

# **The History of the WELS Mission Work on the Island of Taiwan**

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On December 10, 2007 I sat down with Pastor Dan Koelpin at the synod office building in Milwaukee, WI in order to talk to him about the history of our synod's work in Taiwan. Pastor Koelpin had a lot of good information seeing that he has had extensive experience with our synods mission work in Taiwan. He was elected to serve on the Executive Committee for Southeast Asian missions in 1983. Even though he was not involved with the Taiwanese mission efforts from the beginning, his 24 years of experience have given him much knowledge and insight of this mission as a whole.

Now, if we are going to talk about Taiwan, we must begin by mentioning Hong Kong. In the early sixties we were already on the ground there doing work with the Chinese Evangelical Lutheran Church. A Pastor by the name of Peter Chang was heading up the Chinese efforts in Hong Kong. He served as pastor as well as the head of the Seminary there. Another program that was in place in Hong Kong was a radio program called the "*Voice of Salvation*." This program was heard not only in Hong Kong but also in Taiwan. That is when the Lin family, who were living in Taiwan, heard this radio program. After hearing the gospel via this radio broadcast, the Lin family got in touch with the Chinese Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hong Kong. They asked if the church in Hong Kong would send some people to help them. So in the late 1960's Peter Chang and the church in Hong Kong sent a Vicar to Taiwan in order to help instruct and train the Christians living there.

Sending a Vicar was no small feat. The church in Hong Kong was lacking in manpower. They, too, needed more men to serve as leaders in their church. Nevertheless, the church in Hong Kong did send someone to help out. Victor Chung the brother of Peter Chang in Hong Kong was sent to help the Lin family in Lukang. Finally, their prayers were answered. But as time went on, it turned out that Victor Chung only hurt the small group of believers in Taiwan.

Victor Chung had purchased the church in his own name. After some time went by, he took the money from the church and fled to China never to be seen again. This rattled the Lin family. They were very disappointed in what happened. They thought this man was coming over to help and the only thing he did was rob them. Thankfully, the WELS stepped in and covered the cost for this small group of Christians in Lukang.

After this first attempt to send a man to Taiwan failed, another was sent to help the Lin family. Vicar Dan Lee was sent to Taiwan to do mission work. While he was there, he met a man by the name of Matthias Chen. Matthias had a Presbyterian background but desired training from Vicar Lee. It was at this point that the WELS decided to send three of its own missionaries to help in the capital city of Taipei. It was in 1978 when the first American missionaries Doug Found, Marcus Manthey and Rob Meister stepped foot on Taiwanese soil. However, the Americans did not go down to Lukang where the Lin family was. Instead, they remained in Taipei while Vicar Lee was sent to carry out work in Lukang among the Lins.

As the first American missionary team settled in, there were still some major obstacles to overcome. The biggest was the lack of national pastors. No matter what foreign field we are in, the main objective is to train locals for the ministry as well as to identify and train local lay leaders. This was very difficult to do at first. The problem was you never knew who was legitimately interested in training for the ministry or if they only wanted a job that paid them American dollars. This problem is one that the mission in Taiwan has faced up to this day.

Another major problem did not come from the Taiwanese but from our end. The WELS lack of understanding of the Chinese culture and language might have been an even bigger problem than any we faced from the local Taiwanese. The Chinese language and culture are very different than our own. Some of the first missionaries really struggled with the language

and culture of the Taiwanese people. Because of that, two of the first three left and went back home. The mission effort had, once again, faced another setback. However, two other men, Ralph Jones and Rob Sirilla were called to replace the men who left. Once again, it seemed that things were back on track. Things seemed to go well at first. We even added two more missionaries to our team bringing the total up to five American missionaries on the island.

It was during this time that we decided to expand our mission efforts elsewhere on the island. In 1986 missionary Rob Meister was sent to do outreach in Taichung which is the third largest city situated in the middle of the island. Missionary Meister spent four years there trying to get a mission started. Sadly, once again, the WELS mission efforts faced another setback. Three of our missionaries wanted to promote the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. Because of the strong belief in spirits these missionaries wanted to promote the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as the speaking in tongues. The problem was that by doing this they took the emphasis off the gospel of Jesus Christ. This, of course, upset the synod and finally those three men resigned leaving our mission team at two missionaries. On a positive note, it was also during this time that Matthias Chen was installed as the first national pastor in Taipei. This proved to be a wonderful blessing to the church as our numbers grew.

Up to this point we have looked at many of the struggles faced by the Taiwanese Christians early on. From greed to false doctrine they have weathered many storms. Yet despite the many problems that our mission in Taiwan has faced, the Lord has also blessed our mission efforts in many ways. One of the major blessings is that we have faced no problems from the government. Unlike China, Taiwan is very open to Americans, as well as American missions. The WELS has had no problem buying land, registering churches or doing outreach. Further blessings in recent years have been the English classes which have been added to our program.

Missionary Kevin Stellick has spearheaded the ESL program in Taichung. There have been many volunteers who have gone over to Taiwan in order to teach God's Word to the Taiwanese via English classes. Even though the numbers of members in our church there have not grown dramatically, these classes have exposed many Taiwanese to the gospel and continue to be a blessing still today.

Another major blessing that God has given to the mission in Taiwan is the recent cutback. Currently we have only one missionary, Kevin Stellick, doing work on the island. Why would I say that the manpower cutback is a blessing? It is because the local church leaders have had to take more of a leadership role. They realize that the Americans will not be there forever. As a result, much of the work being done in Taiwan is done by Taiwanese. God willing, within a year's time we will have three national pastors. Peter and Noah Chen, as well as Chen Dien Ming, are close to becoming fulltime pastors in the Taiwanese church. What a blessing that will be! Chinese pastors for Chinese churches.

Despite the early setbacks and the continuing struggles of our mission efforts in Taiwan, the future looks bright. Through the bumpy roads and humble beginnings in Taiwan, Christian men and women have emerged who have been tried by adversity and have remained firmly grounded in their Savior. It will be these strong Christians who will rise as leaders in the Taiwanese church, who will lead the next generation of Christians on the island. Thank God for bumpy roads because it is these trying times that have strengthened this small group of Christians as they look to God and his Word in order to bring Jesus to the people of Taiwan.