

The Church Braves Persecution in Indonesia

Despite the growing threat of Islam, members of the Bethel Church network are reaching thousands each year because of documented miracles.

Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago—a group of more than 13,000 islands stretching almost as wide as the continental United States. But even in the face of what might appear to be daunting challenges—such as long distances between islands, travel difficulties and severe persecution—the gospel is spreading like wildfire, and the Holy Spirit is moving in powerful ways.

Bethel Church, or Gereja Bethel Indonesia (GBI), is one of Indonesia's fastest growing church networks. Affiliated with the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee, GBI has more than 3,500 churches and even more sub-congregations scattered throughout the island expanse. In Irian Jaya alone, the Indonesian province also known as West Papua, the GBI network comprises 31,000 members.

GBI ministry outreaches in Irian Jaya have not only resulted in thousands of salvations, but also in many miracles, as members from the various congregations have reached out to nonbelievers around them.

One of the key outreaches for the GBI Solafide congregation in Jayapura, the provincial capital of Irian Jaya, is a hospital ministry in which groups of believers visit the sick and pray for healing. Martina Suela Sewo, who became a Christian by

being healed herself from breast cancer in 1998, is one of the members of the hospital visiting team.

In August of last year, a man named Thomas was admitted to a hospital in Jayapura. He was an independence activist who had been involved in demonstrations in Nabire, and he had been shot in the stomach.

After Sewo talked with and prayed for him, he came back to Jesus and agreed to be baptized. As Thomas came out of the water, everyone was amazed to see that his wound had remained dry. Later, he was declared totally healed by doctors.

In Wamena, the Alpha congregation of Bethel Church was just one of many churches playing host to a weeklong mission outreach last September, during which many miracles occurred.

“On Saturday night a blind woman received her sight,” pastor Bangun Manurung told Charisma. “Throughout the week, we have had many miracles. One teen-ager, who had been virtually blind since childhood, was able to follow me as I ran through the congregation.”

Unlike those in more turbulent regions of Indonesia, believers in Irian Jaya face little persecution due to the fact that the island has traditionally had a strong Christian influence. The Muslim presence is growing, however. In Wamena, a large mosque is being funded by Arab money, and Muslim converts receive financial assistance for farming and education. And there are fears that with the pro-independence movement, there could be strong government

and military involvement.

Revival and Persecution

Despite political and religious conflict, churches in Indonesia are growing fast and seeing people come to Christ in record numbers. Jakarta Bethany Church, a member of the GBI fellowship, numbers almost 100,000 members in 288 church branches. Each week, more than 400 services are held. The Bethany network has also established 37 congregations in Asia, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada.

Bethany Church was the result of a vision Niko Njotorahardjo had in 1988. As a pastor working with Alex Tanuseputra, who had founded the Bethany congregation in Surabaya in the 1970s, Njotorahardjo felt called to plant a church in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. Today, one of the largest Bethany congregations meets in Jakarta's Hilton hotel and each Sunday holds five services that are attended by more than 6,000 people.

Church leaders told Charisma that the key to the church's phenomenal growth is its cell-group structure. The church is organized into cell groups, called "family altars." There are 3,042 of these "altars," which are each formed with one pastor and a nucleus of about five families totaling around 20 people.

The motto of Bethany Church is "Successful Bethany Families"—a slogan that accompanies them

wherever a Bethany congregation is active. Njotorahardjo emphasizes that the pastoring of cell groups is the core of the church. So far, the church has trained 3,000 pastors.

"I meet with the leadership once a month, and we have a discussion from which arises the vision for the church. This is then passed on to the altar groups through their pastors," Njotorahardjo says. "We call this 'sharing the fire.'"

Prayer is a key foundation of the church in Jakarta. Since 1997 the Jakarta Bethany Church has implemented one month of prayer and fasting each year. The congregation also runs "prayer towers," where members give of their time to pray. This prayer continues round the clock, seven days a week, each group of intercessors taking two-hour shifts.

Concerted prayer is extremely important at this time, church leaders say. Christians in many parts of Indonesia face severe persecution and deal with growing constraints of political factions pressing for an Islamic state. It has even become tense and sometimes dangerous in Jakarta, where there has been a higher level of tolerance toward Christians. The degree of danger and persecution is more acute in the provinces—the pastor of the Padang congregation of Bethany Church, West Sumatra, paid with his life when his church was burned down.

Pastors in Jakarta prefer to keep a low profile and have learned to be less public about their activities. Churches have had to change meeting venues on many occasions after receiving threats of violence.

"We focus on our burden at this time," says pastor Njotorahardjo. "It is based on Luke 1:17. We feel commanded to prepare people ready for the Lord."

Islam is not the only threat to Christians in Indonesia, however.

Church leaders believe that their country is in the middle of an intense spiritual battle. Spiritual warfare becomes an essential part of spreading the gospel in Indonesia as with other countries in the Far East.

Spiritual Warfare

Believers in villages and cities scattered across the Indonesian islands regularly encounter strong demonic activity because of the proliferation of traditional island religions.

While conducting an outreach in Nabire, pastor Bangun Manurung from the Bethel Church in Jayapura became the subject of an aggressive spiritual attack by a young satanist named Yori. The young man had been trained in the occult on the island of Biak and had been sent to curse—and if possible kill—Manurung.

On the first night of the outreach, Yori became puzzled. Every time he sent a curse against the pastor, it seemed to bounce off what he saw as a protective “glass wall” in front of the platform.

Thinking he would have to get closer to launch his attack, Yori went forward with those who responded to the altar call at the end of the service. When he was asked to testify, Yori simply said, “God is good,” referring to his own god, Lucifer. The following night, Yori was back again with stronger curses. Again, these failed to make any impression on the young

pastor. Yori left, determined to be successful the following evening. But God had another plan.

At the end of the service on the third night, Manurung prayed for each person who had come forward—but he left Yori alone. Finally, the pastor sent everyone away except Yori. Then he called his team together so they could pray for his deliverance.

“We struggled from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m.,” Manurung recalls. “At one point, while Yori was writhing on the floor and the demons were shrieking at me and cursing me, we sent some people to where Yori was staying to fetch his belongings.”

As they unpacked Yori’s bag of possessions, the team discovered the trappings of satanic rituals, including a chalice for blood and other items used in satanic communion. They also found a large flag of the Papuan independence movement.

“What happens if we throw this flag away or burn it?” the pastor asked Yori. The demon voices in Yori screamed at the pastor: “Don’t touch that! That is what we pray on. That is what we sleep on. It gives us strength and power!”

The team burned the demonic trappings and finally, after much prayer, Yori was freed from the malevolent powers that had bound him. When he returned to Biak, he found that the other members of his coven had disappeared. He is now in Bible college.

Such stories of faith and victory illustrate why the church throughout Indonesia is growing so rapidly. And they are what

inspire believers there to stand strong and reach out in the face of tremendous spiritual challenges and political danger.
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