

GUEST INTRODUCTION:

A VISIT WITH MATS

– **Yeow Choo Lak**

I FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Upon invitation from the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS) through Dr Theodoor Aerts, and financially supported by the Programme on Theological Education, whose Director, Dr Samuel Amirtham, suggested some liaison between MATS and the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, following his visit to Papua New Guinea in 1981, I landed in Port Moresby at the crack of dawn on May 28, 1984. It was my first visit to Papua New Guinea, but I was pleasantly surprised to feel that I was quite at home. I did not feel that I had left Asia.

My mind quickly did some homework. It was trying to put two and two together, and two things seemed to register, viz., (a) the people looked very familiar, and (b) I understood Pidgin. No wonder I felt at home.

Having worked closely with Iban friends in Sarawak, and Rungus Christians in Sabah (both in East Malaysia), and knowing the Sengoi work in Kampar (West Malaysia), I am acquainted with a race of people that reminds me of Papua New Guineans, who have their “double” among the tribal people in certain parts of Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and, as mentioned, Malaysia. Two friends in Newton College, Popondetta, Papua New Guinea, reminded me of an Iban friend and a colleague from Ambon. I felt I was moving among friends, more so when I understood their Pidgin.

There is a simple reason for being able to understand Pidgin, so I found out. Pidgin or Pisin (an adaptation of the word “business”) originated from the trade and business language between Malay and Chinese traders, and it gradually became Anglicised in its vocabulary, but not its grammar. Anyone familiar with Malay, Chinese, and English is able

to understand what is being said in Pidgin. Incidentally, anyone familiar with Singlish (Singapore-English, which also reflects the influence of Chinese, Malay, and English) can pick up Pidgin in a jiffy, and conversely my Papua New Guinean friends understood me when I broke out in Singlish. Maybe, this part of the world should use Pidgin more extensively.

As a Chinese, I guess I cannot resist food (God made food for people, and Chinese for food). So, it looks logical to make a brief statement on it. The traditional food in Papua New Guinea reminded me of the pleasant meals eaten with Iban and Rungus friends – plenty of greens and a right amount of meat. Along with food is a simple life-style that has its own attractions. To begin with, it recalls days not of wine and roses during the Japanese occupation. Then, it is nice to travel around in slippers, Bermuda shorts, and a T-shirt. No starched shirts! How nice! It can rain cats and dogs (and it did just that when I was in Lae and Finschhafen), but who cares? Wet feet do dry up! That goes for shirts and shorts, too.

II DOWN MEMORY LANE

I am grateful that friends greeted me in Port Moresby. The first missionaries were not that fortunate. They faced disaster, partly because of hostility by the indigenous people, and more often than not because of tropical diseases, especially malaria. Even today, malaria is widespread. Two friends in the teams had a touch of malaria, and they assured me that I could easily be the next victim, particularly since I did not have any medication prior to touching down at Port Moresby. Praise God, the mosquitoes spared me. Praise God, too, for the brave souls that pioneered missionary work in that part of the world. For obvious reasons, I kept on praising God for their dedicated and committed work.

Papua New Guinea is the nearest I have got to the Pacific Islands, but it was not difficult to see in my mind quite clearly the work of the first missionaries in that part of the world. I have reviewed John Garrett's *To Live Among the Stars* for the *East Asia Journal of Theology*, and during my two-week stay in Papua New Guinea I saw for the first time, at first hand,

the results of the labours of missionaries and local leaders. It was appropriate to recall:

For all the saints, who from their labours rest
Who thee by faith before the world confessed
Thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blest
Alleluia, Alleluia.

Let us now praise famous men and women . . .
All these were honoured in their generations,
And were the glory of their times . . .
Peoples will declare their wisdom
And the congregation proclaims their praise.

I also praised God for the mission boards that had sent out these gallant women and men of God. I thank God for their vision and zeal in sending people with enthusiasm to share the gospel with the Pacific Islanders.

III SOME POINTERS

MATS is surely making steady progress. This is seen in the fact that, for the first time, all the Executive Committee members are Melanesians. Surely, this is a good cause for praising God, more so when it is quite obvious that they are 100 percent enthusiastic about their work. I met a few of them, and was truly impressed by their enthusiasm.

I was equally impressed by the fact that our Roman Catholic friends are fully involved in MATS. For someone not used to this type of blessing, I can only say "Praise the Lord". I wonder how long it will take the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia to enjoy the same blessing.

It is a fact that member schools in MATS are trying to practise self-reliance. I was touched by the fact that many of the faculty and students grow their own vegetables as a way of putting food on the table for the family. For example, Newton College requires that both faculty and students grow their own vegetables by taking care of their own garden

patch. This is a good way to practise self-reliance, and should be encouraged. I was also impressed by family worship in Newton College. My soul was lifted up when I saw and heard the seminarians with their wives and children in both morning and evening worship.

I wonder how many Protestants attend the Roman Catholic Mass occasionally, let alone regularly? I was pleasantly impressed by the revised Roman Catholic Mass celebrated in the Holy Spirit Seminary near Port Moresby. Admittedly, being a modern version, it has many familiar elements. Albeit, it was inspiring to participate in that meaningful service, made more inspiring by the warm fellowship in the Seminary.

The Martin Luther Seminary in Lae has a high standard comparable to the better (in terms of academic standards) seminaries in this part of the world. The resources, both human and physical, are impressive. The school would gain much by having the presence and contributions of other denominations. Being used to interdenominational/ecumenical institutions, I guess I can see quite clearly some built-in defects in a denominational school.

The Senior Flierl Seminary exists to train pastors and church workers to minister in Pidgin in rural areas. The campus has a commanding view of the Huon Peninsula, when it is not raining cats and dogs, and serves the community very well. The life-style is not pretentious, as fitting the seminary's claim to train people for the rural ministry.

The schools visited have degree and/or non-degree programmes. On the whole, I can safely say that they compare favourably with member-institutions in the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia. All things going well, I can envisage MATS mapping out courses, as their member schools continue to make steady progress. Let me mention a few.

It is quite obvious that Melanesian theology is attempting to break out of its shell. The all-Melanesian Executive Committee of MATS is raring to make a break-through. Naturally, they will discover that it takes more than enthusiasm to make break-throughs, but the very fact that they

are truly enthused speaks very well for the emerging Melanesian theology. Not surprisingly, as Melanesians share many things in common with the tribal people in South-East Asia, MATS and our Association should have much in common. Thus, Melanesian theology and Asian theology have much to dialogue about. In this process, mutual benefits will emerge. If I read the situation rightly, such mutual sharing will expedite break-throughs in Melanesian theology and enrich Asian theology.

As Melanesian theology matures it will need a support system that will have to emerge. Without it, Melanesian theology is bound to experience a stunted growth. A support system within Melanesian contexts would have the following features. To begin with, MATS should be “full time”. At present, it does not have a full-time Executive Director, which means that, at best, all its activities are ad hoc in emphasis, if not in nature and operation. Without a mind to project into the future, let alone taking care of the present, MATS is bound to end up at the wrong end of the stick. As a start, the newly-elected Executive Secretary can serve MATS half-time, i.e., MATS “buys” half of his time from his seminary. In this way, he can begin to serve MATS on a regular basis, which is better than giving time to MATS if and when he has time or energy.

As a mind begins to map out courses for MATS, I can easily imagine workshops/seminars are in the offing to upgrade the skills of theological educators in MATS. In this connection, MATS has access to the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools and the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia. As third-world theological associations, these three sister-associations can pool their resources together and help each other in more ways than one. For example, the sharing of theological literature, written with third-world contexts in mind, is a concrete way of spreading the wealth (what we have of it) around. The workshops/seminars to be organised by MATS can then be occasions when Melanesian theologians can challenge each other, as well as others in this part of the world. Surely, this is a good way to grow.

Sooner than later, MATS will have to think of operating a Master of Theology degree programme. (As the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools is already embarking on this, and as the Association

for Theological Education in South East Asia has been running such a program since 1966, again some form of trans-Oceanic cooperation seems desirable.) A few MATS member-schools have a sufficiently impressive Bachelor's programme. As Melanesia continues to make progress, the Melanesian churches will begin to ask for more educated pastors. Also, more indigenous seminary teachers will be needed to man the seminaries. Many of them are already asking for further training, as they feel "handicapped" without a proper master's degree, more so when the expatriate teachers have a doctorate. The students themselves have felt the need for their national teachers to upgrade their skills and qualifications. So, it is quite obvious that the writing is already on the wall.

Melanesian hospitality overwhelmed me. Melanesian aspirations give me the impression that Melanesian theological educators are serious about making quality theological education programmes a living reality. They seem to have the trump cards. Where else do you find Roman Catholics, mainline churches, and even the Salvation Army, coming together to do theology? Humanly speaking, all that is needed is a little help now and then from friends who care.