



WHEN TWIN BROTHERS MET FOR THE 1ST TIME

In September a very significant meeting took place in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea! Over a few days the leaders of the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) met with Otto Kobak, the official representative of the Evangelical Church of Indonesia (GIDI). There was a warm and enthusiastic Melanesian welcome at the airport when some of the men from the ECPNG wore traditional dress and the women wore their women's fellowship uniforms.

The meetings were warm and emotional. Despite their rich diversity, there are many common factors in the cultural background of the tribes from the whole island. The progress of Gospel work and the ethos of the missions involved on both sides of the island are very similar. Over the years many missionaries have served the Lord faithfully in bringing the Gospel to the more than 1000 tribal peoples of the island and the Lord has richly blessed the work. The number of missionaries is now significantly reduced and many of those who remain are involved in Bible translation into the indigenous languages.

For many years Papua and PNG have been divided by the border which splits the island into two parts. The island is the second largest in the world. The border was agreed by the former colonial powers and is an almost entirely straight line. There are no direct scheduled flights between the two countries and this was the first meeting between church leaders from GIDI and ECPNG.

Papua belongs to the Republic of Indonesia. Indonesia is 80% Muslim, however, 57% of the 2.1 million inhabitants of Papua profess to be Christian and most of these belong to GIDI churches. The official language is Bahasa Indonesian, but there are some 250 different language groups in Papua. The Indonesian government is pursuing a deliberate policy of increasing the Muslim population of Papua. They are encouraging Muslim people to move to Papua from other parts of Indonesia, especially Java.

PNG received independence from Australia in 1975 and became a member of the British Commonwealth. The official language is English, but in PNG there are more than 1000 peoples speaking more than 800 languages. More than 97% of the 5.5 million inhabitants of PNG profess to be Christian and many of these belong to ECPNG churches.

The purpose of the meeting of church leaders was more than social. The intention was to seek to establish a link between the 2 churches which will facilitate cooperation in evangelism and mission, especially in Indonesia. The role of a translator was essential for communication, but the immediate sense of unity and fellowship was profound and tangible. The Melanesians present at the discussions felt that they were meeting a twin brother they had never met before!

The ministry of missions, like UFM, is not an end in itself. Our purpose is to see churches emerge who will govern themselves, support

themselves and be able to take the Gospel to their own nation and to the world. The churches are central to God's purposes for his world and when they take initiatives in mission in their own right the potential is exciting.

So after the first meeting, when missionaries and church leaders met, the leaders of GIDI and ECPNG met together, with only Sue Trenier present as translator, for the Inaugural Melanesian Forum. They discussed the possibilities of working together in mission.

The meeting was chaired by Lalepa Patapu, the Church Development Officer of the ECPNG. He welcomed everyone to the small, but significant meeting, which all hoped would go down in history as the first step in fostering and promoting cooperation in the work of mission on both sides of the border and beyond. The visit of Otto Kobak was seen to be in God's timing. ECPNG was being convicted that they needed to look towards Indonesia and take up the challenge to reach out to the Muslim world.

ECPNG leaders recognised and appreciated that, in his purposes, God has placed the GIDI church in a very strategic position to withstand the growing penetration of Islam into Papua and to be able to evangelise other parts of Indonesia. ECPNG had been exploring ways in which they could engage in cross-cultural ministry outside PNG. As a result of their meetings with Otto they were convinced that they are being led to work together with GIDI in facing the challenge of mission in Indonesia.

Otto Kobak affirmed his sense of God's clear leading in this initiative. The churches had been two, but are now becoming one. Otto asked some key questions. How can we, as twin brothers, work together to shine the light of Jesus Christ? How can we be a blessing to many others? How can we darker skins become a blessing not only to Indonesia but everywhere? It might seem impossible, but together we can.

The meeting agreed to take the following initial steps:

1. ECPNG and GIDI church will hold further talks to agree on a plan of action of how the two Churches can work together in extending God's kingdom in Papua and PNG. Some of the immediate possibilities for cooperation are in the area of pastoral work and discipleship training with the GIDI church and pastoral and social work among the Papuan settlements in the Western Province of PNG.
2. A further meeting will be arranged, either in Vanimo or Jayapura, between the leaders of ECPNG and GIDI to explore future missionary visions and plans.

3. ECPNG will work with the GIDI church to gain experience in cross-cultural mission work with a view to working together in reaching Muslim people in Indonesia.

The Lord has richly blessed the work of the Gospel in both Papua and PNG. There are hundreds of thousands of Christians on both sides of the island. Please pray for our brothers and sisters in GIDI and ECPNG as they seek to establish this potentially very significant Gospel partnership. We have assured them of our willingness to assist in any way we can and to pray for them as they plan to engage in cross-cultural mission. ■

Peter Milsom

