invited because of some involvement in the region. Although only six of the twenty-two countries give recognition to the church (meaning that in the other sixteen it must operate underground), the region is not purely Muslim. Not all countries are closed to the gospel, and even in those that are there are opportunities for business investment.

An association of churches and Christian leaders across the region help people set up businesses that are of benefit to the countries concerned and at the same time provide credible cover for a Christian presence. In addition, such businesses provide opportunities for those who have difficulty finding employment once they are known to be Christians. Because of international dealings, the enterprises also supply legitimate reasons for visits by Christians from other countries.

Each enterprise has the goal of planting a church within four years. If it does not achieve this, it is considered a failure. This is quite a goal, especially in a hostile country, and especially when compared with the goals of churches in, for example, my own country. How many churches in Australia have a goal to plant a new church within four years? The Arab churches have overall goals for the region as well. They aim to open two new fields each year and to cover the eleven remaining countries (which are also the most difficult countries) within six years.

## **Looking beyond**

Across the world, in difficult countries and in poor countries, there is a wider vision for world evangelization than we see in the West. Even in out-of-the-way parts of countries such as Mozambique and Papua New Guinea, I have seen maps on walls with pins and ribbons highlighting focal points for prayer.

From other countries I have collected simple prayer bulletins that deal not just with local items or national missionaries, but range across the whole world. People have somehow obtained a copy of *Operation World* and are praying for one country after another. It is great to be in a part of Kenya, or South Africa, or Nepal, or Malaysia, or Turkey and find Christians looking out on the world, eager to pray and evangelize. Their enthusiasm for world mission is invigorating.

## Influences

When my first books were published, they were in the Thai language and in a low-price format that made them available even to the poorest. It never entered my head to include a preface or dedication. Even when the books first appeared in English, I gave no thought to such matters. The first English-language editions were also published in Asia (Philippines, Hong Kong, India), where the aim was to put them within reach of people who could not afford expensive books. The books had no more pages than were absolutely necessary.

As the number of titles increased and the books spread across the world, Christian agencies began sponsoring them to needy countries. Because not all the publishers produced all the titles, it was decided to set up a publishing operation in Australia to produce all the books in one place and distribute them more efficiently. Thus, Bridgeway Publications was born.

### **Eight dedications**

Since all the books had to be published afresh, I decided to rewrite them with expanded comment and in a new format. The first English books had been approximate equivalents of the Thai mini-commentaries, but the books I was now writing for the eight-volume *Handbook* series were large enough to warrant a dedication. By now I was almost forty years old, and thought the eight books provided a suitable medium to acknowledge my appreciation of those who had played a significant part in my life and ministry. I had no problem knowing who to include. Apart from Gae (for whom I had reserved the *Bible Dictionary* that was to follow), eight names stood out unchallenged.

For Gae and me, appreciation of the influences that mould one's life go back to the homes we were born into. We both owe an incalculable debt to our parents (Vic and Jean Fleming in my case, John and Grace Robertson in Gae's) for a Christian upbringing that showed, by teaching and example, what the Christian life should be. Our parents also had a love for God's work in Australia and overseas that translated into enthusiastic support when we began full-time service in Thailand. And from that point, it only grew stronger.

The person who started me on my public ministry was Bob McCallum. In my late teens, he took me with him on preaching engagements and gave me opportunities for Scripture readings and short messages. Whether it was my first Sunday school class, first public prayer, first song-leading role, first sermon or first experience of Christian leadership, Bob was the one who initiated it. The moral support of Bob and his wife Vicki would prove to be of immense encouragement during the Thailand years that lay ahead.

Realizing the need for better biblical knowledge, I went to Bible college. All teachers were helpful, but the one who, more than any other, influenced the course of my life's ministry was David Clines. Though now among the world's foremost Bible scholars, David was at that time only a young man still studying at university. At Bible college he taught a range of subjects, but it was his approach to the Bible as much as the content of his teaching that changed the way I saw things. I began to read the Bible with down-to-earth realism rather than stilted artificiality. David gave me the taste for the Bible.

After graduating from Bible college, I returned to Brisbane, where Gae and I married and settled down. I was motivated to keep studying, but would miss the interaction with David Clines (though we maintained it by mail, even when we each went to live in other countries). However, Gae and I soon found the truest of friends in

Philip and Pat Juler, and in many ways Philip took up where David left off. He had moved in the same direction of biblical appreciation as I had, but had started a few years earlier and was a bit ahead of me, which I found helpful.

For Gae and me, the next four years were in some ways the most vital in our entire ministry. They put some space between Bible college and the mission field, which we believed was necessary for gaining experience, developing gift, proving character and toughening resolve. I was back in a secular job (and so, for a while, was Gae), but we were also immersed in a local church where we learnt valuable lessons in an environment of much work but little progress. Besides the demands of secular employment and church life, we took on family responsibilities with the birth of our first two children. At the same time, I was doing external theological studies, which I wanted to finish before we left for missionary service in Bangkok.

By the time we arrived in Bangkok, we had come to know Reg and Marj Vines, former missionaries to China who now worked in South Thailand. They abounded in common sense and were unstintingly supportive. Although old enough to be our parents, they were never patronizing, intrusive or bossy, and were like grandparents to our children (who soon numbered three). When, after ten years, I had completed my Thai Bible commentary and was asked to write a Bible dictionary, I asked Reg for his opinion. He replied, 'You know that I don't agree with everything you write in those books; but that is the liberty we must give each other. The Lord has given you a gift; you use it – and Marj and I are right behind you.' I hoped that when I reached my mid-seventies, I would be as generous in spirit.

Two people remain in my dedication list of eight, and they are both Thais. Neither is among the many Thais God enabled us to lead to Christ, though in both cases we met them soon after their conversion. Chue Petnamngern was a policeman, about ten years my senior, and one of the first Thai people we met after our arrival in Bangkok in 1965. He was the first person I taught one-to-one, and the fruit of that exercise has kept me at it ever since. Chue became a gifted Bible expositor, a true elder and the backbone of the church we planted. Neither time nor distance has diminished our friendship.

The other man, Chun Kertyoo, was a young conscript soldier when we first met him. Weekly one-to-one Bible studies in the army camp brought the same remarkable development we saw in Chue, and in due course Chue and Chun became the first two elders of the newly planted church. But Chun wanted to be a church planter himself, and soon he was off to his home province to put in practice what he had learnt in Bangkok. His evangelism had a mix of enthusiasm and fearlessness that challenged me then and still does.

### **Books that opened windows**

In the church environment where I grew up, I had the impression that the only valid kind of teaching was that which was given orally in the church. No one ever suggested I might read the writings of those who had no opportunity to preach in our church. There was even a hint that books in general were suspect – in spite of the fact that teachers in New Testament times wrote as well as spoke, and consequently we who live in another place and time are the better for it. One benefit of Bible college was that our lecturers introduced us to teachers who lived in other countries and other eras, so that we could draw more widely on the teaching gifts God gave to the church.

The books I am about to mention are those that opened windows so that I saw a landscape I had not seen before. The books are not necessarily the best on their subjects, but they are the ones that led me into new areas or directions. Most were recommended by Bible college lecturers, who were the first people to encourage me to read good Christian books. Not just David Clines, but Tom Carson, Rice Clayton and Norman Deck helped that initial broadening of my landscape.

Once or twice I had looked at a commentary, but only to check a difficulty. Then one day I began to read Leon Morris's commentary on 1 Corinthians in the Tyndale series, and soon I found myself being swept off my feet. The Bible had become understandable; and because I understood it, I enjoyed it. About this time I read also F. F. Bruce's *The Spreading Flame*. It demonstrated the obvious but often neglected fact that, once we know the circumstances of the time, the biblical writings are lively and meaningful. I did not know it at the time, but I was moving towards what would become a central ministry in the years ahead – explaining what the Scriptures might have meant to their first readers and what that might mean for us today.

Bernard Ramm's book *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, in easing the tension sometimes felt between science and the Bible, eased other tensions as well. It raised issues of interpretation that helped develop a better biblical understanding overall. A book on ethics by Sidney Cave, *The Christian Way*, brought some clarity into foggy areas by its enlightened biblical approach to social issues. And a small book on the atonement, *Sin and Salvation* by Lesslie Newbigin, showed how the doctrine of the atonement underlies everything else. Newbigin's book is a humble contribution when compared with some of the classics on the atonement, but it brought a refreshment of spirit that made me want to read the loftier works.

The person who has taught me most about myself, human nature and Christian behaviour is C. S. Lewis. His book *Mere Christianity* introduced me to a world of Christian insight that caused me to feel in turn refreshed, enlightened, uncomfortable, motivated, rebuked and mentally stretched. Above all, Lewis stripped away the cant and taught me to be honest.

All the above books were read within a year of finishing Bible college. Over the forty-plus years since, many more could be added to the list of writings that keeps broadening the panorama. But these were the few that got me started.

### **People who opened doors**

The hindsight of later years helps us appreciate the initiative people exercised, and the risks they took, in providing raw young Christians with opportunities to develop latent gifts. My first invitation to give public Bible lectures came from Ian Irvine, when I did a series on Malachi at an evening Bible school. A polished speaker like Ian surely drew on large resources of grace to put up with my clumsy performances at the many speaking opportunities he opened for me.

I have already referred to the modest beginnings of my books in Thai. The person who opened the way was an American missionary, Bob Sjoblom, who suggested that my homemade 'Christian explanations for non-Christian people' were worthy of publishing. The result was that the five books now known as the *Basic Christianity Series* began their long life in Thailand. He published my Thai mini-commentaries as well.

A number of years later, Bob suggested that, since the books had enjoyed success in Thailand, they might be useful in other countries. My heart missed a beat when he proposed that I write them in English for publication elsewhere in Asia. I was so nervous at the prospect of my simple writings being thrown open to the scrutiny of a wider world that I even tried to talk him out of it. I am pleased that he prevailed. At times older heads are not only wiser than younger, but also more adventurous.

This was certainly the case with Cecil Howley, a Bible teacher and magazine editor in England who was well known as an encourager of young people in whom he saw potential for Christian ministry. Before Gae and I went to Thailand, he had asked me to write articles for his magazine, *The Witness*. These articles were the first of my English writings to be published. Cecil Howley wrote to us regularly throughout our years in Thailand, always making encouraging comments, often asking for more articles, and eventually inviting me to contribute the commentary on Ecclesiastes to *A Bible*

*Commentary for Today*, of which he was the general editor. The work was later revamped and republished as *The International Bible Commentary*, under the editorship of F. F. Bruce, who by this time had also become a friend and encourager. The 'big name' people have invariably been wonderful examples of grace and humility.

By 1980 my Thai work had almost come to an end, and I had accepted one or two preaching engagements in other countries. But a significant international development came through the initiative of Derek Warren, a well-known English church leader who, with his wife Ruth, had visited us in Thailand in the 1960s and maintained an interest in our ministry from that time on.

Derek Warren was a man of vision who had the faith to take risks, something he demonstrated when, in 1982, he invited me to Britain for five months of ministry 'in the interests of expository Bible teaching'. He opened opportunities for me to speak at big annual events such as the Swanwick Conference and the Bloomsbury Meetings, and put me in contact with key people in Christian ministries. He broadened my horizons by arranging an invitation for me to the Second Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Manila in 1989. When thinking of someone to whom I might dedicate *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*, Derek and Ruth Warren were the first names that came to mind.

Because I am concerned here specifically with those who have been catalysts in the development of our ministry, I shall not mention others in the U.K. who are no less friends than those already named. But I make an exception for Alan and Mary Batchelor, to whom I dedicated my book *Making Sense*. The dedication was partly in recognition of 'a meeting of minds', but more importantly it was an acknowledgment of the wonderful friendship there is between Mary and Gae.

### **Overlooked, but not forgotten**

One problem that arises when books grow by stages, as mine did, is that things get left out. The Thai books had no preface, neither did the English mini-commentaries that grew out of them, and neither did the 8-volume *Bridge Bible Handbook* series that grew out of the mini-commentaries. Even the larger sized *Bridge Bible Directory (Dictionary)* had no preface. When the companion *Bridge Bible Commentary* was published, the main reason I included a preface was to explain that this was not a new book, but a combination of the eight *Handbooks*.

I should have acknowledged my debt to Philip Juler, who back in the days when I was writing the Thai mini-commentaries, volunteered to help by preparing material that might save me valuable research time. Because Philip and I studied and thought along the same lines, I accepted his offer and we agreed upon certain biblical books for him to work on. I can recall some of those books but not all. Certainly, he saved me time, and I drew on his material as I prepared my own. I made draft English notes to guide me as I wrote the Thai, and some of these found their way back into the English versions that were published years later. I gladly acknowledge my debt to Philip, but shift no blame to him for any shortcomings.



*Philip Juler*

Two other people also deserve acknowledgment, both of them many years my senior. Errol Aberdeen was a trusted confidant to Gae and me in the days of our preparation for Christian ministry. He listened readily and commented when necessary, but never relieved us of the responsibility to make our own decisions. More than twenty years later, he began to read my manuscripts as I prepared my first books for publication by Bridgeway, and his approach was much the same. He read with perception and commented with grace.

The other person was Neville Backwell. He was a widely read student of the Word, a discerning critic, a lover of the English language, and a keen supporter of the kind of biblical exposition that my books are meant to encourage. Each of these two men read every word of my *Commentary*, *Dictionary*, *Basic Christianity Series* and *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* before those books were published. They both went to be with Christ before the writing of *Making Sense*.

## New perspectives

Many of the influences talked about in this chapter have concerned what might loosely be called the formative years. In more recent years the influences have come mainly from the non-Western world, as I have come to view not only the world in a different light, but also Christianity itself.

During my years in Thailand, I did not always fit the pattern expected of expatriate missionaries. I worked hard at trying to avoid anything that looked like paternalism, authoritarianism or the imposition of Western practices on Eastern people. I did not always succeed, but at least I like to think that, when a conflict of viewpoints arose, I was on the side of the locals rather than that of the Westerners.

It was not, however, till I participated in the Lausanne Congress in Manila in 1989 that I became aware that I still viewed the world from the perspective of a Western missionary. I was passionate about the evangelization of the world, but still had the unconscious assumption that it would be evangelized from the West. The congress in Manila changed all that. It was not, as I had sometimes branded such events, a ‘talkfest’, but a life-changing experience.

Each day, in addition to the plenary sessions, we were to attend two electives. I perused the list of available electives and plotted my course through the ten days with carefully chosen topics. The first elective I chose to attend was entitled Third World Missions. After all, I was a missionary interested in the Third World. But when the convener of the elective opened proceedings, I discovered that the topic concerned missions *from* the Third World, not missions *to* the Third World.



Reuben Ezemadu

The chairman was a Nigerian, Reuben Ezemadu, who, in his five-minute introduction, said more of substance than I have sometimes heard in a half-hour talk at a missions conference at home. He was followed by five people – a Korean, an Indian, a Brazilian, an Indonesian and another Nigerian – who delivered short papers on set subjects. I was gripped by the quality of the papers and the discussion that followed. In their understanding of mission, these people seemed to be so far ahead of us in the West that it was embarrassing. Whereas we seem to have lost our way, these people had a grasp of New Testament essentials and were translating them into dynamic ministry.

I met the people who spoke at that elective, and many more over the next ten days. My view of the world began to change and so did my work – increasingly so, as I went to a variety of countries and engaged in a range of ministries. Not only have Christians in these countries given me new insights into the mission of the church and the cost of discipleship, but they have been an enrichment to me personally. I shall not single any out for mention here, but articles scattered through this book reflect my debt to many. I go to these countries to teach, but invariably return home feeling I have learnt more than I taught.

## The last five days in India

I had been in India almost six weeks and had now entered upon the final week. The time spent around the country had been thoroughly worthwhile, but by now I wanted just to finish the work and return home to my wife and family. The tough parts were behind me, and the short course in front looked to be downhill all the way.

### Calcutta

It was ten o'clock Tuesday morning and I had just given my final lecture at Calcutta Bible College. I wanted to contact Air Lanka to confirm my flight in a few days from Madras (now Chennai) to Colombo, and was assured by British Airways that the local agent was Air India. One of the lecturers said he was going to Air India at 11.15 anyway, so I could go with him and still be back in time for a lunch appointment at 12.30. So I waited. The lecturer turned up half an hour late, but we got to Air India at 12.10. No, it was not Air India, but another company, Indian Airlines, who was now the agent for Air Lanka.

Quickly, I hailed a taxi and headed for Indian Airlines. It turned out to be just five minutes walk from the Bible college from which I had set out. There was a queue of a dozen ahead of me, so I did not bother waiting, but went straight back to the college to keep my lunch appointment.

At 1.30 I excused myself and returned to Indian Airlines. More waiting . . . finally, some service . . . No, they were not the agents for Air Lanka . . . well, yes, they were the agents, but they could not confirm a booking . . . No, they could not phone Madras for me . . . but they could write a letter for me and send it in the morning . . . 'But I am leaving Calcutta in a few hours . . .' 'Go and see the tourist section; they can probably help'. I looked at the queue, walked out, and decided to send a telegram to a friend in Madras and ask him to confirm the booking for me. I would now hurry back to the college and prepare to leave for the station.



*Calcutta*

The train was to leave at 4.20, and I was told to be there by 3.30 at the latest. I decided to be ready at 2.45, because I knew there would be much handshaking and fond farewelling. But as I walked out of the Indian Airlines office to return to the college, I was confronted by a long procession of striking workers, very militant, who pounced on any person who tried to cross their lines and threw them into the gutter. I was not foolhardy enough to try to crash

through, but neither was I patient enough to wait for the procession to pass (it was at least half a kilometre long). Therefore, I set off with much haste on a long detour and arrived at the college soon after 2.45.

A quick tidy up, and I was ready to leave by three o'clock. However, the principal had called the school together to say goodbye. Speeches, presentation, then four verses of 'Till we meet again', and at 3.25 we were ready to leave. Where are the keys to the Jeep? Someone has gone off with them in his pocket, and no one knows where he has gone. Never mind, the principal has a spare set . . . That's funny; they were there yesterday . . . I wonder who took them. But all is not lost; another car is available . . .



but the person with the keys for that car has disappeared. Try for a taxi . . . not an empty one to be seen.

It was now 3.35. Someone knew a person nearby who might have a spare set of keys for the Jeep, so the principal and his deputy set off on a motor scooter to find him.

They had no sooner left than the person with the keys of the other car turned up. But she could not drive; she was just looking after the keys. The only two who could drive it had gone off on the scooter. At 3.45 the two on the scooter returned in triumph with a key for the Jeep. But all efforts to start it failed. Try the other car. Wait, says someone, there is no water in it. It took a bucketful. By 3.50 the engine had fired and we were off. At last, our first break! We had a good run through and arrived at the station just before 4.15. 'No problem', said the two men, without even the slightest sign of fluster.

## **Rajahmundry**

Relieved to be heading in the right direction, I settled down for the 17-hour overnight train journey. I managed the usual broken sleep of train travel, and at 10.15 the next morning we arrived at Rajahmundry, one hour late. We were to travel by bus from there to Narsapur, three hours away, where the first session of a three-day conference was to begin at two o'clock.

Two men from Narsapur had come to meet me at the train. With them was a local man who knew all the tricks and would organize us from the station to the bus stand. He reckoned all four of us could squeeze into one of the auto rickshaws waiting at the station, but the dozen or so drivers ganged up against him. I could not understand the finer points of the argument that followed, but I found out in due course that the auto rickshaw drivers were demanding fifteen rupees (a rupee at that time was about ten cents), and the local man considered that too much. He hired two cycle rickshaws instead, for a total of ten rupees. So we set off – over bumps, behind houses, down lanes, around the market – and thirty minutes later we were at the bus stand.

The local man, having expedited our travel to his own considerable satisfaction, now left. The two who had come from Narsapur decided to find out which bay the bus left from. 'Sorry, but the bus does not leave from here.' A bridge was broken somewhere, and the bus left from a temporary stand that had been set up beside the railway station (from which we had just come!). This time we determined to go by auto rickshaw, regardless of the price. Wait . . . wait . . . but no auto. So we hired two cycle rickshaws and set off on the return journey.

At 11.45 we arrived back at the point where we had been an hour and a half earlier. Now we were presented with two choices: a train that left at twelve o'clock and took four hours, or a bus that left at one o'clock and took three hours. They decided on the train . . . on second thoughts, the bus.

Seeing some taxis, I asked how long a taxi would take. Two hours. How much would it cost? The taxi started at 140 rupees, but after much haggling from my friends, he eventually came down to 90. Not good enough; they wanted 85. 'Never mind five rupees,' I said, 'let's go.' No, 90 was too much. We would wait for the bus (the train had gone by this time).

It was 12.10 and one of the men had second thoughts about the taxi. He tried again but the taxi would not come down. Five minutes later the other man tried, and he also was unsuccessful. I was insisting they forget the 5 rupees and go for the 90. So one man went back, reluctant to admit defeat. But he soon returned angry; the taxi had now put his price up to 95. That's it . . . we don't go . . . point of honour . . . the taxi's a cheat. Bury your pride, forget the loss of face, let's go for 95, said I. The older man would not budge, but finally the younger man persuaded him. We hired the taxi for 95 rupees.

Relieved, we piled in, but we travelled only as far as the first petrol station when the taxi asked for the fare, as he himself had no money to buy the petrol. More hassles, and we gave him 60 to buy enough petrol to get there, promising the rest when we arrived. The taxi then treated us to a thrill-a-minute ride. How we did not collide with ten ox-carts, six buffalo, twenty pedestrians and a dozen trucks and buses I shall never know.

## Narsapur

At 2.30 we arrived at Narsapur. They wanted me to go straight to the church and meet the faithful three hundred waiting patiently for me. But I was determined at least to have a wash-down – not my hands and my feet, but my head also. I was still carrying the sweat from my running around Indian Airlines and street demonstrations in Calcutta the day before, and in addition was covered in red dust from the taxi ride to Narsapur. What's more, someone had lunch waiting for me.

By 3.15 the first meeting was under way. I shortened my talk to thirty minutes, then after a fifteen minute tea break, gave my second talk, this one the full forty-five minutes. After the evening meal, the night session was to begin at 7.30.



*Narsapur*

At the appointed hour the chairman stood up in front of the packed auditorium (where the crowd had now swelled to more than four hundred), said 'Good evening, friends' . . . and all the lights went out. It was a town-wide blackout that was to last all night. But the church had a generator, which, after initial difficulties, some experts managed to get going. For some reason, however, only the outside lights came on. By 8.15 they succeeded with the inside lights as well, and the chairman was now ready to start all over again. 'Good evening, friends', he said with a glowing smile . . . and again all the lights went out.

While the experts attended to the generator, I went and lay down on a bench along the side of the church. I had developed a fever during the day and was beginning to feel ill. A doctor in the audience went off to fetch me some medicine. Meanwhile, the lights came on . . . but now the public address system failed. Patience won through, and by nine o'clock everything was on and stayed on. Singers and other participants did their stuff, I gave my talk, and the meeting was over by 10.15.

A young man was asked to take me home on the back of his motorbike. He did nothing for my confidence when he told me that he had just obtained his licence and he could not ride very well, especially with a passenger behind him. Still, we set off. Within a hundred metres his lights failed, but he did not bother even to reduce his speed. Because of the blackout, everything was pitch black, and in keeping with the nationwide pattern, no push-cart, ox-cart, cyclist or pedestrian carried any sort of light. We hit only one ox-cart, but miraculously missed all the pedestrians, bikes and other ox-carts along the kilometre and a half of narrow criss-crossing lanes.

The next day (Thursday) I could barely stand up, and got through the day only by lying down on the platform after each lecture. I sweated profusely, largely because (as I discovered later) I had taken a triple dosage of tablets – a result of communication problems. After one session they took me off to hospital for an x-ray and blood tests. Then the conveners wanted to cancel the remaining sessions that day (five in all), but I insisted they go ahead. More than half the several hundred people present were elders and full-time preachers who had travelled long distances from their country regions to

be present for the three-day conference, and I did not want to disappoint them. Also, this was the last engagement in India, and I was determined to see the whole program through.

I had a dreadful night, but the next day (Friday) I felt better, and improved as the day went on. There were another five sessions, plus visits to various institutions around town. After the final session that night, there was much speech-making, hand-shaking and fond-farewelling, bringing the conference to a close by 10.30. The man had still not fixed the light on his motorbike, but we made it home safely for the third and final time.

Next morning (Saturday) I was up very early – shower, pack, breakfast and ready by five o'clock for the long cycle rickshaw ride to the station. A small send-off delegation came to the station, and by six o'clock I was enjoying an old fashioned steam train ride to connect with the mainline train to Madras.

## **Madras**

After five hours we arrived at the junction city, Vijayawada, but I had a further two-hours wait for the mainline train. Off again, and seven hours later we were in Madras.

It was now 8.00 p.m. but I was picked up at the station and taken for a much-needed shower and a meal to the Bible college where I had begun my work in India more than six weeks earlier. But the General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, who had initiated and organized my program, was there to meet me, so there was plenty of talk with him and my hosts. In the end I had to skip the shower. After more hand-shakings and farewells, I was off at 10.00 p.m. to the airport.

The friends I had telegraphed from Calcutta had success-fully confirmed my flight out to Sri Lanka, but when I arrived at the airport there were further delays. At 1.30 a.m. we were finally on our way to Colombo. It was after 4.00 a.m. by the time I arrived at my lodgings in Colombo. At last, a shower! I even snatched a couple of hours sleep. Then, at nine o'clock, I was off to church where I began a series on the book of Joel. At least I had a nap that afternoon.

## Post offices

There was a time when I thought that people who worked in the post office and the railways had been to special training schools where they were coached in how to be unpleasant to the public. The officials behind the counter were unsmiling and apparently resentful of this public intrusion upon their personal tranquillity. ‘Why must you bother me by wanting to buy stamps?’ ‘Can’t you go and post your letters somewhere else?’ ‘Look, this is my train, and I don’t see why I should have to sell tickets to anyone who asks for them.’

I observed this attitude to be almost universal, whether in the West, the East, or whatever countries fit in between. But things have changed – at least in my country. We have not always benefited from the selling off of public utilities to private operators, but when post office workers had to justify their existence if they wanted to keep their employment, things began to change. It is hard to believe that previously unwelcoming places are now sparkling with the smiles of people eager to help.

### Service at the counter

But the change to bright colours and sparkling smiles is not universal. In most countries I visit, post offices are still daunting places. Even in Thailand, a friendly enough country by any measure, the employees are still clothed in khaki uniforms, complete with epaulets, stripes, pips, braid, brass and insignia. It all reminds the public who’s boss.

When we first went to Thailand, the post office provided a regular lesson in how to survive with an unhelpful bureaucracy and a competitive public. Concerning the officials on the other side of the counter, we learnt not to antagonize them. Concerning the throng of people pressing around us, we learnt the necessity for strong arms and legs. The way things work is as follows.

You have moved with the pack till you have reached the counter and have just managed to edge your letters to the front, when a hand appears from behind and plonks a few more letters on top of yours. You move them off and shove your own letters further forward. After what seems an age, the unsmiling official gets round to dealing with your letters. The official may then quiz you about things that need no enquiry, but it lets you know who’s in charge. What’s inside? (a letter); where’s it going? (to the address on the front) . . .

Now comes the tricky bit. The letter is weighed on a beam balance, which has a collection of weights designed for postage rates based on unbelievably tiny increments – 5 grams! Having calculated the weight, the official then looks up a book to work out the cost for the country designated. Countries have different rates and, because of the 5 gram units, the postage invariably works out to be some odd amount that requires many stamps. The official extracts these stamps from various folders and throws them across the counter one by one. You then move on to the second letter.

When all the letters have been weighed and calculated, a trusty calculator tots up the amount and you hand over the money. Then, clutching letters, stamps and change, you muscle your way through the crowd to find some place where you can wipe off the sweat and stick on the stamps.

### Posting letters

These days things in Thailand have improved markedly (and they no longer use 5 gram units), but in some other countries the Thailand of old looks good by comparison. At least in Thailand we could safely post letters in the large postboxes at the post office, which is not the case everywhere. Posting at boxes along the street can

also be a risk, because the boxes may be cleared only occasionally, if at all. Also, postboxes may not be the bright red colour that many of us are accustomed to. In other countries they may be yellow, orange, green or blue.

On my first visit to a country west of Thailand (it was Sri Lanka), I learnt something that I soon discovered to be a common practice as I moved further west in Asia and across to Africa. I was posting letters at the main post office in Colombo and thought I knew the routine, because I had been there a few days earlier. But as I was about to put the letters in the postbox, a kind local person came running to me with, 'No sir! No sir!' He told me to take the letters to another counter where a person would frank the stamps, and then I could put them in the postbox. 'Otherwise they will steal the stamps and sell them again. This service is specially for international mail, because the stamps are many rupees.' He was right. The first lot of letters never reached Australia, but the second lot did.

### **Delivering letters**

By the time I first reached Africa, I had already been to twelve Asian countries and thought I knew how the postal system worked. The first addition to my knowledge was that postal deliveries as I had known them did not exist in many countries of Africa. If people wanted to receive letters, they had to rent a private box at the post office. Postal deliveries did not extend beyond the building.

When we first went to Thailand, we rented a box at the post office because this was more reliable for postal deliveries than a residential address. But as postal service improved, residential deliveries became efficient and reliable. I marvelled at the skill of Thai postmen in finding addresses, because the old house-numbering system had no pattern. Numbers were not necessarily in numerical sequence along a street. Land plots may have begun with a surveyed real estate allotment number, but subsequently there were subdivisions, then subdivisions of subdivisions, and so on. Allotment numbers followed the chronology of sub-division and building, not the physical location within a street.

Thai postmen also proved to be friendly and helpful, and once they knew the residents they gladly cooperated by leaving letters and parcels with trusted neighbours. This was in contrast to another Asian country, where the postman might blow a whistle and wave a letter for the resident to see, but indicate that he expected payment before passing the letter on.

We should not, however, make the assumption that the postal services in all these countries are corrupt. I once sent a letter to a person in a country town in Zimbabwe but mistakenly wrote 'Zambia' in the envelope. The man received the letter, thanks to the kindness of the Zambian post office in ascertaining that the town was in another country and paying for the international redirection.

During the civil war in Sierra Leone, a letter was returned to me, unopened, with an apologetic note that all postal services in the country had been suspended. I was amazed they had even bothered to return it. I was even more amazed when, more than a year later, the carton of books referred to in the letter also arrived back, again intact.

### **Dealing with delay**

In spite of our doubts about international postal systems, virtually all the cartons of books that Bridgeway sends overseas reach their destinations. But they may take a long time. The current 'world record' is held by the West African nation of Togo, where a carton took two years to arrive. Parcels to some other African countries have taken well over one year.

The problem is not with the sea journey but with the internal postal service. And this applies not just to the receiving country but also (in the case of India at least) to the sending country. We sometimes use the Indian productions of our books to supply

countries of Africa, but books from India take about three months longer than books from Australia to the same destination, even though the journey from India is much shorter. Our conclusion is that the books take about three months just to clear the borders of India.

In some countries, people have gone to a postal depot and eventually found the carton among a mountain of others in a warehouse. Parcels may sit there for months till someone gets round to dealing with them. In Myanmar, they tell me that one way the post office clears the backlog of mail (other than through workers stealing or selling the contents) is periodically to take a few truckloads to the garbage dump.

The postal service in Myanmar is easily the worst that we have to deal with. When sending a letter, we always send a duplicate a week or so later, in the hope that one might arrive. Our success rate with letter deliveries is less than 50%. All our parcels for Myanmar are now sent to addresses in north-east India, from where they are taken across the border through well-used routes. They all reach their destinations.

### **Happy outcomes**

Our extensive involvement in Myanmar began through a parcel of books stolen in the post office. The beginning of the story goes back to the early nineties, when Myanmar was still very much a closed country. I was at home in Brisbane when one day I received a letter from a man who had read one of my *Bridge Bible Handbooks* and asked could I send him a reference book such as a Bible dictionary. But it would have to be small and unimportant looking, because if officials discovered it they might confiscate it or turn it to profit by selling it.

Unknown to the man in Myanmar, my own *Bridge Bible Directory* had just been published, so I decided to send him a copy. I cut it into four sections, put the sections into envelopes of different shapes and sizes, and posted them at intervals of three or four weeks. Some were posted sea mail and some air mail. Remarkably, all four envelopes reached the man (though some letters written during the same time did not). The man then took the four sections to a bookbinder and had them sewn back into one book.

A year or two after this, the government of Myanmar, in search of tourist dollars, began to open the country to visitors, so my friend invited me over for ministry around Bible schools and churches. By this time I had satisfied myself that he was a trustworthy brother, and when I arrived discovered that he was well-known and respected across a wide circle of churches. I asked him how he had come into possession of one of the *Bridge Bible Handbooks* in the first place. He said he had bought it along the street. This meant that someone in the post office had stolen a carton and sold the books to a vendor. Although some of my books had been infiltrated into Myanmar across the border from Thailand, that particular title was not among them. Only one parcel of *Handbooks* had ever gone into Myanmar, and that was sent from Singapore to what was mistakenly considered a safe address.

As a result of my several trips to Myanmar and the hundreds of books that have subsequently entered the country, my ministry there has grown extensively. I have taught in many Bible schools, churches and conferences, and my books have so far been translated into Burmese, Falam, Tiddim, Rawang, Lisu, Lhauvo and Karen. And it all started through books stolen from the post office. As Joseph said to his scoundrel brothers, their intention was evil but God turned it to good.

## Taking photos

People in the Western world do not realize that taking photos can be a high-risk operation in many countries. The camera is seen not as an item for pleasure but as an instrument of espionage. During my years of residence in south-east Asia, this had never occurred to me, because people everywhere seemed to be enthusiastic takers of photos. But as I moved west across Asia and into Africa, I became increasingly cautious.

### **Bridges and other things**

The country where I first met this caution about photography was Pakistan, but in that case the main prohibited subject was bridges. This struck me as strange, but I subsequently found this prohibition to be common in many Asian and African countries. Airports and military installations are also commonly prohibited subjects, but that is not so surprising.

From Pakistan I went to Kenya. This was the first time I had set foot in Africa, and the very first day I was jolted into a more cautious approach to photography. I was walking down a main street in Nairobi when I saw an impressive fire engine parked on the roadside outside a fire station. Being interested in trucks of all sorts, I thought I would take a photo. Before I had a chance even to click the shutter, I was set upon by a security person and asked to come into the fire station.

There is no point resisting such an ‘invitation’, as if one has any rights in such circumstances. An important looking officer wanted to know why I had photographed the fire engine. Did I not know that was prohibited? I tried to explain my innocence, pointing out that I had not taken the photo. He threatened to open the camera and destroy the film, but my abject apology and some sweet talk managed to dissuade him.

From that point on, I was extra careful. Not careful enough, however, to escape the attention of someone who saw me taking a photo from a bus window. The man banged on the side of the bus beneath my window, shouted abuse, then jumped on the bus and headed for my seat. He had the intention, it seemed, of teaching me a lesson. But by this time the bus was pulling away from the bus stop, so the man decided to jump off – but not without a few parting expletives.

Over the next few months in Africa, I found that restrictions on photography in public varied from outright prohibition to cautious tolerance. One country even published a list of prohibited subjects – any bridge, post office, bank, government building, government official, railway station, train, bus park, taxi park, market, electricity pole or person in uniform. In other words, no photography was allowed at all, other than in the confines of one’s home or in a game park. And the restrictions had to be taken seriously. We repeatedly heard stories of visitors who could not believe that such restrictions existed, and finished up wasting hours, even days, at police stations. They usually lost their film as well.

### **Freedom, with discretion**

At the other end of the range of policies, one country, Malawi, issued a leaflet at the airport stating that visitors were welcome to take pictures publicly, provided they were not offensive to local people. After some of the countries we had been in, Malawi was a refreshing change. Though poorer than most, it seemed well-ordered, the cities were neat and tidy, and the atmosphere was relaxed and welcoming. The crowds of people walking to churches on Sunday morning was indeed a memorable sight – and photographed without fear.



After the experiences of that first African trip, I developed some proficiency at taking pictures from a moving vehicle. Occasionally, I would hear shouts of warning from local people when I was about to photograph a prohibited subject, but secrecy and discretion usually enabled me to take a variety of photos for the record. But many of the sights that have most moved or shocked me have never been captured on film. I can never bring myself to take photos of certain kinds of people and things. Maybe photos would inform people back home and perhaps stir their hearts, but those who suffer do not deserve to have their privacy invaded or their dignity abused.

### **Under surveillance**

Before going to Sudan, I had read that a person needed official permission in order to take photos. Sudan is obviously experienced in matters of officialdom. In all the passports I have exhausted over forty years, Sudan holds the record for the highest number of rubber stamps produced by one visit – twelve. And they filled two pages.

To begin with I found that passing through the immigration procedures at Khartoum airport was not enough. I had to report to a government office in town, where further procedures took place. After this I applied for permission to take photos. This required going to another part of town and undergoing extensive questioning, but eventually I was issued with a permit – an impressive laminated card complete with photo. My day so far had gone well. I had been in the country only eight hours (my plane having landed at 3.30 a.m., after a midnight flight from Cairo) and business with officialdom was already complete.

Feeling confident with my permit in my pocket, I set off to face Khartoum. My only other appointment for the day was with the Bible Society, so I thought I would put the remainder of the afternoon to best use by taking all my photos at once. This would confine any unwanted attention to one day.



*Khartoum*

There is not a lot to see in Khartoum, so I took a few photos to give an idea of the place, being careful to avoid pointing a camera anywhere in the vicinity of the river (the Nile) or the government buildings along its banks. Having walked around the main city area, I made a long detour through suburban streets as I wended my way back to the guesthouse. By 4.30 p.m. the guesthouse was in sight, so I stopped for a Coke at a roadside stall. Three Sudanese men came and greeted me, asking apparently casual questions about who I was, where I came from and what I was doing. It seemed innocent enough to start with, but then they told me they were policemen.

They had seen me taking photos. ‘Yes’, I responded. Why was I doing this? ‘My wife is back in Australia, she has never been to Sudan, and I want to take some photos back to show her where I have been.’ Did I have permission to do this? ‘Yes.’ Could they see my permit? ‘Certainly.’ I pulled it out of my pocket, displayed it for them to see, and returned it to my pocket. Not good enough. They wanted me to give it to them, which is what one never wants to do with official documents. It is too hard to get them back. They put their heads together, conversing in Arabic while examining the permit thoroughly. The speaker then returned it to me, saying, ‘Welcome to Sudan’.

The three men walked off, and I thought it wise to do the same. I quickly finished the Coke and got back to the safety of the guesthouse. Only then did I realize that I had not taken a photo for well over an hour. Those three men had been trailing me for the last hour, and very likely for most of the day.

## Better to refrain

I took no more photos in Khartoum. But a few days later I was at a Bible school in Omdurman. Just finding the place was an achievement. I had been told to take a taxi to a prominent mosque near the river and then make my way on foot – walk so far, turn left along a dirt road, go so far up a slight rise, and so on. But the roads were all dirt, and from the river they all seemed to go up a slight rise.



*Through the door and into the Bible school*

After I had criss-crossed the area a few times, a local woman walking past sensed my problem and guessed that, being a European, I must be looking for the Bible school. She was completely hidden behind her black clothing, not even her eyes being visible, but she lifted her hand and pointed silently to an unmarked door in a mud wall. I smiled and thanked her, and felt sad that the face of one so kind had to be kept hidden.

Once through the door, I soon ascertained that I was in the right place and began my day's work. When the midday break arrived, I decided to skip lunch, walk into town and take a look around. I wanted to take one or two photos, just for the record, but thought it wise to show my permit to a nearby policeman before doing so. The man almost fainted with fear. He said he could not give me permission on such a sensitive matter and would have to consult his superiors. I told him I was not asking for permission; I already had it. I was simply setting him at ease by showing him that everything was in order. But the man was so scared I left my camera in its bag and spared him further anxiety. Consequently, I have no photos of Omdurman.

I have learnt that, in such countries, photos are not worth the risk of attracting adverse attention. My hair and skin colour already make me stand out, and a camera only makes me more conspicuous. Always, someone is watching, whether we are aware of it or not. And it only needs one person to shout one word to attract public attention.

For this reason I have consistently resisted the temptation, in country after country, to photograph derelict soldiers. There is something comical about soldiers in frighteningly impressive battle uniforms, rolls of ammunition wrapped around their necks, slumped asleep over their high-powered weapons or sprawled on the ground in front of the buildings they are supposed to be guarding. Others are equally comical for their impressive make-believe, installed behind sandbags in the main street of a busy city, machine guns at the ready, faces blackened and helmets camouflaged with grass, while cars and buses whiz by and people go about their affairs as if these battle-ready troops are non-existent.

One secret of survival in such countries is knowing how to live with the military. The locals have learnt it, and visitors do well to follow their lead.

## Plain language

Some years ago a prospective publisher wrote to me, along with a number of others, with the proposition that we each write one chapter of a book to be entitled, *The Greatest Lesson I Have Learnt*. This was to be an Australian counterpart of a book with a similar title written by Americans. After some reflection, I decided to write about simplicity in communication, not because this or any other issue could be put into any kind of rank, but because I sensed that it might differ from topics chosen by others on the list of invited contributors. As things turned out, the book was never published. I suspect that most of the articles, like mine, were never even written.

The present chapter covers issues I might have written about in the proposed book, and it supplements, rather than repeats, what I have discussed at length elsewhere – in *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* and in Chapters 35 and 36 of *Making Sense*. It also includes material on the seminar topic I was invited to speak on at the Amsterdam 2000 conference on world evangelization, ‘Presenting the gospel to different audiences’.

### Changing the way we speak

The conveners of Amsterdam 2000, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, suggested that seminar speakers might highlight one memorable line that would focus the content of the talk and stick in people’s minds. My one-liner was, ‘We must make the effort to change the way we speak’. This may not appear to be a statement with world-changing consequences, but it certainly reflects a great lesson I have learnt. I am referring here not to speech training (though some of us may need that also), but to the words we use.



Amsterdam 2000

To some extent we all carry with us our cultural baggage, and this can be a hindrance in communicating the gospel. If I say we must rid ourselves of this baggage, most people will agree – but still think and talk as they did before. The cultural issues I am talking about are not obvious things such as the dress or music of a foreign country, but less obvious things such as the way we traditionally think and communicate. Our cultural baggage may be that of our Christian group, our native country, or a foreign country to which we have migrated.

In the context of world mission, we have all heard how missionaries should adapt themselves and their presentation to the local culture. If we are not careful, however, this can be both artificial and patronizing. People in our own society or elsewhere know when we are copying them with the aim of converting them but have made no effort to understand them or move away from our church sub-culture.

We must do more than merely adapt our presentation of the gospel to fit people’s background; we must adapt our way of communicating so that people will understand the gospel no matter what their background. My years of preaching in many countries have been years of constant learning, and one thing I have learnt is that, with only a minimal understanding of local societies and religions, preachers can still make an impact – but only if we have made the effort to change the way we speak.

## No need to impress

When I started out as an enthusiastic young man who wanted to preach the gospel and teach the Bible, I tried to sound like one who ‘knew his stuff’. I had done a lot of study and I wanted this to be evident in a sermon (or lecture, study, handout, or article) that was well sprinkled with impressive terminology. This was not solely with the desire to impress, because I genuinely wanted others to benefit and even do more study themselves. In time I found that my hopes were rarely fulfilled. Often, the way I did things was counter-productive.

Elsewhere in this book I recount my introduction to another culture and the need to learn another language. This in turn taught me things I had never considered in my native culture and language. Thai people did not speak English, even as a second language, and if we could not live and work naturally in Thai, all day every day, we might as well have gone back to Australia. But at the time I had no idea how this would change for ever the way I thought and communicated.

This experience in Thai, especially in working among the unevangelized, taught me that in talking to people about things they do not know, we should be able to give a clear explanation solely through using words and thought patterns they are familiar with. We should not need to teach new modes of expression before we can engage people in meaningful communication. Teaching in Thai helped me teach better in English.

One habit I developed in Thai, which I have used ever since in English, was to keep in mind the following question while preaching: if non-Christians are present, or indeed any people who know nothing about this subject, will they understand what I am talking about? Certainly, they may not understand fully a thing’s *significance* (e.g. the Lord’s Supper), but they should understand the words we use. In every language there is, I imagine, a vocabulary that almost everyone uses or understands. This is so, regardless of the specialist or distinctive words used in some circles, whether high-sounding and technical words on the one hand or coarse language and slang on the other.

## Breaking loose

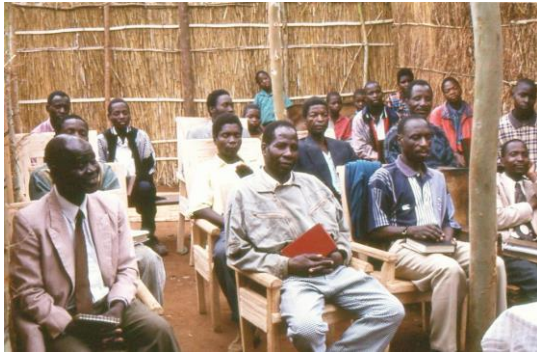
Four and a half years after arriving in Thailand, we left the country for the first time when we visited Australia on leave. By this time I had written a few books in Thai, some to introduce the gospel to enquirers and others to open up the Bible to readers. But in Australia I would be back on home soil and preaching again in my mother tongue. However, I no longer thought or preached as I once did, and I was put to the test the first time I had to preach – which was the very day we landed. Our ship arrived in Brisbane mid-morning (this was in the days when travel by ship was cheaper than travel by plane) and that evening I was to speak at a large missionary conference.

I had not addressed an audience in English for four years and cannot recall ever being so nervous. A large number of people had assembled, many of them supporters and well-wishers who were welcoming back the young missionaries. But by now I saw much of church life and outreach in a new light, and my views would not please the traditionalists. Moreover, I no longer used the King James Version or prayed using ‘thee’ and ‘thou’.

We may smile now, but this was fairly radical in the 1960s. I recall the flutters as I sat on the platform listening to others pray and read in the conventional manner, and I almost lost courage. Desperately, I tried in my mind to compose a prayer using the accepted ‘hast’, ‘gavest’ and ‘couldst not’, and got hopelessly confused. There on the platform I made a decision. ‘Be brave. Don’t be a hypocrite. Do what you know you should do. Better to encourage the remnant who want to change than to satisfy the majority who will not change.’ I had made a start, in my mother tongue, to change the way I spoke.

## International English

One thing I had done in preparation for this visit to Australia was to write a small book called *How the Church Grew*. It was an approximate English equivalent of one of my Thai books and traced the growth of the first century church with the aim of informing and challenging the church today. There was nothing very polished about the book and I had not thought of anyone reading it other than those I met while on leave in Australia. When later asked to write my Thai books in English for other Asian countries, I began by putting *How the Church Grew* into modified English for non-native readers. In doing so, I 'bent' the language too far, though reprints gave me the chance to revise. Later, I rewrote and expanded the book as part of a series of mini-commentaries. This was where I began consciously to analyse what I had learnt over the years from speaking and writing in Thai and to apply similar ideas to English.



*Pastors' seminar, Malawi*

By this time my world had spread from Thailand to other parts of Asia, and from there it would spread further. Because of this 'natural language' approach to communication, I discovered I could go from one country to another and, with very little understanding of the culture, speak in a way that communicated with the audience. This, however, was only because I had by now set myself on a course of continual

learning. Year after year, through country after country, I was discovering better ways of saying things simply and concisely.

English has become almost a universal language today, but it is not the language of the Bible. Nor is Western culture the culture of the Bible. People can understand God, and God can make himself known to them, in any culture and any language. Indigenous cultures and languages are not in themselves less Christian or more Christian than those of the West. Missionaries from the West do not need to convert people from their culture or language in order to make them 'proper' Christians. People can realize their identity right where they are, renewed in the image of him who created them.

Clearly, the better we know a culture or language, the better we can serve people. But in adapting our presentation within a society, there is a danger, and that applies to our own society as much as to others. The danger is to take local ideas, clothe them in biblical language, and then finish with something that is not historical Christianity. We hear the criticism that in some non-Western countries people have put a veneer of Christian language over former pagan notions and produced what is called christo-paganism. Yet we in the West have put a veneer of Christian language over the secular notions of our age and produced christo-secularism. There is, however, a difference. For whereas many Christians in the non-West are aware of the threat of christo-paganism, most Christians in the West are unaware of the pervasiveness of christo-secularism.

What concerns me is not that the meaning and usage of words change with society. That may be annoying, but it is inevitable, and we just have to live with it. My concern rather is that we put too much effort into adapting the message to the society and not enough effort into communicating the message in language that people will understand, no matter what the society. We need to pay more attention both to the original message (the timeless truth revealed in the Bible) and to the way we pass it on to others (our usage of the plain language by which ordinary people communicate).



This has been demonstrated in the comments of Christians in a number of African countries. Although I have been to many African countries for ministry, I have not lived for an extended time in any. My knowledge of African cultures is that of a visitor, not that of a resident. Yet from several countries I have received comments such as, 'The books are so helpful, it's as if you had the African people in mind when you wrote.' Whether in writing or speaking, whether in Africa or Asia, we can be confident that the message of the Bible will make itself relevant to the readers and hearers once they understand it.

### **False sophistication**

Concerning plain language, two stories are worth recounting. Back in Thailand, after my *Bible Handbooks* and *Dictionary* had established themselves as standard Christian materials, I was talking with some Thais, all tertiary educated and theologically literate, who made comments along the following lines. My books, they said, were easy to read and explained the Bible so that it was intelligible to anyone, but, they added, the language was not 'classy'. It was not the 'high brow' Thai normally met in academic works. Thai writers like to sound literary.

My response was that the tendency to write in a style that appeals mainly to people of higher literary appreciation is not peculiar to Thai writers. Even with Christian writers in English, the commentators seem at times to write for the commentators, and the theologians for the theologians. My aim is to write something that is academically sound, but useful to those who are not academically inclined.

The second story comes from Australia, where a person who made charitable comments about my books then asked, 'Don't you think it a bit beneath you to write these simple books when you could write more scholarly-looking works for a higher market?' The question highlighted the difference between what he and I thought important.

There was nothing derogatory in the man's use of the word 'simple', but it is a word I hesitate to use, because it can create an impression that is not helpful. If I suggest we use simple language, I do not mean patronizing language – a 'teary-deary' style for old people or an 'itsy-bitsy' style for children. Nor do we use 'matey' language for one group or the latest 'with it' language for another. We use ordinary words, by which we should be able to explain anything.

Likewise, if I say we preach the simple gospel, I do not mean the gospel stripped of its majesty and theology, but the gospel with all its majesty and theology explained so that the most ill-educated person can understand it. In short, if we cannot explain something in plain words that anyone can understand, the reason is possibly that we do not understand it ourselves.

### **Popular misunderstandings**

'Simple' is one of a number of words I avoid – or am careful to explain – because in popular usage their meaning is different from what I have in mind. The word 'text' is another. It should mean the body of print we are reading, whether a paragraph, page, chapter or book, but to many people it means a verse from the Bible, such as John 3:16. I am careful with the word 'creature', because whereas I mean 'created being', other people think 'beast' or 'animal'. 'Person' and 'personal' also mean different things to different people. If I say I believe in a personal God but do not explain myself, some people may think I am talking about an old man with a long white beard. If I say I believe in a personal devil, they may think I believe in a slimy green creature with an arrowed tail.

I am learning constantly that apparently well-known words are either not known or not understood. In a series of sermons, I had referred to legalism, only to be asked afterwards by someone (who had been a good church-going Christian longer than I had been alive) what the word 'legalism' meant. On another occasion a Christian of similar

longevity asked, after I had delivered an impassioned sermon on world mission, which mission I was talking about – WEC, the Leprosy Mission, or what?

Misunderstandings can also arise with the words ‘immoral’, ‘moral’, ‘morality’ and the like. To many people, these words have meaning only in relation to sexual behaviour. Another word that can land us in trouble is ‘literal’. I may say a thing is not literal, meaning it is figurative, only to discover later that some understand the word ‘literal’ to mean ‘true’. To them, not to interpret something literally means not to believe it.

There seems to be no end to the misunderstanding of the meaning and usage of words. Although I try hard to eliminate misunderstandings by avoiding or explaining words where I foresee problems, I am forced to recognize that probably every time I speak, someone will misunderstand something. It is reassuring to realize that everyone else who speaks publicly fares similarly. Even Jesus was misunderstood, and not necessarily with malice. At times we shall be misunderstood even by those who know us best.

### **Lack of knowledge turned to profit**

The likelihood of our being misunderstood is all the more reason why we who are preachers and writers should be constantly finding easier ways to express our ideas. It does no good to hide behind accepted vocabulary. With any topic, the test of our understanding is whether we can explain it to a person who is not equipped with a specialist vocabulary.

If we and our friends share the same technical knowledge (for example, in science, literature or economics), we can save time when talking together by using technical terminology. To turn this into everyday language that non-technical

people can understand will require more time, effort and words, but in the process we shall benefit not only our hearers but ourselves also. We shall discover how well we know what we thought we knew, and shall feel rewarded when we see how other people profit from their increased knowledge.



*Pastors' seminar, Solomon Islands*

One other benefit that comes from talking in everyday language to people outside our group (which, in the case of Christians, often means talking with those who have no biblical background) is that they help us learn. I have found they can ask simple questions, not necessarily in a spirit of contention, about things I had so taken for granted that I had never really thought about them – certainly not from the point of view of a casual enquirer. If we believe the Christian faith to be true, we should welcome any opportunity that helps us understand it better and communicate it to others.

### **A passion to communicate**

This belief in the truth of Christianity is what gives me the urge to preach, teach and write – and to do so in uncomplicated language that anyone can understand. I believe Jesus Christ to be the only way of salvation, and the Bible to be the only authoritative written revelation God has given us. My purpose, therefore, is to help people understand these things – to help them understand the Bible and all that flows from it, so that we might know God, be built up as Christians, reach the world for Christ and see churches grow.

People who do not know Jesus Christ find this almost impossible to grasp. They think there must be something in it for me, as if it is the way I earn my living. I have



even met Christians who, in referring to my books, have said, 'But when it's all boiled down, it's really a fund raising exercise.' I am usually stumped for words, not just because I take no income from my books, but mainly because I suddenly realize how different is their view from mine. They cannot see that people might write books because of the desire to help others know God, know Christ, know the Bible and know themselves.

In the world of today, most things are evaluated according to their profitability or practicality. For Christians, however, the underlying reason we do things is not that they are profitable, but that they are good. Our commitment to Christianity is not because it works, but because it is true. For no matter what its usefulness, if it is not true, any passion for communicating it is but wasted energy.

## Arriving in Albania

For two weeks I had been getting used to living in southern Italy without being able to speak with most of those I travelled and worked with. Interpreters had translated when I preached and occasionally when I travelled, but mostly I was unable to communicate with my hosts in a common language.

In spite of all this, I managed to get through, thanks to facial expressions, exaggerated hand movements and the occasional word that sounded like something in the other language. I wondered when the people who arranged my itinerary would take one chance too many, and it almost happened when I had to board a ship to cross to Albania.

### **Making the right connections**

A person (non-English speaking) picked me up in Foggia in the morning for the one-hour drive to the town of Bari, from where I was to catch the ship across the Adriatic Sea to Durres in Albania. I was told that this man would somehow connect me with three Christians from north Italy who were taking three vehicles of aid across to Albania on the same ship (which doubled as a vehicular ferry).

These men from north Italy could not speak English either, but I was given the name of one of them, De Masi. I was to write this name, along with my own, on a small placard and walk round the ferry terminal till someone noticed me. That would at least see me on to the ship. When we arrived at Durres, I was to leave the ship holding a similar placard but with only my name on it, in the hope that someone there would see me. This person, like the Italians, would not know English, but he would take me the one-hour drive to Tirana, the Albanian capital, where I would be based for my ministry over the next week.

Unknown to me, the man who drove me from Foggia was not the one who would take me to the ship. When we reached the outskirts of Bari, he was apparently supposed to meet a local person who would then take me into his care. It took several detours and many calls to other motorists, pedestrians and anyone else within hearing for my driver to reach the place he was looking for. We eventually reached the place, and there was the local man waiting at what I assume was a pre-arranged location. To my considerable relief he spoke and understood enough English for us to communicate. His name was Salvatore and he graciously took me home for a late lunch. He said we would go to the wharf at 5.00 p.m. to buy a ticket and prepare for the ship's departure at 11.00 p.m.

Some time after five o'clock we arrived at the ferry terminal. It seemed that hundreds of vehicles and people were there early to buy their tickets. Displaying our placard, we walked round and about, inside and outside the terminal, up and down lines of vehicles that looked as if they were queued for the ferry, but with no success.

This went on for almost an hour. Then Salvatore produced a slip of paper from his pocket with De Masi's cell-phone number on it and said he would phone to find out where he was. Why he had not done this before he left home, or when we arrived at the terminal, I do not know. He then had to buy a pay-card for the phone, and this again meant many tours around the terminal till we found a place that sold them. By this time the luggage we had been carting around for the last hour had become uncomfortably heavy.

Triumph! He made contact, and yes, the man was there at the terminal, but he was sitting in his vehicle because he had a sore foot. However, he should not be hard to find, because his was a white van, parked on the right hand side. So we set off again.

Did Salvatore know the make of the van? No. Did he know its size or shape? No. Did he know the registration number? No. But at least we knew the man was somewhere in the vicinity of the terminal, so we felt confident enough to buy the ticket.

We then set off to find the man, but half an hour of further wandering brought no success. Back to the phone. Yes, the man was still waiting and was still 'on the right hand side'. Even then my friend did not know 'on the right hand side' in relation to what. We then heard a loud whistle from the opposite direction to which we were walking, and when we turned around saw a man waving with much excitement. That must be him, said Salvatore. So we picked up the luggage again and carted it a further hundred metres to meet the man and talk with him – well, Salvatore did. And, yes, it *was* De Masi.

The two men talked and laughed about the events of the last hour, and were relieved that we had all met up. De Masi looked at my ticket, saw that I was in Cabin 58, and said he would come and visit me after they were on the ship. He said that boarding time for vehicles was 8.00 p.m., which was the same as for passengers. I had been told this by the booking clerk when I bought the ticket, and it was displayed on the board in the departure lounge.

### **One more connection**

After various delays at immigration and customs, I finally arrived at my cabin about nine o'clock. The previous night I had not gone to bed till 1.00 a.m. so thought I would make the most of the opportunity to have an early night.

At 9.30 I turned out the light to go to sleep when I was called over the public address system to go to reception. There I was met by an Italian pastor named Daniele. He was from Rome, and was heading for Albania to prepare for a group from his church to go there in some sort of ministry. He had not been to Albania before, so that day had phoned a friend, Fares Marzone, to get a contact phone number in Tirana in case something unexpected arose. (Everyone seems to know Fares. He was the man who had organized my entire itinerary, including all the arrangements mentioned above.) Daniele spoke English, so we talked for an hour or so before I headed off for bed. We decided to stick with each other when we left the ship in the morning, and hoped that he might squeeze in with me for a ride to Tirana.

The ship was late leaving Bari, and arrived off Durres about 6.30 a.m., only a little behind schedule. But we were then kept off shore for the next four hours, because no wharf was available (even though ships run to the same schedule every night). At 10.30 a.m. we were told to prepare for disembarkation, but even after the ship berthed at 11.00 a.m., we were kept standing in the exit passageway for half an hour. When we made it to land, I marched around in the dirt and dust of the area where the gangway landed, displaying my name, and though this attracted a lot of attention, none of the attention came from anyone who was supposed to meet me.

Daniele waited nearby, as he was hoping one of the vans might be going on to Kukus, eight hours from Tirana to the north, where he was heading.

The rate of exit of vehicles from the ferry was so slow that after half an hour we decided to walk the several hundred metres to the exit from the wharf area. Perhaps the person to meet me had been stopped by customs officials and was waiting outside the main gate. Also, vehicles had to exit via this gate, so we still had the chance to see one of the vans.

### **A ride to Tirana**

The area around the main gate was the worst introduction imaginable if one wanted to impress visitors – dirt, dust, broken asphalt, makeshift shops, decrepit buildings, scattered garbage, rusting car bodies and aggressive taxi drivers. No vehicles seemed to be coming through the gates, so after half an hour we decided Daniele should phone

the number that Fares had given him. At least many Albanians understand Italian. No phone was readily available, but a taxi driver took him through the debris to find one in a distant shop, while I guarded the luggage. He returned ten minutes later to say that a person had come to meet us, but after waiting several hours had returned home. We should therefore hire a taxi to Tirana.

We settled on a price of \$US15 with our obliging taxi driver, who took us through further debris to a beaten-up Mercedes for the drive to Tirana. We then found he was not a taxi driver at all, but a tout who had made a catch for someone else. The real taxi driver was in the same casual garb as everyone else, except that he had a cap! It was very impressive, especially the gold insignia that looked as if it had come from the commander of the national air force. Daniele sat in the front and conversed with the driver, while I sat in the back with the tout. He had decided to come along for the ride, but spent most of the time asleep.

Both Daniele and I were appalled at the conditions we saw along the road – dirt, potholes and broken asphalt where there should have been a road, utterly lawless

traffic, hovels along the roadside, junk everywhere, beaten-up buses, and dozens of rusting car bodies. Some were in ditches, some upturned, some half out on the road, some in front of houses, some in fields, and some even in what appeared to



*Road to Tirana lined with wrecked motor vehicles*

be wrecking yards. This was Daniele's first time out of Italy and his standard comment for almost everything he saw was, 'This is unbelievable'. Certainly, it was for Europe.

An hour later we arrived in Tirana. We then had to find the address that Daniele had obtained through his dockside phone call. In true local style, the driver and the tout yelled out to passing motorists, pedestrians, policemen or anyone else within earshot to get directions as we moved steadily towards what we hoped would be a correct destination. After a dozen or so of these lusty enquiries, we arrived at our destination, the Christian Assembly church in central Tirana.

As usual, I made sure the driver was out of the taxi before we were (Daniele did not quite understand this piece of free travel insurance), and then that our luggage was out of the boot before we paid the taxi. The tout then insisted that the trip had taken longer than he thought, and that he wanted \$20 instead of \$15. This brought heated debate, which became even more heated when he insisted that the \$20 was for him personally because he had hired the taxi, and we had to pay another \$20 to the taxi driver.

The driver was now back in the car, but the heated argument between Daniele and the tout continued. We were, however, at our destination and we had our luggage, so we decided to make a quick exit by giving him \$20 and heading into the church. He took the money with much bad grace and climbed into the taxi with the driver, where further heated discussion took place. He then jumped out, rolled the \$20 note into a ball and pitched it straight at Daniele. Daniele picked it up with the attitude of 'Well, if you don't want it . . .' but then the driver jumped out, took the money from Daniele (not with bad grace) and got back into the car. The last we saw of them, they were in the front of the taxi continuing their animated discussion.

### **The group at lunch**

Praise God, we were at the church. It was 2.30 p.m., which was rather late, seeing the ship had arrived at 6.30 a.m. We were welcomed inside, where a group was sitting talking and eating. The discussion was again in Italian, so I was not sure what was going on, but imagined it was an explanation of our adventures and late arrival – also an explanation of who Daniele was and how he had come to be with me.

Then I noticed that one of the group was De Masi. This was the first I knew that De Masi had any connection with the people at the church, let alone that he and I had been heading for the same place. But how had he and his friends managed to leave the ship without our seeing them? After all, we had waited and checked each vehicle as it came off. Much discussion followed. It was all a mystery, because they had waited and looked for us at the ship for so long that finally they gave up. Then, somehow, the fact emerged that we had come on different ships!

Both ships had been scheduled for boarding at 8.00 p.m. and departure at 11.00 p.m., but neither Salvatore nor De Masi had been aware that two ships were sailing at the same time, from neighbouring piers, and to the same destination. In the end we were all strengthened in our belief in the sovereignty of God, for had not Daniele made that chance phone call to Fares before he left home, no one knows how the story might have ended.

## Singing

In all the countries we visit, the church's worship involves singing – whether loud or soft, harmonized or in unison, with exuberant movement or with motionless poise. Sometimes the singing is accompanied by musical instruments (which range from bongo drums in Swaziland to a pipe organ in India), and sometimes there are no musical instruments at all. On occasions we meet churches that have fallen into the current habit of using the word 'worship' simply to denote a song session, but many of these places at least give a prominent place also to prayer and the Word. I talk about these other issues elsewhere in this book.

### Some African churches

A most memorable church service was in Blantyre, Malawi. To start with, when people entered the building, they followed what was clearly an agreed practice. Whether male or female, old or young, family friends or otherwise, they began at the seats beside the outer walls of the front row and systematically filled towards the centre aisle, row by row, till the building was packed from wall to wall, front to back, with over six hundred people.

There was no sound system, but each of the platform party, except for me, had no difficulty filling the room with his voice. Many Africans not only have booming voices, but they have learnt, better than some of us, how to project their voices. The service was in the Chichewa language, which meant I had an interpreter (my long-time friend Winston Chidzambuyo), so my lack of volume did not matter. But the volume from the six hundred singing voices seemed to lift us out of our mundane surroundings.



*Winston and Grace Chidzambuyo*

Many of the songs were local compositions, but others had tunes to which I could put English words and so enter into the spirit of the singing. Both Gae in the audience and I on the platform were moved in the same way. The singing was unforgettable – a wonderful mixture of shrill female voices and deep male voices, all with distinctive zzzz sounds and in that harmonized style that is common in eastern, central and southern Africa. I believe we had a glimpse of the reason why singing, according to the visions of Revelation, has an important place in the worship of heaven.

Across the six African countries we visited on that trip, in churches large and small, we enjoyed variations of the Blantyre experience. But there were a few notable contrasts.

In one country, we were at a meeting for the Lord's Supper where neither the hymns nor the singing had the same uplifting quality. Although we did not understand the language, we recognized the hymns, because they had been translated from English. There was no music, and the singing did not sound African. But at the halfway point, after the distribution of the bread and wine and a few announcements, a person picked up a piano-accordion and started belting out some rollicking Sankey tunes. Somehow, it did not fit. Gae on one side of the building and I on the other (for men and women had their separate sides) instinctively looked at each other, which only added to the difficulty of controlling our mirth. What's more, the changed tempo scarcely improved the singing.

For sheer volume, no country of my experience can beat Nigeria. The Nigerians certainly hold nothing back. Some of the men have a way of clapping that makes the sound go right through one's ear, like a huge firecracker exploded at close range. But they do not always clap according to the beat of the music, and the increased volume is no compensation for the lack of timing. Nevertheless, it is good to see people enjoying their singing with gusto. In my country the singing is so insipid at times that one wonders if people have any interest in what they are doing.

### **The South Pacific**

But let me return to the subject of harmonious singing. The other part of the world where I have had a comparable experience to that of Africa is the islands of the South Pacific, especially the Solomon Islands. It seems that all the people there, even small children, know how to sing in harmony – not just four-part, but what sounds like six-part or more. They are able to make it up as they go along, and it always fits beautifully, whether with local-language songs or English-language songs. One can easily enjoy being part of such singing.

Much of the singing in parts of the South Pacific is without musical accompaniment, but this seems to make it all the richer. The same applies elsewhere. One feature of unaccompanied singing (which we have met in Pakistan and countries of Africa as well as in the South Pacific) is the introduction of each line by a person who sings the whole line or introductory words solo, after which the congregation sings the complete line. Over the years they have learnt to do this without losing the rhythm or tune, and everyone seems to adjust readily to the improvisations and variations of the lead singer.

The Solomon Islanders are a quiet people, different from the exuberant Africans. There is not the clapping and waving of the Africans, nor the same energetic movement of arms and legs, but in one church there was a period when, one by one, up to a dozen people moved out of their seats, down the aisles and around the front of the church in slow rhythmic dancing. They all had their own style, but it fitted the tempo of the singing. The other two hundred people in the congregation were not moved to the same activity, nor were any of the church leaders, but no one seemed to mind the silent contribution of these few.

### **Other places**

In many countries, Christians have successfully adapted traditional hymns to their own style of singing, while using Western musical instruments. I was captivated by the singing of an Aboriginal church in outback Australia where the singing of traditional hymns to the languid strumming of a guitar gave the songs a new 'feel'. I had a similar experience among a Maori group in New Zealand. Today, patterns of worship among both Aborigines and Maoris are changing, as they produce new songs of praise within their indigenous cultural forms. This is a widespread trend among First Nations people. ('First Nations people' are the original inhabitants of a country who are now in a minority through the loss of their country to a colonizing power.)

Instruments and singing styles are different again in Asia. Some Hindi and Punjabi songs of North India sounded beautiful, and some Telugu songs of South India were so memorable that I found the tunes being replayed in my mind for days. Whether the words were of similar quality I do not know. The same applies in places such as Germany, Romania and Czech Republic, where the words of certain hymns sound to combine so beautifully with the tunes that I wish I knew both. In Thailand I have found the tunes and words of some locally composed songs complement each other in a way that draws out moving expressions of worship.

Whatever the language, God is exalted when his people sing praises with understanding and thanksgiving. At the same time they build each other up in their faith and testify to others that the joy of salvation has transformed their lives.



## A weekend camp

Our church in Bangkok had organized a weekend camp to be held near Hua Hin, a seaside town 240 km to the south. The owner of the camp lived in Bangkok, and during the previous months we had discussed arrangements with her three times, including a final meeting two days before leaving to confirm everything. However, I had lived in Thailand long enough to know it would be wise to go down to Hua Hin on the Friday morning just to make sure everything was satisfactory. I took a local Thai Christian with me.

### Setting up camp

We arrived at the campsite at 1.00 p.m. to find that the caretaker knew nothing of the camp that was to start that night. But as there were no other bookings, the camp was ours if we wanted to prepare it. The property had no water supply, so we rushed into town, ten kilometres away, to buy water. The owner of the water truck was not there. We were told of various places he might be, and after half an hour of hide-and-seek we found him. Having settled the arrangements for water, we returned to camp and set about cleaning the place – kitchen, dining area, sleeping quarters, bathrooms, toilets and assembly hall. The caretaker's wife began sewing away at all the torn mattresses.

At 4.00 p.m. we felt some relief when we saw the water truck approaching, but it broke down a hundred metres from the camp. After half an hour of tinkering, and with much encouragement from onlookers, the man got it started, but before it could move we heard a horrible clanging noise that told us all was not well. The fan had come off, and the flying blades so damaged the engine that there was no way it would start again.

We found an old 44-gallon drum suitable for holding water and decided to ferry the water up to the campsite on a crude wooden cart that someone found for us. Luckily for us, the truck had a pump with its own small motor that could pump the water from the truck into the drum. Unluckily for us, the hose burst before we unloaded the first drumful. Again there was plenty of advice on how to solve the problem, but the reality was that over the next two hours we made twenty trips to wheel the 4,000 litres of water into the camp and fill all the water jars in the toilets, bathrooms, kitchen and dining area.

### Getting to camp

The camp entrance was hard to find at night, so at 10.00 p.m. we went out to the main road to wait for the bus that was bringing campers from Bangkok. We waited for an hour . . . two hours . . . three hours . . . and finally at 1.30 a.m. the bus arrived. Then the story of its delay unfolded.

We had booked the bus for 5.30 p.m., but when two people from the church arrived at the depot to direct the driver to five designated pick-up points around the city, they discovered that the bus had not returned from an up-country trip. One of them decided to hail a taxi and make a quick trip to inform the waiting campers of the delay. But Bangkok's traffic is worse than normal at that time of day, and there is no such thing as a 'quick trip' anywhere. After an hour and a half the taxi completed its rounds, but by this time some



*Bangkok depot for up-country buses*

people had gone home. Others had gone looking for the bus but, as they found out later, the bus came while they were away.

By the time the bus was clear of Bangkok, the time was 10.00 p.m. The chaotic sequence of events might appear to us to have been a disastrous start to the camp, but the people on the bus did not see it that way. They exhibited that remarkable Thai characteristic of being able to see the funny side of things that we find exasperating.

This was a camp designed for non-Christians, and the common adversity of the bus adventure loosened up everybody and created a wonderful spirit. The camp turned out to be the best evangelistic camp I have participated in. Although we had an invited speaker to lead the formal Bible study sessions, the Christians from the church were the ones who made the weekend successful. Without being annoying or senseless, they created such an atmosphere of openness, friendliness and intellectual honesty that people were prepared to talk and listen. Any time day or night, there seemed to be a worthwhile conversation going on somewhere. The best evangelism is often done not when there is a 'safe' space between speaker and listeners, but when there is a one-on-one engagement between believers and enquirers.

## People you meet

In the course of meeting people all over the world, I have heard many stories worth telling. I have not, as a rule, recorded them here, because I am largely recording my own experiences rather than those of others. But every now and then I meet someone who seems to have a fairly colourful existence.

### **In North Africa**

The time had come to leave Sudan, so at 3.00 a.m. I was picked up and taken to Khartoum airport for a flight back to Rome and on to Belgrade. But when we arrived, the terminal was closed. After making enquiries, my friend learnt that the flight had been transferred to the domestic terminal. The reason was, apparently, that the plane was going first to Port Sudan (on the Red Sea), and since this was within Sudan, the flight was domestic (even though the same plane and flight number would take us on to Rome). Once I was checked in, my friend left.

Because this was the domestic terminal, no announcements or signs were in English and I could not find anyone who spoke English. So when the next flight was called, I joined the queue, but upon reaching the gate was turned back by an alert attendant. Next time I made no mistake, and soon was striding across the tarmac for the luggage identification.

Travellers from Western countries may not be familiar with this luggage identification exercise, nor may they be aware that in many non-Western countries there are no seat allocations. All luggage was lined up on the tarmac, and only after passengers had identified their bags would those bags be loaded on to the plane. If the bag contained a bomb, the owner would be blown up with it. Having identified their baggage, passengers then made a rush for the plane to claim a seat.

Gae and I had worked out a strategy to handle this routine. While I identified the luggage, Gae beat the mad scramble by heading straight for the plane and claiming two seats. At Khartoum, however, I was on my own, so just joined the race.

The plane landed at Port Sudan and we all had to disembark, go to the terminal and claim our luggage. The procedure was a farce, but it satisfied the bureaucrat who devised it. The way it worked was this. The luggage came into the arrival area on a long u-shaped conveyor. We all lined up along one length of the conveyor, collected our luggage, carried it through a temporary check point set up at the u-turn (show passport, boarding pass and ticket) and then placed our luggage back on the same conveyor, which took it back to where it came from. It was then put back on the plane, but was now international luggage as distinct from domestic luggage.

At this point I spied a person who looked as if he might be European. I asked if he spoke English and if he knew what was happening. 'Yes' to the first question, 'No' to the second. But we decided we should stick together for the rest of the adventure.

The man had an unusual accent, but when I asked where he came from he surprised me by saying, 'England'. However, he did not live there. He was married to a Belgian, their home was in Austria, and for the past fifteen years he had spent most of his time in difficult countries, working for international aid agencies. He had been through crisis after crisis in Somalia, Bangladesh, Western Sahara, Eritrea, Sierra Leone . . . and so the list went on. 'But I have had enough,' he said, 'and yesterday was just about the last nail in the coffin'.

He had been in a truck heading back to Khartoum from one of Sudan's many war areas. They had given notice of the time they were to pass through a control zone, obtained clearance and attached the usual flags to the already distinctively painted

truck. But as they passed through the control zone, there was a sudden burst of rifle fire. Bullets ripped through the truck and everyone hit the floor. The driver, a Sudanese, jumped out and began to remonstrate with the soldiers who had fired at them. In the ensuing argument, he pointed out that they had given notice, received clearance and come through at the right time. 'No, that clearance is for tomorrow,' said the soldiers. 'It is for today', replied the driver. Further argument . . . check the paperwork again . . . 'Oh, yes, so it is,' said the soldiers. 'Sorry.'

### **In Eastern Europe**

Many stories have been told of secret deliveries of Bibles and literature to Christians in Eastern Europe during the years of communist oppression. The couriers were often as much at risk as the local believers. The couriers knew which locals to contact, but the locals never knew the couriers' names. The theory was that what they did not know they could not tell.

A person in Czech Republic told of a mysterious visit from someone who, in broken English, told of a delivery about to take place. The Czechs had never seen or heard of this man before and took precautions in case he was a spy. A meeting place was arranged at a roadside rest area, and the courier was to leave a sack beside a garbage bin. The locals arrived early but tried to look natural by playing with their children on the lawn. In due course the courier arrived, put the sack beside the bin and drove off. No words were spoken and the locals never saw the man again, but they had a fresh supply of literature.

The home I stay at in Bulgaria had often received deliveries of books, always in the middle of the night, but the books were always wrapped and despatched immediately the next day. The police watched the house constantly and made frequent inspections, but never found any incriminating evidence.



*Anonymous housing, Bulgaria*

On one occasion, the police had just made an inspection when, that night, some books unexpectedly arrived. Because the police had been to the house only that day, the owner felt no urgency to wrap and despatch the books. But the next morning, with the carton sitting on the kitchen table in full view of anyone who entered the house, the police called for another inspection.

The owner objected to the harassment along the lines, 'Look, you came only yesterday and found nothing. Now you hassle us again. What do you think this place is? Do you think we get books dropped on us in the middle of the night? Why this annoyance? But if you insist, OK, the house is yours. Go ahead and search.' The police, taken aback by the man's apparent confidence, decided they would not intrude after all.

### **In the Pacific**

In a coastal town of a Pacific island, we were caught in a monsoon that quickly showed that our house would be cut off by flood. But the man of the house was a picture of confidence. He had been through monsoons and floods before, so as he went off to work he assured us all that we were safe. He left strict instructions with his wife that all were to remain in the house and not move, regardless of what happened.

But as the hours passed, the water kept rising. The house was on stumps about a metre and a half tall, and the water looked as if it would soon be above the floorboards. No boat was available, and neighbours kept yelling at us to get out while we had the chance. So the man's wife made a decision to evacuate. We each assembled a package

of belongings, and cautiously felt our way down the steps to head through the muddy waters in the direction of a public hall that was on higher ground. We had to hold our belongings above our heads, Ulysses style, because the water was up to our chests (up to the necks of shorter people). Amid much hilarity and thanksgiving we reached higher ground.

Because of the crisis, factories sent their workers home. When the husband arrived back and saw us in the public hall, he was furious. He had left strict instructions not to evacuate! So we all had to go back to the house, partly to show his confidence but mainly to assert his authority. Grudgingly, we did our Ulysses act once more, this time back *into* the flood.

We were all annoyed at this high-handedness, but soon we were home again, drying out for the second time and hoping that the man's faith would be vindicated. It was, though we sat marooned for the next twenty-four hours. 'I told you so' was the man's attitude. He was a local preacher, so he knew of the three abiding virtues, faith, hope and love. And for him, faith and hope were what counted.

## Interpreters

During the years of our settled ministry in Thailand, I had no reason to work with interpreters, and consequently had a lot to learn when I began moving around other countries. Some of these were former British colonies where English is the common language of the majority, perhaps even the national language, even though it may not be the first language of anyone. I was relieved to find that in such countries most Bible schools operated in English, but I soon found that in church services interpretation was often needed because of the varied audiences. As my ministry moved beyond the former British colonies, interpretation became the norm.

### Learning how to do it

At first I found interpretation irksome and restricting, but as the years passed I learnt some of the techniques. The usual procedure is for preacher and interpreter to speak alternately, sentence for sentence. This means that the preacher should frame the sentence so that it is short, has few sub-clauses, is in simple language without idioms, and has a self-contained meaning. This is especially necessary when the only person available has limited English. One admires the courage of such people.

The other end of the scale is represented by an interpreter I had in Budapest, Hungary. She worked for the government and was experienced at simultaneous interpretation. Instead of following the sentence-by-sentence practice, she just let me talk on, while she talked over the top without drawing breath. That sort of interpretation requires exceptional skill.

Strange as it may seem, some people who spoke English almost as well as native English-speakers have not been good interpreters. On one occasion, when lecturing on the book of Judges, I mentioned that most of these judges were not civil officials but military leaders who overthrew the oppressors. They became national heroes. The interpreter turned to me and said, 'This language has no word for hero'. The man spoke English as if it was his mother tongue, and in doing so had no need for any mental translation. But now he was translating for others, and because he was trying to translate my words rather than express my ideas, he struggled throughout the lecture. Those who shared translation responsibilities with him through these lectures did not have his brilliance at English, but they were far more fluent translators.

Good translators do not aim to find an equivalent for every word. They aim to understand the meaning and purpose of the sentence, and then produce a similar meaning and purpose in the receptor language.

If the interpreter is also able to copy hand movements and facial expressions, so much the better. This sometimes produces good interaction with the interpreter. Some are shy to be as animated as I am at times; but others follow movement by movement.

A good example of this was in Albania. I was explaining that an Israelite scribe was originally a person who made hand-written copies of ancient writings, and I accompanied my words with a scribbling action. The interpreter, who had been copying my actions throughout, said to me in English, 'No, it goes this way,' and moved his scribbling hand in the opposite direction. I took a moment to catch what he was doing, so he repeated himself. 'It goes this way. The Hebrews write from right to left.' The man was a keen young Christian who only five years earlier could not speak English. His spirited contribution produced some mirth and enlivened the audience, as does any such exchange between preacher and interpreter.

In another country my interpreter was very long-winded and I had difficulty maintaining a flow in my delivery. Also, because of his limited English, I had to go

slowly and carefully, which dragged things on even more. He had interpreted at several lesser events, but was in the audience at a large conference where I had another interpreter. This new man was excellent. He got into the mood of my talk well and was so crisp and lively in his delivery that I was able to speak with a feeling and freedom that I had not enjoyed in that country previously. The former translator was stunned at the transformation and wanted to know why I had changed. He was a delightful person who had done his best, and I did not have the heart to give him more than a partial explanation.

### **On the same wave length**

Wherever possible, I like to have time with the interpreter beforehand to go through the talk. The basis of much of my preaching is a thorough familiarity with the text of the biblical book I am expounding, and if the interpreter does not have this familiarity, the effect of the exposition can be lost. I know which words of which verses my eyes must pick up from the page as I speak, and the interpreter must be aware of what I am doing. Moreover, certain verses in his Bible may not say what my Bible says. In view of these potential trouble spots, I often choose topical teaching rather than textual exposition when preaching with translation.

There are, however, happy exceptions. If the interpreter has the same fervour for biblical exposition, or the same approach, or has a particular interest in the same book or subject, the translated talks can come across exceptionally well.

This was the case with Helmut Gräf, a German missionary friend in Tanzania. He approached the Bible in much the same way as I did, and he was a gifted linguist. He



*Helmut Gräf*

invariably knew where I was coming from, because he had translated all my books into Swahili – the entire commentary from Genesis to Revelation, the entire dictionary from A to Z, and my smaller books as well. I found him a marvellous interpreter when I preached. He even seemed to see my applications coming – not bad, seeing neither the language he was interpreting from nor the language he was interpreting into was his native tongue.

Another happy case was with a Yugoslav who interpreted my twenty-five lectures on the books of Kings at a Bible school in Serbia. When I asked where he had acquired such a fluent command of English, he surprised me by saying he had never been outside the country. He learnt from reading books, watching movies and talking to any English-speaking person who crossed his path. He also had a good knowledge of Kings and was keen to get all the names and places correct according to the local Bible. A young man in Côte d'Ivoire who interpreted my studies in Jeremiah into French was similarly brilliant, and he too had never been out of the country.

### **The right words and the right usage**

In contrast to these Bible-loving interpreters, an interpreter in one other country did not even take his Bible with him to church, let alone into the pulpit. When I questioned him about this, he said he had difficulty finding books of the Bible, so he would make up his own translation as he went along. It is difficult to help the audience understand what the Bible says when the interpreter himself does not even use the Bible.

Interpreters that have such a casual attitude are rare. Most seem to be good readers of the Bible. But being familiar with the Bible in their own language does not mean they are familiar with it in English. Many of us preachers sprinkle our sermons with



memorized words quoted from the Bible, but the interpreter may not recognize these as biblical quotations.

In the course of one sermon I said, without indicating that the words were a quotation from Galatians, that if we sow to the flesh we shall reap corruption. The interpreter, without recognizing the quotation, heard the word ‘corruption’ and translated it not by the word used in Galatians, but by the local word specifically used for corruption in government. This almost certainly took the audience’s thought off on a different track. (In some languages the local word for government corruption is simply a transliteration of the English word. A feature of many languages is that people tend to import a foreign word to denote something unpleasant or embarrassing rather than use a local word that is readily available.)

I have learnt also the necessity of checking that the translator knows the meanings of any technical words that might occur in the sermon, such as ‘scribe’, ‘sanhedrin’, ‘tabernacle’, ‘tithe’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘prophet’ and the like. In one sermon, I built several points around the difference between the temple and the synagogue. At the end of the sermon I found, to my dismay, that when I spoke of the synagogue the translator used the word for temple, and when I spoke of the temple he used the word for a local idolatrous place. The occasion was an ordinary church meeting, so I wondered why the observer of the interpreter’s mistake had not interjected to correct him. Such interjections happen often, and no one seems to get upset about them.

Certain words or expressions that are common in English present problems in almost every language I have encountered. One of these is the word ‘apply’ (or ‘application’) in the sense of knowing how to ‘apply’ the Bible to everyday life. We explain the text and suggest an ‘application’. If no equivalent is readily available, translators have to talk around the point to explain the idea and perhaps summarize it in a local expression they can use for future reference.



*At a conference in Cambodia*

### **Numbers, dates and times**

Another problem concerns large numbers. Bible students have for a long time been aware of the difficulties in understanding how the ancient Hebrews counted large numbers. In other languages I often meet the same problem. Numbers up to a hundred, perhaps even a thousand, may be straightforward, but after that there is little consistency and much confusion. I have found it helpful to keep a piece of paper on the lectern beside me and write the number down so that the interpreter can see it and translate it correctly.

Confusion also arises with dates, mainly in countries that do not reckon their years according to the Christian calendar (where AD stands for *anno domini* and means ‘year of our Lord’). Some nations count their years from a point that is important to them, such as a momentous event or the birth of a leader. Local people, even in a modern-day country like Thailand (which counts its years from the birth of Buddha), still naturally use the local year number and must do some quick mathematical calculations to translate from or into our numbering system. Interpreters can easily get confused when trying to put the number of a specified year into the number that means something to local people.

Months and days are also a source of confusion. In Nepal and Ethiopia, I have met people who keep a Western calendar and a local calendar together, because neither the months nor the dates within the months correspond. Ethiopia, for example, has thirteen months, twelve of which have thirty days and the other five. Nepal has only twelve months, but the number of days varies from twenty-six to thirty-three.

There is also surprising variation in the way people count the hours of the day. Many of us have become accustomed to using a twelve-hour clock locally but a twenty-four-hour clock internationally. In Thailand, however, there is no twelve-hour clock; only the twenty-four-hour clock for formal use and a six-hour clock for everyday use. Four o'clock, for example, can mean 4.00 a.m., 10.00 a.m., 4.00 p.m. or 10.00 p.m., depending on which local word is substituted for 'o'clock'. In Ethiopia things are different again. Their day is divided into two periods of twelve hours, which start at 6.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. This means that when a clock shows 2.20, the time according to our reckoning is 8.30. When a person said he would collect me at four o'clock to show me his church's ministries, I expected to meet him at 4.00 p.m. but he arrived at 10.00 a.m.

When translating written material, people have time to make the calculations of years, dates and times that will transfer into figures local readers understand. But when interpreting a lecture or sermon, they have no time for calculations. Embarrassing experiences have taught me either to clarify such things with the interpreter beforehand or omit them.

### **Unusual practices**

Interpreters, like preachers, can develop bad habits. One man spoke in a flat voice that fell away at the end of every sentence. No matter what I did to enliven proceedings, he did not move a muscle, other than those that controlled his voice, and these continued to lose energy at the end of every sentence.

At the other extreme was another interpreter in the same country. This man shouted at the audience the whole time (in spite of having a good microphone) as if he was announcing fiery judgment. Even when I made a neutral statement such as, 'So you can see what the writer is saying,' he announced this vehemently to the audience. Likewise, 'God is compassionate and responsive to the cries of his people' was shouted in such threatening manner that I wondered if the man really knew what he was saying. At one stage during the talk I said to him quietly, 'Why are you shouting all the time?' He looked at me blankly – and kept shouting.

In another country a female interpreter had developed a strange habit. She began every sentence with a noise that sounded like an air raid siren – beginning low and ending high, at the pitch she used for speaking. A couple of times when she mistakenly thought I had finished the sentence, she started the siren, then, realizing I had not finished the sentence, stopped half way up. I wondered whether, when I had finished the sentence, she would pick up the siren at the point she had left off, or simply forget it. But she did neither. She restarted it.

One of my most unusual experiences of interpretation was at a Burmese-language church in Bangkok. In the late nineties, the fastest growing churches in Bangkok were Burmese. Thousands of people from Burma (Myanmar) had escaped across the border into Thailand, and many of these were being brought to Christ by Burmese Christians in Thailand.

The man behind the growth of a large church in Burma itself, Tin Maung Tun, commonly known as Ronnie, was in Bangkok at the time and, having excellent English, volunteered to be my interpreter. When some Christians from our local Thai church, Bangplat, heard that I was to speak in the Burmese church that afternoon, they decided to come along. They had known me for thirty years but had never heard me preach in English, so thought this would be a novelty.

When I discussed my topic beforehand with Ronnie, he almost leapt for joy – ‘That’s exactly my view . . . Just what they need . . . Great stuff . . .’ But even that unfettered excitement did not prepare me for what followed. Never have I had a more enthusiastic interpreter. One sentence of mine grew into three, four, five, six of his, all announced with much zest. I managed to keep the flow of my sermon going, but quickly worked out that I should simply leave things to him. As I spoke each fresh sentence, I could see Ronnie out of the corner of my eye looking at me with fervent expectation and hear him saying softly, ‘Yes, that’s it,’ ‘Great,’ ‘I love this’. Once or twice he even finished the English sentence for me (correctly, too). Between the two of us we had a great time – which cannot be said of every occasion when the interpreter adds to the preacher’s sermon.

Down in the audience, sitting next to one of our friends from the Bangplat church, was a Thai non-Christian girl who had been brought along by Burmese workmates. One of the Bangplat people, having an understanding of English and seeing that this girl could understand neither English nor Burmese, began giving a whispered Thai translation in her ear. ‘But which one is the preacher and which one is the translator?’ the girl asked. I wasn’t quite sure myself, but it did not seem to matter.

### **Language ability**

This may be an appropriate point to make some comments about language ability in general, because native English-speakers often make the mistake of judging other people’s cleverness or intelligence by their ability in English. But people’s inability to speak my language is no more a measure of intelligence than is my inability to speak theirs.

In my travels, I have encountered people from English-speaking countries who mock the broken English of others. At times they have spoken rudely to local people who are having difficulty with English, even though the locals are in their own country and the English-speakers are the guests. At least these local people are competent enough to communicate in a language other than their mother tongue, which is more than can be said for most whose mother tongue is English. In fact, many of these people speak several languages. I suspect that of all the peoples of the world, native English-speakers are the most linguistically incompetent. This is partly because most have never had reason to learn or use another language.

Another sign of our poor understanding of language is that we tend to equate literacy with intelligence. Most of us are literate; that is, we can read and write. But, to put it crudely, that is sheer luck. We are fortunate enough to have been born and bred in countries where everyone is taught how to read and write. But such ability has no direct bearing on intelligence. I have met illiterate people who are very intelligent, and literate people who are not very intelligent at all.

If we judge people’s intelligence by their literacy, it inevitably gives us a feeling of superiority. If, on the other hand, we judged intelligence by the ability to speak another language, we native English-speakers might be classed among the dullest people in the world. In saying this I am not attempting to set up some simplistic test of intelligence. I am merely making a plea for tolerance, understanding and, above all, humility.

## Hospitality

Hospitality is a Christian responsibility that is taught in the Bible by both precept and example. Yet for many in the West, as they become more affluent, they become less hospitable. Much of the Bible's teaching about hospitality concerns kindness shown to those in need, especially those we have not met before. But many Christians, far from exercising hospitality towards strangers, do not even exercise hospitality towards each other.

We sometimes assume that everyone has friends, but in fact many people are lonely, even some who are active in church and community affairs. In giving hospitality, the main requirement is not to prepare a lavish meal but to include others in our home life. People do not expect a banquet (even takeaway food will suffice), but they do appreciate friendship.

### Church and home

As I move around churches in my own country and those of similar culture, I meet a widespread spirit of disappointment among caring Christians that they cannot enthrone the members of their churches to be hospitable.

Sometimes the church will organize a roster to ensure that visitors are invited home, but sooner or later most people ask to be taken off the roster. Then, as I heard in one place, the handful who remained decided to cancel the roster, because they had to exercise hospitality once a month. I should have thought that showing hospitality once a month was a fairly modest demand, but they considered it quite a burden. Then I discovered that they scarcely showed hospitality once a year! Worse still, that was typical of most in their church, and of almost every church.

The people we know best, and who know us best, are those who have had meals in our home or hosted meals for us in theirs. And this applies not just to Christians. The hospitable Christian home is among the best aids to evangelism. It breaks down barriers, builds friendships, and creates within people an awareness that we love them and want to know them better.

This is not simply a tactic to get people captive within our walls so that we can attack them with the gospel. Nor is it a ploy to make people feel obligated to us so that we can invite them to church. Certainly, we should have a goal to present Christ to people, and true hospitality will open opportunities, but Christian faith requires us to demonstrate Christian love, whether people respond to it or not. And that applies both inside and outside the circle of believers. The Bible even specifies hospitality as a requirement for those who would be leaders in the church.

If caring leaders find it difficult to motivate Christians to invite people home for meals, they find it almost impossible to get them to accommodate visitors for a night or two. The same few families open their homes time and again, while hundreds around them cannot bring themselves to do it once. And they are the poorer for it. All who have opened their homes will surely testify that their lives have been enriched by the people who have passed through. The lives of the guests also are enriched.

### Something beyond value

After ministry for five months in a dozen countries, Gae and I were at Johannesburg airport, where I was about to see her off on her flight home. (I was to go on alone to Namibia and Botswana for further work.) While waiting for departure, I asked Gae what she would say if someone asked her what was the highlight of the trip. She thought for a moment and said, 'The hospitality in the homes of Christians in Eastern Europe.'

I would have said the same – and earlier in this book I have written about Christians in Eastern Europe. The point made here is that in the course of our work we see some wonderful sights, the sort that captivate international travellers, but the fellowship of God’s people is better than all. It is a taste of heaven.



*Poland: in a cramped Communist-era unit*

When we travel, we usually offer to arrange our own accommodation. Those who invite us may offer us lodgings in their homes, but we realize that accommodating a couple can be difficult. It can also be costly. If I am invited to a Bible school and am travelling alone, the school may have a room it can offer. But in many countries, we have thought it right to accept the invitation of local people to stay in their homes – in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Fiji, India, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Yugoslavia and Zambia. Whether I was travelling alone or we were together, the hosts had in most cases not met us previously, so they had no idea what sort of guests to expect.

In addition to these occasions, we have often been invited home by local Christians for meals, and these provide us with treasured memories. The homes in some cases were very poor. Again, most of the hosts had never seen us previously, and some had only met us at a meeting where I had spoken that day. Among the additional countries where we were privileged to enjoy such hospitality are Albania, Botswana, Egypt, Ethiopia, Hungary, Kenya, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, Tonga and Uganda.

### **Learning love from the poor**

One remarkable feature is that people in poor countries are not only hospitable to visitors, but also exercise permanent hospitality by taking the needy into their homes. I was sitting in one poor home in Zambia, observing people coming and going, so decided to ask who all these people were. The couple had five children of their own, then had taken in four orphans, then taken in relatives who had nowhere to stay, then taken in someone who was out of work, and so on. I asked how many people slept there. Fifteen, was the reply. The entire house seemed to be not much larger than our living room back home– though there were two small mud-brick outhouses where some of the fifteen slept.

In Malawi I was in a similarly small house, again with a large extended family, but wondered why there were twenty-five small children sitting on the floor in a small and dingy room, reciting nursery rhymes and Bible verses. These were orphans, I was told. The man and his wife looked after them, but could not accommodate them all in their tiny house, so took them each night to similar tiny houses around the neighbourhood where people had found them somewhere to sleep.

We have friends in Myanmar, as poor as those in Africa, who have extended their care of unwanted children by acquiring an additional house (a humble dwelling of woven bamboo walls) and installing house parents. They have now started a school, mainly because the children have no hope of a useful education if everything was left to the government.

### **Others first**

A local evangelist in Ethiopia went to great lengths to make me comfortable in a modest guest room he had set up in his church. When he took me home for a meal, which he did twice, I observed that the one-room hut where he lived was smaller than

the church's guest room where he accommodated me. The hut was divided by a curtain into two areas. One of these areas had a rough table with some seats, and a small stove in the corner (the mud floor serving as the kitchen bench). The other was the sleeping area for the man, his wife and their children. The bathroom was outside, separate from the hut – another contrast to my lodgings, which had the bathroom attached.

Everything about the man's home was a contrast to the guest room he had arranged for me, but he wanted to treat me well. When compared with the man as a person, however, I felt second rate. This man was the founder and leader of a mission outreach that in fourteen years had planted fifty-two churches, all of them poor and struggling to cope with even the most basic demands of an outreaching church.

All these caring Christians, in spite of the demands placed on their meagre funds, gladly wanted to share their homes and their meals with us. No matter how poor they were, they insisted on extending hospitality. If we tried to offer an embarrassed protest, the reply was invariably along the lines, 'But God is so good to us and we are just sharing his blessings with you.'

## Best-laid plans

Driving a vehicle in strange countries can be a highly stressful exercise, though it enables us to engage in ministry that otherwise would be out of range. But if public transport is available and I am travelling alone, it may be a better option – and it certainly reduces tension. There is no fixed rule to guide in these matters; we consider each country on its merits. Always, however, there must be careful and clear planning. But even best-laid plans can go wrong.

### Help from Mahomet's brother

Earlier in this book, I talked about my almost disastrous experience of returning a hire car to Amsterdam airport in the early hours of the morning. I determined never to be caught again. Years later, when I had to return a hire car in similar circumstances in Amman, Jordan, I checked the airport layout the day before so that I could leave the car in precisely the place I had been told. I was to lock the keys inside the car.

We left the guesthouse at 2.00 a.m. and I dropped Gae and the luggage outside the check-in area while I went to put the car in the nominated car park. But when I drove up to the boom, the automatic card dispenser did not work and I could find no way to open the boom. I manhandled it, looked for ways of driving around it, sought out illegal ways of getting into the parking area, but all without success. I therefore parked in a two-minute drop-off zone and went looking for someone.

No car hire offices were open at that time of the morning. I asked two men, 'Do you speak English?' to which one replied, 'A little'. I told him my predicament, and although he tried to help, extensive criss-crossing of the terminal building brought no success. My blood pressure was rising, I got into the car, drove around the airport again, tried the boom again, parked again in the two-minute zone, and again went looking for someone. I found another who spoke a little English but could do nothing to help. Then he called out to a departing passenger who walked confidently as if the airport was his home. This confident-looking man spoke excellent English and listened to my sorry tale. He then asked, 'Is this hire car from Mahomet Anil?' 'Yes', I said. 'Don't worry,' he replied, 'he is my brother'.

I was not sure what 'brother' meant and could not see its relevance to my predicament. But the man went bounding over to the car park, tried the boom (unsuccessfully), and proceeded to bang on the door of a small building nearby. After much shouting and banging, a man emerged who had obviously just been woken up. After some animated conversation, Mahomet's brother waved to me to drive the car around again. The freshly awakened man, who I guessed was the parking attendant, walked across to the boom, fiddled with some apparatus that unlocked it, and triumphantly held it up while I drove in. At the same time he smiled broadly, waving a bunch of tickets which he then began to put into the empty ticket dispenser.

Meanwhile, back at the check-in area, Gae's blood pressure was also rising. It was almost an hour since I had dropped her off, everyone else had checked in and she had no idea where I was. But we made it on to the plane and on to Istanbul.

### Planning an escape route

In Istanbul we met more of those unforeseen circumstances that can easily wreck one's carefully made plans. We had arranged for the hire car company to deliver the vehicle to us at our hotel the morning we were to leave Istanbul for Turkey's country regions. Because Istanbul is a metropolis of unplanned streets and chaotic traffic, I had done some walking and mapping over previous days, and checked details with local Christians. I wanted to make sure I knew a route to get the car out of the rabbit warren

where we were housed and on to the motorway, without going the wrong way down a street or driving along a trams-only section of road (as I once did in Rome).

The man who delivered the car was two hours late, spoke almost no English, but knew where I had to sign the paperwork. I thought we might have taken him with us to guide us on to the motorway and then give him a taxi fare home, but communication was hopeless. I just had to be brave and find my own way out through the traffic.



*Getting out of Istanbul*

Everything began well. I followed my plan successfully with some feeling of achievement, till we reached an intersection where our intended route was blocked and police waved us to detour. I could see our intended route stretching towards the motorway, but a presidential procession was expected and that meant 'no go' for all other traffic.

Within a short time we had not only lost our point of access to the motorway, but had passed under it and were in a maze of streets where neither signs nor intuition gave us any idea how to find our way out. I tried to keep the motorway in sight in the hope that we might see a ramp on to it. We moved away, moved closer, moved away, moved closer, and eventually saw an access ramp. It was going in the wrong direction, but we thought it better to be on the motorway and heading in the wrong direction than not to be on it all.

So we entered the motorway and after five kilometres took an exit that looked as if it gave us the chance to cross over and come back in the direction we wanted. It turned out not to be as simple as that, but after some to-ing and fro-ing we were back on the motorway and heading in the right direction.

### **Left to one's sense of direction**

This experience of getting out of Istanbul was a re-run of what happened in Athens a few weeks earlier. Again we were staying in a rabbit warren area (that is usually where all the cheap accommodation is), again we arranged for the car to be delivered to us, and again I had worked out a route to get out of a congested and confusing city. But this time the car did not even turn up. The woman at the car hire company phoned to say the lanes were too narrow and there was nowhere to park while we did the sign-up business. She would drive over, collect us and our luggage and take us to her office. We could sign up and take the car from there.

Like locals the world over, the woman assured us the route out of the city was easy. We would soon be on the road we wanted, which in this case was the road to Corinth. 'Do this, do that, turn right, follow straight on, you can't miss the road out.' But there is no such thing as 'straight on' in most old European cities. Roads wind in an unplanned fashion, and other roads branch off every few hundred metres, mostly at irregular angles, making it difficult to decide which road goes 'straight on'.

We had no alternative but to set off. Our sense of direction, however, soon told us we were not on the road to Corinth. Then, unexpectedly, we saw a small sign pointing to a town we had not heard of, but it was our only hope. We pulled on to the footpath to consult a map and found the town to be in the north of Greece (in the general direction of our ultimate destination, a mission to Albania). The road's northerly direction was good enough for us; a turnoff to Corinth had to be along it somewhere.



The honking horns told us we were trying the locals' patience, but once we were out of Athens all was well.

As much as possible, we avoid driving in big European cities, other than to pick up or drop off a car. The best way to get around the big cities, and sometimes between them, is usually by public transport.

### **No assured destination**

Public transport, however, can also have traps. I had just finished some ministry in Rome and Fondi, and was to travel south by train to Naples. My Italian-speaking friend obtained the ticket at the station, but he forgot to take it to a machine to endorse it with the date of travel (which was the same day as we had bought the ticket). Very soon I was in trouble.

When the conductor came through to punch the tickets, he turned on me aggressively, speaking only Italian. I tried to tell him I was a visitor, I did not speak Italian, and I had no idea what the problem was. But he kept at me, till I wondered if I was to be arrested. I wasn't, and eventually the conductor moved on. But each time his work required him to walk passed me, he barked further aggressive words.

The train journey was to take several hours and terminate in Central Naples. But upon reaching the outskirts of Naples it stopped, and just about everyone got out. I sat tight, because I knew from my rail map that this was not my destination. After ten minutes, the only other person on the train was a Belgian traveller who came to ask me if I knew what was happening. We decided to wait a little longer.

After a while some railway workers came by and, with vigorous gestures, showed us that this train was going nowhere. We picked out the word 'Metro' from what they said and, taking the lead from their agitated pointing, decided to cross to another platform from where we could board the Metro for town. By keeping an eye on the Metro's rail map and checking names against the passing stations, we exited safely at Central. But where was the person who was supposed to meet me?

My arrival was an hour and a half later than scheduled and my host was not there. But I have learnt not to panic in such situations. I had exited into an area where the Metro was on one side and the country trains on the other. So, after walking up and down in search of anyone else who looked bewildered, I placed myself and my suitcase in the middle of the walkway where everybody had to see me. If after half an hour my host did not arrive, I would phone a number I had been given.

Within half an hour my host arrived. No announcement had been made at the station, but he had heard on his car radio that railway workers on the main line had suddenly gone on strike, and that was why my train stopped where it did. I imagine it pleased the conductor.

### **Stranded at the terminus**

This sort of thing had happened in foreign countries before; that is, I have been stranded at a terminus when the host has been waiting in the wrong place because the transport arrived unannounced at a different terminus from the one scheduled. This happened at an airport in Manila (Philippines) and a bus terminus in Lautoka (Fiji). The reason for the Lautoka problem was that floods had thrown country bus services into chaos. It had also delayed my return so that I arrived in Lautoka only the day before my scheduled flight back to Australia. That is why I always arrange a program so that distant regions are covered first, and ministry in the city of departure is kept to the end.

I do not always expect people to meet me when I arrive somewhere. It depends on the sort of place, the kind of ministry, the people who invited me, or personal plans that might land me in some place to transit to another. In many cities of the Western world there are public transport systems that service airports (the price of a taxi usually being

prohibitive), but in other countries taxis are plentiful (the price being comparable with public transport in the West).

In view of the hundreds of times I have been through airports, it is surprising how seldom I have been stranded. When I have been, the reason has usually been that the person supposed to meet was caught in a crisis of some sort, or was so absorbed in his work that he simply forgot.

When an expected welcomer is not there, I usually wait for one hour and then start phoning around to see what to do next. At the airport in Gaborone, Botswana, I passed the time by watching a bank teller, neatly dressed in a business suit, serve customers while all the time sucking a large round gob-stopper mounted on a white plastic stick. He made it last for most of the time I was there. The gob-stopper filled much of his mouth, but by positioning the stick so that it stuck out of one corner he was able to converse with customers; though occasionally he had to suck back the spit that dribbled down his chin.

### **Going the extra mile**

Onlookers are invariably helpful when they suspect that I am waiting in vain. Taxi drivers may see the opportunity for a fare, but people in shops and offices, or those who just seem to be standing around, generously go to great lengths to help. Most will offer to phone or do other things on my behalf.

In the airport at Port Vila, Vanuatu, I had expected to be met by the church dignitary who had arranged my visit, but no one showed up. Several people took pity on me as I stood alone beside my luggage, and kept asking if I needed help. After an hour it was obvious that I did.

One man, a minibus driver for a hotel, on hearing the background to my visit, offered to take me to the church headquarters. Another plane had just landed, he had collected five tourists and he could take me into town. Not only did he detour to the church headquarters, but he got out of the bus, took me around the building till he found a responsible person, and refused to leave till he was satisfied I was in safe hands. The tourists sat in the bus waiting patiently. I tried to give the man a tip for his trouble, but he steadfastly refused no matter how much I pressed him – rare for someone in his line of work. With a cheery wave he returned to his minibus, strolling at that relaxed pace that is a feature of life in the Pacific islands.

I then learnt the reason why the church dignitary had not met me at the airport. He had been disciplined by the church for dishonesty and immorality. More than that, when he left office he took all his files with him, so that no one had any details of my arrival or the meetings he had planned for me.

My visit, however, coincided with a visit to headquarters by a group of pastors from all over the islands. We never found out if I was intended to be part of this meeting, but I was invited anyway, as well as given other opportunities to make my visit worthwhile. I was there only five days (on my way to ministry in Fiji for the next few weeks) but the result of this unscheduled meeting was that my books spread to islands where previously they were not known.



*Vanuatu: two of the pastors*

## Lessons in giving

Gae and I first learnt about sacrificial Christian giving when we went as missionaries to Thailand and began to be on the receiving end of other people's giving. It caused us to make a radical rearrangement of the way we gave, and started a process that has produced regular reassessments ever since. We have proved that as we increase the pressure on ourselves, we can live on less and give more away.

If Christians in our home country first set us thinking seriously about giving, Christians in other countries had even more effect on us. An overall observation of Christian giving around the world is that the higher the income, the smaller the percentage people give. To put it another way, many Christians in poorer countries are more generous and more likely to tithe than are most Christians in wealthier countries.

### Among the poor of Myanmar

I met an impressive outward sign of truly sacrificial giving in a church in the provincial centre of a hill tribe region of Myanmar, one of the poorest countries of Asia. In the course of conversation, I had estimated the income of the church. I had also worked out that the pastor's *monthly* income was equivalent to two hours' income for a labourer in my own country. On the wall was a chart that showed the church's annual budget and progressive income. There was also a chart of church members that showed the number at the beginning of the year and the progressive total as the church moved towards its yearly growth target.

But in the entrance area of the building was a row of about eight boxes, each labelled for the receipt of offerings over and above the regular tithes to which church members were committed. One box, for example, was labelled for additional offerings people might like to give to country pastors (who received even less than the town pastor). Another was for the receipt of gifts from those who had received some unexpected income and wanted to give the Lord a portion of their 'windfall'. Another was for people who wanted to give thanks for a special blessing such as recovery from sickness or some other answered prayer. Another was for anyone who wanted to celebrate a birthday by making an offering. And so it went on.

The pastor was surprised that this was all new to me. He then asked the embarrassing question of how Christians in my country showed their gratitude to God for birthdays, health and other blessings.

### The need to rethink

Most of us have a tendency to settle into practices to which we become so accustomed that we seldom stop to examine them. Gae and I began our full-time missionary work in the traditional manner in that we lived in a foreign country while being supported financially from our home country. We had to build a church out of converts from a non-Christian community, and during the years of our residence in Thailand neither the church nor we ever considered the possibility that it might support us. The church's giving, like ours, was directed elsewhere.

When we returned to Australia, we were still supported in full-time ministry by churches and individuals from our home country. I returned to Thailand often, and began to receive invitations to other countries. As previously, I did not expect the churches of poorer countries to support me, seeing I was already being supported from my own country. The only understanding was, in some cases, that if I could travel at my own expense to the countries concerned, churches and organizations within those countries would look after certain local affairs. For example, they may provide

accommodation at a Bible school where I was teaching. I expected to pay for guesthouse accommodation and transport.

On the few occasions when local Christians paid such expenses, I felt uncomfortable, but as the years moved on, such occasions increased. Nevertheless, I had still not stopped to rethink established practices. It was my visit to Nigeria in 1993 that woke me up.

### **Learning from the Nigerians**

At the outset of my time in Nigeria, I was taken aback when told that on each stage of my extensive travels around the country, a local person would accompany me. To be honest, this was more a blow to my pride than anything else, because I have used public transport to travel around many strange and difficult countries, always without a chaperone. They assured me that Nigeria was different, and in time I had to agree with them.

The point of the story, however, is that the cost of the local person's travel and mine was paid for by the local missions or churches where I taught. Moreover, they paid for the cost of the accommodation. In some cases it was rough and cheap, in others above average, but always they looked after me thoughtfully. Whenever I tried to pay, I found they had already settled the account on my behalf.

Another thing I discovered was the unusually large amount of time and effort needed to arrange my itinerary. I had assumed that the organizers phoned the various centres to make arrangements, but I soon discovered that the inter-city phone system was almost defunct, and the postal system was little better. The only way to organize reliably was to send a messenger by bus, which often meant a day's journey between centres, an overnight stay and a return journey the next day.

One cause of Nigeria's chronic distress, apart from conflict and corruption, is that it has Asian-style population pressures (one in four Africans is a Nigerian) combined with African-style economic, social, political and religious problems. No other country in Africa has the large number of congested cities that Nigeria has. Amenities and services cannot cope. A survival mentality develops, and this in turn produces an atmosphere of tension and aggression.

These conditions highlight the self-giving of the Nigerian Christians that I met throughout the country. Almost every time I taught or preached, I was given a monetary payment. I was not used to this and found it embarrassing. But I was being taught some good lessons, one of which was that it takes grace to be a good receiver as it does to be a good giver. The other was that our behaviour can betray a patronizing attitude even when we are not aware of it.

After one conference, I discussed this matter with my fellow preacher, Reuben Ezemadu, a man whose vision and strength never cease to inspire and challenge me. Reuben reminded me of what the Bible teaches Christians about providing for those who minister to them. He assured me that no matter who was invited to speak, the conveners would pay transport and accommodation costs plus preaching fee. It made no difference whether the speakers were Nigerians or Westerners.

Reuben then asked me how much they gave me. When I told him, he opened his own envelope and said, 'There; same as they gave me. They didn't feel they should give you more because you're an overseas speaker and I'm just a local; nor did they feel they needn't give you anything because you already have plenty of money. Such things make no difference. Those who are taught have a responsibility to support those who teach them, and that's the biblical principle.'

## Changing attitudes

Not all people are as forceful as Nigerians in pursuing what they believe is right, and some may not even have arrived at such convictions. But one joy of revisiting Thailand in later years has been to see a maturing of views in these issues.

After I had given five talks at the Bangkok church we founded twenty-five years earlier, I was given a warm letter of thanks along with 1500 baht, and an explanation that preachers are given 300 baht per sermon. In a nearby province, where a church had been planted by an outreach from the Bangkok church, a weekend of special meetings was rewarded by a comparable payment. Other Thai churches, as well as Bible schools, have similar practices. Changing attitudes in monetary matters reflect changing relationships and responsibilities.

The important issue in the above examples is not the monetary value of the payment, but the different relationship between traditional sending countries and traditional receiving countries. In places where traditional missionaries are dominant and the church submissive, the giving of Christians tends to be weaker. People are less inclined to take the initiative and less likely to see the need for sacrificial giving.

## Contributions from the poor

In some places, however, poverty is so extreme that people have virtually nothing they can give. Or they may live in a subsistence economy where they can grow food to eat, but have no cash to pay for goods and services such as Bibles, books, school fees and bus fares.

We have often felt close to tears when grateful Christians, often unknown to us personally, have brought us an expression of appreciation that is just about all they can afford. In the Solomon Islands one man travelled a long way just to bring us a pineapple. In Zimbabwe one church member brought half a bottle of ground garlic, and from India a grateful person posted a small packet of Indian biscuits. Another Indian posted a 100 rupee note (at that time about two US dollars), along with a fulsome, if quaintly worded, letter of thanks from him and his family. Someone in Papua New Guinea gave a bag of nuts, and a person in Nepal a small jar of honey.

In many places there are formal presentations of tokens of appreciation, often in the form of local handicrafts and items of clothing, whether tribal or national. Some of these are among our prized possessions. But nothing can match the collection of money taken from a women's meeting that Gae addressed in a country area of Zambia. It was the saddest looking collection of grubby, screwed up, low denomination notes we have ever seen, and it totalled about fifty cents. It was possibly the closest to a 'widow's mite' offering we have seen.



*Zambia: they gave out of their poverty*

That gift reminded us that, although we know the meaning of the 'widow's mite' story, most of us who live in affluent countries remain unchanged by it. We are still to be identified with those who 'contribute out of their abundance' – which makes us wonder how Jesus really sees us.

## Contributions from the rich

But not all who 'contribute out of their abundance' do so in miserly fashion. The amount of giving from some of the wealthy Chinese communities of Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and elsewhere is remarkable.

On one visit to Singapore, when a local church leader was introducing me to various local and overseas ministries, I was staggered at the amount of money coming from Singaporean Christians to finance these projects. Figures were in the range of ten times what churches in my country would consider realistic. My friend, hearing my gasps of near disbelief, said, 'Oh, you Australians don't know how to give.' He may have been playfully provoking me or he may recently have read *Operation World*; for there he would have read that giving to world mission from churches in Australia was the lowest of any country in the developed world.

The Singaporeans seem to measure their giving by a different standard. Admittedly, the average income of church members in Singapore is among the highest in the world, but high income-earners are not always the biggest givers. In Singapore, however, something is different. In an index I saw recently that listed the top ten countries according to *per capita* Christian giving, Singapore's figure was almost twice that of the next country on the list.

## Off to sleep

Life in most modern Western societies is intense, especially when compared with life in most other societies. We are driven by stress-producing factors such as time management, ambition, competition and efficiency, which cause us to put a high value on privacy, comfort, quietness and relaxation in our non-working hours. In spite of that, many of us find it difficult to sleep or 'switch off', even when we have the opportunity.

In non-Western countries, most people seem to have no trouble dropping off to sleep anywhere, any time. This is so not just in slow-paced countries but also in countries where life is noisy and hectic. In much the same way as I say to myself, 'I think I'll turn off the TV,' these people seem to say to themselves, 'I think I'll go to sleep', and promptly go to sleep.

### Buses and trucks

I first observed this enviable ability in Thailand, but I have met it repeatedly elsewhere. The poorly designed and jam-packed Bangkok buses of the sixties and seventies looked as if any form of on-board relaxation would be impossible, but invariably the moment a seat became vacant, the nearest standing passenger would collapse into it and within seconds be sound asleep.



*Taking a nap: Bangkok street sweeper*

Passengers were not the only ones to nod off. On one occasion, the bus was stopped in a queue at traffic lights when I noticed the driver had fallen asleep. The light turned green and traffic ahead of us began moving, but our bus stayed where it was. The bus boy hanging outside the front door shouted the equivalent of 'Hey! Wake up!' whereupon the driver, in one instantaneous synchronized motion, snapped back his head, crashed into gear and roared off.

Years later, Bangkok went up-market with the introduction of air-conditioned buses with more comfortable seats. It almost looked as if sleeping became mandatory for all seated passengers. The jerking that came from weaving in and out of traffic and stopping at almost every bus stop did not seem to disturb anyone.

One day I decided to make my journey interesting by conducting a survey. From my standing position in the aisle, I could see the faces of forty-three seated passengers, and forty-one of them were asleep. One sleeping passenger woke up just in time to get out at my stop, so when we alighted I asked him how he knew when to wake up. He was obviously surprised at my ignorance. 'I know where to wake up. This is my stop,' he said. To pursue the matter further, I asked if he had ever over-slept his stop. 'No', was his puzzled reply, given with a look on his face that said, 'These foreigners ask dumb questions.'

People fall asleep in strange postures and strange places. Twice I saw the pillion rider on a motorcycle asleep. Once I saw a truck labourer rocking around asleep while seated on the topmost row of Coca Cola crates that were themselves rocking around as the truck sped along the street.



## Night-riders

In the Solomon Islands, Gae and I had just finished several days of seminars for Christian workers on the small island of Kwai, off the coast from the large island of Malaita. People left in their motorized canoes for various destinations, but those of us going to Auki, on the opposite side of Malaita, had to leave at two o'clock in the morning. Rain was threatening and not a star could be seen; in fact, once we were out into the sea, nothing could be seen. But this did not daunt our driver. He just opened the throttle and propelled the canoe at high speed into the darkness. It was windy and eerie, but we hoped he knew where he was going and that he would beat the rain.

After a long time (it seemed close to an hour), we picked out the outline of hills and assumed we were approaching Malaita. The driver kept boring on through the darkness till, in due course, he gauged it was time to produced a torch and check where he was. He shone it ahead and picked up a small sandy beach just thirty metres away. Yes, it was our intended landing place. Not having travelled this way before, Gae and I were wide awake, a little nervy, and in the end utterly astounded at the accuracy of this blind navigation. But others in the canoe – about a dozen Solomon Islanders – saw nothing to get excited about. They slept almost the entire journey.

A truck was supposed to meet us and take us on the two-hour trip over the mountains to Auki. When no truck was to be seen, most of the others lay down on the beach and went to sleep. The wife of a local pastor engaged us in conversation for a while, but then said, 'I think I'll have a nap', and within thirty seconds she too was sound asleep.

Half an hour later the truck arrived, whereupon people collected their belongings and piled into the back. I volunteered to ride in the back and let the pastor's wife ride in the front with Gae and the driver, but she refused the offer. She could stretch out in the back and get a better sleep, she said. Soon we were bouncing along the rough track



*Passengers by truck, Solomon Islands*

through the jungle and up over the mountain – until we came to a hill too steep for the truck to climb. The driver woke his load of sleepers, rolled the vehicle back down the hill, and then started off again, all of us pushing for all our worth to get the straining truck over the top. Then everyone jumped in and promptly went back to sleep.

Further on, we came to another steep hill and the exercise was repeated. The locals were obviously used to this. But the next stop was for a different purpose, because a rear tyre had punctured. The truck had no spare tyre, so the driver removed the wheel, thereby converting the six-wheeler to a five-wheeler. Being mobile again, we picked our way through the dark and after a two-hour journey reached Auki.

Day was dawning and Gae and I were both tired. It had, after all, been a sleepless and adventurous night. Others, however, had grabbed enough sleep to face the new day reasonably refreshed. Good beds are our usual requirement for a good night's sleep; others have learnt how to get by without them.



## What about culture?

When we first went to live in Bangkok in 1965 we had not heard of culture shock; consequently, we didn't get it. In due course culture shock became so much the 'in' thing that the person who did not get it was not considered normal. These days, with the explosion in international travel, 'culture' has become an overworked word that tourists use to denote things they find interesting or different. Often they use the word to justify things they ought to condemn, or to criticize things they ought to accept.

If an encounter with another culture is only temporary, any evaluation is usually superficial. This is not just because the observers have not learnt enough, but also because they know they will soon be home, where everything is what they consider normal. At home, everything is 'as it should be'. Because of this, when we meet practices that differ from ours, we have a natural tendency to see them as inferior – as if our practices are the norm for humanity. There is nothing wrong in being amused by things that are different; the danger arises when we are prejudiced and therefore judgmental or patronizing.

### **Ourselves and others**

Often we are as unaware of our culture as we are of our accent. When people of another country or region speak, we hear their accent, but we do not hear our own. We see their culture, but do not see our own. In its broadest sense, culture is simply the way of life of a social group, whether a club, a tribe or a nation. It includes the habits of thought, speech and behaviour that people acquire through living together. It is something they pick up or learn, not something planted within them as a kind of human instinct.

For example, we all have an instinct to eat, but the way we eat is an acquired habit. There is nothing in our genes that determines the 'correct' way to hold a spoon. What we may see as 'correct' is nothing more than the result of etiquette, training or habit. Culture is not absolute; it is relative and it is constantly changing.

Sometimes people excuse wrong behaviour on the grounds that 'it is our (or their) culture'. But culture is not sacrosanct. No culture, whether ours or any other, is unchallengeable or beyond criticism. Every culture is infected by sin. Every culture needs cleansing and must be evaluated according to God's standards.

It follows, then, that no culture is a perfect expression of Christianity. None is truly Christian. Since humankind was made in God's image, some elements in a culture may reflect God's values; but since humankind has fallen into sin, other elements may reflect wrong values. Every culture, including our own, is a mixture of good and bad, and therefore is a field of conflict for all who think about behaviour within a society.

### **Learning to change**

Upon entering another culture for the first time, we are fascinated by things that are different. We may be amused, shocked, or impressed, but when we know we are to live in a place permanently, the novelty soon wears off and we find ourselves in need of some strong self-discipline.

Culture and language are inseparably tied, and we learn each by way of the other. But this is not as easy as it sounds. Breaking comfortable old habits and replacing them with unappealing new ones usually means hard work and tears, whether we are learning a new language or trying to fit into a new culture. Local people are remarkably gracious when we make mistakes in ignorance, but they are not so tolerant when they think we have been there long enough to know better.

Inevitably, we become frustrated at times with local people or circumstances, and when this happens we easily become judgmental of the local culture and idealistic about our own. If we show by word or attitude that we consider the local culture inferior and ours superior, we are in trouble. Even the desire to get together with expatriate friends or the urge to furnish our house as 'home away from home' calls for some self-denial.

When Gae and I settled with our family in Bangkok, we determined to avoid the usual expatriate fellowships and many of the Western home comforts. We wanted to make our friends among the Thais and make our home fit into the neighbourhood. We did not want to give the impression that we were foreign operatives who had come to Thailand to discharge our 'working hours' activity among the local customers and then retreat to an oasis of Western living where we became something different. Also, by reverting to our homeland culture, we would be telling the locals that we thought our culture better than theirs.

Local people appreciate whatever effort foreigners make to adjust to the local culture, but they know when we are truly trying to identify with them and when we are just 'aping' them in the hope of getting converts. They realize that ethnic differences may never be entirely removed and they may show no resentment when sometimes we behave differently. In some cases, however, they do not realize that what is second nature to them may be entirely unnatural to us.

No matter what homeland we belong to, all of us are at times unaware of the idiosyncrasies of its culture. We do things unconsciously that people of another culture may be unaware of, disapprove of, or simply consider pointless. Nevertheless, we appreciate the efforts of foreigners to conform, even though such efforts may be clumsy and only emphasize the differences between us.

### **From novelty to annoyance**

At the time of our first arrival in Bangkok, our senior missionary friend from South Thailand, Reg Vines, met us at the port and stayed with us through our first ten days. Apart from the strangeness of everything, we had met difficulties that neither Reg nor we had imagined. But the time came for him to return south, and I shall never forget the feeling of utter vulnerability as he left to catch the train. We were grateful beyond words for all his loving help, but now we were to be left alone with two small children, a decrepit house, not a word of Thai, only one person whose whereabouts we knew, and the promise that a Thai woman (who could not speak English) would arrive at six o'clock next morning to look after the children while we went for the first time to language school. With his broad smile and down-to-earth manner, Reg put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'You've got the Lord up above and your head on your shoulders. That's about all you need. You'll be OK.'

Reg's parting words may have been an over-simplification, but they contained the essence of the truth. I do not decry the need for intending missionaries to have some preparation in cultural awareness, but what saw us through was a combination of language study, commitment, common sense, prayer, helpful Thai friends and a passionate desire to learn. Some cultural practices came as a matter of course and soon became second nature – what a person does or refrains from doing with fingers, hands, head, legs and feet – but the things that became most difficult were those not usually referred to in the 'how to survive in a foreign country' handbooks.

I have never kept a diary of personal jottings, but after several years in Bangkok something constrained me to record some impressions. The way we had chosen to live in Bangkok was not easy, but then we had never expected it to be, so we had little to complain about. In fact, the work we were engaged in made life in Bangkok rewarding. But as I re-read my notes, I observe that the thing we found hardest to take was not so much any physical difficulty as the lack of a private life.

The concern that most of us in the West have to protect our privacy is largely a product of Western individualism. It is a feature of our society that is rarely an issue in other societies and was probably not an issue in biblical societies. In that sense, non-Western peoples often have more in common with people of biblical times than we do.

If there is nothing particularly Christian about the concern for privacy in Western society, neither is there anything particularly unchristian about the absence of privacy in other societies. The Christian requirement is for love, patience, kindness, tolerance and forgiveness, whether we are natives in our own culture or guests in another's. Too easily we can lose patience with a culture we *assume* is unchristian, while at the same time we ourselves are guilty of attitudes that are *certainly* unchristian.

### Testing one's patience

When we have been conditioned for the first thirty years of life not to ask or expect personal questions about private affairs, we do not immediately adjust to an environment where anybody might ask anything. I doubt if we ever adjust fully. Matters of toilet procedures, birth control practices and sexual activity were all the subject of public questioning and discussion. In a society where a whole family may sleep in one room, even on one mattress, people do not assume they have a right to secrecy. What we found difficult was not just the initial question and answer but the subsequent discussion, which usually concluded that we should benefit if we did things differently.

Most of us tend to resent unsolicited advice, especially when we know it is nonsense. If the children were sick, it was because they did not drink hot water – or cold water, or iced water, or water from boiled vegetables. If we took them to the doctor, we were wasting money; if we did not, we were being stingy. If we displayed resentment of the comments, the locals' response was that they were only trying to help – which was undoubtedly true, though it rarely made things easier.

The fascination with money was universal. We were constantly asked how much money we received each month, how much we paid for this, how much for that. It seemed that every purchase we made was scrutinized – and either we had bought the wrong thing or paid the wrong price. If, to achieve a good price, we bargained as hard as the locals, we were considered too tough; if we did not, we were considered too soft.

When the topic of privacy came up in conversation with Thai friends, their view was that they were not being busybodies, but merely showing interest. Conversely, they felt that if we did not ask them such questions, we were not interested in them. People of different culture and background view things in different ways. There may be no moral question one way or the other. Our dislike of something does not make it wrong, nor our liking of it make it right.

In general we tried to swim along with the cultural current as best we could. But sensitivity to local practices is not the same as unthinking acquiescence. Our home was open to everyone, and people were always interested to see what we had in various rooms. Some neighbours became most

alarmed when they saw that our beds were oriented east-west rather than north-south – which was something we had never noticed. They assured us that Thai people would never do that, and advised us to change; if not, death might descend upon the house. But that was merely a superstition (related to the way corpses were laid out), so we left our beds the way they were.



*Not being busybodies; just showing interest*

## A point of view

In many Eastern countries it is not acceptable for males and females to hold hands in public, let alone hug or kiss, though men may hold hands with men and women with women. These are matters of etiquette and behaviour that we do well to go along with, whether we like them or not. We need to remind ourselves that people whose habits differ from ours are not necessarily of a lower or higher moral standard. Sometimes people of other cultures also need to be reminded of this.

On one occasion in an Eastern country, a local person and I were walking along the street when we saw two tourists kissing affectionately, though not passionately, in the middle of the street. My friend was very annoyed. 'Just like animals,' he said harshly. Though the tourists had behaved thoughtlessly, my friend needed to be more tolerant. So I replied, 'I have never seen animals kissing.' He was taken aback, because to him kissing was associated with copulation, and therefore was not appropriate in public. 'But,' I continued, 'I have seen lots of men in this city urinating against walls or trees – just like animals.' He burst out laughing: 'What's wrong with that?' A discussion ensued, at the end of which he admitted he had never considered such things from another point of view.

A friend from another country was staying with us in Brisbane when he expressed shock at the number of cases of divorce and remarriage among Christians that he had met in Australia. 'It is contrary to what the Bible clearly teaches.' I agreed with all he said about the Bible's teaching and the decline in standards, but thought it worth reminding him that when I was in his country, I heard cases in almost every city of Christians taking other Christians to court. It took him a while to admit that this also was contrary to what the Bible clearly teaches, but he still wanted to convince me that there were many dishonest Christians in his country, and this was one way of dealing with them.



*Church elders in Tonga*

Modes of dress vary widely from country to country, whether concerning what they wear or do not wear on their heads, on their bodies or on the feet. In countries where women might cover their heads, I have been in churches where Christians criticize women from other places who do not cover their heads. But in the churches of these critics, the men would never dream of complying with the

biblical command to kiss each other – which is what men in some countries do universally. In other countries, I have met those who practise feet-washing as a regular exercise of the church and those who remove shoes before entering 'holy ground' for public worship.

Whether these practices are to our liking or not, they at least remind us that everything that happens, even in the Bible, happens in a cultural setting. We need to discern between the essential biblical requirement and the cultural packaging that surrounds it.

This is well demonstrated in matters concerning marriage. In one country, during conversation with a local Christian friend, I asked him casually where he first met his wife. He said, 'At the railway station when she arrived for the wedding.' He was a mature, perceptive, widely read Christian and a PhD, but he was happy with this arrangement. Elsewhere in the same country, I met another Christian, also a PhD, who had just returned from overseas studies. When asked his immediate plans, he replied

that he wanted to go into pastoral ministry, but only after he was married. So, he had someone in mind? No, but his parents would find him a suitable wife.

I am pleased to live in a culture where we each choose our own marriage partner rather than have our parents choose one for us, but our practice is no more Christian than the alternative. Nor has it, on the whole, produced better or more lasting marriages. The Christian concern in this issue, as in others, is not with the cultural packaging (how we obtain a marriage partner) but with the essential biblical requirement (how we behave towards a marriage partner).

### **Applicable everywhere**

All of us, whether from the West, the East or anywhere else, make judgments on 'foreign' cultural practices mainly on the basis that they are different from ours. At the same time, we see our own practices not as cultural, but as normal. That is fair enough, provided we do not then make the assumption that what we consider normal is Christian.

We rightly assert that Christianity can function in any culture, but in doing so we place upon ourselves the obligation to apply a biblically informed mind to all that we do. And our familiarity with well-established social practices often makes this more difficult in our own culture than in another.

## On air

Long ago I reached the conclusion that I am not suited to radio and television broadcasting. I still marvel at the grace and patience of those who engaged me for a number of radio talks in Brisbane back in the early 1960s. I have a natural tendency to look for excuses whenever I suspect that a radio invitation is coming my way. However, I am supportive of radio ministry in general, and am pleased that my *Basic Christianity* books are used as radio follow-up material in a number of countries, sometimes in English and sometimes in other languages.

### On the spot

Invitations these days are usually for discussions or interviews. These may be 'comment' segments of just a few minutes, longer 'Christian viewpoint' segments, or extended half-hour talks or discussions designed to make known the gospel. These have occurred in such varied places as Papua New Guinea, the Netherlands, Côte d'Ivoire and Fiji, but perhaps the place where I was most apprehensive was Nigeria. In view of my earlier tussle with suspicious immigration officials, I did not want my activity broadcast on the radio. The local people, as usual, had more faith than I. Far from there being any adverse fallout, several people came to Christ as a result of the broadcast. My interviewer, like many in that country, knew how to present the gospel clearly and without fear.

Yugoslavia saw Gae's introduction to radio broadcasting. It came so suddenly that she barely had time to feel nervous. We had only arrived in Yugoslavia that afternoon (second trip for me, first for Gae) and were walking from our lodgings to the Bible school so that Gae would know the route. A car drew up beside us and we heard the familiar voice of our local friend, Vladimir Majersky. 'Welcome again to Yugoslavia; and, Gae, you are on the radio tonight at eight o'clock. It is for one hour, live, but don't worry, Maria will guide you through.' Gae needed more than Maria, especially since Maria, the program's host, did not speak English. The Holy Spirit and a good interpreter (Vladimir) combined with host and guest well. Gae returned home so relaxed that I wondered why I was feeling jittery about my scheduled appearance the next week.



Vladimir meets Gae: 'You're on air tonight'

### Tricky translations

I had often watched cross-language interviews on TV and wondered how it was done. We see the interviewer ask a question in English and the person respond in another language, which is translated either by a voice-over interpreter or a caption on the screen. How many people are involved in this exercise? Do they have an interpreter whispering in the background? Are the interviewer's questions dubbed in later?

On my previous trip to Yugoslavia, I had my questions answered, at least so far as my own radio interview was concerned. The interviewer, in this case Vladimir, was to ask me ten questions, which he gave me on paper in English beforehand. The procedure was that he asked the first question (speaking in the local language), and

although I could not understand what he was saying, I answered ‘in faith’ according to the English version of the question written on the paper. A third person, Ondrej Franka, interpreted my comments for listeners.

It was strange at first, but my faith held firm – until they decided to eliminate one of the questions! As this was a live broadcast, there was no time to make off-the-record comments they could edit out later. They tried to scribble notes, make signs, or in some way show me that the next question, Question 6, was being omitted, so I was to give the next answer as if I was answering Question 7. I was so busy concentrating on the answer to Question 5 that I did not immediately understand what they were trying to tell me. There was no opportunity to ask for explanations, because we were on air and all three of us had to keep talking.

By now I had given the wrong answer to one question (or the right answer to a question that was not asked), but the skilled interpreter managed to get around it somehow. We were now on to Question 7, which was in fact Question 8, and although the omitted answer seemed to me to lose the flow of the questions, the other two men managed to tie it all together.

Unlike authors, radio interviewers do not have the luxury of being able to rethink, rewrite, correct or otherwise clarify what they have said – at least not if their interviews are being broadcast live. They seem to me to be engaged in a very stressful exercise, but Vladimir and Ondrej just proceeded as if everything was happily under control. I went home feeling reassured that radio was not my field.

## The life of faith

A reassuring feature of life in most affluent countries is that the government provides a social welfare system that has many safety nets to catch us if we fall. Whether the problem is unemployment, poverty, health, property damage or national security, we are helped and protected either by government schemes or by private insurance. If, hypothetically, God ceased to exist, it would make little difference to the way most Christians live. The Bible declares that Christians walk by faith, not by sight, but many live with no apparent exercise of faith at all.

By contrast, most Christians in the poorer countries know nothing of a social welfare system that provides such wide-ranging benefits. In many countries where these Christians live, there is little expectation of fair government and no sense of national security. Citizens do not enjoy the basic freedoms that people in the West take for granted. In circumstance of constant uncertainty, Christians have learnt to trust in God. They survive only by faith.

### **Nothing guaranteed**

Daily life in the West has become so secure and well-ordered, even predictable, that many Christians have forgotten how to take risks. They no longer know how to step out in faith. For our brothers and sisters elsewhere, however, faith is necessary for even the simplest of procedures. Nothing can be taken as certain. As a Christian in one country said to me, everything requires the prayer of faith. If they hold a conference, they must pray that the electricity will stay on. If they post a letter, they must pray that it will reach its destination. If they want to travel to a nearby town, they must pray for the bus fare. And once they are on the bus, they must pray that it will take them there without robbery or injury.

Even the houses that most Christians live in are poorly built and vulnerable to break-ins, many of which are violent. Robberies not only deprive poor Christians of their already meagre possessions, but often result in injury, incapacitation or death. In such circumstances, daily life, even survival, is an exercise in faith.

One result of living in a prosperous and secure country is that our expectations are high. The more we have, the more we want – and the more we complain when things go wrong. People in difficult countries do not have high expectations and consequently tend to complain less when things go wrong. A human tendency is to blame God for life's misfortunes, but this tendency is less evident among those who would appear to have more cause for complaint. After the devastating floods of Mozambique in 1999, the response of one local Christian was, 'We don't blame God; we trust him.'

The attitude of such Christians is not, 'If God makes things right for me, I'll follow him,' but 'Although God does not seem to have made things right for me, I'll follow him.' Their faith is not conditional upon the removal of hardship; it gives them the strength to bear hardship. A person in a well-developed country may have an underdeveloped faith, while a person in an under-developed country may have a well-developed faith. A baby yells when it cannot get what it wants; a mature person has learnt to deny self and exercise patience.

### **Risk is normal**

Few countries of modern times have suffered as much as Cambodia. The atrocities of the Khmer Rouge almost obliterated the church, yet the country is now more open to the gospel than neighbouring Vietnam and Laos, the other former colonies of French Indochina. A few decades ago, Cambodia was driven by an ideology that expressed itself through butchery, but today it is driven by a corrupt pragmatism that gives an



impression of ‘anything goes’. But in this unstable and irregular society, the church has grown dramatically. In 1990 it numbered only a few thousand Christians, but ten years later it numbered more than sixty thousand Christians and could count more than a thousand local churches.

In the chapter headed *Let us pray*, I referred to a congress on evangelism in Cambodia, where, in addition to Cambodian pastors and evangelists, there were some from Vietnam and Laos. At that time, Vietnam and Laos were grouped with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Afghanistan and North Korea as being among the ten countries most hostile to local Christians. Although these Vietnamese and Lao believers made the dangerous journey and clandestine border crossing at great risk to their lives, they saw nothing heroic in their actions. The only Christianity they knew was lived by faith in God and at great personal risk. It was the life of faith that Jesus taught and his followers demonstrated.

Yet in both Laos and Vietnam the church was growing. In Laos it had grown from 15,000 to 50,000 in ten years. In the capital city there were now 8,000 Christians instead of forty, and eleven churches instead of one. In neighbouring Vietnam, one pastor I spoke with said that when he left the state-sanctioned church to go underground in 1990, he had only six people. From that beginning, his ministry had grown to sixty-three churches with 7,000 believers.

On account of this remarkable growth, previously indifferent governments became positively hostile. In each case, when authoritarian rule had suppressed the church, the government had no need to worry, but when the church began to grow in a way that the government could not control, persecution became intense. Suffering was not something to be avoided; it was what believers expected if they were committed to Jesus Christ. Like Christians in New Testament times, they were not surprised by the ‘fiery ordeal’ that came upon them.

### **Dealing with pain**

Modern medicine has brought us so many benefits that we almost think it unfair or unnatural if we are called upon to suffer. In the West our first thought when confronted with, let us say, a headache, is to take a painkiller. In other parts of the world, where painkillers are scarce and their price prohibitive, the Christian’s first thought is to pray. The point I am making is not that we should pray instead of taking tablets, but that Christians in poorer countries have learnt to deal with pain differently. They realize it is an inevitable part of life, and they would like to have better health services, but they see no need to get angry with God when relief does not come instantly.

The pain these Christians suffer may come from sickness, hunger, war, injustice, persecution, or unnaturally frequent deaths in the family circle; but they know that, as the Bible says, suffering produces

endurance, character and hope. Endurance through suffering proves faith to be genuine and brings to the believer a greater awareness of God’s love. At the heart of Christianity is the belief that there is no glory other than through the path of suffering.

Because we have a Christian responsibility to bring relief to those who suffer, we can easily slip into an attitude that says, ‘I too have a right to be free from suffering’. Avoidance of suffering becomes an excuse for avoiding the path that Jesus Christ trod.



*Health centre, Burundi*

Among Christians in many countries, I have seen a courage in the face of suffering that reminds me how easily the ease of Western living can remove us from the sort of life Jesus requires of his followers.

### **Realistic expectations**

While new missionaries sent from the West are sometimes ill-prepared for suffering, because of the pampering of their home society, those sent from some of the difficult countries in the developing world often pick the toughest places to go to. Here is an extended quote from *Missions Update*, a Nigerian missions magazine that leaves prospective missionaries and other readers in no doubt that pain is to be expected and there is no point complaining.

‘Suffering for Christ and his kingdom is fundamental to the Christian faith, especially as it relates to missionary enterprise. . . We are in a violent world. If we are to make any headway in the assignment given us by our Lord Jesus, we must be prepared to endure suffering, hunger, rejection and even death. So long as we remain in this world, suffering is helpful to our faith. . .

‘Taking the gospel across cultural and linguistic barriers entails much suffering. Does God have any purpose in this? Of course, yes! He has ordained that through suffering he will perfect our obedience and prepare us for the eternal joy and glory he has laid ahead of us. . .

‘We should never allow suffering to deter us. Rather it should stimulate us towards accomplishing great things for God. To a large extent our attitude is what determines the role that suffering will play in our walk with God. It could be a help or a hindrance. . . Should we embrace suffering or avoid it; ignore it or endure it? The truth is that suffering for Christ is part and parcel of the missionary calling. Rather than dodge it, a prospective missionary should anticipate situations that will require him boldly to identify himself with the suffering of Christ. . . We should not put ourselves in avoidable trouble, but neither should we shy away from opportunities to suffer legitimately for Christ. It is the gateway to glory.’

### **Fearless before Islam**

Our natural desire to avoid trouble means that most Christians hesitate to engage in head-on debate with Muslims, but a Ugandan friend of mine named Wilson makes a speciality of it. He is not a Christian eccentric; just a fervent evangelist who knows his Bible, has studied Islam and welcomes any opportunity to debate with Muslims. Perhaps more importantly, he runs seminars and training sessions on Muslim evangelism in churches, universities, secondary schools, Bible colleges and any other venue he can find – twenty people in one place, a hundred in another, three hundred somewhere else. He carries on this work week after week, month after month, and over the years has given thousands of Christians, both clergy and laity, knowledge and confidence in taking the gospel to Muslims.

After one round of training seminars he said, ‘Christians got courage to witness to Muslims, who never believed a Christian could hold the Quran in their hand and start witnessing without fighting. Muslim leaders even admitted to us that they don’t understand their own Quran.’ But in spite of this widespread ignorance, Islam still manages to win converts, mainly because it offers incentives of money, education and employment to those who will convert. Because of an apparently limitless supply of oil money, Islam can build mosques all over a country and secure large amounts of publicity through television, radio and newspapers. In a country where most people are poor, the temptation to convert is great.

After one debate Wilson sent me the following: ‘Thanks for your prayers for my debate with the Muslims. When I arrived at the venue I found that Muslims had flooded the area and brought reinforcement from Kampala including army Muslim officers. I spoke for 20 minutes and in middle of my talk when I read from the Quran,

the Muslim machine operator switched off the microphone. So I increased my voice and read out the verses loudly. Then a Muslim preacher angrily walked towards me, but the Lord used one of his fellow Muslims to pull him back. . . . Next day a young Muslim man came to me and told me he never slept the whole night because things I spoke from the Quran and Bible troubled him. I sat with him for six hours and went through the Bible and Quran, proving to him that the Jesus the Muslims believe is not the biblical one. I showed him many things and at the end he confessed Christ as his Saviour. I am planning to go back and stay a bit longer for evangelism.'

Wilson went back and through his evangelistic outreach 25 people trusted Christ, including five Muslims. In the years that followed he reported many conversions – fifty in one place, a hundred in another – and consistently the proportion of converts who were Muslim was about one in five.

On one challenging occasion Wilson wrote, 'Twelve Arab Muslim missionaries arrived yesterday here in Kabale and we are assessing the situation, whether they will stage a crusade in town or go into the villages. We are prepared for them. Wherever they go, we will be there within minutes. I alerted Christian leaders and our team to be ready for this invasion.' Other Muslim missionaries, Pakistanis, were going around Muslims communities in other towns, urging people to join jihad groups for holy wars. Wilson added, 'My heart was very heavy. I could not understand why Muslim missionaries incite Muslims to violence and spread religious hatred in a Christian country.' He quoted one case where an angry Muslim missionary 'grabbed my Quran from my hands, but I chased him through the town and got it back.' But he quoted other cases where Christians had lost heart in the battle and given up.

Over the years Wilson's colourful experiences have kept me informed and prayerful on his behalf. 'Yesterday around 5.00 pm a Muslim businessman came to me and started being provocative. He warned me that all Islamic nations were looking for me, they have my name in their books, and I have been reported to the head of Islam in Uganda for him to find a solution to deal with me. We argued a long time. When he was about to leave, I told him through his van window, "Jesus loves you and he is willing to save you." By the time we finished this one hour of hot and aggressive talk, people had gathered from across the street. One angry man threatened to cut off my head. I am not worried too much for these threats. The Lord who saved Daniel in the den of lions can save me from all known and unknown threats if he wills. Death is no longer a threat to me. I put my total trust in the sovereignty of God.'

## Procedures

At home or abroad, participating in public worship with God's people can be one of the highest experiences of which a human being is capable. This is not to say that every meeting with God's people for worship is as satisfying as it might be. The fault could lie in a wrong attitude within me, wrong behaviour by others, mindless traditions, inappropriate practices, theological error, or simply the inability to understand what is happening when one is in a country whose language is different from one's own. I am thankful that many of the countries I visit use English, though even when interpretation is necessary, one can still appreciate what is being said and done.

### Church services

Several church services stand out in my memory for the quality of their praise and worship. One, at a church in Malawi, is referred to earlier in the chapter entitled *Singing*. Another, at a large Methodist church in India, had a presentation of readings, prayers, hymns and comments that truly brought us into the presence of God. At the end of the service, eight Hindu converts were baptized by immersion.

Another memorable service was in Ibadan, Nigeria, where I found I could identify with a missionary friend, a person not easily excited, who said, 'The worship of the Nigerians is so vibrant you can hardly keep your feet and hands still.' And it was not only their singing that was enthusing. Everything about their worship seemed to exalt God and uplift his people.

Perhaps the sweetest of all public worship experiences have been in much humbler settings, first in Thailand and later in Australia, where small congregations of fairly recent converts expressed themselves with unselfconscious realism and warmth. It was the sort of worship that comes from those who have found new life in union with the risen Christ but have not yet been introduced to the habits and language of conventional church services. Expressions of worship were informal without being ill-mannered, intimate without being over-familiar, unrefined without being coarse.

### Bread and wine

Most of us are aware that there are many ways of distributing the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, but we are not necessarily aware of the differences in the elements themselves. In some countries people do not eat bread and in others they do not grow grapes. Even where bread and wine are available, they are unlikely to be precisely the same as the substances used by the Lord Jesus.

Among the substances I have seen used to represent the original bread are sticky rice in Laos, ordinary rice in the Solomons, pappadum in India, cracker biscuits in Thailand, mealy maize in Zambia, chapatti in Pakistan, coconut in Papua New Guinea, and a variety of leavened and unleavened breads in most other countries. These could be in the form of a bun, a loaf, a slice, a flat cake, small cubes or wafers. Among the substances used to represent the original wine are coconut milk in Papua New Guinea, herbal tea in Laos, ordinary tea in India, berry juice in the Solomons, flavoured water in Myanmar, and a variety of red wine, white wine, grape juice, soft drinks and cordials in most other countries.

### Tradition and novelty

Since our world is different from that of Christians in the first century, we accept that our procedures are not identical to theirs. We expect our church procedures to fit naturally into our present-day world and our local way of life. To me there was something incongruous about nineteenth century British rituals among Indian labourers

in Bangalore, the 1662 Anglican service for Sudanese refugees in Cairo, and an American Easter bunny in a Thai church.

A practice is not wrong, however, simply because it is traditional or novel; nor is it necessarily right. We must not judge a practice unfavourably solely because it does not immediately appeal to us, nor should we be carried away solely because something is new or attractive. We may react against Western traditions in a non-Western country, but be too easily impressed by variant practices in the same country merely because they happen to be new to us. The different practices may be a reflection of culture rather than spirituality, of habit rather than conviction.

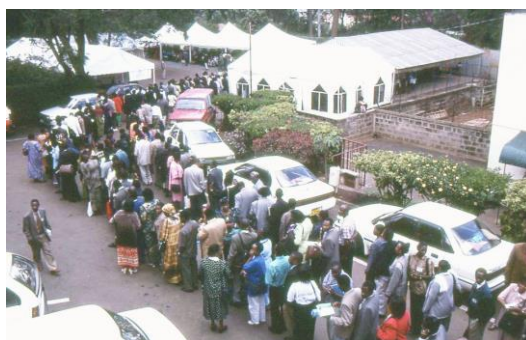
This was well illustrated when friends of mine, a Baptist and an Anglican, married. The husband enjoyed now going to an Anglican church, because he found the worship more substantial than the breezy procedures he had come from with the Baptists. But the wife wished their visits to his former Baptist church were more frequent, because she found the worship there refreshing after the predictable routine of the Anglicans.

### **Feeling uncomfortable**

Occasionally, I find myself in a place where things are not as I expect. In 1990, soon after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, we were returning after several months in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe and our one-way ticket brought us home via the United States. Though I have had some good experiences with the US (my books published and sold there number ten times more than those of Britain, Australia and New Zealand combined), I have also encountered some oddities.

When in Sacramento, California, I was invited to an evening 'sharing' meeting to speak about Eastern Europe. The gathering seemed to consist of an odd assortment of people. The 'sharing' varied from sensible comments to accounts of extra-terrestrial experiences, but the highlight was from a person who spoke just before my allotted time-slot. He had recently returned from a South American country and began by 'praising the Lord' and rattling off his statistics – 'eighty-six decisions for Christ, one hundred and sixty-four cured of various diseases, plus forty-one cured of cancer, six blind people made to see, and eleven people raised from the dead.' I had the feeling that, after such mighty things, I was an anti-climax.

However, I was not – at least for some in the gathering. They made encouraging comments that showed my contribution about ordinary people dealing with everyday matters was not wasted. They had been informed and helped.



*Lunchtime, East Africa Congress, Nairobi*

Years later I had a comparable experience at the large East Africa Congress in Nairobi, Kenya. Among my assignments was a talk towards the close of the conference on the subject, 'Do the work of an evangelist'. I had planned to give an inspirational address that would help end the conference on a high note. But during the previous three days there had been so much hype that I decided to abandon my planned address and talk about

some practical issues. People can easily get on a 'high' when there is much exuberance at a big conference, but when they return home they have little idea how to make inroads into the unbelieving community around them.

I was astounded at the response to my off-the-cuff address. There was a stream of people who wanted to talk about the down-to-earth issues I had raised. It reassured me

that hype does not satisfy as much as the noise volume might suggest. There are always people in the audience who want more substance than the showy exercises give them.

### **What is important?**

The excesses of the conference just mentioned are not typical. Most inter-denominational events of my experience are not slanted towards one line or another, but are well-balanced and uplifting. Even denominational events such as conferences, camps, seminars and conventions rarely display denominational distinctives. The same is true of the many Bible colleges where I have taught, both denominational and inter-denominational.

However, when I go to different churches on Sunday, all of a sudden things seem to change. The differences that were not evident in the Bible colleges and conferences are now quite marked. It raises an interesting question: what are the things that create differences among Christians and what are the things that promote unity?

## Taxis

Words do not always convey the message we intend, because the picture in the mind of the speaker is different from that in the mind of the hearer. We had this driven home to us when, in the mid-1960s, my parents visited us in Thailand. It blew their mind. In letters to them about our life in Bangkok, we had used words such as ‘house’, ‘lane’, ‘neighbour’, ‘taxi’, ‘bus’, ‘hospital’, ‘market’ and ‘coffee shop’, and though we told the truth, the picture in their minds was nothing like the reality.

‘Taxi’ means different things to people in Bangkok, Sydney, Calcutta, London, Rome and Lagos. The word that denotes an expensive, even luxurious, form of transport in a wealthy country might denote a cheap, even crude, form of transport in some other country.

Another contrast is that, whereas taxis in the West are largely used in urban transport, in other countries they are also a form of intercity and long-distance transport. They may run randomly or to timetables, range across the country or be confined to fixed routes. They will often bring much weariness of body, but rarely will they bring boredom.

### Friendly taxis

There are few places where we are more likely to feel flustered than the exit area of an air terminal in a foreign country. We have just passed through the hassle of immigration, baggage collection and customs clearance (which really *is* a hassle in some countries of the developing world), we are trying to push a luggage trolley while still clutching our precious travel documents, and then suddenly we are set upon by well-wishing taxi drivers. We have not yet changed money or found our bearings, and everything seems strange and threatening. In such circumstances it is easy to lose anything – documents, luggage, money, politeness, wits, sanity.

The first time I left my homeland for foreign shores, I lost valuable items while still in the process of setting foot on Thai soil. The ship had anchored in midstream because of no wharf space, and I transferred to the harbour area in a water taxi. The taxi men proved the truth of Thailand’s promotional motto, ‘Land of Smiles’, as they cheerfully waved me goodbye. When I later opened my luggage I found why they were so happy. After that, I always travelled with a secure lock on my luggage.

### The taxi station

Not all taxi drivers, however, exhibit good cheer. My most unsettling experiences were in Nigeria. I often travelled from town to town in a taxi, which in some cases was more like a minibus. The taxi was usually a Peugeot 504 station wagon with an extra seat that enabled it to hold nine people. In some cases it was a Kombi or similar van, again with extra seats to boost the number of passengers.

I was at the taxi station in Ilorin, waiting for one of these Peugeots to take me to Kaduna, when a fight erupted in the taxi in front of us. It was not a fistfight, but the aggressive shouting, waving and shoving that I saw repeatedly throughout my time in Nigeria. Passengers, taxi touts and bystanders all seemed intent in getting involved in the action, but I just sat tight, lifting my hand occasionally to fend off the jostling public around me.

Sam, the local Nigerian mission leader who was sending me off, showed an inclination to intervene. I kept saying in my head, ‘Don’t do it, Sam’. But Sam could not read my thoughts and decided he would arbitrate. People from both sides turned on him, gave him a good shove and returned to their conflict.

Not understanding the language of the conflict, I asked Sam what the trouble was about. Apparently, a woman in the taxi had become impatient with the driver because he would not leave till the last seat was filled. He resented this female interference, and so the argument broke out. The driver refused to depart unless the woman left the taxi, and the woman refused to leave the taxi because she had paid her fare. People inside the taxi joined the argument, some on one side and some on the other. Touts and bystanders followed suit. I found the scene quite scary, but Sam kept his cool. He was used to it. After a while the taxi driver got back in and hurtled off, the woman and others in the taxi still shouting and waving madly. I asked Sam how long this would go on. 'All the way to Kaduna,' he suggested.

### **Tensions in a confined space**

The next taxi backed into the bay, and a local man that Sam had delegated to accompany me boarded the taxi with me. Once it was full, the taxi set off.

My friend was in the middle of the middle row and I was against the side door. After a while, the man against the other side door decided to put up the window. It was hot, but he did not like the wind blowing him about. My window was permanently stuck at four or five centimetres from the top, because the winding mechanism was broken. This was evident because there was no inner skin to the door (or to two of the other three doors), so that the door mechanisms were exposed to view. Also there was only one winder handle, and this was passed around to whoever wanted to wind a window up or down. Like most taxis in Nigeria, it was dented and battered all over, but at least it had a turret lining, which was an improvement on a taxi I had ridden in a few days earlier.

As we travelled along, the station wagon-cum-taxi became very hot and stuffy, especially in the back row where there were no side doors and both side windows were fixtures. A woman asked if the man in our row would open his window, but he refused. Acrimonious argument broke out. The taxi driver joined the argument (on the man's side), asked the man for the winder, and then wound up his own window, just to show who was boss. He passed the winder to the front seat passenger on the other side, with instructions to wind his window up also, but the man compromised by leaving it four or five centimetres from the top. The car became unbearably hot, but relief arrived an hour later when the taxi stopped for us to get something to eat.

The woman and the driver then set to with a toe-to-toe argument. The woman stuck her face in front of the driver's, pointed to her cheek and said, 'Go on, hit me, hit me. No. You're a coward. You're an animal . . .' All this arguing was in English, as that was the common language of people from different clans. While these two were arguing and the rest of us were eating, my friend took advantage of the distraction to quietly retrieve the winder and wind down all the openable windows.

When we returned to the taxi, the driver, seeing what had happened, went around and wound the windows up again. After a while, my friend tried some sweet talk with the man beside him, but to no avail. He then tried to sneak his hand forward to grab the winder that was lying on the front seat beside the driver, but the driver spotted the approaching hand, snatched the winder and threw it on the floor beneath his feet. That was the end of the action. We just had to sweat it out till the end of the journey.



*Returning to the taxi from the eatery*



## Good news for the passengers

A few days later I was to travel from Jos to Warri, another full-day journey, this time in a fifteen-seater minibus that had been modified to hold twenty-two passengers. It was crammed so full of additional luggage and merchandise that passengers could barely move a muscle.

In addition to the normal luggage and merchandise, plenty of extra petrol was taken on board. Nigeria is an oil-producing nation, but because of corruption and mismanagement, petrol was scarce and expensive. In Jos we saw a line of cars, two abreast, more than a kilometre long, waiting for petrol. The drivers slept in the cars,



*One kind of Nigerian minibus*

and some were into their fourth day of waiting. Our minibus driver stored jerry cans (Nigeria could be dubbed 'the land of jerry cans') in every available space. One was stored beside the engine, another under my feet and another behind my seat.

It was a relief when we finally set off on our long journey. Before we were out of the city limits, a man with a

huge voice burst into prayer, imploring God to look after the vehicle, the driver, us and all others on the road. The driver said a hearty 'Amen' and so did several others. The driver then began playing a cassette of Christian music, the singers performing with the sort of gusto one expects in Africa. The volume was turned up full blast, and though I kept my fingers in my ears as best I could, I still heard everything clearly.

When the ninety minutes of noise was finished, there was enough pause for another man to burst forth, this time with a gospel sermon. He covered all the basics of human sin, the cross, repentance, faith and the dire consequences that awaited all who rejected his message. The driver again said 'Amen', put in another cassette and kept hurtling along to prove the efficacy of the first man's prayer of faith.

After a 'comfort stop' and the chance to eat some mealy maize at a roadside stall, we set off again, with another cassette to keep us awake. When the ninety minutes of noise was finished, there was enough pause for a third man to burst forth, this time with a gospel sermon in a language I did not understand. But it was delivered with no less passion than the first sermon. The man then passed around a tract (in English) that told the story of how he became a Christian.

When, at the end of the day, we were approaching our destination, a woman offered hearty praise to God (in English) for a safe and happy journey – and the driver said 'Amen'.

Four of the twenty-two passengers had participated in the outreach service of this mobile Gospel Hall, a proportion that approximated that of evangelicals in Nigeria as a whole. Reliable statistics are hard to obtain, but evangelicals are estimated to account for about twenty percent of the population. Certainly, we had more evidence of a Christian presence in this minibus than in the taxi to Kaduna. But then Kaduna is in the predominantly Muslim north, whereas this journey was through the more Christian regions of the south

## Packed in

I have seen jam-packed taxis and buses in many countries, but none to equal Thailand. That is possibly because of the length of time I spent in Thailand. Certainly, I rode in more buses and taxis there than anywhere else

The three-wheeled motorized taxis that Thais affectionately call tuk-tuks are found in a variety of forms in many Asian countries. In most cases the driver straddles a small motor and passengers sit behind him in a single seat facing the front, but one variation is to replace this seat with two longer seats along the sides. This increases the passenger seating from two to six. On one occasion in Thailand I was in a tuk-tuk that had thirteen people crammed into this space, plus a bicycle on the roof.

A larger version of the tuk-tuk with two side-seats is the small utility or pickup. I once saw an Austin A30 with twenty-seven people loaded into the back. I witnessed the breaking of this record when I myself was one of thirty-two people crammed into the back of a small Datsun.

But my most 'jammed in' experience was a taxi trip between two towns in South Thailand. The car was a four-cylinder sedan of

Japanese make, with a bench-type front seat and steering column gear change. There were six of us in the front and seven in the back, all sitting 'zig-zag' (alternately to the front and back of the seat). We were jammed so tightly that I seemed unable to move even so much as half a centimetre. None of the four doors would close, which meant that four people were half outside the car. One of these was the driver, whose leg was not long enough to press in the clutch. His arrangement was to yell 'press' whenever he wanted to change gear, and the passenger nearest the clutch responded. We travelled that way for three hours – over 220 kilometres without a stop.



*Twenty-seven passengers on board*

## Very important persons

My kind of work does not usually bring me into contact with the VIPs of this world. It is therefore a welcome sight to see prominent persons in church. This does not mean that God should be grateful that a few of the 'mighty and noble' have joined his church, but it does indicate that some of the 'mighty and noble' have submitted to Christ's lordship and, we trust, brought Christ's values into their own administrations.

### **The President in church**

In Gaborone, capital of the African country of Botswana, the nation's President was in the front row the morning I spoke in a church there. I am not sure whether, like his counterpart in Zambia, he was a fervent born-again evangelical, but I was told he was a strong supporter of churches, and could be found worshipping in some church each week.

The government of Botswana even paid the fares of youths to attend camps operated by Scripture Union during school vacations. It worked on the theory that money was better spent in helping such enterprises than in dealing with problems created by people with nothing better to do than hang around the streets. At the time I visited Botswana, it was the only country in sub-Saharan Africa where the electoral process was clean enough to guarantee that a government could be changed through the ballot box.

### **Christians and the political process**

A few years later I was in Zambia, and the evangelical President mentioned above had by now become something less than evangelical. He began his first term by dedicating the nation to God, but as he approached the end of his second term, he was in such disgrace that the church tried to disown him. Once again, the identification of the church with a particular political figure or party had proved disastrous.

My reason for being in Zambia was to provide the daily Bible teaching at the Beyond Amsterdam 2000 Conference. The big five-day event, attended by 1,500 evangelists, pastors, and other Christian workers, was held in the prestigious national convention centre that only the week before had been the venue for an African heads of state congress.

The President of Zambia had conveyed to the organizers of our conference that he would like to make an appearance, but the organizers kept him out. However, the President's estranged wife, still the First Lady, attended several sessions during the week, and heartened everyone with her occasional 'Amen' and 'Praise the Lord'. But in time she too became an embarrassment to the church.

Zambia's next presidential elections were approaching, and various current and would-be politicians, including a presidential candidate, appeared at the conference. (The current President was constitutionally prevented from running for a third term.) Whenever these political figures attended, their presence was announced and they were allowed to stand and acknowledge the audience, but the conference organizers were smart enough not to give them a microphone or allow them on to the platform. One person who appeared to be in a different category, however, was the former mayor of Lusaka. She was there almost the entire week, and could be seen sitting with open Bible and notebook, taking notes enthusiastically.

At the corresponding conference in Nairobi, Kenya, a few months later, the conference organizers made an 'altar call' for all those involved in Kenya's up-coming national elections. A surprisingly large number of people came to the front (about one hundred out of an audience of 1,500), which created a brief crisis, because the

organizers' plan was that those of us on the platform were to move among these candidates and pray for each of them.

This high level of Christian involvement in politics is widespread in Africa, especially in the nominally Christian countries. Some may be power-seekers, but others have a genuine desire to raise helpless people out of depressing social conditions, and they see this as one way of achieving improvements.

Some years later, when my *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* was published in Burundi's national language, Kirundi, the book was launched at a large public function by the nation's First Lady. There were similarly large functions to launch first the *Commentary* and later the *Dictionary* in Ethiopia's national language, Amharic, again featuring prominent people but these did not include political leaders.



*Burundi's First Lady: Bible Commentary launch*

### **A Sikh minister of state**

In the Punjab, in India, there was a different kind of VIP on the platform. This man was not a Christian, but a Sikh, and the venue was the auditorium of a large high school. This school was an initiative of a dynamic Indian Christian, Daniel Abraham, who, in his capacity as President of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches of India, had invited me to India to speak at FECCI's five-day annual convention in Dehra Dun. After that, we went to the Punjab for the twenty-fifth anniversary of his own ministry.

From three or four children, Daniel's school had grown to more than 1,800. By now it was not only a Christian outreach but also a source of income to support his extensive work among the poor of India's north-eastern states.

The Sikh celebrity was a minister in the Punjab government. He arrived with a heavily armed escort, which then broke up to guard all the auditorium's entrances and exits. I sat in the audience and watched as this imposing figure made speeches and presentations. Although I could not understand what he said, his performance looked and sounded impressive – though he was, after all, a politician. Afterwards, Daniel and others confirmed that, both publicly and privately, the man seemed to be genuinely supportive and friendly.

A postscript to the story is that, during the same week, I spoke at the celebration of the opening of a new church in a nearby country region. Almost a hundred were present, and many of the converts were Sikhs. During the previous weeks, I had spoken at some big-name conventions and met a number of big-name people, but that meeting in a humble country church moved me more than any other occasion. It was wonderful to see the audience well sprinkled with turbaned Sikhs, some who were already converted and others who sought prayer and counselling at the end of the service.

### **A Christian Prime Minister**

One Sunday morning I arrived at a church in Honiara, capital of the Pacific nation of Solomon Islands. Although I had never met Sir Peter Kenilorea personally, I recognized him in the congregation. He had been Prime Minister of the Solomons for six years – three years leading up to independence and the first three years after independence. And there he was, one of the deacons in the church, distributing the bread and wine and passing round the collection bag.

After church he came up and introduced himself – 'just call me Peter'. He immediately began talking about my books and how much he had used them over the

years. He invited Gae and me home for a meal, though first he excused himself while he took a few old people home. He owned a car, he said, and did not like to see them walk.

Peter and his wife Margaret lived in a home that was delightfully modest – nothing ostentatious or extravagant and obviously ‘lived in’. In short, it was a home, not just a house. A few photos here and there suggested his international status (one with Margaret Thatcher, another with the first George Bush), but otherwise one could have been in the home of any warm-hearted Christian who loved God and loved people.

A Bible lay on a table, and there on top of a china cabinet was the set of *Bridge Bible Handbooks*. The books did not look as if they had been put there for my benefit; and from their appearance, Sir Peter had told the truth about using them often. They were indeed well-worn.

### **The princess and the prince**

Another island nation in the Pacific, Tonga, is reputedly a Christian country with a Christian king. The royal family is large and powerful, if benevolent, though the lack of a democratically elected government brings increasing restlessness.

In 2003 I was in Tonga for a Billy Graham sponsored School of Evangelism (the new name for a Beyond Amsterdam 2000 Conference) and an associated Festival of Peace (the new name for what was once called an evangelistic crusade). The king of Tonga was patron of these events, though was unable to attend because affairs of state saw him out of the country at the time. But a prominent princess was the leader of a battalion of prayer warriors who, before and during the events, prayed untiringly for the six hundred at the School of Evangelism by day and the thousands at the Festival of Peace by night.

The evangelist for the Festival of Peace was an Indian friend, Robert Cunville, with whom I have shared many conferences in many countries. Robert is part of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and is based in his home state of Meghalaya, India.



*Tonga's royal palace*

After one of his nightly addresses at the sports stadium, one of the hundreds who came forward in response to his appeal was a middle-aged man who was both a prince and a government minister. Although brought up as part of the state church in a nominally Christian country, he saw for the first time that he was not, in biblical terms, a Christian.

After local Tongans counselled him, and Robert with others visited him at home, this influential member of the royal family began a new journey. He saw for the first time that eternal life is not something merely to wish for in an uncertain afterlife. ‘It is something I have *now*,’ he said. Through faith and repentance, he found new life. He discovered, as we all must, that people are not saved on the basis of social rank or inherited privileges. They are saved by God’s grace, and they receive that salvation by faith.

## Paper

The ‘paperless office’ has become a sick joke. After we were told that computers would reduce and even eliminate paperwork, we are bombarded with more paper than ever – more notices from government authorities, more ‘we love you’ letters from banks and public utilities, more junk mail in our letterboxes, more supplements in newspapers, more ‘free’ magazines from corporations that use our money, more fancy packaging . . . and so the list goes on. But while this wastage escalates in the West, many countries in Africa and elsewhere face a shortage that we in the West cannot even imagine.

Every week I receive letters that have not only cost a good part of a week’s wages for postage, but have used part of a precious supply of writing paper. The part of a page not used is often torn off with a ruler and kept for some other use. Letters are written on the back of used paper, the reverse side of flattened-out envelopes, unused pages of diaries, second-hand birthday cards and small pieces of paper cut from a larger sheet. Paper is so expensive in some African countries that the cost of books printed there can be greater than that of books printed in Australia, in spite of Australia’s highly expensive labour.

### **The essentials**

I was in the chief city of an African country, having arrived the previous day. My first assignment was a morning’s teaching at a Bible school – really a training centre for about twenty-five people who were preparing to go out with one of the many homegrown church-planting missions in Africa. The building had two storeys, the top floor being occupied by the mission. There seemed to be about five rooms, all undecorated, used for office and teaching activities.

At the end of the morning’s lectures, I said I wanted to use the toilet. I was asked if I needed toilet paper for the exercise, and when I said ‘Yes’ I was told to wait briefly and I would be taken to the appropriate place. A few minutes later a woman appeared with a bucket of water and a roll of toilet paper, and invited me to go with her. So off we went – down the stairs, along the street, past an assortment of small shop-houses for metal-workers, grocers, wood-workers, hair-cutters and motor mechanics, around the corner, around another corner, then down another street till we came to an unmarked door that the woman indicated was the toilet.

I asked for the paper and bucket, but the woman indicated that first she had to go inside and ‘make it clean’. When she opened the door, I observed that the toilet fronted directly on to the street, with only a loose-fitting wooden door to shield the occupant from passers-by. When the woman had ‘made it clean’, she still would not give me the bucket. Flushing was her job, and I was to allow her to clean up after I had done what I had to do. So she dutifully waited outside while I was inside; then I waited outside while she went inside to carry out her flushing duties.

We then set out to return home, the woman carrying the empty bucket and clutching the roll of toilet paper. But workers from one of the shop-houses knew what was happening and ran out to demand of her some paper. She tore off a strip for one, then for another, then for another – then workers began to appear from the next shop. ‘Quick! Run!’ she said, stuffing the toilet paper down her blouse. We made it safely back to base, and the woman returned the toilet paper to the person in charge.

During the next few weeks, I had many experiences of this Africa-wide shortage of paper, especially toilet paper. No bathroom or toilet ever had paper. In private homes it was kept in a secure place in the kitchen or eating room. In Bible schools it could usually be found in the principal’s office. But it always had to be asked for.



Often there was a delay while someone was sent to the toilet to ‘make it clean’ before I was given the go-ahead – and the paper. In guesthouses I was sometimes issued with a ration of a few metres when I checked in. Sometimes there was none at all, but in those cases the people responsible for me had already taken note and thoughtfully gave me some.

All travellers know the importance of carrying toilet paper or a suitable alternative at all times. But in most countries of Africa this practice is more than a mere precaution. Paper of any kind is scarce and expensive. Forget about toilet paper that is super-soft or pastel coloured. Any kind is a luxury.

## **Publishing and printing**

When people make requests for publishing, the cost of paper is not the only consideration. Nor must we be easily persuaded by the enthusiasm of the hopeful publisher, especially when translation is involved. On more than one occasion I have met a Christian in a developing country who says he is a publisher and would like to publish my books. When I ask how many books he has published, the answer may be, ‘One’. It turns out to be a 16-page tract of how he became a Christian. Some people tell me they are good translators, but conversation with them does not encourage confidence.

Even if people are good translators, there is little point translating a book if it cannot be printed, and little point printing a book if it cannot be distributed effectively. Another problem with many developing countries is that there is no nationwide publisher, no network to market Christian books, and not even a register of literature outlets or titles available.

Concerning publishing and printing, a note of explanation may be helpful, because many people mistakenly equate the two. The two functions are separate and distinct, and people with expertise in one may have none in the other. Publishers are people or

organizations who accept material for a book or magazine, have it printed and then market it. Printers are people who own and operate printing machines. Most publishers do not own printing machines, and most printers do not publish.

Some well-known publishers, whose names are on millions of books around the world, operate out of modest offices with only a handful of staff. In accepting manuscripts for publication, publishers may take considerable risks. They must provide the money to print the books and then release them to be sold by booksellers. If they make good choices they will have good profits, but if they make poor choices they will lose money and could even go bankrupt.

The usual procedure is that publishers shop around for printing prices and use the printers who give them the best deal. Once the books are printed, the printers are paid. But the publishers are only paid if they can sell the books.

Christian publishers do not need their books to be printed by Christian printers any more than Christian car owners need to drive cars made by Christian manufacturers. In most developing countries, the problem faced by Christian publishers is not that they cannot find printers, but that they cannot find the funds to work with. The temptation is



*Roadside bookshops are found in many countries*

then put before them to buy a printing press and do the work themselves, but in most cases this temptation must be resisted. Printeries usually bring with them many problems of work efficiency, labour relations, maintenance and finance, with the result that they are rarely economically successful when tied to the operation of Christian ministries.

In the case of most Christian ministries, a better investment, and for a very small fraction of the cost, is for people to buy a computer and do the typesetting themselves. Most publishing problems are not with printing but with typesetting, especially when non-Christian typesetters have little understanding of the accepted conventions for biblical references and terminology. Once the text is typeset correctly, all the printer has to do is photograph and print what is handed to him.

Christians need the written Word and the printed materials that help them understand and use that Word. If the 'paperless' institution is unlikely in technically advanced countries, it is much less likely elsewhere. Yet poor countries are desperately short of paper; and without paper, they will struggle to meet the demands of a growing church.



## In and out of jails

Jails are depressing places wherever they are, but people in developed countries have no way of imagining just how bad they can be in other countries. When we see the frightful conditions in some of these countries – the dinginess, filth, lack of facilities, inhumane treatment and cramming of twenty prisoners into a cell designed for six – we begin to understand why prison reform was one product of the radical social reforms initiated by Christians in the nineteenth century.

### **A Thai jail**

Our initial contact with a founding elder of the Bangplat church, Bangkok, came through his imprisonment. He was at that time a country farmer and only a new Christian. He was in jail not because of criminal activity, but because, when he was burning off after harvest, his fire got out of control and burnt down a neighbouring farm house. Thailand at that time was notorious for arson, and the government had introduced a policy of mandatory imprisonment for anyone responsible for burning down another's building. It did not matter whether the fire was accidental or deliberate.

While in jail, the man started doing Bible correspondence courses and a colleague at the correspondence school referred him to me to follow up. Upon release from jail, the man was drafted into the army for two years national service and, because he was based in Bangkok, we began Bible studies with him and others inside the army camp. We then found that while in jail he had led another prisoner to Christ, and that led to my first visit to a Thai jail.

It is something of a shock to see prisoners walking around shackled, holding the heavy chain up from the ground by a length of rope or cord tied to it midway between their feet. Conversation with a prisoner is difficult, to say the least. Visitors and prisoners are each in one long iron-barred cage, with a four-metre wide no-man's-land of bare concrete between them. They then have to shout to each other across the chasm, at the same time competing with dozens of other prisoners and visitors strung out on either side doing the same. And with the noise bouncing off the bare walls, floor and ceiling, conversation is almost impossible.

These strict security measures struck me as being illogical in view of the apparent freedom elsewhere in the prison, where visitors were bringing gifts for prisoners. The prison system provides inmates with virtually nothing, so visitors bring along all sorts of things – soap, toothpaste, clothing, fried rice – which they give to an official who is given inducements to pass them on to the prisoners. The Bangplat church had collected various commodities to help this new convert in jail, and when he was eventually released they fitted him out with clothing and helped find him a job. The man who had led him to Christ in prison baptized him in Lumpini Park in the centre of Bangkok.

The story does not end as happily as we should like. Old habits die hard, and when the man had trouble making ends meet, he pawned some of the clothes the local Christians had bought him. He thought he would retrieve the clothes fairly promptly, but the night after he pawned them, the pawnshop and two hundred other shop-houses were destroyed by fire. The man lost face, lost heart, lost his clothes and soon lost his job. He just disappeared and we have not heard of him since.

### **Lessons, Thai-style**

I was never engaged in regular work among prisoners, but made occasional visits when people were referred to us. One of these, another Bible correspondence course student, was in a jail about thirty kilometres outside Bangkok and his response to our

letters and visits convinced us he was truly converted. Upon his release he was baptized and became part of the Bangplat church.

The first two or three Sundays he came to church, I gave him a few baht to help with his bus fare, for he had very little money. The next Sunday he arrived at church carrying two large chickens by the feet (they were plucked, but not beheaded or gutted), took his seat in the congregation and propped up the chickens against the wall. We were all curious about the purpose of the chickens, whereupon he explained that though he was grateful for the help with his bus fare, he had to do something to help himself. So he had asked a neighbour to lend him some money, bought the two chickens, and after church would take them to the market nearby and sell them at enough profit to get his return fare home. I thought it was a good story about self-help, but a person to whom I told the story in Australia completely missed the point. When I got to the punchline (about selling the chicken to get his fare home) the only thing the person could say was, 'On the Lord's Day?'

Although the man continued to come in to Bangkok regularly for church, a group from the church also went out to his town once a month to help him in outreach. He appeared to be the only Christian in the town, but over the next two years we visited all the houses, ran occasional open air meetings and even began a small Bible study in his home. Then one day a telegram arrived at our house in Bangkok to say he had been arrested for preaching the gospel and was in jail.

Upon receiving the telegram, I rushed to see one of our church elders, suggesting we drive out immediately to see what was going on. The local elder, however, took it all very calmly. 'No hurry,' he said. 'I am not free to go today; and anyway, a night or two in jail won't hurt him. Let's go out Friday.' So I agreed not to go, though I was still anxious and somewhat agitated.

By Friday, however, I had received a second telegram. The man was out of jail and the matter was closed. It turned out that his slightly eccentric evangelism had annoyed the local police and they arrested him for 'creating a public disturbance'. They took him to the police station and tried to make him see the error of his ways by extracting an unofficial gratuity from him, but when protracted negotiations failed to produce anything, they decided to put him in jail to show him who was in charge. When I took the good news to our local elder, his response was as calm as before. 'I thought it was something like that,' he said. 'With patience and prayer, these small matters all work themselves out.' It was a lesson to me as well. Missionaries sometimes think they are the ones to make the decisions, instead of leaving the local people to do things in their way and their time.

### **A Nepalese prisoner**

Earlier in this book I mentioned Timothy Rai, the man who first invited me to Nepal and who was my host, guide and interpreter throughout my time there. He and his wife Bharati are among the many I have met in my international travels whose dedication amid extreme difficulties is a constant challenge to me. They had a burden for the unreached, especially in the remote areas, and when I was there they were learning Tibetan, with the hope of one day going to Tibet to evangelize. In the meantime, they were doing all they could to evangelize the Hindu country of Nepal.

One day, a few years after visiting Nepal, I received news that Hindu extremists had launched an attack on a provincial church conference where Timothy was preaching. The police, however, took the side of the attackers rather than the attacked, and Timothy and three colleagues were thrown into jail. If convicted, the men could spend up to six years in jail for proselytizing and disturbing the peace. Hindu militants were angry at the growth of the church in Nepal, where forty years earlier there was one congregation of twenty-nine believers and now there were over three thousand congregations and almost half a million believers.

How do we pray for Christians in prison? Our first instinct is to pray for their release; certainly, according to the writer to the Hebrews, we are to feel for them as if we are there with them. Yet when the apostle Paul was in prison, his first request was not that he might be released but that that he might have boldness to proclaim the gospel clearly. Though in chains, he had the freedom of Christ's ambassador. So while we pray against injustice, we pray also for God to reassure and use his people in the midst of injustice. If freedom comes, praise God; if it does not, keep trusting. The prisoner is, after all, free in Christ, and the free person is, in a sense, the prisoner of Christ (to adapt a statement that Paul makes when writing to the Corinthians).

Timothy and Bharati are among those many people we know or hear from who say, 'We pray for you every day.' These are people in countries all over the world, many of whom we have never met, but who put us to shame with their commitment to prayer. Gae and I could not say honestly that we pray for Timothy and Bharati every day, but certainly we tried to while he was in jail.

Then, after almost four months in jail, Timothy and his friends were suddenly and unexpectedly released. Within a few days of his release, Timothy wrote to us. Here is part of his letter:

'Bharati and I pray to God and seek his guidance for the future. We have totally committed our lives to serve God – the world behind us, the cross before us, no turning back. In jail I could make my close relationship with Christ. I spent my daytime with the prisoners sharing and teaching from the Bible, and night-time with the Lord praying and reading the Bible. I shared the gospel with eighty people in jail and another fifteen in temporary custody. Praise God that six prisoners prayed to receive Christ and three of them promised to give their land for starting churches in their villages. I experienced my jail life like Moses who was in Mount Sinai with the Lord for forty days. I thank God for this wonderful opportunity.'



*Timothy and Bharati Rai*

Within weeks, Timothy was back in the town of his arrest, preaching again. He wrote a few weeks later to say he had baptized five converts there. Back in Kathmandu he baptized twenty converts, and in neighbouring Bhaktapur another fifteen. In another letter, he says:

'There are five more new believers in Ramechhap, a remote place with no transport system and we have to walk there for more than three hours in mountains. I need three trained pastors and three trained evangelists to help me promote the church-planting ministry and carry the responsibility. I do not have any source of income to train these men, but I have strong faith in the living God who is my provider. All the believers in these regions are very poor. . .

'The Hindu Federation is still running after me. The leader is writing in the national newspaper about me, demanding the government for punishment. Some of my friends say I should file a case against the government concerning my wrong imprisonment, but I do not think to do this. God is giving new opportunities after prison publicity, because I meet professionals and businessmen in Kathmandu with much opportunity to share God's Word.'

Timothy had learnt from Jesus to say, 'Father, forgive.' He also proved that when the followers of Jesus entrust their souls to a faithful Creator, unexpected good can result.

## Coincidences

Everyone has stories of remarkable coincidences, and for Christians these are often worth telling because they demonstrate the sovereign control of God in human affairs. But while stories of these coincidences are cherished by the tellers, they can sometimes be tiresome to the listeners.

In my case the coincidences are not always as remarkable as I might like to think, because once a person's name is connected with books and those books are in many countries, chance meetings through some contact or association are inevitable. Moreover, I have a wide international network of friends and acquaintances. In discussion with Christians almost anywhere, I find that, before long, the name arises of some person known to both parties. For all that, I cannot resist one or two stories, partly because something can be learnt from them.

### **It starts with being friendly**

One simple lesson I have learnt over the years is that we become increasingly useful in Christ's kingdom once we learn to talk to people in a friendly, non-intrusive way. It is not necessary to confront people aggressively with what some Christians call 'witnessing'. Often all that is necessary is an awareness of the people around us who may be lonely, shy, apprehensive or in need of help. Most people do not resent a pleasant 'hello'.

Gae is far better at this than I am. This was particularly evident during the ten years or so that we were engaged in a vigorous local outreach in Brisbane. Many of the people drawn into our area of evangelism were first met through a friendly approach in circumstances not connected with the church or its activities. In international travels also, Gae was a constant source of new contacts.

One such contact came during a brief stopover at a guesthouse in south-east Asia where we and others crossed paths while in transit from one country to another. Gae got talking to an English couple returning home after a time in Nepal with a volunteer service organization. They gave us the names of active Nepalese Christians to whom we later sent books. This opened further opportunities, and in due course brought an invitation for ministry in Nepal. This in turn enthused a Christian organization there and has resulted in the translation of several of my books into Nepali. The outcome of Gae's friendliness to a couple of people in transit is that the Christians of Nepal for the first time have a Bible Dictionary in their own language.

Friendliness does not always have such a far-reaching outcome, but it is still a Christian duty. And we have no way of knowing how far-reaching its effect may be.

At one international airport, we were disembarking from a plane when Gae noticed a mother struggling with a baby and an excessive amount of luggage. The woman's dress showed clearly that she was a Muslim. Gae offered to carry something for her, and soon the two were in happy conversation. The woman said she had been wondering how she would get herself off the plane and had prayed that God would move someone to help her. By the time they reached the immigration barrier, they had exchanged views of their faith and left their addresses with each other.

### **From country to country to country**

Perhaps my most remarkable series of coincidences started during work in the Solomon Islands in 1984. I had conducted studies at a Christian high school and, in talking to staff later, met two Indians who were teaching there. Their names were John Prasad and Stanley Jonathan. (Travellers from the English-speaking world sooner or later learn that naming conventions vary from country to country. People of the same

family, or even husband and wife, do not necessarily have a common surname.) I found the two brothers were from the city once known as Madras but now called Chennai. When I said I expected to be in Madras the next year, they gave me the name and address of their parents, in case I should like to visit them.

Finding addresses in most parts of Asia is a challenge, and I determined not to be too guilt-stricken should I not find the address given to me. But I thought I should mention the matter to the principal of the Bible college where I was based. 'No problem,' the man responded. The address was within walking distance, so he sent a messenger to call the father to the college. I was invited home for a meal the next day and the parents were delighted to hear some first-hand news of their sons in a remote Pacific island. They brought out family photos, including some of another son, Vincent, who also was a teacher.

Five years later I was in Manila for the congress on world evangelization known as Lausanne II. There were over 4,000 participants and they came from 196 countries. This was the first time I had been to such an event and I was determined to meet as many people from non-Western countries as possible. The first meeting was about to commence, so as I entered the huge auditorium I headed for the first vacant seat alongside someone who was not European-looking. The man I sat next to was from Papua New Guinea. After we introduced ourselves, he thought for a moment and then asked me if I was the person who wrote *Bridge Bible Handbooks*.

The man then introduced me to the person on the other side of him, a Christian from India who was teaching at a high school in PNG. His name was Vincent. 'Do your parents live in Madras, just near the Hindustan Bible Institute?' I asked. Vincent replied with a stunned 'Yes'. But his eyes almost popped out when I said, 'I had a meal with your parents in your home – and you look just like your photo.'

But more was to follow. Six years later I was in Papua New Guinea for several weeks of Bible teaching in a number of regions. At one of the provincial airports, Lae, while standing in the check-in queue at the airport, I noticed that the person in front of me was an Indian. Yes, it was Vincent.

### **Unlikely sightings**

During that same trip to Papua New Guinea, one other airport provided the setting for another pleasing coincidence. I was trying to leave Mt Hagen, where I found that the check-in counter was approached not through a queue as at Lae, but through something more like a rugby scrum. I made a comment to that effect to a Papua New Guinean beside me, and that initiated the usual conversation – where are you going . . . where are you from . . . what do you do . . . ?

When I told the man what had brought me to PNG – books, teaching, churches, Bible colleges – he put his hand into his bilim (the national all-purpose carry-bag), pulled out a *Bridge Bible Handbook* and asked, 'Is this one of your books?' It turned out he was a Christian and he was working through Genesis to Deuteronomy in his daily readings as he travelled around.

Another unexpected sighting of my books occurred when I was boarding a plane in Brisbane for Bangkok. While walking through the Business Class section to my seat in Economy Class, I saw a young Thai woman reading the Thai edition of my book *The Christian's Faith*. After the plane was on its way, I made my way back to her seat to find out more.

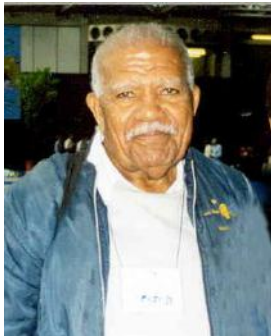
The woman outlined how she had spent a time in jail for drug trafficking and now the Australian government was deporting her. (That explained the Business Class.) She had been given *The Christian's Faith* by someone who kept a supply of other-language Christian books suitable for foreign prisoners in Australia. After arrival in Bangkok, I phoned the woman and arranged for a meeting where I could introduce her to

Christians from our local church. But we had no success. She just disappeared into the smoky haze of Bangkok – still with my book, I hope.

### Sharing lunch

Just as friendship opened the way to Nepal, so it did to Fiji. The occasion was one of the very successful training days for Christian workers that Scripture Union in Brisbane operated during the year. The conveners hired premises such as a high school that could accommodate hundreds of people in dozens of electives. My job, like that of many others, was to run workshops on selected subjects morning and afternoon.

During the lunch break I noticed a man, who looked like a Pacific islander, sitting alone. I went and sat with him, shared my cut lunch and learnt that he was Mesulame Nainoca, a retired government official who was now directing Scripture Union in Fiji. As the conversation flowed on, I learnt something of SU's ministry in Fiji and mentioned in passing my own contribution to SU's daily reading notes along with other things I had written. Mesu's ears pricked up. Putting two and two together, he asked if I was the author of some easy-read mini-commentaries that someone had suggested could be useful in Fiji.



Mesu Nainoca

This incident started the flow of my books into Fiji. Mesu, I was to discover, was among the best known Christian leaders in the country. He was an influential radio broadcaster, a senior statesman among Christian Assemblies and a leader in several inter-denominational organizations. A year or so later, Mesu initiated and organized several weeks of ministry for me in Fiji, mainly in relation to church leadership and expository Bible teaching. Some of the teaching prepared for that trip later became part of the book *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. And it all began through going to sit with a lonely figure during a lunch break.

One other note about Mesu is that he became an outspoken critic – at first a lone Christian voice among indigenous Fijians – of church leaders and political figures who put ethnic loyalties ahead of justice and compassion. He took a stand that not only showed courage but also demonstrated the ability, rare in some circles, to relate Christian faith to social problems.

## Uganda after Amin

Uganda has come a long way in recent years, but at the time Gae and I first visited in 1990, it was the most pathetic country we had seen anywhere. The people had scarcely had time to feel relieved that Idi Amin was gone when their self-appointed 'saviour', Milton Obote, gave them a modified version of the same injustice. But Obote had also gone, and a new government was now bringing new hope.

### Cautious optimism

Almost every Ugandan we met told us with pride that Kampala's main street had been resurfaced. But that was all. Other streets were still full of potholes, some so large that certain streets were untrafficable. Buildings were covered in red dust, many bore the marks of bullets, and windows in some still carried broken glass from recent fighting. The electricity was off and on, day and night, and the water ran in only some parts of the city. In the church-run guesthouse where we stayed, we were given a jerry-can half full of water each morning, and that had to serve all the bathing and toilet requirements for both of us for the day.

The Scripture Union worker who acted as host for us in Kampala told how guilty she used to feel when pretending not to see a dead body lying beside the road or in the bus park; or how cowardly she felt when running up an alley to hide from an approaching soldier. People lived in fear and were suspicious of everybody, she said. Only now were there signs that they were beginning to trust each other again.



*Kampala, 1990*

And things in the shops were better too. Basic commodities were beginning to reappear, though even then the jars, packets or other items were widely spaced so that a shelf or bench might not look as if it was almost empty. 'We can now buy jam *and* honey', we were told. But they were still luxuries. In every place we ate we were served bread, sliced and buttered, but there was never anything to put on it. The main 'stomach filler' was a dough-like substance cooked from a kind of large banana, but the tiny chunk of meat served with it was usually more fat than meat, and the oil rancid. The people selling assorted goods along the footpath were a pathetic sight – a spread, perhaps, of three ballpoint pens, five envelopes, one note pad, an eraser and a small packet of white chalk.

### God is good

One Saturday, after an all-day seminar with Scripture Union staff and volunteer workers, a committee member invited us home for the evening meal. She, with her husband and family, lived in a small plain house owned by the university where her husband taught civil engineering. The humble living room had the features one becomes accustomed to in poor countries of Africa – no floor coverings, bare walls, a few chairs, a table and perhaps a bed. From what we could see, all rooms were equally spartan.



The hosts were welcoming and talkative. They served the usual buttered bread and tea, and our conversation ranged over a variety of subjects concerning the church and mission.

In time, they brought out the main course. It consisted of a plate containing three slices of tomato, three slices of cucumber, a small leaf of lettuce and a piece of chicken no larger than a person's thumb. Gae and I noticed that we were the only ones to have the chicken. They had given us what was probably their own protein allowance for the week! But the chicken was so old and tough that, after chewing for what seemed a very long time, I still could not get it into digestible form. In the end, I simply swallowed it whole.

After the meal and some further conversation, the husband offered to drive us back to the guesthouse, for everyone had to be inside before the 8.00 p.m. curfew. He had acquired a small battered truck to help in some building work he did on the side, because the university wage was not enough to live on. As we bounced around on the frightful potholes and unsealed road, the man said, 'Ah, this is a good country. Here we are driving in the night, the stars shining above, the wind blowing on our faces. We have a house to live in. We don't have to live in the trees like monkeys. No one shoots at us. We have food to eat. We have so much to be thankful for.' Tears came to my eyes as he spoke. They still come, more than ten years later.

## Appendix

### How Bridgeway operates

The central ministry of Bridgeway Publications is to help national Christians, churches, missions and institutions in needy countries, by publishing and supplying the Christian reference materials referred to in this book. Most Christians in developing countries have few, if any, Bible helps, partly because they lack the money to buy and partly because the materials are scarcely available. One way to supply books to these countries is for Christians in the West to pay for them by way of a sponsorship scheme that Bridgeway has set up.

The collection of books is, for convenience, referred to as a Christian Workers Kit. It can be sponsored for \$80, including postage, and consists of:

- the 600-page *Bridgeway Bible Commentary*
- the 480-page *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary*
- a 5-book *Basic Christianity Series*, for non-Christians or new Christians
- *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*, a book on how to teach the Bible
- *Making Sense*, a book about Christianity in today's world
- a 5-book pictorial and expository series
  - Bible Lands – then and now*
  - Following Jesus*
  - Going Places with Paul*
  - Parables and Pictures*
  - Proverbs Today*

For economy in postage, a number of sponsored kits may be put into one carton to go to one destination, from where they are distributed. Bridgeway has an up-to-date picture of specific needs around the world and allocates books accordingly. Sponsorship gifts, no matter how small or large, are allocated to a matching number of kits, depending on local needs and requirements. The demand is always greater than the capacity to meet it, as the stories in this book illustrate. When books arrive in the destination countries and recipients write back to express their thanks, their letters are forwarded to the sponsors. Letters quoted in this book are samples of what the sponsors receive.

Bridgeway is a non-profit foundation registered by the Australian government as an income tax exempt charity. This means that, although there is no tax benefit for donors, Bridgeway is able to utilise the full amount of all gifts without any tax deduction. Also, Bridgeway's overheads are very small. The entire operation is run by volunteers who work out of their homes, using their own facilities and equipment. Bridgeway neither owns nor rents office premises and is grateful that it can warehouse its stock rent-free. It pays no wages and owns no equipment or vehicles. Apart from the cost of printing and posting the books, the only significant overhead costs are for the insurance of stock and the annual financial audit required by the government.

The author takes no royalties from Bridgeway and waives royalties for publishers of other-language editions in needy countries. Publishers in Western countries pay royalties, though not to the author. All royalties are paid into the Bridgeway trust, from where they are disbursed to a variety of projects in needy countries. It is a cause of praise to God that, through the simplest of organisational structures, much is being done to help people around the world – though this could not happen without the generosity of the sponsors and the commitment of the volunteer workers.