

Banda Aceh Methodist Church celebrates dedication of restored buildings financed by Indiana Area

By Bill Imler

BANDA ACEH, Sumatra, Indonesia – The ribbon was cut and the doors were flung open Sunday morning, Jan. 20, for the grand celebration and dedication of the restored and improved buildings of the Methodist Church of Banda Aceh. The event was just over three years after the buildings were severely damaged by the tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004.

Under the theme, “From Mourning to Dancing” (Psalms 30:12), several hundred people gathered to give thanks and praise to God for not only the rebuilt sanctuary but also the countless miracles of blessing that have occurred in this once-remote province at the northern tip of the island of Sumatra.

The tsunami swept away more than 200,000 residents. When it hit early on a Sunday morning after a violent earthquake in the sea to the southwest, Pastor Tahir Wijaya had just arrived at the church, along with his wife and their two-week old infant. Feeling the earthquake, Tahir jumped on his motorbike and went to offer help to some of his parishioners.

When the flooding sea water overtook him he abandoned his bike, climbed a coconut palm tree, and barely managed to survive. Meanwhile, his wife, carrying the baby, led early worshipers and Sunday school children to the third floor of the education building, and saved their lives. Even so, out of this small congregation of 100 members, 38 people were lost.

One of the miracles from the aftermath of the disaster is that this church, in the heavily Muslim

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province of Aceh, has grown to 300 members.

Soon after the tsunami, when the United Methodist Committee on Relief announced its intention to assist the rebuilding of the church, Bishop Mike Coyner suggested that Hoosier United Methodists provide the funding. Offerings for UMCOR-Banda Aceh MC were received, and to date \$200,000 has been provided. UMCOR provided approximately \$50,000 to cover costs of clearing and removing debris. When Dr. David Wu of General Board of Global Ministries-UMCOR first visited the site shortly after the disaster, he was unable to enter the building due to the wreckage and dead bodies left behind when flood waters receded.

Ribbon cutting

At the recent ribbon cutting, seven elementary-age girls in full Aceh-Chinese ceremonial dress presented a welcoming dance. The Rev. Fajar Lim, president of the new Provisional Conference of the Methodist Church of Indonesia and a former pastor of the B.A. church, led a procession of honored guests, including 30 pastors who made the 12-hour bus trip from Medan. The Rev. Sam Dixon, deputy general secretary of UMCOR, gave the sermon. The Rev. Bill Imler greeted



Photo courtesy of the Imlers

Bill Imler, right, hands a copy of Bishop Coyner's prayer offered in the Banda Aceh Methodist Church dedication to church leaders.

worshipers on behalf of Indiana United Methodists, and offered a prayer of blessing provided by Bishop Coyner.

The restored sanctuary is striking in its beauty and symbolism. Walls are in tones of sun-enriched earth. The design in the front of the chancel area represents ten stones of the commandments. Twelve embedded columns represent the disciples, and a high window above the balcony symbolizes the Holy Trinity. Twelve or more windows of clear glass, embellished with light colored symbolic panels, look outward. In his sermon, Dixon declared them to be mission windows, for from this sanctuary members were reminded to look outward to the fields of mission and evangelism that surround them.

The presentation copy of Coyner's prayer was handed to

Lim, and a copy also to Wijaya.

Historic connection

Indiana United Methodists have an historic connection with this church. At the time of its founding in 1957, primarily as a Christian presence serving the Chinese ethnic community in Aceh, the district superintendent was our own Rev. Gusta Robinet, lifelong missionary to China and Indonesia from Columbia City, Ind. Robinet was one of the earliest women to be ordained, and in Sumatra she became the first woman superintendent of The Methodist Church in the world. Along with the late Rev. and Mrs. Newton Gotshall, missionaries in the 1920s and 1930s, Indiana has had a vital connection to what is now the autonomous Methodist Church of Indonesia.

During two days preceding, the

Imlers, along with Dixon and Wu, were given an extensive tour of the area, to see a number of UMCOR related projects. These were often in cooperation with other non-governmental organizations and especially with UNICEF. Schools have been rebuilt, including the largest elementary school in Aceh province. More than 500 houses have been built for survivors who lost their homes. By UMCOR philosophy, homes are considered complete only when wells, sanitation system and basic furniture including a treadle Singer sewing machine have been provided, in contrast with some non-governmental agencies who left the area after constructing walls.

UMCOR's programs in Indonesia are directed toward economic, social and educational improvement. In general, the programs are in cooperation with the Indonesian government and other international aid organizations such as UNICEF, USAID, Church World Service and Hope International.

The tsunami washed away thousands of lives and millions of dollars worth of property. Miraculously, as aid has poured in from governments and agencies from around the world, this once-contentious, closed society that sought independence from Indonesia, is now open, welcoming visitors, embracing the aid that is offered, and apparently undergoing far reaching social and economic change.

The Rev. Bill Imler is a retired pastor of the North Indiana Conference. His wife, Dona Lou, is chairperson of the NIC Committee on Africa University. They live in Angola, Ind.

Church's social action agency announces legislative priorities

WASHINGTON (GBCG) – The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) has set seven legislative priorities for 2008 in which the faith community can bring a unique and much needed voice to the debate. The priorities target two kinds of legislation – those already being considered by Congress, and those which should be considered to address issues of justice and inequality.

The 2008 legislative priorities of GBCS, the public witness and advocacy arm of the denomination, cover a broad spectrum: global warming, poverty, health care, drug sentencing reform and ending the war in Iraq. All of these priorities support emphases of the GBCS Board of Directors, and further specific objectives adopted by the board at its annual meeting.

“They either are objectives that we think can be accomplished this

year,” explained Mark Harrison, director of GBCS's Peace with Justice Program, “or issues that are so important that they need to be emphasized regardless of our hopes to accomplish them this year or not.”

Here are the 2008 priorities:

- ◆ **Increase Affordable Housing** – GBCS will focus its support in 2008 on the “National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act” (S.2523). John Hill, director of Economic and Environmental Justice, said this is a companion bill to legislation that passed the House of Representatives last fall.
- ◆ **Reduce Global Warming Pollution** – GBCS supports comprehensive legislation to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, according to Hill. GBCS

supports efforts to strengthen the “Climate Security Act of 2007” (S.2191). Hill said this is a bipartisan effort to reduce U.S. global warming pollution.

- ◆ **Protect Children's Health** – To protect the health of all children, the Rev. Cynthia Abrams, director of GBCS's Alcohol, Other Addictions and Health Care program, said GBCS will encourage Congress to support three pieces of legislation: H.R.1108/S.625, which provides for regulation of tobacco by the Food and Drug Administration; full funding for the “STOP Underage Drinking Prevention Act” (Public Law #109-422); and reauthorization of the “State Children's Health Insurance Program” (CHIP).
- ◆ **Re-authorize the President's AIDS Plan** – President Bush's current AIDS funding expires

at the end of 2008 and “must be reauthorized,” declared Linda Bales, director of the Louise and Hugh Moore Population Project at the board. Bales noted GBCS will work in collaboration with other faith-based and other groups to achieve funding for prevention, care and treatment. She said the U.S. contribution to the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and malaria is crucial to have any chance to achieve the goal.

- ◆ **2nd Chance Act** – Bill Mefford, director of GBCS's Civil and Human Rights Program, said the “Second Chance Act” (S 1060) will reduce recidivism and will strengthen families of ex-offenders through providing critical programs in the areas of employment, housing, and substance abuse and mental health treatment.

- ◆ **End Global Poverty** – GBCS supports the “Global Poverty Act.” Harrison said this bipartisan bill requires the president to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to further the U.S. foreign policy objective of promoting the reduction of global poverty.

- ◆ **End the War in Iraq** – GBCS will support legislation that requires a date certain to remove U.S. military forces from Iraq. Harrison said the legislation should specify that no permanent military bases should remain in that country.

Hoosiers on the General Board of Church and Society include: Albert Bohnstedt (NIC) of Fort Wayne, Ind.; the Rev. Marie Lang (SIC) of Greenwood, Ind. and Ike Williams (SIC) of Carmel, Ind. For more information, log on to www.umc-gbcs.org.