

How One Woman Challenged Asian Culture

People criticized Indri Gautama for daring to be a pastor. Today she is one of Indonesia's most innovative leaders.

If you walk past Indri Gautama in one of Jakarta, Indonesia's trendy shopping malls you might be tempted to think she is an investment banker or the president of a multinational corporation. Usually dressed in tailored suits, and never without her cell phone, the petite Chinese woman scurries from one meeting to another. She is constantly sending text messages to her office and talking in rapid-fire Indonesian to the dozens of people who work for her.

But Gautama is not a banker or a businesswoman, at least not in the strict definition of the word. She is the newest breed of Christian minister in Indonesia, one who possesses not only biblical knowledge and godly character but also plenty of marketplace savvy.

Those who know her best call her "Apostle Indri." She is comfortable with the title because she has planted a thriving church movement in the heart of the world's largest Muslim nation—a country that is not famous for its female leaders. She got her start in ministry by preaching to the residents of some of Indonesia's most remote, poverty-stricken islands.

Gautama dared to challenge the system, and her courage has opened up a way for many younger leaders to follow.

"The men here looked down on me. Their attitude was, 'Let's see how long she is going to last,'" says Gautama, who is 49. "They thought I was too tough to be a pastor!"

Those who knew Gautama as a girl would never have expected her

to be a Christian, much less a minister. But God had a plan.

OUT OF DARKNESS

She was raised in a wealthy family in Indonesia, and her parents practiced ancestor worship. Her father's focus was always on money. Her mother had originally planned to abort her. When Indri was 10, her mom took her to Chinese temples to obtain healing from her frequent childhood ailments.

The sickness and dysfunction in her home made her a very angry girl. "I was taught that money was everything," she says of her past. "I didn't know anything about Christianity. I didn't value God or people. "

Much of her young-adult life was wasted. After graduating from college in Australia she moved in with a Middle Eastern man in Honolulu and spent much of her time in discos. During that rough period of her life she had seven abortions.

Yet in 1984, after returning to Jakarta, she heard the gospel and had what she calls a Damascus road experience. Her "first Bible," she says, was a video of a Benny Hinn crusade.

Then, in 1988, she finally gave her life to Jesus Christ and was baptized in the Holy Spirit while visiting a dying AIDS patient in a Jakarta hospital. After she commanded a demon to leave the young man, a bolt of heavenly electricity seemed to shake the room.

"The doctors who checked on that man later said he had no trace of HIV in his body, and he gained 80 pounds in one night," Gautama says of the incident. It was the first of a long string of miracles that would lead this woman to become one of Indonesia's most prominent ministers.

STARTING AT THE BOTTOM

Don't be fooled by Gautama's executive image. Despite her penchant for nice suits and designer handbags, she is not a Christian diva. She cut her teeth in the ministry by giving

her life for the poor. Early in her ministry she learned the importance of giving in order to break the cycle of financial lack.

In 1993, at age 36, she sold her passport business and a stuffed toy factory she owned and gave away her other businesses. She became an itinerant evangelist to the people living on the island of Sulawesi—and then to other dangerous areas where Muslims often burn churches. She lived among the natives, ate their simple food and challenged nominal Christians to repent of their spiritual lukewarmness.

“I was like John the Baptist,” she says. “They called me ‘the bulldozer.’”

Indeed, there is plenty of prophetic power in this small woman. Her gruff voice, which often sounds strained because she preaches so many sermons a week, gets people’s attention quickly. She grabbed even more attention when she began a church in Jakarta in 2002 with seven people.

Part of the fire in Gautama’s bones is a deep hatred of poverty. She abhors the fact that Indonesia is one of the richest nations in the world in terms of natural resources, yet many of its people barely eke out an existence because of ignorance and idolatry.

Gautama decided she would be part of the long-term solution to turning her nation around. And she started by reaching young people.

Apostolic Generation Church opened officially in 2003 after a divinely orchestrated meeting with Naomi Dowdy, an American missionary living in Singapore. Dowdy had successfully grown a 5,000-member church in another male-dominated culture, and she is known as an apostle among independent charismatic ministers worldwide.

When Gautama founded her congregation she had little training

and no support from male pastors in the city, so she asked Dowdy to mentor her, both in her personal life and in church growth strategy. The result: Apostolic Generation Church now has grown to 1,800 members, with seven full-time staff and 50 care cell pastors and other volunteers. In addition, the church recently broke ground to build an impressive downtown office complex that should be completed in 2008.

Known as Kuningan Place, it will feature apartments, offices, a 1,000-seat auditorium, a day care center and a parking garage housed in four skyscrapers, the tallest of which is 30 stories. Members of Gautama's church sold the complex's apartments in two months so that construction could begin. A prominent Australian architect designed the sleek buildings, which will dazzle Jakarta's financial district with their steel and green glass.

"It has been so exciting," Gautama says of the project—which has caught the attention of church leaders who once criticized her. Today, some of them have come to her for advice on how to grow their own churches.

Adds Gautama: "It has been scary at times because we are walking on water, but our faith in God will not be shaken. So we run and make huge leaps of faith."

MAKING DISCIPLES

Gautama's ministry is guided by the principle of mentoring. She believes that to build strong churches she must pour her life into those she is training. But she also knows she must learn from those who have successfully accomplished what she aspires to do. That's why she looks to Dowdy as a spiritual mother.

"Naomi is the best, most emotionally stable and highly committed woman of God and lady apostle I have ever met in my Christian walk," Gautama says of her friend and role model, noting that the mentoring relationship has provided her with

“a safety net” of accountability.

Meanwhile, Dowdy and other American church leaders see Gautama as a model for younger leaders who will have an impact on the 21st century church.

“Indri is setting a trend for this generation,” Dowdy says. “She is willing to change and willing to become all that God calls her to be—which involves taking risks, receiving criticism but not being reactionary. Because she is so gracious she has been able to win over many of her former critics.”

American minister Barbara Wentroble, who founded her own apostolic network in Dallas recently, has preached in Gautama’s church and participated in conferences with her. “Indri is so bold and is such a risk-taker, even though she is coming out of a culture where women are oppressed. The culture has not held her down,” Wentroble says.

When you ask Gautama to describe her vision, she talks rapidly and with passion—just as she does in the pulpit at her church. “The members of my church know that they are called to be His transforming agents,” she says. “We are to win, nurture and disciple souls and develop them to be apostolic leaders so that we can advance the kingdom of God.”

But Gautama is not just talk. She works hard (so hard, in fact, that she has not yet found time to marry) and her staff puts in long hours to carry out the church’s vision.

Once a week Gautama hosts in her home a special care cell for 80 children and teenagers. The meeting lasts almost all day, and provides Gautama a chance to personally disciple those who will carry her vision years after she is gone.

“One 15-year-old boy is leading our junior youth care cell, and he recently led a 12-year-old girl to the Lord,” Gautama says. “That girl was a test-tube baby and was on drugs and

suicidal. Today she is being disciplined.”

And that will be Indri Gautama’s legacy. One way or another, this courageous pioneer will make sure that thousands of young Indonesians not only hear the gospel but are also trained to transform Indonesia for Christ.

J. Lee Grady is a contributing editor of Charisma. He visited Indri Gautama in Jakarta years ago and interviewed her again a short time later.