

Sharing Christ with all Creation

The Hmong Outreach at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in
Appleton, Wisconsin

Interview with Pastor John Baumann – April 10, 2002

Darren Knoll
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Professor J. Brenner
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Appleton, Wisconsin, might be the classic example of the average midwestern American town. The people are hard working, active in their community, and careful in raising their children. Like many other such midwestern towns, Appleton is a city that was for years almost wholly comprised of Caucasians. Yet the face of Appleton has slowly shifted from an exclusively white town to an area with much greater ethnic diversity. The amount of minorities living in the city has grown exponentially over the last three decades. There are now Hispanics, African-Americans, Eastern Europeans, and Asians. Of the Asian population, one group stands out from the others merely by size alone – the Hmong. They are almost five thousand strong in the city. While their settling in the city has been consistent since the end of the Vietnam War, only lately have citizens, and more specifically Wisconsin Synod congregations in the area, taken an active step in reaching out to these people.

The following pages are excerpts from an interview with John Baumann. He is one of three pastors at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in downtown Appleton. He is the point man in the Hmong outreach for the area. His call specifies that 50% of his time be involved with ministry to members of St. Paul and 50% of his time be put into leading the Hmong outreach and mission. The scope of the interview, as is the scope of this paper, is to document the start of this mission and its function in the Appleton area.

Please note that these are excerpts from a two-hour interview and that either phrases or sections that were not directly pertinent to the question were deleted.

Question 1: When did the idea to start Hmong outreach come up and who was involved?

Baumann: "In 1997 at a study group that the local pastors have every month. One of the men commented that he had been having a Hmong family coming to church because the daughter was in their school. The more they talked, the more they noted the day-to-day contacts that they have with Hmong people in the store and so on. Over their next few meetings, they kept talking about how they could reach out to the Hmong, and eventually they decided that one of the churches in the area should talk to his congregation about calling a man specifically for this task. And I don't want to downplay what the LWMS group at Mt. Olive did. (In October 1998) They asked Jay Lo and Pang Moua (men who work with the Hmong in the Twin Cities) to come and speak to local congregations about Hmong ministry. I think that was the first time that many of our people really thought about this type of outreach. So to name any one person might not be the best. Let's just say it was a unified effort of pastors and lay people in the area."

Question 2: Which congregation took the point on this mission and why?

Baumann: "St. Paul's was chosen because of its location. Most of the Hmong in Appleton live in or around the downtown area, so it's natural they would want to lead. After the pastors ran the idea past (District President) Engelbrecht, the members of St. Paul took a huge step and decided to call me. Let's see, that was around April (1999) I received the call and was installed around the 1st of July."

Question 3: What had been happening with this mission before you arrived?

Baumann: "When I received the call, they already had the Vacation Bible School ready to for the early part of August. It was the first year that St. Paul's had a summer school specifically for Hmong children. Other than that, most of the evangelism was done through meetings with people who either came to church or had children in one of our schools, but as far as I know there were no families in the church."

Question 4: Why did St. Paul's decide to involve itself with this type of ministry?

Baumann: "Basically because of the numbers. Most everyone either knew someone who was Hmong or lived next to them or worked with them. There is a Hmong Alliance church on the West Side of town, but other than that not much else. So I guess that was another reason. Some churches had types of outreach, a bits and pieces kind of thing, but not that many. The big Evangelical church, Christ the Rock, did some things and so did a few Methodist churches, Missouri Synod, Assemblies of God and the Roman Catholics had a little bit going. But most of what they did was aimed at social aspects of their lives. They helped them find jobs, become citizens, had food missions, things like that. But none of these churches put much time into communicating Christ, at least that's what my contacts have shared with me. So there was some activity, but not a lot."

Question 5: What makes you different? How do you distinguish yourself from these other groups?

Baumann: "From the moment we start talking to a Hmong person, we make it clear what we are trying to do. We are not trying to trick them or deceive them, or simply get them a better job or some cash. We tell them up front that we want to share the message of the Savior with them – God's plan of salvation. Occasionally that turns

some off, but I think many Hmong appreciate our honesty. Also, we have the benefit of time and staying around. The Mormon missionaries learn aspects of the language but then leave after a little while and the Hmong are not too fond of that. We also make sure that we know that we are not just doing this to make their lives on earth better or to make ourselves feel good. We want them to know that our mission is so much bigger than that.”

Question 6: What are some of the difficulties you have faced in your outreach?

Baumann: “By far the biggest obstacle is language. I can speak with them at about a kindergarten level. Most of the Hmong people under the age of 30 are fluent in English. They may speak some of the Hmong language, but usually we can communicate really well in English. With their parents, usually one parent is fluent and the other only speaks the Hmong language. With the grandparents, usually neither of them speaks English or cares to. So we have to be aware of the group that we are working with. We try to communicate with those who aren’t fluent using the children of the spouse that is. It’s sort of awkward sometimes, but the language problem is on the decline since more and more Hmong can speak fluent English.

Their vocabulary is another problem, at least for the older generation. The Hmong language finds the Bible difficult to understand. You see, they have no word for sin, as in the accountability of it. They have a word that is used to describe when something is wrong or something they should not do, but no word for actual sin. A lot of other concepts to them are foreign due to the lack of words in their language like redemption and justification and renewal. It is hard for many of them to grasp the concepts.

I'd say another difficulty is how the Hmong think. Anglos, I call them that because I can't think of a better term, tend to pigeon hole everything. We got our work facet, our social facet, our religious facet, our day-today facet, our recreational facet, and all these different compartments that we put things into. The Hmong don't have that. Everything in their lives is connected – they see it as a whole. So to be Hmong is to have this religious facet as a part of your life. A Christian Hmong is not really Hmong at all, or so some of the older generation thinks. If you are Hmong, the tradition is that you speak the language, follow the customs, and believe the same thing and so on. This type of thought is dying, again as their culture becomes assimilated, but it still is evident. We are making progress with this among the kids, but not so with the adults. So we stress we are not trying to turn someone from being Hmong, but stressing that Christianity is the way and the truth.

The family structure is another thing. The Hmong are a group that highly values the family. It's not uncommon to have three or four generations living under one roof. This comes from their idea that children are to care for their parents even after death. If they don't respect or care for them, when they come back to earth life will be difficult for them – they'll have problems in the spirit kingdom. There's a lot of pressure put on children. If you don't do this, you're a bad kid. I know it sounds weird to us, but that's the way it is for them. So you see how hard it must be for some kids to turn their back on what their parents have been teaching them from day one. Their parents warn them and fear the assimilation of the Hmong culture into the American way of life. They think that if this happens, the family will break down and no one will care for them, now and when they're dead. So this pressure is continually applied by the parents.

Another thing is that our main contacts are women and children. The husbands care little for what we have to say. So when we got into a home, we speak to the father figure also, whether or not he is actively listening. We have had some really positive response from our guys on how this is working out.

We had a class once where I asked the people, who were of all ages, to line up in order of importance, as the Hmong understand it. The head of the line was grandpa, followed by grandma, then dad, mom, sons, daughters, and all their kids. The line was basically oldest to youngest with males ahead of females. Then I asked them to line up in order of importance as Americans see it. It was amazing. A twenty-five year old girl went to the head of the line because she had a Ph.D. They understand importance here to be based on your educational level. So the conflict that some have between these two ways of life is a constant struggle for us."

Question 7: How much do the three groups (children, parents, grandparents) actually believe what they were taught by their ancestors?

Baumann: "The kids see it mostly as tradition. Out of respect they may pay lip service, but they don't see the point and probably won't teach their kids this. With the parents, it's about half-and-half. Some think just like the kids, others are strict in following what they have been taught. Most of the grandparents actually believe in the spirits and gods and so on and it is really difficult to get them to change from this type of thinking."

Question 8: Has that made a difference in the way that you reach out to these three groups on Hmong society?

Baumann: "Definitely. The children and some parent are almost like clean slates. They don't care about the past beliefs and it is a joy to share Christ because up to 80% have no idea who Jesus is or what he has done for them. It actually may be easier with them

than some Anglos because they don't have all the luggage that Anglos do. Many of them don't have preconceived notions about Jesus or have come up with the theory that the church only wants their money or something like that. With parents who believe (in the spirits and ancestor worship) and grandparents, we work with law and gospel in a simplified form. It keeps it simple and the message is there, always up front. The last thing we want is confusion."

Question 9: We've talked about some of the problems in evangelizing the Hmong. What is your outreach format and what differences do you see from outreach in Anglo missions?

Baumann: "Here is our format. First we work on building relationships. There is a lot of fear and mistrust in the Hmong community because many of them have been burned in the past or think that Anglos want them to do away with their culture completely. We try to develop friendships with them. We canvass and continually visit prospects. We try to talk to whole families when we are in the homes. We talk to a Hmong person in the checkout line. Basically, we just show Christian love to them in the hope that the opportunity to share Christ will arise.

As we grow in friendship, we try to make it clear to them about the hope we have as Christians. This life is not the end. Sure, things may be rough here, but that is going to pass. This works better than I thought. The Hmong are quick to pick up on this attitude. It is very helpful in leading someone into a discussion about law and gospel.

And that's what follows. After we know something about the person or have the type of relationship where we can speak somewhat openly, we present a simplified law/gospel presentation. Like I said, some of the concepts are hard for them to grasp,

but we keep working. If there is interest of we feel like the person is ready, we encourage them to attend a Bible Information Class.

So I guess our mission is different because of our specific hurdles with their culture, but I worked in another mission congregation and this was basically the same format. The key is that we let the Word do the talking and let the Spirit do his work. I am just blessed by God to be involved with this type of thing.”

Question 10: How much is the congregation(s) involved with this ministry?

Baumann: “Like I said, there was some unorganized evangelism work done by individuals in the past, but things are a little more organized now. We have a meeting here every two weeks about strategies and so on. We have people in the area who go out to the homes and make follow-up visits. We have volunteers who serve when we have special get-togethers. We have people who drive and pick up people for class or church. We have a lot of people from here and other churches that teach for our Hmong classes. We use the vicar from St. Matthew’s – 10% of his time is with us and he is a big help. And I don’t want to forget the help that many of the churches in the Valley and their pastors have given us. So it really is unique because we may be the leader, but this mission is carried out by people in a number of churches around the area. The mission in the St. Paul (to the Hmong) started as a one-congregation thing. This one is unique because from day one everyone was involved. It’s an area outreach. St. Paul is the center where most of the classes are held and obviously so with me spending half of my time with the mission, but many other congregations have helped out. From a human level, this has been the key, but it’s always due to the grace of God that we keep going. But here at St. Paul we have a newsletter and I give PowerPoint presentations not only here but anywhere they want me to in the area.”

Question 11: Since you have been here, how has the mission grown from a human standpoint?

Baumann: "Like I said, when I got here the Vacation Bible School was getting ready for the first time. Members of area churches had been visiting certain individuals, but usually only if they came to one of our church services. Most everything else was done on the individual level.

That first Vacation Bible School had six children on Monday. By the end of the week we were up to thirty-two. We had two men who were a big help. Jay Lo and Pang Moua came down from the Twin Cities and did a lot of canvassing and made some positive contacts. I am positive that their work helped get the word out. If anything, that first year helped us get the message out that we were really around to share the message with the Hmong, the story of Jesus Christ. The next year at VBS we had anywhere from thirty to sixty kids, maybe up to seventy. Last year our low was about sixty and our highest was eighty-five. So it's exciting to see the work and progress we are making, from a human standpoint.

When I came, there were plans to start some kind of teaching workshop, but nothing was actually operating. So two years ago we started holding classes for Hmong children every other Saturday. This has been huge for us. We usually got around thirty kids that first year or maybe even a few more. Last year it was about seventy for the entire school year. As I was saying before, the kids are a way for us to meet some of the parents. When they visit or pick them up, we try to establish a connection and set up some kind of visit. Through VBS and Saturday school, right now we have contact with about thirty-five to forty families. If I was in a foreign mission, I think the mission board would say, 'Wow! Good! Keep it up!'

As for worship services, it is hard for many of the Hmong families to understand what we are trying to do. They may come for the kids or to support a family member, but sometimes up to half of a group doesn't know what's going on. We can have up to three pews full on any given Sunday. So usually when we meet someone who is interested, or talk to a family member who wants more info, we start a Bible information class. I have four going right now. Most of these people, because of the unfamiliarity with the Bible and Jesus, need the one on one attention. The classes are nice, too, because I can inform them about how we worship and why."

Question 12: You mentioned that the Saturday school has been a useful tool.

What is the typical schedule for one of these school days?

Baumann: "We pick the kids up or they are dropped off at nine AM. For the first forty-five minutes we have recreation time. This seems to relax the kids and get them in a good mood. It makes it really easy for the first timers to relax and gives us a chance to talk to any parents that come in to drop off their kids. After that, we have a snack and talk with the kids. Then we have a devotion - usually a very simple lesson that tells about Jesus and what he has done for us. We sing after the devotion. It's so great to see the kids singing songs throughout the morning because many of them probably go home singing these songs that tell of our Savior. Then we break off into small groups by age and have an hour-long class. Here we can tailor the message to a certain age group. We go a little more in depth with the older kids but stay simple with the younger ones. There is a little time to make projects to take home. Finally, we serve them lunch and wrap up what we talked about for the day. I love this program because it gets us involved with parent and child and really is a way for those who want to help with teaching, serving or getting materials ready to join together and help out the mission."

Question 13: The strides you are making from a numbers standpoint seem great. What kind of spiritual maturing have you seen from Hmong people associated with the mission?

Baumann: "It's hard to pin that down exactly. I'd have to say the greatest thing I've noticed is in the BIC classes and the Saturday school. You see people who had no idea about their Savior give these wonderful confessions of faith or kids who tell the story of Christ with no reservations and with a firm faith. I am just thankful that by the grace of God the Spirit is working even through all my screw-ups.

And I hear stories from our people that they are sharing the message with relatives and acquaintances as they head back to Laos and Thailand. It may sound kind of odd, but the Vietnam War might have been one of the best things to happen to the Hmong. The chances of us getting to them would have been pretty small, but now they've come here. We trained men like Jay, Pang, and Ger Yang. They reach out to others and so on. So to see the way the message goes down the line from family to family and family member to family member is amazing."

Question 14: What are some events in the brief history of this mission that you remember as being very beneficial?

Baumann: "I mentioned before how wonderful it was that Jay and Pang came to help canvass during VBS. They speak the language and the Hmong people are much more accepting and trusting of their own. They helped us by giving us insight into how the Hmong think, what their way of life is and things like that. Another big help has been having Paul Tao on staff. It's like having Jay or Pang around all the time. He is working for us a lot and doing much of the legwork I can't get done. Those two things are probably the two greatest."

Question 15: What are some unexpected happenings you have seen in the Hmong as you share the message of God's grace with them?

Baumann: "Right now I am working with Paul's uncle. He was a Shaman in the Hmong culture and probably the last kind of person I'd ever think would come to us. There was also a lady at Mt. Olive who just rejoined the church after a long break when she went through the grade school. She went back to her family and their way of life and beliefs and just knew something was missing so she's back.

The one that really sticks out was how I first met Paul. I was swimming with my son at the pool and saw a Hmong man with his son so I went over and started talking. Eventually I got around to telling him who I was and what we were doing at St. Paul's and invited him to come over and check us out. I didn't see him for a while and honestly forgot our conversation. Then one day he shows up at Saturday class and then enrolls in a BIC class. He said he kept thinking about the things we talked about at the pool and decided to give it a better look. Now, like I said, he is spending a huge amount of time reaching out into his community and plans to enroll at MLC and study for the ministry."

Question 16: What does the future hold for this mission?

Baumann: "Our big emphasis is on retaining kids after they have gone through our classes. We have contacts with the kids and hopefully with their parents, but we are concerned about the age group in between, from about 15 to 25. Others in this kind of work have warned us about losing this group, so we are aware of it and don't want to have this trough of lost where a whole age group is left out. We also want to stay close with parents and grandparents to keep encouraging the kids so they don't lose interest. With Paul on staff, I think that will give us breakthroughs as we work with adults. In

fact we plan on starting worship services in May. Otherwise our big thing is publicizing what we are doing. We want the Hmong in the area to know what we are doing and why. This isn't about little things, it's about the biggest thing – our relationship with our God. I am confident the Lord will bless our efforts as we reach out to this group of people.”