

A Pioneer Partnership and its Enduring Fruit

In 1978 Luke and Dorothy Beidler moved to Kalimantan, Indonesia, as pioneer missionaries appointed by Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) among the Dayak people who live along wide rivers curling through a great tropical forest. The Mennonite Mission Board of Indonesia (PIPKA), EMM, and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) united to send them and others from Indonesia and the United States. Appointed by MCC came Paul and Esther Bucher in 1979 from the United States. From PIPKA had come Pak Darmono first in 1977, followed by John Reiner Paulus in 1978 and Gusti Ngurah Filemon in 1980.

It was a ground-breaking partnership between an Anabaptist mission agency in the global south and two from the west. EMM already had a long history of sending workers to places where the church did not yet exist, and PIPKA was fired with the same vision. Together they would go to West Kalimantan, a region of Indonesia to which Islam had come 300 years before but where a high percentage of its people still followed their traditional religion. MCC would contribute skills in community development as well as in verbal Christian testimony.

Luke and Dorothy found a people who knew of the creator God but did not worship him. "God speaks to us through the birds," the villagers said. "Some are evil and others are good. When we hear the chirping of the evil birds, we do not go to our fields for three days, and we must sacrifice pigs. We fear the birds."

Even their creation story traced their origins back to a great bird which laid two eggs in the sky who in turn became the first man and the first woman through whom a pantheon of nature gods, and finally humanity itself, were born. Birds dominated their skies.

The Beidler's learned the Dayak language and began to share the good news. Traveling by boat and sometimes living on the water in a *bandung* (house boat), they identified with the villagers and began initiating fellowships of new believers. For three of their years in Kalimantan they lived and witnessed in riverside Melapi where Pastor Hendrikus Kipa now leads a thriving congregation of rice and rubber farmers.

"We heard that when Jesus was baptized, a bird from heaven descended on him, and this was a special sign to us who feared the birds that God himself had come to us!" said believers at Jelemuk, a neighboring congregation. "Now we no longer fear the birds."

Now 35 years later there are 19 PIPKA congregations scattered up and down the rivers of the region. When Yesaya Abdi, chair of PIPKA and president of IMA, and the regional director for PIPKA, Dri Soesanto, visited the region in March 2013, they took Tilahun Beyene, coordinator of the International Missions Association (IMA), and Richard Showalter, IMA coach and president emeritus, with them.

The team marveled at the spiritual fruit they saw along the rivers and in the forests. Since EMM and MCC disengaged from ministry in the region years ago, little has been reported in the west. However, the seed that was sown then, and continues to be sown by PIPKA, is far from dormant. It is thrilling testimony to the power of partnership and God's Word.

Everywhere the team went, people remembered Luke and Dorothy Beidler. “They spoke our Dayak language,” said Pastor Hendrikus Kipa of Melapi with a beaming smile, “and they spoke it well.” The willingness of the Beidler’s and Bucher’s to live among the Dayak villagers in primitive conditions is a long-remembered legacy.

“Go back home to the United States and say thank you to the people who sent Luke and Dorothy,” said young Pastor Petrus Kipa, son of Hendrikus. “My grandfather heard the gospel from Pastor Luke and met Jesus,” he said. “As a result, my father became our pastor at Melapi. And now I’m a grandson in the gospel because of that witness.” He was close to tears.

Today the village churches are impressive. Many of them consist of half the population of their villages. When they gather for worship, the benches are filled with children as well as with fathers and mothers. Grandpa’s and Grandma’s are there, too, and village chiefs show up in the crowded meetinghouses, staunch members of the congregations.

In the village of Uchung Bayur, Pastor Yusak Sudarmanto led the people in preparing an elaborate ceremony of welcome to the team of visitors from Jakarta, Ethiopia, and the United States. Dancers led a procession to the meetinghouse, festooned with palms, lights, and ribbons. Seventy-five children formed a great choir, raising the roof with enthusiastic singing. Then the youth and young adults sang, followed by fathers and mothers.

Pastor Yusak is a man of conviction and vision. The congregation he leads dominates the spiritual life of the village, but this brings challenges as well as rewards. “What do I do,” he asked, “when two of the candidates for village chief are in my congregation and they want our support against other candidates? I believe it would harm the church to take sides politically, but threats come if I don’t.”

The visiting team encouraged him and prayed for him after hearing his heart, impressed with how tough political questions can torture church leaders in Kalimantan forests as well as in Jakarta and Lancaster. In Melapi Showalter had illustrated a point by offering a U.S. dollar to anyone in the congregation who would first come get it. Later he learned that it was the village chief who came, a stalwart in the congregation.

In Nanga Embaloh the team visited two houseboats, one capable of carrying 100 tons and the other 150. “Until ten years ago when fuel prices started rising,” said the owner, “we traveled three days with the current all the way down to Pontianak on the coast to stock up on supplies for the villagers. Then we traveled back up river for seven days. Now we can no longer afford to do that.” But ten years later the boats still have an inventory of all kinds of hardware, including new refrigerators and freezers.

The visiting team members were more than observers. In pastor’s conferences and congregations they taught and preached by invitation on subjects including giving, suffering love, obedience, and missions. They also shared reports of growth and opposition in various parts of the global church, with a special focus on Ethiopia and the Middle East. The villagers loved the interaction, turning out in force even at inconvenient hours.

After visiting the PIPKA congregations, the team visited an upriver mountainous region of Kalimantan called Silat Hulu, where PIPKA had been invited for a pastor's conference and revival meetings among churches planted by WEC missionaries. To reach the isolated district, they traveled for four hours on a 33-foot Dayak long-boat powered by a 15-horsepower engine. The boat had just enough power to navigate treacherous rapids traveling upriver, and the team members heaved sighs of relief and breathed prayers of gratitude when the pilot announced, "The village is just ahead."

When they arrived, they learned that the villagers wanted not one, but two, pastor's conferences. So they shuttled back and forth on steep mountain tracks by motorcycle to "the end of the end of world," the village of Inggut, in addition to the main meetings in Keranga Lintang. As in the PIPKA churches, the villagers of Silat Hulu district welcomed the team exuberantly. A group of young women decked with the plumage of a beautiful jungle bird danced in celebration, and day after day the meetinghouses were crowded.

Yesaya Abdi used peanuts to illustrate the importance of financial giving, and Tilahun Beyene told stories of the Ethiopian underground church to people who had never heard of Ethiopia.

PIPKA regional administrator Dri Soesanto from Jakarta visits the Putussibau region frequently, helping maintain regular contact with the national and global Anabaptist community. Yesaya Abdi said, "The mission to Kalimantan is a model for partnership between agencies from different nations. Decades later, the fruit keeps growing."

Tilahun Beyene remarked, "This trip itself could be a prototype for leaders of different agencies in IMA. Only a tiny fraction of the story of modern missions gets told in our sending churches. Let's go together to encourage the churches and hear the stories so we can tell them to others."

Richard Showalter, April 2013