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HMong Mission in LCMS

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Editor’s Note: This is a reprint of Kou Seying’s article that first appeared in *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 2 (Nov. 2014): 309–326.

Abstract: “HMong Mission in LCMS” was a paper written in 1998 for a course in the PhD in Missiology program. It is the first comprehensive analysis and well-documented studies of the first two decades of LCMS ministry among the HMong people in America. The paper captures both the ecclesiastical and theological developments of the initial decades. Concordia Historical Institute’s subcommittee for ministry to minority groups in the U.S. comments in a November 1998 letter requesting to archive it, “The paper is an original and it is a necessary piece to fit into the total picture of the LCMS World Mission today.”

Introduction

HMong mission in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has over two decades of history. Two questions are often asked: Who are the HMong people? And why are they here [in America]? It is surprising. Yet, at the same time, it is not surprising that after two decades of HMong presence in America, many still ask these questions. The most widely accepted meaning by HMong scholars for the word “HMong” is free or free people. There are approximately 300,000 living in the United States of America (U.S.). Nearly half (125,000) entered the U.S. from the refugee camps in Thailand.¹

The HMong people live throughout the world. They are a nation of people without an original country of their own but who have a distinct culture and language. The earliest possible documentation of the HMong people dates to 2679 BC in Chinese annals.² Several million still live in the southern provinces of China today. In the mid-nineteenth century, some of them migrated to Southeast Asia, where they settled in Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos.

During the Vietnam War, HMong men were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight the Other Theater of the war.³ This part of the war was fought in the country of Laos. It was very much a secret war and a civil war. HMong were on both sides of the war, along with the Lao and other groups. The secret army of the CIA primarily consisted of HMong soldiers. One of its top priority missions was to contain the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴ General Vang Pao estimated that

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35,000 HMong men were killed in the war, an astounding number when one compares it to the 58,000 American soldiers who died in Vietnam.⁵ When the war ended in 1975, many HMong fled to neighboring Thailand. Because of the involvement with the U.S. government, they were the prime target for the communist regime to destroy. Many eventually resettled in the U.S. and other parts of the world, including Australia, Europe, and South America.

Today, there are several large HMong communities throughout the U.S. The largest concentrated community is the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, with an estimated HMong population of over 60,000.⁶ In the St. Paul Public Schools District, nearly 25% of the students are HMong.⁷ Other large communities are in Wisconsin, California, Colorado, and Georgia.

There are two primary dialects, Blue and White, spoken among the HMong people in the U.S. The traditional religion of the HMong is animism, with a strong emphasis on henotheism.⁸ The following is a brief description of HMong beliefs and worldview:

...The concept of time is vastly different from that of the western linear view. Various ages repeat themselves cyclically with no final goal. In this way, there is really no purpose to history at least not the usual understanding of the term “history.” It is interesting to compare and contrast a village a century ago with another village today, often, one will see that there is virtually no difference.

The powers of nature, of the spirits, are terrifying and mysterious. There is very little distinction between the physical and spiritual realm. Spiritual power may reign over a family, clan, village, or certain localities such as a river or a mountain or any physical representation. It is the duty of human to make peace with the spirits, the terrifying and mysterious powers of nature. There is no divine guidance in the human appeasement act. It relies solely upon the ability of human especially through the shaman to manipulate the spiritual realm.

The HMong people believe that there are many spirits, but it is important to have a close adherence to a certain spirit usually connected in some ways with the dead ancestors (*ib tug dlaab ib tug qhua*). This belief has been referred to as *henotheism*. It has tremendous social implication. The closeness of relation is determined by the adherence to a certain spirit. When this has been determined by any two individuals then the emphatic phrase *koj tuag tau huv kuv tsev kuv tuag tau huv koj tsev* could be exclaimed which says, “I may died in your house and you may died in my house.” This is to show the ultimate relationship of families. Otherwise, it would be of great offense to the spirits to die in the house that adheres to a different spirit.

By tradition, the HMong people structure around the concept of clan and community. The communal aspect of society dictates that the survival of the group is of paramount importance. The existence of an individual is defined through the relationship to the community. An individual who lives outside of the communal structure traditionally cannot survive because there is no identity. All actions have to be for the common good of the group to ensure its survival.⁹

Most often the object of worship has been characterized by power rather than justice, love, or mercy. This carries out usually through the shaman who would perform rituals to communicate with the world of spirits. Sometimes, the shaman would enter a state of trance to participate in the life of the spirits for a short period of time. Often, power is believed to be attained through this practice of shamanism.

The HMong worldview does see that there is no escape of the human problems. Whether it is illness, social, political, or spiritual problem, the state of grace cannot be reached in any final way. There will always be new problems. Blood sacrifices of animals are the usual means of atonement in the sense that it appeases the anger of the spirits or to gain some kind of material favors from them.¹⁰ Much of the resource is used for these various rituals and sacrifices throughout the year. Animistic rituals and sacrifices are offered in many occasions from birth to death, from marriage to New Year celebration, and so on. More often than not, it drains the family resources.

It may be concluded that there is no aspect of a traditional HMong life that can be separated from the spiritual realm. It is this bondage of the terrifying and mysterious spirits that finally led to the overwhelming success of the mission in Laos. Christianity came not as the product of European American missionaries but as it embraced the HMong in such a salvific way. The freedom from the spirits to the freedom in Christ met with great resounding. This is something that many of us who were born into Christian families may not be able to appreciate to the fullest in terms of human experience.

“Cast away the spirits” becomes the central theological theme for HMong Christians. It is at this point that becomes the crossroads for further theological development. Faith in Christ means that the spirits are cast away; the old tradition has been replaced by the new.¹¹

The First HMong Congregation in LCMS

Many families that came to the U.S. were sponsored by many Lutheran congregations and individuals beginning in 1976 through the Lutheran Immigration

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and Refugee Service (LIRS) agency in New York. They resettled all across the country from coast to coast and north to south. Truman, Minnesota, was one of those places where Lutheran congregations assisted in bringing families into the U.S. Two congregations from Truman and South Branch sponsored Chia Ky Vang's¹² family. The family arrived on June 10, 1976. It was through this resettlement effort that the Vang family became Christians. Pastor Arthur Drevlow at South Branch baptized the Vang family. After two years, in 1978, they moved to St. Paul to join other Vang clan members.

St. John in Truman recommended the family to Pastor Edward F. Lutz at Bethel Lutheran Church in St. Paul. Through the ministry of Bethel, a HMong ministry began to reach out to the HMong community. As membership grew, Bethel conducted two worship services with one in English and the other in English but translated into HMong by Yia Vang, the second son of Chia Ky Vang, and other young leaders. The Vang children also attended Lutheran schools in St. Paul, both at Eastside and Central.

In 1982, HMong ministry in Minneapolis began under the leadership of Pastor Steve Kosberg, former missionary to Papua New Guinea. After six months of intensive language learning through a HMong man, he led the first HMong worship service in January of 1983. Five people came to that first service.¹³ They held their services at Mt. Olive. Financial support for this ministry came from Mt. Zion Lutheran Church and other area congregations. Mt. Zion had also sponsored HMong families.

In this first decade, lay ministers and lay leaders (Yia Vang, Va Tou Her, Wang Kao Her, and Chang Tao Vang) served these ministries under the supervision of Pastor Kosberg. In 1986, the two ministries in St. Paul and Minneapolis decided to join together to form one congregation. On the first Sunday of June 1986, the two ministries merged and held their first worship service together as one congregation at Jehovah Lutheran Church in the Midway area of St. Paul.

Centrally located Jehovah Lutheran Church graciously opened its door, sharing the facilities with this new congregation. On September 18, 1988, the congregation was officially received into membership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Minnesota South District with the name HMong Evangelical Lutheran Church. Thus, the first HMong LCMS congregation was born.

Due to internal conflicts in 1989, all the members from the Her clan left the congregation to form a new congregation, HMong Community Lutheran Church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).¹⁴ The issue was not theological but a social one that led to the exodus of the Her clan. It was difficult for Pastor Kosberg and Pastor Jeff Miller, Minnesota South District Mission, to help in resolving the conflicts. Confronted with two different worldviews, they were not exactly sure how to approach the problem. They were handicapped by the fact that neither of them knew the HMong language enough to detect the dynamics of what the members were not verbalizing. What they thought they understood was different from what the

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members were saying. The other challenge was that, out of respect for their being from outside of the HMong community and for their roles in the ministry, the members simply chose to not explicitly share every detail. Thus, it was not possible for the supervising pastor nor the mission executive to prevent the group from leaving the LCMS.

Less than two years after this break, Laokouxang Seying (Thao)¹⁵ was ordained and installed as the first HMong pastor in the LCMS on July 7, 1991, at HMong Lutheran Church. He is known simply as “Pastor Kou or *Xibfwb [Nyaj] Kub*” who served the congregation for a total of seven years.¹⁶ During the time of Pastor Kou’s ministry, the congregation grew to serve about 300 members. Today, its total membership is 282 with an average worship attendance over 100 under the leadership of Deacon Chang Tao Vang, who was commissioned by the Minnesota South District President, Rev. Dr. Lane R. Seitz, on December 1, 1996. This congregation continues to be the largest HMong congregation in LCMS today, with the majority under the age of 18.

Lansing, Michigan, and the Michigan District

The HMong ministry in Lansing, MI, began in 1978 at Our Savior Lutheran Church. Several families arrived in the greater Lansing area through the sponsorship of Ascension, Our Savior, and other congregations. Zong Houa Yang and his wife, after initially resettling in Philadelphia in 1976, moved to Lansing and were confirmed at Our Savior in 1978. Zong Houa served as a Bible study leader and translator for these families.

After completing the Lay Minister training at Concordia College Milwaukee (Concordia University Wisconsin) in December of 1981, he began serving in the following month as a full-time certified lay minister to the greater Lansing area and other areas of Michigan. Over the years, the primary focus was in Lansing and, to a certain degree, in Saginaw. His ministry was supervised by the pastors at Our Savior and Ascension and by a joint HMong Ministry Committee.

In 1989, Zong Houa began his pastoral studies through Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, in a special colloquy non-degree program. He was mentored extensively by Pastor Roy P. Schroeder and Eldor F. Bickel. While studying for the pastoral ministry, he continued to serve the ministry as lay minister.

As Zong Houa drew near to his ordination into the pastoral office, several meetings of the joint committee were held to discuss and clarify the direction of the HMong ministry in Michigan. The committee affirmed that he would continue his ministry with Our Savior, Ascension, and other LCMS congregations in the Lansing area, Saginaw, and possibly Detroit. The committee also placed emphasis on integrating the HMong into the Anglo [English] worship services. This would require

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additional English language skills on the part of Zong Houa. Another point was the intensification and continuation of his theological studies. The committee recognized the need to help the transition from lay minister to student to ordained pastor. It was a concern that the proper balance be reached in the social service functions performed for the HMong along with the other pastoral duties.

As with most new ministries, financial support for HMong ministry is always a concern. The committee also cited this as a concern with the direction of HMong ministry in Michigan. Much of the support was and continues to be from outside the HMong members, posing a tremendous challenge in the long run.

In November of 1993, Zong Houa was issued a one-year, non-tenured call to serve the HMong people in Lansing and other parts of Michigan. This call was in conjunction with the Mission Board of the Michigan District. Zong Houa would be supervised by the administrative pastor and elders of Our Savior Lutheran Church. The senior pastors of Our Savior and Ascension would assign his tasks. The Mission Executive and the Board of Mission Development of the Michigan District would evaluate his ministry “at large” annually. His work would be 60% in Lansing and 40% in other areas of Michigan.

Again, a part of this call was to strive for mainstreaming the HMong people into existing Lutheran congregations and seeking advanced training in cross-cultural mission work. Finally, Zong Houa was ordained on December 19, 1994, at Our Savior Lutheran Church. His ordination was a welcomed event, for the HMong are almost non-existent on the clergy roster of LCMS. It strengthened the rest of HMong mission work.

In 1995, while continuing with the ministry in Lansing and Saginaw, Pastor Zong Houa started serving some HMong in East Detroit on a once-a-month basis through Mt. Zion Lutheran Church, an ELCA inner-city culturally diverse congregation. This was a new opportunity to serve the HMong in Detroit, where a large community exists. Strategically, Detroit was an important site for reaching a large number of HMong in a concentrated area.

A controversy arose in 1994 over the question of where the HMong should conduct worship services at Our Savior Lutheran Church. They were worshipping in their own HMong service in the gym or music room. Many of the HMong members did not approve of this arrangement. Some withheld their presence at worship because they were offended by not being able to worship in the sanctuary. In April of 1994, it was decided that the HMong would worship at the English service on the first and third Sundays of each month and would hold their own HMong service in the sanctuary the second and fourth Sundays after the English 10:45 a.m. service. This was also an attempt to assimilate the HMong into the mainstream worship life of Our Savior Lutheran Church.

It is noteworthy that worship services in the HMong language drew anywhere from 50 to 120 people. The number of HMong in the English services was usually no more than 30. By 1995, HMong membership numbered 187 in the Our Savior congregation, consisting of about 100 children, 10 to 20 high school age, and about 60 adults. As of October 16, 1996, the HMong members at Our Savior began worshipping regularly every Sunday in the HMong language. As the result, attendance has increased.

Pastor Zong Houa is the only ordained HMong pastor in Michigan. He covers a wide area of ministry and networks with other HMong pastors in Minnesota and Wisconsin regularly through meetings and conferences. Much of his time in Lansing has been in a “social work” function rather than in a traditional pastoral role. With the help of Pastors Bickel and Schroeder, doctrinal and worship materials were translated into HMong by Pastor Zong Houa. One of the desires is to eventually reach out to the HMong in Asia.¹⁷

The Wisconsin Districts: North and South

The HMong ministries in Wisconsin, as with HMong ministries in other districts, began with the sponsorship of many HMong families throughout the state by congregations and individuals of the LCMS. HMong ministries in Wisconsin emerged as the result of these efforts. The families that were sponsored provided the nucleus group to the outreach effort to the HMong community. Often, individuals in these families became the leaders for the ministry.

In the summer of 1987, James Henning, the principal of Trinity Lutheran School in Oshkosh, approached Yia Vang¹⁸ asking him to teach the Word of God to the HMong families attending Trinity Lutheran Church. During this time, Yia was enrolled at Concordia College Milwaukee (Concordia University Wisconsin) to continue his studies toward the pastoral ministry.

At that same period of time, Trinity Lutheran Church in Sheboygan and Redeemer Lutheran Church in Manitowoc also approached Yia to assist the HMong families in their congregations. While completing his college education, Yia worked with these congregations to explore the possibilities of developing ministry to the HMong people in these communities.

These ministries were not able to be developed until after Yia completed his seminary training in St. Louis. He was ordained on March 21, 1993, and called as missionary-at-large to the HMong people by the South Wisconsin District. Pastor Yia traveled to various ministry sites in both North and South Wisconsin Districts each month. This was the beginning of many HMong ministries throughout Wisconsin.

In 1995, HMong Lutheran Outreach was received into membership as the second HMong LCMS congregation. They currently worship at Trinity in Oshkosh with

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nearly 100 members. Also, four additional mission congregations have been established in Wisconsin within the last three years. Fox Cities HMong Lutheran Church, with 25 members, is led by Pastor Yia as well. HMong Hope Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, led by Deacon Faiv Neng Her, who was commissioned on September 22, 1996, has a total membership of 125. Nou Toua Yang was commissioned on January 25, 1998, to serve HMong Redeemer Lutheran Church in Manitowoc, now with 67 members. HMong Pilgrim Lutheran Church has 75 members and is led by Deacon Kue Ly, who was commissioned in 1998 as well.

California-Nevada-Hawaii District (CNH)

The CNH District came into contact with the HMong people through its congregations sponsoring HMong families to resettle in the U.S. St. Paul in Merced is one of those congregations that sponsored HMong families. Not only sponsoring families, the congregation opened its door to HMong Christians from other denominations to use its facilities for their services. In 1989–1990, Pastor Kou served his vicarage in Merced. As he fulfilled the seminary requirement for vicarage, it was also a time to explore HMong ministry and to expose the HMong community to the LCMS.

Although the congregations in California had been in contact with the HMong community and had some peripheral ministries, there was no Word and Sacrament ministry serving the HMong anywhere in California.¹⁹ It was not until 1998 that LCMS HMong ministry was established at St. Paul in Merced. Conversations and meetings between Rev. Clarence Eisberg and Nou Vang Thao, pastor of the Lao Evangelical Church, which rents St. Paul's facilities, led to a new HMong ministry in the LCMS.

A meeting was held in Merced on April 4, 1998; among the representatives were leaders from St. Paul's congregation, Rev. Yia Vang (HMong Field Counselor from LCMS World Mission), Rev. Ed Krueger (CNH Mission Executive), Nou Vang Thao, and Rev. Clarence Eisberg. As the result of this meeting, the official process for developing this ministry moved forward quickly. Already in April, Pastor Eisberg began to instruct Nou Vang in Lutheran doctrine for adult confirmation. In order to maintain the momentum, it meant that Nou Vang had to be both student and teacher at the same time. He taught what he learned each week to the HMong families.

After sufficient preparation had been reached, it was time to recognize this new ministry publicly. The many years of establishing relationship with the HMong community culminated in a wonderful event in the summer of 1998. This statement was proclaimed:

The exploding power of Almighty God within His Church is something awesome to behold. And on Sunday morning, June 7th, 1998 that is exactly what happened at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Merced, Calif.²⁰

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On this day, 95 were baptized and confirmed 20. Along with Baptisms and confirmations was the commissioning of Nou Vang Thao and Philip Koua Thao as commissioned deacons of Word and Sacrament ministry by President Walter Tietjen of the CNH District. Today, there are 125 HMong members at St. Paul. Other areas are being developed in California through the missionary-at-large effort of Deacon Nou Vang.

Minnesota South District (MNS)

Faith Lutheran Church in Minneapolis opened its door to a new HMong ministry in the Minnesota South District. This new mission congregation began worshiping in April of 1998 and is in the process of being recognized officially in the District. Deacon Dang Thao is working with this ministry under the supervision of Pastor Rodney E. Ketcher, serving 83 people. Saint Stephanus, another site in St. Paul being developed at this time, is in the midst of a highly concentrated HMong neighborhood, Frogtown. Deacon Chang Tao Vang from HMong Lutheran Church is working under the supervision of Pastor James W. Bender.

Synodical Efforts At Large

The first HMong Lutheran Hymnal was published by Concordia Publishing House in 1991, the result of an effort over ten years by HMong leaders and pastors serving HMong ministry. With a \$10,000 grant from LCMS Foundation, it was possible to publish this hymnal. It contains 235 hymns, 109 children's songs, and liturgical materials. This hymnal was uniquely constructed to contain both dialects, placing them in an inverted back to back order into one book. In other words, there is no back cover in this hymnal. By rotating the hymnal around its horizontal axis, one goes from the cover page of one dialect to the other.

Since 1993, there have been numerous meetings and gatherings among the HMong members and leaders. Leadership conferences and ministry convocations have been held throughout the Midwest on an annual basis. These events were created to support and encourage these new ministries, drawing anywhere between 200 to 400 participants of all ages.

Several important meetings took place in late 1994 and early 1995 to discuss the future of HMong ministry. One important meeting was held at Concordia College in St. Paul at the invitation of the Rev. Dr. Robert A. Holst, President of Concordia College (Concordia University—St. Paul), on October 27, 1994. At this meeting, a HMong Mission Project was proposed. Subsequent meetings were held to discuss the mission project to include the dialogue with Concordia Theological Seminary for

possible theological training for HMong leaders and the development of the HMong Institute.

In April of 1995, Minnesota South District called Pastor Kou to serve as missionary-at-large with the specific task of developing leadership training and a mission institute. After several meetings with Dr. Holst, it was decided that the HMong Institute be located on the campus of Concordia University. Pastor Kou was appointed as the director in 1997.

Several important meetings took place beginning in August of 1995 at which all the mission executives of the various districts with HMong ministries and the HMong pastors came together to find ways to work together in expanding HMong ministry in LCMS. The first meeting was a “skunkworks”²¹ held at the South Wisconsin District office on August 15–16, 1995. Present at the meeting were four district mission executives: Rev. Earl Bleke, (South WI), Rev. Dwayne Lueck (North WI), Rev. Jeff Miller (MN South), Rev. Mike Ruhl (MI); three missionaries-at-large: Rev. Kou Seying (MN South), Rev. Yia Vang (South WI), and Rev. Zong Houa Yang (MI); and the Rev. Ron Meyer (President, South WI).

The goal of this meeting was “to create a learning team that will provide support, ideas, and accountability for the implementation of the HMong Mission Initiative.”²² It was the first time leaders of HMong ministry in the LCMS came together to discuss one common task: how to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the HMong people in North America. Several issues were identified. The top three issues were the plan/vision, raising leaders, and funding.

It was necessary to begin the process of expanding and training workers to connect with a seminary or college. Another important part of this plan/vision was to provide a forum or national gathering for bringing together HMong leaders. There was also a need for a ministry center to process information about HMong ministry. Perhaps, a mission society could play that role. In adopting the plan/vision of HMong Mission Initiative, it was important to go beyond the immediate existing HMong ministries.

The issues of raising leaders had to do with both the long-term and immediate needs. The greatest challenge was and is that there are only three ordained HMong pastors in LCMS. It was critical to begin the identification process of potential leaders for the seminary. Leadership training by HMong and European Americans was discussed. The matter of credentialing and certifying was an important part of the discussion, along with other aspects of leadership, such as use of volunteers or worker priests, age and type of service to the missions.

The funding issue was always a difficult one. It was clear that the HMong themselves would not be able to support their ministries. It was necessary to seek external funding as well as internal. Possible granting agencies were identified: Lutheran Brotherhood (LB), Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL), Lutheran

Women's Missionary League (LWML), Districts, foundations, and mission societies recognized by the LCMS.

Another milestone meeting was held in Milwaukee on February 2–3, 1996. A vision statement included the following focus: "An expanding network of credentialed HMong leaders, mentoring and mobilizing HMong lay leaders, empowering them for indigenous, contextualized, congregation based mission work among HMong populations in America and North America."²³ This meeting continued the discussion of leadership and funding issues.

An important step was taken at this meeting for HMong ministry in LCMS. President Ron Meyer updated the lay ministry certification discussion at the Council of Presidents as the result of the request of the last HMong Mission meeting. This step led to the certification of Commissioned Deacon by districts for Word and Sacrament ministries under the supervision of ordained pastors. This approach became the process for district presidents to place workers into situations where calling ordained pastors are not possible. While these commissioned deacons serve their congregations, they were to engage in pastoral studies through the then DELTO program or other approved alternatives that lead to ordination.

One other very significant matter at this meeting was addressed: the recognition of HMong ministry in LCMS. The Rev. Dr. Robert J. Scudieri, North America Area Secretary for LCMS World Mission, participated in this meeting. The next meeting took place in St. Paul, MN, at Concordia University on May 29–30, 1996. At this meeting, the representatives selected Pastor Kou to chair the HMong Ministry Conference, which is intended to support the existing HMong ministries throughout LCMS. With the recommendation from the representatives, Pastor Yia was appointed by Dr. Scudieri as the HMong Field Counselor to work with LCMS North American Missions. A task force was also created to support the work of the field counselor. Cher Tou Vang (a lay leader from St. Paul, MN), Pastor Zong Houa, and Pastor Jeff Miller were appointed to this task force. The field counselor is to assist districts in planting HMong ministries. These were the significant actions at this meeting.

The various meetings with officials from LCMS International Center, districts, Concordia University, and HMong leaders, ultimately led to the formation of the Upper Midwest DELTO (Distance Education Leading to Ordination) program which consists of seven districts (IW, MN North, MN South, ND, SD, South WI, North WI). Originally, it began as a HMong project. Because of the tremendous pastoral need of the church, it expanded into other groups besides the HMong, including European Americans in unique settings. The first class was held on March 5–7, 1998, at Camp Omega in Waterville, MN, with four HMong deacons at this initial class. The fifth HMong deacon joined at the second class held in St. Paul, MN. The Upper Midwest DELTO was assigned to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

Another very significant event for HMong mission during this period was the announcement of Dr. Holst on February 15, 1997, that Concordia University—St. Paul pledged to partner with the church in reaching out to the HMong community.²⁴ Specifically, in its future plans, Concordia pledged to raise endowment scholarship for HMong students, to include a HMong emphasis in its new library building project, and to provide a special Southeast Asian Teacher program (SEAT). CSP has the largest enrollment of HMong students in the synodical colleges and universities: between 40 and 50 students yearly. CSP has been supporting HMong students since 1984 with its Southeast Asian Students Program. On July 1, 1998, Pastor Kou accepted the call from CSP to be a full-time faculty member directing the HMong Institute, teaching, and networking with the church and the HMong community.

At the HMong Leadership Conference in St. Paul, MN, on August 28–29, 1998, the HMong Ministry Conference entered into a new partnership with the LCMS Board for Congregational Services. The Multicultural Department, led by Rev. Jerry M. Kosberg, will work with the ministry conference to enhance the ability to support existing HMong ministries throughout LCMS. Also, at this conference, the plan to move forward in establishing a HMong mission society was approved.

An Analysis of the Two Decades

The total HMong membership in LCMS today is approximately 1,300. It has taken over two decades to reach this point. It is important to note that the HMong people did not leave their homeland by choice. It was the result of the Vietnam War that many were forced to leave Laos. For this reason, the HMong people in America are not immigrants. Physically they are here in America, but their hearts and minds are in Asia for many that came as adults. This is in contrast to immigrants whose immigrating to the U.S. was for economic and/or religious reasons. This difference has had an impact on the work of the church to a certain degree.

The question of why it took so long for HMong ministry to expand in the LCMS may have several answers. First of all, the goal of these many congregations who sponsored families was to assimilate or integrate them into the mainstream congregations, as indicated clearly in the Lansing ministry. This goal was especially difficult to achieve for the HMong families coming from a communal society. Many congregations did not understand why after such a short period of times the HMong families moved away. The congregations felt they had done everything possible to support these families, from food to housing to employment. Yet, many families still chose to leave.

The most significant reason was that these families needed a HMong community to survive. They were cut off from their relatives. For a traditional HMong person, the relationship to the community (family, extended families, clan) defines his or her

existence. Even though many families were cared for very well, they were extremely lonely. As soon as other relatives arrived, the natural thing to do was to join them. The language and cultural barriers were contributing factors as well. Thus, assimilation or integration into the mainstream life of the congregation was for the most part not possible. Once they were joined with relatives, the clan usually determined the new congregation²⁵ where they would join or they would simply return to animistic practice.

Secondly, the lack of HMong pastors in LCMS played an enormous part in the slow growth of HMong members in LCMS. There are good candidates among the HMong leaders for the pastoral office, but they do not meet the academic prerequisites for LCMS pastoral education. The following discussion is an example of theological education issues in LCMS today:

For the most part, theological education in LCMS has been very traditional in the classic western sense. It requires that there is only one appropriate level, time, place, and language. Therefore, everything else must fit into this one category for theological education. If it does not fit, then, theological education cannot take place. This is the greatest challenge for today's situation. Many leaders from the ethnic/immigrant ministries do not meet the requirements for traditional theological education. Yet, at the same time, the need to reach out with the gospel is not met by the church.

The first and foremost issue has to do with language. There is no biblical mandate that English must be the requirement in order for theological education to take place. This is a steep and rocky mountain to climb for members of LCMS whose first language is not English. The moment English is the requirement to prepare leaders for service in the church in a specific context, the pool of qualified candidates reduces to an unworkable number. This English requirement was reaffirmed in late 1997 by the DELTO Policy Board in a resolution that was passed:

Because of the value of communicating in English in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as well as in American society as a whole, the DELTO Policy Board recommends that those who enter the program make every effort to become proficient in English before entering the program or by the end of the course of study (December 6, 1997 Memorandum from Dr. Alan W. Borchering, Board For Higher Education).

These leaders who are chosen by the congregations who do not meet the English efficiency requirement become more or less denigrated. Their abilities to lead seem unimportant. LCMS has missed some wonderful opportunities to equip leaders from various language groups due to this

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prerequisite. Until this is resolved, recognition of theological education in all situations is nearly impossible.²⁶

This has been an issue all along in HMong ministry. It is not surprising, then, that after two decades there are only three ordained HMong pastors in the entire LCMS. This situation will continue to be an issue until LCMS addresses this policy adequately. Whether these current deacons will successfully complete the program leading to ordination remains to be seen. There are indications that some will not be able to continue this program because of this precise academic issue.

Another major factor today has to do with the transition in the HMong community. Many people are much more concerned with maintaining an “American lifestyle” that requires a great deal of time in the work place for both husband and wife. As the result, spiritual life is not a priority, as in many parts of the rest of America today. Many individuals are holding two different jobs. For those who own their own businesses, often, it requires many hours per day and seven days per week on site.

Two Theological Emphases

Christ as the deliverer and Christ as the healer have become important theological emphases for HMong ministry. Given the animistic background, Christ the deliverer takes precedence, since it deals with the nature of crisis in the HMong situation of spiritual bondage. To become Christian means that Christ has cast away the spirits, a bridge for Christianity to make an inroad. This action is very concrete in the HMong worldview. It leaves very little room for abstraction.

Christ the healer is also important because of the traditional role that the shaman has played in determining the causes of illness or a problem. Christ the healer must somehow replace the shaman. It is very difficult to separate this kind of healing from the traditional understanding of healing. Therefore, the risk of misunderstanding and the abuse of faith in Christ exist much more in this area. Christianity has the tendency to be a religion of efficacy for the HMong people. Often, the result is that one looks to the miracles and not the One who performed the true miracle, Jesus Christ. “Miraculous signs are important for the initial entrance to Christianity. This allows Christianity to be rooted in such an understandable way if it does not go beyond the biblical notion of miracles.”²⁷

The deliverer and healer aspect of Christology are explicit in HMong ministry. All other aspects are implicit, because at the surface they seem irrelevant to the HMong cosmic reality, which cannot be defined with great certainty in the first place.

The Future of HMong Mission in LCMS

What will be the future of HMong mission in LCMS can only be speculated. There are social, political, and ecclesiastical issues facing this ministry. Filial piety is so strong in the HMong community that it can become a hindrance to the mission work of the church. It is not easily discernible what is acceptable and not acceptable culturally. This notion of honor is so deeply embedded for so many generations. To simply walk away and join a church without the consensus of the elders is shameful and must be avoided at all costs, especially for many HMong men.

Closely related to this problem is the clan issue. If the latter can be approached constructively, it may ultimately shape HMong mission in LCMS. The allegiance to the clan traditionally defines the identity and status of the individual. The clan provides support and security that no insurance policy can replace. When the whole clan embraces Christianity, it is not an issue. It becomes an issue, however, when only certain individuals become Christians. Often, when this happens, relationships suffer greatly and a tremendous struggle ensues.

Economically, the HMong people are considered to be one of the poorest and less educated groups among the Asian communities. Given this fact, the HMong mission in LCMS needs innovation. The traditional American church model may not be realistic for the HMong. Financial issues will continue to be some of the concerns for the foreseeable future.

At this point in the HMong history, there is a tension between the traditional leaders and the new leaders who are educated in the U.S. Many feel that the educated people are not relating well to the community. The fear is that their learning might alienate them from the people and tradition. At the same time, the young people feel that the older generation is not paying attention to them. This has become an important issue in many HMong congregations across the denominations.

Identity is another issue for many young HMong in America. Many are trapped between two cultures. The church has a tremendous opportunity to reach out, providing a place where they can be HMong without shame. At the same time, they can live a life under the Gospel that frees them from the guilt of abandoning their HMong heritage.

Many are asking and seeking the LCMS because there is something different about this church. *Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*, and the *missio dei* are foundational in the LCMS. With this strong and sound theological background, the HMong will find a unique place in this church. The HMong Christian population shows no sign of declining worldwide. In a HMong American Partnership survey, only 24% claim to prefer Christianity. Traditional animist practice is still a preference for the rest of this community in St. Paul.²⁸

Why might the LCMS be unique among the HMong Christians and community? For one reason, there are indications that the popular religion phase of Christianity is coming to an end,²⁹ which is how the Reformed churches tend to draw their members. Their legalistic theology has begun to have a negative effect on their younger members. They are in a crisis at this juncture, especially C&MA.

Secondly, the Roman Catholics, with their strong expression of Christian faith through animistic categories, seem to have a limited influence on mission development. However, their contribution of transcribing animistic rituals and ceremonies into the HMong written language is important academically for the studies of HMong people and their traditional beliefs, but it has not produced the mission results for which they had hope.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the confessional/biblical stance of the LCMS has begun to become an “attractive thing” for the young HMong Christian leaders. Both the church and educational institutions are working together to reach out to this community. In the long run, our unique Lutheran theological and missiological perspective with a HMong flavor will lead the way in HMong Christian mission developments.

The questions and issues for HMong mission in LCMS might be such as follow: What is a unique HMong identity in the LCMS in the future? As we grow in number, how will the church be structured? How will theological education be integrated into the HMong context? How will the HMong mission in LCMS deal with the issues of polygamy, foods offered in animistic settings, including blood, and other animistic matters? These are the kinds of questions and issues that will require an ongoing discussion. In light of God’s blessings in the last few years, HMong mission in LCMS has the potential for a worldwide explosion. To that end,

May God Be Praised and Glorified!

Endnotes

¹ Ben Barber, “U.S. HMong: unsettled, unaccepted, uncertain,” and “HMong People Overlooked, Forgotten,” *The Washington Times*, December 1–5, 1997.

² Robert Cooper, ed., *The HMong* (Bangkok: Artasia Press Co. Ltd., 1995), 5.

³ Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1995), 1.

⁴ The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the main supply line for the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam, with a portion inside Laos. Much of the effort was poured into cutting off this supply line.

⁵ General Vang Pao was a HMong General in the Military Region Two (MR II) who led the HMong army to a world-renowned fighting force under the CIA operation in Laos. In his speech on May 8, 1997, at a seminar sponsored by Liberty State Bank in St. Paul, he stated these figures. Today, he continues to play a leadership role among many of the HMong in America.

⁶ Barber, *The Washington Times*.

⁷ Saint Paul Public Schools Annual Report 1995–1996, 3.

⁸ Henotheism is a religious practice that has close adherence to a certain god (spirit) while recognizing the existence of others. *The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error*, Compiled by Steven Cory (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).

⁹ This notion of placing the emphasis on the group or family rather than the autonomous individual has caused a great deal of pain among the HMong communities in America.

¹⁰ Cory, *The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error*.

¹¹ Kou Seying, “The HMong Incipient Theology” (A paper written for “Christian Theologies in Asia,” G991, at Luther Seminary: St. Paul, Minnesota 1996), 10–13.

¹² Chia Ky Vang rescued one of the very first downed U.S. fighter pilots inside Laos during the Vietnam War.

¹³ Steve Kosberg, “First Hmong pastor in LCMS ordained...,” *The Harvesters*, Special Ethnic Ministries Edition 8, no. 4 (December 1991), 9.

¹⁴ The “Her” clan members were approximately one half of the total membership at HMong Lutheran Church. The others consisted primarily of members from the “Vang” clan.

¹⁵ Thao is Pastor Kou’s clan name, the first HMong clan to become Christian in Laos (See *Tso Dlaab Tseg Lug ntseeg Yexus* by Koua T. Thao [Brighton, CO: C&MA HMong District, 1988]). St. Peter Lutheran Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, sponsored his family who arrived in the U.S. on September 14, 1976.

The usual customary addressing of a HMong individual’s name is by the given elder name and the first (youth) name. For example, “Pastor Nyaj Kub” would have these designations besides the professional title: “Nyaj” is an elder name given after a man is married and has children.

This name would then be attached in front of the youth name, “Kou.” HMong often do not use the last name in addressing one another. These last names are usually clan names. In this writing, the HMong names follow the HMong tradition.

¹⁶ The ministry at HMong Lutheran Church: 1991–1995 full-time pastor, 1995–1996 vacancy pastor, and 1996–1998 supervising pastor.

¹⁷ HMong Ministry Report 1996, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Lansing, Michigan.

¹⁸ The complete name is Zong Yia Vang (*Ntxoov Yag Vaaj*).

¹⁹ California had the largest HMong population in the U.S. for most of the 1980s, with the largest concentration in the Fresno area.

²⁰ “MERCED, Calif.—June 7th...,” *CNH Lutheran* (Summer 1998), 1, 12.

²¹ Skunkworks is a term for the concept of bringing the best together to think and plan, “An often secret experimental division, laboratory, project or the like for producing innovative designs or products, as in the computer or the aerospace field,” (HMong Missions Skunkworks, meeting minutes, August 15–16, 1995, Milwaukee, Wisconsin).

²² HMong Missions Skunkworks Agenda, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 15–16, 1995.

²³ HMong Mission Meeting Agenda, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, February 2–3, 1996.

²⁴ Robert A. Holst, in a speech on HMong initiative at Concordia University—St. Paul. February 15, 1997, outlined various goals and objectives to serve the HMong community and its students.

²⁵ The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) denomination has the largest HMong Christian membership at 23,313 in 1994 (HMong District, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, 1994 statistical report, Brighton, CO). Those who came to the U.S. as Christians, the majority were C&MA members. C&MA has 50 years of history with the HMong people. Many families returned to this denomination in the U.S.

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²⁶ Kou Seying, “Theological Education Across Cultures: Today’s Issues in LC-MS,” (A paper written for “Theological Education Across Cultures,” DMSL 910, at Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN, 1998), 2.

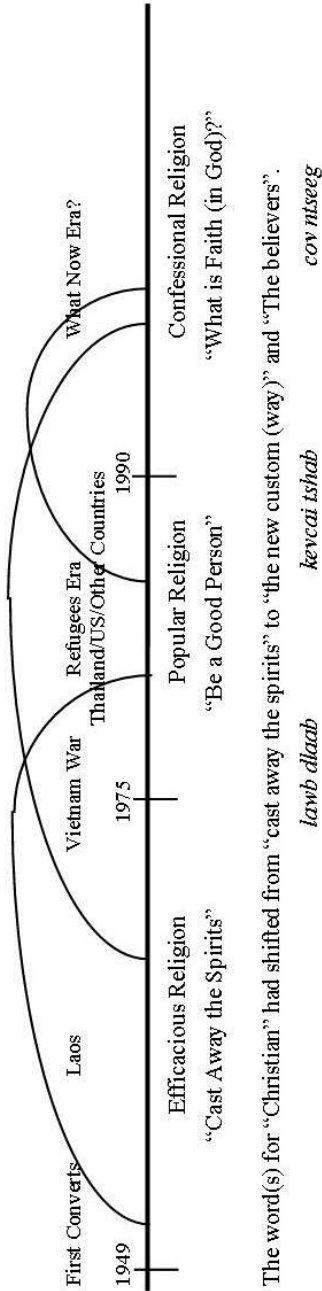
²⁷ Seying, “The HMong Incipient Theology,” 15.

²⁸ Britt K. Anderson, *Frogtown/Summit-University HMong Community Assessment* (St. Paul: HMong American Partnership, 1996), 4.

²⁹ See “An Overview of HMong Christian Eras” on the following page of this journal.

An Overview of HMong Christian Eras

HMong Christianity can be identified in three overlapping eras:



When speaking with animists, the phrase "the new custom" is preferred.

Among Christians, "the believers" is preferred.

Today, the phrase "cast away the spirits" refers mostly to the time of conversion (exorcism). Therefore, "cast away the spirits" may not necessarily mean "Christian".

- Two popular theological themes are God the Deliverer and God the Healer!
- The longer HMongs live in the U.S., the higher the divorce rate (abortion rate increased proportionately too).
- HMong students (90%) in elementary level scored above the national standard despite parents being uneducated and poor.
- More formal western education means less likely to practice traditional religion.
- Filial piety is being challenged more and more.
- Total HMong population in the U.S.: 300,000
- MN: Over 60,000 (*Washington Times* December 1-5, 1997)
- 25% of the students in the St. Paul, MN Public Schools are HMong.

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