

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Photo credit: Concordia Seminary St. Louis

Kou Seying pictured at the 2017 HMong symposium.

Rev. Laokouyang (Kou) Seying 1964–2019

A Partial Biography of Kou Seying

Rick Marrs

Lao Kou Xang Thao (as his name is listed in the yearbook) began his career in higher education as a freshman at St. John's College (SJC) in Winfield, Kansas, in August 1983. We knew him then as Kou Thao. Later he chose to go by his surname, Seying.

He made his presence known on campus first on the soccer field. Kou had been a high school All-American. SJC coach, Neal Kaspar, had not recruited him, but Indianapolis Lutheran high school teacher, Richard Johnson, had encouraged him to attend SJC Winfield (personal communication with Kaspar, March 2020). SJC

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admissions counselor Tammy Saleska (now Tammy Ferry) visited Indianapolis Lutheran on her way to visit her parents in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and convinced Kou he should “fill out an application” for SJC despite the fact that he had already been accepted into the engineering program of another university (KFUO Word & Work video interview with Dale Meyer, 2019). He quickly became the “striker” on the soccer team, the key offensive position, and led SJC in scoring for three years. He was an NLCAA (National Little College Athletic Association) All-American every year. SJC went to the NLCAA National Tournament twice under his leadership, placing sixth in 1984 and fifth in 1985. In the 1984 quarterfinals, the team took the eventual national champion into overtime. His quickness, ball handling, and teamwork skills were extraordinary and exciting to watch.

I was a young instructor and career counselor at SJC in 1983, just starting to teach at the age of twenty-five. Kou was in one of my first classes. I realized very quickly, along with other faculty members, that Kou was NOT just a skilled athlete, but also a VERY bright student. He excelled in academics and athletics at SJC. He had a bit of an Asian accent. He had to explain to us that his family was not from China or Korea, but he was HMong. He was very patient in explaining to us that the HMong were a people group from Laos, and that his family had immigrated to the US when he was twelve, after the Vietnam War and with the help of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services.

But Kou was not just a bright athlete. He was popular and active in many different student activities. He was on the Student Council. He was elected to the “Homecoming Court” both his sophomore and junior years, the only male student to be on that court both of the last two years of SJC’s history. He was chosen by the student body as the last “Homecoming King” of SJC in 1985. Everybody knew and loved Kou. He was a friend to everyone.

But he was not just bright, athletic, and popular. He was also faithfully committed to the Gospel of his Lord Jesus Christ. During his sophomore year, he was still struggling with what vocation he would decide to follow. He was academically skilled and knew that he could do well in a STEM-type vocation, perhaps engineering. He sensed some cultural expectations to go into a STEM field in which he would be financially successful. He took a career development course that I developed and taught that year, and discussed the results of various interest inventories, values assessments, and skill evaluations with the class.

In the end, he concluded that studying to become a pastor was his calling. He desired to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others through the Office of Pastoral Ministry. Decades later, when we were professors together at Concordia Seminary, he reminded me how important that career development class had been in assuring him that he should become a pastor. We never know in what small ways the Lord will use us to nudge young students in faithful directions. Knowing that Kou became a pastor

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partly because of a course he took with me thirty-five years ago is truly a humbling and gratifying thought.

Kou did not get to graduate from his beloved St. John's College in Winfield. The college was closed by the synod in 1986, at the end of Kou's junior year. He, along with a cadre of other "Johnnies," transferred to Concordia University Wisconsin to complete his final year of undergraduate studies before seminary; again he excelled in soccer and academics. He also got his pilot's license during that time. I remember, because he flew a small plane down from Wisconsin to Missouri to attend my wedding in June 1987. In 1993, after he had completed his studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, and was serving as a pastor in St. Paul, Minnesota, Laura and I gladly returned the favor and drove many hours with our two young daughters to attend his wedding, when he married his beloved Maykou. Attending a HMong wedding and reception was a wondrous experience.

We stayed in touch throughout the years. We received newsletters about the various ministries the Lord called him to in Minnesota and California. While he was still a parish pastor, he would sometimes stop by my seminary office and offer advice on the formation of future pastors, especially those preparing for ethnic ministries, like in the EIIT program. When Concordia Seminary decided to call a professor specifically for urban and cross-cultural ministries, I recommended Kou be interviewed and called. In 2015, he was called to serve in that capacity, and was a wonderfully gifted colleague and professor. He would often drop by my office just to talk, and to ask my advice about how to work within the culture of Concordia Seminary. I greatly miss those conversations.

The apostle Paul said in First Thessalonians 4:13, "But we do not want you to be uninformed brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as those who have no hope." I still grieve the loss that we the church have suffered because the Lord chose to call our brother Kou from his labors among us to his rest in paradise. We give wondrous thanks for the years that the Lord chose to call our brother to serve among us and teach us so much about the importance of looking at the Gospel through the eyes of other cultures. We wish we had had more time with him here, but we look forward to that great and glorious day when our Lord Jesus will return for us all.

Words on Behalf of the Center for Hispanic Studies at the Visitation of Our Dean and Brother, Kou Seying

Morning Prayer Service
Lutheran Church of Resurrection Dec. 6, 2019

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

My name is Leo Sánchez. Through the Center for Hispanic Studies, my colleague, Marcos Kempff, and I worked closely with brother Kou at Concordia Seminary. Together, Marcos and I prepared some words that I would like to read from the two of us.

When we learned that our brother Kou was coming to serve with us at Concordia, we wanted to be among the first to greet and welcome him to his new seminary family. We wanted to do that in the best way Latinos know how, with a big hug. We wanted to encourage him the best we could.

We quickly learned that it was Kou who was the one who excelled at being welcoming and encouraging. When we ran into each other on campus, we often exchanged warm welcomes. Hugs were never in short supply. And Kou always had just the right words to make us feel encouraged in our work.

No matter how busy he was in his travels, Kou always made time to encourage others. Not too long ago, before his health started to deteriorate this past summer, I spent time with Kou at an event of the Association of Theological Schools for mid-career faculty. We were in a beautiful hotel in Newport Beach, California. I remember showing him a nice jacuzzi by the hotel pool, suggesting that he take some time off and relax a bit during a break from the day's agenda. But he was more interested in reaching out to a pastor in the area and having soup fellowship with him. So what do you think we ended up doing? Jacuzzi or soup? You got it! We had a delicious soup fellowship! Kou wanted to take time out of his busy schedule to be with this brother pastor. During his time as Dean, Marcos and I enjoyed lots of soup fellowships with brother Kou. Rich, deep, hopeful conversations. We will miss those precious moments.

When Kou was diagnosed with cancer, and we visited him at home to talk, pray, and sing hymns with him, he would say to us, with that smile of his: "Remember, I'm still your Dean!" He enjoyed receiving little reports from us about how things were going at the seminary. He was an encouraging leader. He wanted to make us feel

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valued. Serving under him was a blessing. His welcoming disposition and helpful words were his way of honoring us in Christ's name.

Kou was an encourager until the very end of his life. Marcos and I visited him a day before he died. I said to him, "Jesus loves you"; Marcos said to him, "Peace be with you, brother Kou." He looked at us, first me, then Marcos, right in the eyes, and he went like this: ["thumbs-up!"]. I will never, ever forget that. Our Dean wanted us to feel valued and supported even when he was suffering. Even in the last days of his life with us in the here and now, Kou was wanting us to continue in the Lord's mission.

Marcos is in Guatemala speaking at a youth conference at the time of this memorial. He really struggled with whether he should go or stay. He wanted to be here. But then we ventured to ask, "What would Kou say?" or "What would our Dean want?" He would have given us a thumbs-up. He would have wanted Marcos to go and carry on the Lord's work, His mission.

Kou's confidence in Jesus, even in the face of pain and death, encourages us even now as we continue to run the race in this vale of tears. Our brother has died in Christ, and now rests from his labors and the pains of this life. Kou, the welcoming one, is now himself welcomed by a loving Father to be with His Son, Jesus, in paradise. With us, Kou, first and foremost a baptized child of God, now awaits the resurrection from the dead.

Still even as we miss our Dean, brother, and friend, we hold on to the hope that we shall see Kou again. We know that at the last day, we will be awakened from death so that, as the hymn goes, "these mine eyes with joy may see O Son of God thy glorious face."

Maykou, Grace, Sarah, Seth, Malachi, and all the Seying family: We grieve and hope in Jesus with you. A big hug to you all.

A Memorial for Kou Seying

Robert Holst

Concordia University, St. Paul [CSP] continues to be blessed by the ministry of Professor Kou Seying. He served as a pioneer HMong missionary in Minnesota and was CSP's first HMong professor. While Pastor Seying served as missionary-pastor of a HMong congregation at Jehovah Lutheran in St. Paul, his first connection with CSP came as coach of the men's soccer team beginning in 1992. He helped me, as Concordia's president, to understand the challenges, opportunities, and blessings of

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reaching out in ministry to the HMong people. At that time and today, the largest gathering of HMong immigrants in the USA live in Minnesota—about 90,000.

Pastor Seying saw clearly that strong traditional cultural and family ties among the HMong people made it difficult for him, as pastor, to reach across clan lines. HMong congregations were “clan bound.” He helped Concordia and Concordia helped him to reach across traditional barriers—a good example of teamwork in God’s mission. As one example, HMong funerals were and still are important spiritual clan events. In week-long “animistic” gatherings, non-Christian families devotedly honor not only the person deceased but other ancestors as well. It would be culturally and spiritually insensitive or even blasphemous for a pastor to attend such a gathering. However, we deemed it possible and meaningful if I, as a college president and an “outsider,” would briefly visit funeral gatherings of a relative of Concordia students. It could show care and share concern. We worked as a team on such occasions and word spread rapidly through the HMong community that Concordia was a caring place. It became clear that Pastor Seying, as a professor rather than a congregational pastor, might also reach more people in different clans. Today CSP professor Lee Pao Xiong, Director of the Center for HMong Studies, notes, “As pastor and pastor-professor he played a vital role in and for the HMong community. In prayer and care, he was able to reach across traditional and contemporary issues drawing people together. His love and message of God’s saving grace reached out to all including animists and shamanists.”

Pastor Kou Seying also saw that the HMong immigrants, many impoverished and wounded, needed and gave opportunity for holistic ministry. They needed vocational and material support after losing all because of fighting with the USA in the Vietnam War. They needed psychological support to deal with traumatic scars from loss of loved ones and of their ancestral homeland, followed by deprivation while confined in foreign refugee camps. Some also experienced ugly racial prejudice after entering the USA. Pastor Seying knew that the Good News of life and salvation in Jesus Christ could and was giving them faith, hope, love, and peace in their new, confusing world. Dr. Lane Seitz, President of the LCMS Minnesota South District at that time, notes, “Rev. Kou Seying was passionate about sharing the Gospel with the HMong people who immigrated here to Minnesota. He was especially interested in finding ways to reach outside his own clan to the other clans represented in the Twin Cities. I thank God for him and the work God was able to accomplish through him.” As an example of the fruit of his and others’ labors, five HMong pastors were placed by the seminaries in Minnesota South District in 2016. About three hundred HMong students attend CSP’s traditional educational programs.

Pastor Seying’s mission and evangelism ministry, among many things, faced two major challenges and opportunities. First, there was little literature in the HMong language. Pastor Seying joined in efforts to translate the Bible and other literature into

HMong. In partnership with other pastors and church leaders, he enabled CSP to publish several CPH Arch books and distribute them to families and congregations as another way to share Jesus with the HMong people.

The second challenge was helping HMong people in the vigorous debate on what should be their term of self-identity. [Traditionally, in various orthographies, the HMong were known as MEO in Laos, MIAO in China, H'moung in Viet Nam and Mong in Thailand.] There are several distinct HMong dialects and there is tradition, pride, and comfort in using one's own clan dialect. There arose the need to communicate with one's new neighbor in a common dialect. As the HMong moved from a pre-literate to a literate multilingual people, as pastor and professor, Kou Seying actively participated in that identity debate. "He was a bridge builder and a peacemaker. He made learning about Christianity more interesting, inviting, and comforting," according to Dr. Cheryl Chatman, Concordia's Dean of Diversity and Executive Vice-President.

For more cultural freedom and broader spiritual contact with the HMong, he became a full-time instructor at Concordia, St. Paul in 1997. Besides sharing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ with all students, he also helped HMong students grow in proficiency in the English language and in understanding cultures of the USA. Professor Seying helped CSP administrators and professors see the need and blessing of what is now the KOOM HUM TSHAWB FAWB TXUG HMOOB [English: "Center for HMong Studies"]. What he envisioned, present CSP Professor Lee Pao Xiong planted and guided into a major cultural and educational resource. It enabled CSP to become the first educational institution [public or private] in the USA to offer a minor in HMong studies. Both HMong and some USA Vietnam war veterans have given such important artifacts and information to this Center that US government officials, scholars, student groups, and tourists come to examine the treasures. The Center for HMong Studies is now preparing for its eighth international conference, originally scheduled for April 17–19, 2020. Scholars from the USA, Belgium, Vietnam, and China have already submitted essays that they plan to present.

The life and service of Professor Kou Seying at Concordia continues as a blessing to many. As Dr. Brian Friedrich, Concordia's current president, gratefully states, "What he planted still blooms like multiple petals of beautiful flowers. As the first so-called minority member of the Theology Department, he enriched the university's perspective, experience, and love."

We in St. Paul, Minnesota, join Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in praising and thanking God for the life and ministry of Kou Seying. To God be the glory.

Rev. Laokouyang (Kou) Seying, A Missionary’s Missionary in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS)

Michael Lange and Robert Newton

Missiologist Donald Larson suggests that missionary development takes place in three stages: Learner, Trader, and Storyteller.¹ These stages well capture the person and ministry of missionary Kou Seying and the legacy that he leaves us to follow as Lutheran missionaries.

Kou the Learner

Learners are insatiably curious. Always asking questions, they desire to dig deeper in their quest to understand better a subject or, in the case of a missionary, a people group whom they seek to reach with the Gospel. Such learning requires humility, the willingness to say with St. Paul, “Now we see through a glass darkly.” As an MDiv and later PhD student at Concordia Theological Seminary, Kou was always asking questions inside and outside the classroom. His was no idle curiosity. He was committed to becoming a missionary to his HMong people, first in the United States but also to others around the world. He wanted to learn all that he could about sound missiological theology and practice. Already as a vicar in Merced, California, he demonstrated a strong aptitude and passion for missionary service. “Tell me your story,” was often Kou’s request. This caring curiosity for people that he longed to know and to have them know the love of their Savior Jesus would never leave him.

His learning continued in earnest as he formally entered the mission field as an ordained pastor. He quickly became a student of HMong culture and faith for the sake of Gospel proclamation. Seeking to learn from HMong Christians and non-Christians alike, he explored the depths of HMong culture, social organization, family life, and faith practices. He believed that the Gospel intended to transform every aspect of HMong life, personally and communally, taking every thought captive to the heart and mind of Jesus Christ.

“But, we are HMong” is a phrase that is often used to justify overlooking behavior or practicing secrecy from people not part of the HMong culture. Kou believed that a person’s Christian identity must supersede this mindset. “But, we are HMong” does not easily loosen its grip. The old Adam, demonstrated by “but we are Hmong,” must daily be drowned as the new man arises. Only the Word of God, showing Christ’s love and victory, can refine and purge this powerful cultural construct. For many this is a

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lifelong battle. However, Jesus has already made full atonement. We are given a new identity, freely by faith.

Kou the Trader

Over time and with some experience, missionaries develop the ability to trade ideas, understandings, practices, and values with their host culture. These exchanges prove most valuable when they connect with life's joys, sorrows, successes, and struggles in both the natural and supernatural worlds.

Kou engaged the HMong people at the level of everyday life. In sharing back and forth with clan elders, religious shaman, mothers and fathers, young people and children, he developed a deep understanding of HMong life here in California and an even greater empathy for their spiritual, cultural, familial, and material struggles. Like our Lord, he was moved with deep compassion for his people, knowing that they were truly harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

While sharing common concerns and possible responses with leaders in the HMong community, Kou sought always to point to the one and only real answer to life's sufferings: our Lord Jesus Christ. Specifically, he pointed people to the cross.²

Tao Lee was a HMong shaman, who learned to know the Seyings through their radio program, "Light of life." Tao was fully aware of his bondage to Satan. He could never appease Satan adequately, saying, "When Satan blindfolds you, that's all you see. Jesus has to lift that blindfold." While stressed out and sick of the old ways, he was unable to find comfort from Christian pastors who encouraged Tao to stop serving Satan and serve Jesus instead. It seemed that he was trading one form of legalistic coercion for another. Kou's radio program had offered something different. There he heard the power of the Gospel. Jesus removed his Satanic blindfold and hopelessness and offered Tao God's light and love in Jesus. There was a trade: spiritual bondage under the law exchanged for freedom and true sonship under the Gospel.

Kou the Storyteller

Holding a position of influence, even authority, in a community, the role of storyteller, cannot be assumed by missionaries; it is only bestowed by the unreached community to which the Lord has sent them. It is only given when the community believes one has something worth hearing.

Kou became a true storyteller among the HMong in both method and message. The "Light of Life" radio program ran first in Minnesota, then in the Central Valley of California, and finally through the Internet, bearing fruit among the HMong people around the world. Beyond the airwaves, Kou shared the eternal truths of the Gospel through story in his preaching, Bible teaching, and catechetical instruction. Kou

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understood God's Word as the personal story of God's love for the world and His desire that all people everywhere would know Him as their loving Father. Kou was gifted to share that story in the language and cultural world of the Hmong, knowing that the Scriptures were written for them as much as for any other group. He taught in simple yet profound ways that even children could understand. His hope was that his people in hearing God's Story would desire to enter into it personally, embracing their living Lord through faith. "This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3 NIV).

Kou also became a storyteller among us in the LCMS. He instructed us in sound missiological practices through the personal story of his own ministry.

Kou used all of his skills and learning as he moved into wider ministry and teaching. Key lessons were taught including the emphasis on planting multiple congregations simultaneously in different population centers. Knowing that he could not be pastor of them all he prayed for, identified, and trained local indigenous leaders to preach and teach God's Word. He developed leadership training modules to prepare those leaders who demonstrated spiritual and social maturity to serve as leaders and then enter seminary training to serve these young congregations.

Perhaps the greatest missionary lesson Kou shared with us was his burning passion that all people would hear and believe the Gospel. Kou's evangelistic zeal captivated the imagination and hope of Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML) women and long-term LCMS members first in Minnesota and then in the Central Valley of California. While he was a champion for the HMong people, his desire to connect all races and cultures to Christ forged meaningful relationships which blossomed in his work multiculturally alongside the students and faculty at Concordia Seminary.

The three stages of missionary development don't take place in a vacuum. They grow out of the deep and personal relationships we build with others. Kou's ministry was built on relationships. Team ministry with his wife, Maykou, proved essential in opening the intimate doors of trust and relationship within HMong families. This trust unlocked hidden secrets and revealed idols that needed to be destroyed.

Kou strove to build relationships between HMong leaders around the LCMS, (no easy task), recognizing that ultimately only Christ could build the needed bonds of trust required to serve together in His Kingdom. In the California-Nevada-Hawaii District, Kou was an inspirational man of possibilities, holding out a preferred reality of serving together as a church of many cultures under one Lord to reach even more people with the Gospel. He carried that hope to the heart of our church body when he was called to serve as a professor at Concordia Seminary, a storytelling position. However, Kou often stepped back into his role as learner and trader, forging relationships, contributing to the community with tireless energy, and inspiring an

evangelistic zeal. Laokouxiang (Kou) Seying was a man captivated by the Gospel and its unspeakable power to transform hearts, lives, and ultimately God's church and world. These are marks of a true storyteller. Our brother Kou was emerging as such a storyteller in our church body when he was translated from this life to the glorious presence of our Lord. We remain forever grateful for the story of his life and the Christ-centered love, wisdom, and understanding he shared with us as we live and serve in this missionary age.

Endnotes

¹ Donald N. Larson, "The Viable Missionary: Learner, Trader, Story Teller" in *Missiology: An International Review* VI, no. 2 (April 1978).

² "From the biblical and missional approach, one sees that the way of the cross, when properly applied, has all the 'ingredients' to address the question of HMong Spiritism. First of all, suffering is not something that the way of the cross avoids or shies away from. It deals head-on with suffering." Kou Seying, "HMong Spiritism," *Missio Apostolica* 23, no. 1 (May 2015): 97.