

New Tribes Mission Co-Founder Dies at 98

✖ Robert “Borneo Bob” Williams, co-founder of Florida-based New Tribes Mission, which plants indigenous churches in remote areas worldwide, died Wednesday in Fresno, Calif., at the age of 98.

Through his 70-year ministry, Williams planted hundreds of churches in Indonesia, where he and his late wife, Rena, began their missionary career in 1939. During the next six decades, he established schools, clinics, a small boat ministry and a seminary that has trained and sent out hundreds of native Indonesian pastors, teachers and evangelists.

Williams was born on Nov. 27, 1910, and first came to faith at an Aimee Semple McPherson crusade in his native Denver. He and Rena were married in 1930 and attended the Foursquare Church’s LIFE Bible College in Los Angeles before joining forces with evangelist Paul Rader and his Courier Ministry. Rader introduced the Williamses to Robert Jaffray, an influential leader in Asian missions for the Christian & Missionary Alliance (CMA).

Jaffray challenged the Williamses to join him in taking the gospel to parts of Asia where it had not yet been preached. Instead the couple moved to Arizona where Williams pastored small churches and worked as a cowboy and part-time sheriff.

But Williams said the Lord kept after him. “One day I slipped out of my saddle, knelt in a sandy creek bed and prayed: ‘Lord, if you really want to use me, I will go anywhere you send me. ... Let it be to people who have not yet heard the gospel,’” said Williams, whose life story recently was chronicled in the book, *A Promise Kept: The 70-year Ministry of Borneo’s Jungle Evangelist*.

As missionaries of a newly formed ministry called Go-Ye Fellowship, the Williamses set out with their daughter, Starr, and son, Robert Lee, for Asia with just \$12 and God's promise from Isaiah 58:11: "The Lord shall guide thee continually."

In 1939, they attended Jaffray's language school in what is now known as Indonesia, then established their first mission station in West Borneo, working in partnership with the CMA. Williams regularly walked or paddled deep into the jungles to share Christ with the native Malay and Dayak peoples. As he planted churches among the Dayak tribes, he routinely faced dangers from poisonous snakes, crocodiles, malaria and powerful witch doctors.

The Williams family barely escaped with their lives during the Japanese invasion of Borneo in 1942. But once home in the U.S., Williams continued to sound the call for missions. In 1943, he and his friends Paul Fleming and Cecil Dye signed the founding document of New Tribes Mission (NTM), envisioning the launch of 5,000 missionaries into unreached areas.

After the war, Williams continued to support NTM but returned with his family to Borneo and the primitive Dayak tribes he had come to love. Each year he pushed deeper and deeper into the jungles, bringing with him young Dayak pastors whom he had disciplined. In the ensuing years, he also purchased several boats to pick up people living along the Kapuas River and take them to the churches, clinics and schools that he started.

"Borneo Bob" baptized thousands of Dayak, Malay and Chinese believers that he personally led to Christ in villages he visited. He was affectionately called Opa (Dutch for grandfather) as his fame spread throughout the region. One of his greatest joys was the establishment of the Seminaria Theologica Kalimantan (STK) in Pontianak, West Kalimantan (Borneo), which he founded with the help of Indonesian leader Ronny Welong.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Indonesia began severely restricting Western missionaries, but by then Williams' ministries were already under the leadership of native workers. In 1988 he moved to Fresno, Calif., so he and Rena could get medical care and be closer to family.

Though he was retired, Bob Williams served as a visitation pastor at Northwest Church in Fresno, led Bible studies and prompted the formation of Asian Partners Inc. to help support STK. In his 80s and 90s he continued to lead missions teams into Borneo. His last visit was at the age of 96.

Earlier this year he reflected: "I still marvel at God's blessing in giving me a 70-year career in Borneo. Not many live to such an age in a place with so much disease and danger. Surely the Lord kept His promise to guide me continually."

He and Rena were married for 67 years. She died in 1998. They are survived by their daughter, Starr Madsen; sons Robert Lee Williams and Roger Williams; 10 grandchildren and 18 great grandchildren.