

The "St. Paul" Who Lived in St. Paul

A Summary of the Life and Ministry of Ger Yang

by

Joel Schulz

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
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FOREWORD & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to everyone who took the time to share with me their information about and their experiences with Ger Yang. I never was privileged enough to meet the man, so I owe a debt to these men for everything written in this paper. Whether I have everything documented completely or not, all of my information was gathered from a few interviews and a stack of paper including correspondence of all sorts and reports from Ger himself about his missionary trips. Thanks to Pastors Loren Steele, Leon Piepenbrink, and Dan Koelpin for interviews and the stack of papers. And a heartfelt "Ohah Choo!" [thank-you] to Jay Lo and Pheng Moua, two dear friends of the now sainted Ger Yang, for the insight they gave me into Ger's life and ministry in an interview that I had with them.

The purpose of this paper is not an attempt to try ^{to} and solve any mystery, nor investigate anything which will be left in the hands of the proper authorities, but simply to show how God's grace was displayed in the life of this faithful servant of the Lord. As we look at the facts of Ger Yang's life, we cannot help marveling at God's grace, and giving thanks to the Lord for using this man as His instrument to "scatter God's Gospel" to so many Hmong people who may never have had the chance to hear the good news! God be glorified!

THE "ST. PAUL" WHO LIVED IN ST. PAUL

A Summary of the Life and Ministry of Ger Yang

*"Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come,
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home."*

Ger Yang's widow, Yer, sang these words softly along with the Hmong choir from Emanuel during one of the devotions at her husband's funeral, in spite of the uncertainty of how her husband died, the possibility that her life or the lives of her children might be in danger, and not knowing how she was going to raise eight children alone.¹ And in spite of all of this, there was a smile on her face.

This was only one of the many sights a person would have seen at this three-day funeral. It began with two days of visitation before the actual funeral service. During those two days, December 16th and 17th, 1995, eight pastors from the WELS gave devotions to the mourners on passages of Scripture that were dear to Ger. A Hmong translator, Pheng Moua, about whom we will hear more later, put a long three days in conveying the English into the Hmong language. In accord with the Hmong custom, this two day visitation from 9:00 AM until 10:00 PM each day was complete with public mourners, wailing out loud. During those days, hundreds of people, including over 150 unbelievers, were gathered in that funeral home each day to listen to these devotions.

After giving his devotion, Pastor Dan Koelpin was given the opportunity to address seven or eight young men, one of whom was Pheng, who were ready to take up the work that Ger had started, even "willing to die for the Gospel," as they put it. He looked them in the eye and talked to them about how important it was to continue in this work. He also assured them of the great admiration that the Southeast Asian Executive Committee, of which he is the chairman, had for Ger Yang, and

the work Ger did through God's help.

The funeral was held the next day, Monday, December 18th, at Emanuel Lutheran Church in St. Paul, MN. Several hundred people attended this funeral, including forty WELS pastors who showed up in their robes and ^{with} a Bible passage that they would have used at Ger's ordination which was planned for the following April of 1996. Most of them spoke their Bible passages along with a few brief thoughts from Scripture as part of the service. Among them were both the synod president and the district president. Once again, the entire service was translated into Hmong, so it lasted over two hours. The funeral service was even attended by dozens of pagans, including shamans (witch-doctors) and animists. As the casket was carried into the hearse, these same pastors in their gowns lined the front steps and sidewalk of the church. This made quite an impression on all of the people who were there that day. The presence of so many pastors and Christian friends spoke a very powerful message of love and unity to the Yang family and to the Hmong congregation. It also spoke a very powerful message to all of the animists and ancestor worshipers at the service. They were impressed by the motivation that was driving this love. Once again, it even helped encourage some of the Christian Hmong to want to spread the Gospel at any costs, including death.²

Sentiments were expressed to the Yang family at the funeral by many of his co-workers and brothers in the faith, in words like these from Missionary Robert Meister:

"This year December has been much different than I thought it would be, and I know that is very true for you, too. You see, I was hoping to spend a lot of time with Ger this month and next. We were going to teach the Hmong people in your brother's village. But the Lord had other plans. Why He took Ger home at this time is not easy for us to know. Maybe we won't ever know. But the Lord knows. He will give you comfort in your time of grief. He will help you and your children. He will give the Hmong people here the kind of help they need when they need it. Our God still wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of His truth. And, of course, God will also help the Hmong people of St. Paul who now have no Hmong

pastor.

Ger gave up his life as he was in God's service. The Bible says that is an honor. Even though you were willing to give Ger up for many weeks while he traveled, you now will have to wait to be reunited with him in heaven. But you can be sure of what Jesus said, 'Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life' (Mt. 19:29). God be with you during these difficult days to come, and remember the real meaning of Christmas: Christ came to save sinners. Ger believed in that Savior; let's continue believing in Him and working for Him, too."³

Ger's loss was felt very deeply not only by family and dear friends, but also people who shared his zeal to spread the Gospel. Pastor Dan Koelpin sent these sympathies to Ger's family:

"...At times like this we wonder why and there are no simple answers. We cannot always know God's plan, but what we do know we must hold onto. We know that God loved Ger. We know that His Son, Jesus, died for him on the cross. We know that Ger believed in and loved Jesus Christ, God's Son, and we know that God has promised to work everything to the good of those who love Him. We shall miss Ger, but we will not feel sorry for him for he is with the Lord, the same Lord that will care for us and work all things to our good..."⁴

Ger Yang was a servant of Christ who was ready and willing to die for that Gospel message that brought him peace. He was on fire for the Lord, as Pastor Steele would say, and the Holy Spirit had worked in him a burning desire to "scatter God's Gospel." This is why, very fittingly, the Scripture text which Pastor Piepenbrink used for the devotion he gave at the visitation in the funeral home, with more than 150 pagan Hmongs gathered in the chapel, was Romans 1:16, "*I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*" This passage was in many ways the theme of Ger's ministry. He was given much reason to fear. But Ger Yang was definitely a man who was not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

LAOS

Ger Yang was a Hmong man born in the Chieng Khouang Province of Laos on June 5, 1947.

He was one of nine children born to Chue Blong Yang and Xai Yang, who were farmers in the country area of that province. Ger was the youngest of the nine, with six brothers and two sisters. Their farmhouse had four rooms and no plumbing. Ger's family was not wealthy. They lived on what they raised on the farm and what they got from hunting amidst the dangers of tigers and wild boars.

Ger was forced to grow up very fast. At the same time that most of us are given our new Bibles as Confirmation presents, Ger received something else. "They gave me a machine gun which I had learned how to use when I was 13 years old, because they wanted us to know how to use a gun at a very young age in case of emergency."⁵ Things were never politically stable in Laos for young Ger as he grew up. Added to this responsibility, Ger's father, Chue Blong, died while Ger was quite young. In the Hmong custom, which is very much the opposite of what we know, the responsibility of caring for the parents falls on the youngest child. Ger now had a great deal of responsibility in this family living on a farm in a politically unstable country.

Ger was nowhere near Confirmation, or even hearing about the Gospel for that matter, at this point in his life. His family was not Christian. They were pagans who were into "shamanism" and ancestry worship, which is common for any Hmong family. In fact, the Yang family was very strongly into shamanism. Ger's brother is a shaman, a witch-doctor.

Ger was led astray from early on: "My ancestors told me that when we die, we will return to live with our ancestors some place. We did not know what we would see there, or what we would do there, but it was supposed to be a good place. I learned that we would stay in this place for awhile, and then be born again into another life. If you were a man in this life, you would come back as a woman. And if you were a woman in this life, you would come back next time as a man."⁶

In ancestry worship, the family of the person who died would then be responsible for burying

him in the very best place and in the right way, not only for the good of the deceased, but also for the good of the family. This would involve staying with the body, walking over hot coals, putting a bamboo fence around the grave, and even placing plates of food on the grave in just the right manner! Ger tells us why: "I was taught that after a person had died, he could come back to earth when he was hungry to get food from his children on earth. When he is hungry, he could ask the children to give food and animals such as cows, water buffaloes, pigs, chickens. The ancestors would make the living parents on earth have dreams to show them what they are hungry for. If they did not give them what they wanted, the dead ancestors could make their children sick. After that, the family members can ask a shaman (a person who practices witchcraft) to come to predict what the dead ancestors want to eat. Finally, they promised to give what the ancestors wanted if their children get better. So we lived in much fear of our ancestors. It was very scary to think about dying."⁷ It is easy to see how much Ger and his fellow Hmongs grew up in fear of their ancestors, and fear of the unknown afterlife that they had no idea about. They were without hope.

They knew about no loving God and Savior they could pray to. Before meals, the head of the house would invoke the ancestors to come and bless the home and eat first. They were very careful about how they treated their dead ancestors! They also prayed to rocks, trees, and rivers, since animism is a very big part of their religious life. Christianity was not something even discussed during his childhood.

It seems that the Lord was preparing Ger for His service in other ways at this time. Ger was the fortunate one from the Yang family to receive an education. There are two ways a Hmong person can receive an education in Laos: Either you have to come from a very wealthy family, or you have to be smart enough to be at the top of the class. Ger's family certainly was anything but wealthy.

They lived in poverty. Thus, Ger was definitely a top-class student. He was a very hard worker. He passed the exam required to make it to school and continued passing the exams required to get a person from one grade to the next. School there was much different than in the U.S. The standards are much higher, different languages are learned, and age makes no difference with the grade that a person is in.

So Ger, the only one fortunate enough from his family to have this opportunity, took advantage of it and studied very hard. Education is very difficult there. He was required to study both the Laotian and French languages if he wanted to be a teacher anywhere. Eventually, Ger would be fluent in five languages: French, Lao, English, Tai, and Hmong! He was a very intelligent man.⁸ Ger became a very recognized and well-respected leader in the Hmong community as well as in the Yang clan, because he was the first one of them to be educated. The others around him really looked up to him because of this.

He studied to be an elementary school teacher because he enjoyed working with children and the government took good care of teachers.⁹ This was important because Ger seemed to always place a high priority on being able to support his family. He used his training as he became a teacher for school children; both Hmong and Laotian, even though it was only for a short time. At the same time he was studying to be a teacher, he was also extending his farming experience and learning the art of war, having already being introduced to a machine gun as a teenager. His "peaceful" existence in Laos would not last for long.

In 1969, when Ger was 22, he gained another "brother." Jay Lo, whose stepfather is Ger's brother, came to the Yang family because he needed a place to live. The Yang family gladly took him in and considered him one of the family. For the next nine years that Jay would live with Ger, the two

of them became very close friends, and considered each other brothers. Jay had not had an easy life either. He had been involved in actual combat from the time that he was 12 years old. The two would eventually fight together when the Communists came to town.

Ger had another happy occasion three years later. After an interesting "duel" with another prospective "wooer," Ger won the heart of the young Yer Moua. The two of them were married in the summer of 1972, when Ger was 25. Since then, they have been blessed with a large family. There are five daughters: Der, Chao, Joua, Chong, and Vandee, and three sons: Boonmee, Cha, and Kong, the last two being twins. As I write, two of the daughters are married.

WAR

Three years later, things changed drastically for Ger Yang. He certainly found out what war is all about. The Communists took over Laos in 1975. Up until this time, the government took good care of teachers. The Communist government saw things differently. They forced all of the workers in Laos who had ever worked in cooperation with the CIA to be "re-educated." But they deceived everyone by telling them that the CIA had fled the country. Then the Communists forced everyone to go to these camps to supposedly "learn about the new rules." In reality, they put the Laotians to work in hard and heavy labor, digging out trees and filling bomb craters. They were imprisoned in barracks during the evening. Their daily ration was a pound of rice and water. There was not a lot of re-education going on, but plenty of slave labor.

Those who were being reeducated began sending messages back to their families telling them that they were not studying at all, but only working. The workers who had not been forced into the camps yet feared that they might also share the same fate, and went into the jungle to dig up all of

their guns that they had buried there before the Communists took over. They began organizing forces to fight back against the injustices being inflicted on them. Then, when the Communists forced all teachers to work for nothing, without wages, Ger Yang joined the fray. He was given a machine gun like the one he was taught to use when he was thirteen years old, and in 1975, he and Jay Lo joined the rag-tag guerilla force Jay affectionately named the "Freedom Fighters."

Ger had always been a leader. He had always been someone that was respected by all of his peers, and this situation was no different. Jay recalled how there was no mistaking which one of the band was Ger Yang. All of the fighters, including Jay, carried M-16's, the standard issue of machine gun. But not Ger. He had to carry an M-30, a canon without wheels. Everyone recognized Ger with his big gun.

But even with his big gun, Ger and company were out-matched and out-sized. And as bold a leader as he was, he once again knew the word "fear" very well.

"On January 1, 1976, it was my first battle with the Communists and it lasted 15 days. At this time it was very scary because the Chao Fa (the guerillas who fight against the Lao Communist government) did not have big guns such as missile launchers, 75 mm guns, 155 mm guns and others, because the Communists already took them after they took control of the country. When we fought, we used machine guns but the Communists used big guns and it was very scary. We were saved and no one was hurt because we lived in the jungle and we divided into small groups of four soldiers who worked as guerilla fighters. After we fired we would run back and take a different position and fire again. We compared this to a mongoose fighting a cobra. We fought this way against the Communists every day and we were divided into 30 or 40 groups. We would kill at least 20-30 Communists each day."¹⁰

Ger pushed on with the resistance. But things got harder now for them. "After 1977 the Lao Communist government perceived that if they did not ask North Vietnam to help them, the Lao Communists could not survive. During 1977 and 1979 we were very scared because North Vietnamese soldiers were experts at fighting in the jungle. They divided into groups like us! At that

time we could not survive against them. Most of us were captured by the North Vietnamese soldiers. I was wounded and captured.”¹¹ There was no place to run. They simply had to throw down their arms and surrender. Jay Lo’s family was captured also. Jay, however, was the only one of them to escape. He made his way to Thailand by sneaking through the jungle, and from there to the United States.

“War for Ger Yang was more than something you read in the paper or hear about on television. It was part of real life, as was the fear of being killed in battle. He had learned his battle tactics well, and what the strengths and weaknesses of his enemies were. He learned to be self-sufficient and persevere in the face of tremendous obstacles.”¹² There is no doubt that being held captive for over a year while nursing battle wounds was a bit of a tremendous obstacle. There is no doubt that it was a scary thing being held captive by the North Vietnamese Soldiers.

Ger Yang would certainly have been killed, as well as the rest of his fellow troops in the resistance force. It was inevitable. However, the Communists knew that Ger was well connected. They gave him the chance to save the lives of his family and countrymen as well as his own. Ger found himself with no other choice but to go and find the rest of the guerilla troops that had escaped and have them lay down their arms and surrender. For his cooperation, Ger was given his life and was set free from his captors.

THAILAND

So there was Ger Yang, done with the war, and back on the farm with his family. He once again began trying to make a living by farming, hunting, and fishing. But then he had a most unfortunate accident with explosives while fishing. This, together with his battle wounds, made it

quite difficult for Ger to be a very good farmer. He was missing an arm and half of his face. So in fact, it made it impossible. He would have to make a living elsewhere.

So then Ger gathered his family together, and they made their way to Thailand. This was not an easy process. It was more of an escape that took a long time. They had to carefully and quietly make their way from town to town. They did not have to sneak through the jungle like Jay, but slowly move from village to village before eventually making it to Thailand in 1984, and there they stayed at in the refugee camp at Chieng Kham. Ger and his family stayed at this camp for a year.

At this camp, it once again seems that God was preparing his servant for the work that lay ahead of him. In Chieng Kham, Ger learned his basic English and also, being a teacher, taught the Lao language.¹³ However, not everything at this camp was good. He complained about the fact that they used reverse psychology with his children. In these camps, they try teaching the children to love the country and hate your parents.¹⁴ They also divided your belongings. Things were not much better here than in Communist Laos.

But then an old friend came through for Ger Yang. Jay Lo had made it safely to the United States, and had some family and relatives that were connected well enough there. They were able to physically sponsor the Yang family for a trip to the States. Ger certainly knew that this could be a golden opportunity for him. So Jay Lo and his family definitely did help out.

U.S.A.

On July 25, 1986, Ger Yang, his wife, and all of their children arrived safely in St. Paul, Minnesota. Ger's first question upon coming to America was "Now, what should I do?" What was an injured man, missing an arm, and having to support a family going to do? Well, Ger and his family were fortunate enough to receive public assistance from the AFDC, the social services branch that

would help families in the Yang's situation. They were forced to depend on this as their main income.

Then Jay Lo helped his friend again. Jay had become the president of the Hmong Higher Education program. He helped Ger, and three months after his arrival, Ger started going to school for his G.E.D. After he received his G.E.D, he continued his education at Inver Hill Community College to obtain his Associate Degree. After receiving that, he went to Metro State University to get his B. A. Degree in counseling. It is very obvious that the Lord continued guiding Ger in the preparation for his future ministry by seeing that he would be well-educated. With all of this education, Ger certainly seemed to be "apt to teach."

CONVERSION

But while this was all going on, well before Ger finished all of this education, something far more important happened in his life. Within the first year of living in the States, Ger would hear the greatest news of his life! "The war against Communists was behind him, but he would soon learn about a very different kind of war - one that was bigger and more important. He began to hear the story of the battle of sin and God's victory in the war for us."¹⁵

It all started when two of Ger's daughters, Chao and Joua, became playmates with Pastor Loren Steele's daughter. These children then brought Pastor Steele to the house, and introduced him to Ger. Pastor Steele recalled that when he knocked on Ger's door the first time, and Ger answered the door, he didn't get very far with him. Some of the children were interested, however, and Pastor went back for Bible study. It didn't bother Ger, and he let his children go to church at Emanuel. The younger children were the most excited about it at the beginning. Eventually, Ger's curiosity got the best of him and he decided to follow his children to church. He saw that it was a good thing, so he

began coming back to hear the message of how Jesus rescued us from our state of hopelessness.

One day, as Ger returned from church, he marched into the house, and went straight for the Xwm Kab, a shrine made out of paper that is taped to the wall of every Hmong household. The Hmong believe that it will bring good fortune to the family. It was an idol in every respect. Ger ripped this flimsy piece of paper right off of the wall and tore it up in front of his family.¹⁶ It was very evident that the Holy Spirit had been working in Ger Yang's heart. There was something more to life than man-made gods, and something not quite right with worshiping ancestors. Ger had learned about the True God, who loves us enough to have sacrificed His own Son for us! Ger no longer had to live in eternal fear.

So Ger began going to church regularly with his younger children. He also started attending Bible class to hear more about this good news. Ger was baptized in 1988. The Holy Spirit made him a child of God, and now Ger really knew what true peace is all about. The youngest children of the family were the first to be baptized, and then after Ger was baptized, eventually the older children were as well, and finally his dear wife Yer became a child of God.

Christianity was something very special for this first-generation Christian. He had never really had much of a comfortable life. He had known a lot about war, strife, and hatred. He writes about this in an exegesis he did with Pastor Piepenbrink on Romans 5:1-5:

“Since I have become a Christian, I know that we have fought against God because of our sins. Our actions such as hatred, strife, selfish ambition, sexual immorality and so forth are against God's Law. We deserve eternal hell and eternal punishment from God. We surely lose our war against God.

Now I believe that I have peace with God because of his love and forgiveness of my sins. I confess my sins which I have done. God promised that he will accept me as his child when I believe in his promise that Jesus is my Savior and has died for me. Jesus has established peace with God. My sins are removed. I will live how he wants me to live. I want to spread his Gospel, the good news, to those who do not know

God like me in the past part of my life. When they learn how God loved them, they can receive forgiveness of their sins.”¹⁷

Ger Yang certainly had a handle on sin and grace. He knew about the importance of the Gospel. Ger also finally escaped from the fear of his ancestors that most Hmong live in constantly. He now had something much greater to look forward to; something worthwhile to put his hope in!

“As a Christian, I know that I do not have to call upon my ancestors to protect me. I do not have to worry about feeding them and what they are hungry for. I can pray to God to help and protect me wherever I go and whatever I do. Now I have hope because I trust God that he will give me an eternal life in heaven. We won’t face trouble, great depression, sickness, sadness, and tears, or groaning, weeping, or immortality. But in heaven there will be the glory of God - his love, mercy, his power, his holiness, his eternity. We will feel the best because we won’t see everything which we faced now in the sinful world. We will have a perfect home in heaven.”¹⁸

Ger’s natural response to the great love God showed him was one of love and zeal to thank God for what He has done. He asked once again, “What can I now do to help?” He had a heavy conscience with how he had lived the first part of his life and wanted to serve God in any way he could to show his thanks for this free gift of forgiveness. He started to help out at Emanuel and began translating for Pastor Steele. His training in English was paying off. Steele was in need of a translator who knew his doctrine well. Ger stumbled along at first, but soon became quite a valuable asset.¹⁹

It also became important very quickly for Ger to share this news with other Hmong people who were in the same hopeless situation that he had been in. This was not always a very easy task, because Hmong Christians suffer much persecution for believing in Jesus. “The unbelieving Hmong hate us,” Ger said, and he knew this well because he used to be the one doing the hating!

“I tell our Hmong Christians that unbelievers do not know God, but rather hate God. We should not be angry with them, because we used to be like them in the past. We used to hate God and hate Christians too. Rather, our Christian Hmong should praise God and pray to him to help, and to open our mouths to speak to those who do not know God. In this present sinful world, we face many terrible problems,

but we praise God and pray to him, and our problems will calm down. We should be patient. We have joy that God redeemed us from our eternal hell, and now he will forgive us as he has promised, when we repent of our sins.

Now I am in joy because I am God's child. I live in his way of love. I know how to forgive those who trespass against me. I know how to love those who do not love me. I suffer terrible trouble in my life in this sinful world such as physical handicaps - losing my arm, racism, hatred, prejudice from different religions. The unbelievers do not want to join what we are doing. They are speaking against our Savior. They disdain Jesus by telling false things to other people such as lying that Jesus is not a savior. He is only another human. Christianity is not Hmong religion, it is a Jewish religion.

The most important thing in my life is that I want to be a pastor and share God's Word with those who do not know him, like me in the past. I want others to repent of their sins, and I want them to be saved, and to live with us in God's house. I hope to serve in the Hmong and Laotian communities, wherever they live.²⁰

It is very obvious that Ger's faith was most dear to him, and that it was the most important thing in his life. He wanted more than anything else to be able to share this good news with others. He wanted them to be able to have the same peace, joy, and hope that he had. What happened next could not be the least bit surprising.

MINISTRY

In the summer of 1992, Ger Yang was moved to take the next step. He wanted to begin studying for the ministry. The normal track through the ministerial training program of the WELS would not have been possible because of the fact that English is a second language to Ger. It would have been quite difficult for him to attend Northwestern College and then Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. So Ger began studying with four able Twin-City area pastors: Don Fastenau, Jon Ladner, Loren Steele, and Leon Piepenbrink. Their program resembled that of the Seminary. They taught him Christian doctrine in depth, going through all of the books of the Bible with him. He studied Greek and began translating and also doing exegetical work in the New Testament. He also studied Hebrew

and began translating and doing exegetical work in the Old Testament. He even studied the Lutheran Confessions.²¹

“As this training continued over the next three years, Ger Yang began to find greater areas of service in the Hmong congregation at Emmanuel. He taught confirmation classes, adult membership classes, Sunday school classes. He served as interpreter for sermons by Pastor Steele on Sunday afternoons. He began translating Luther’s Small Catechism, and other evangelism tracts and works. His work in St. Paul was richly blessed by God and the Hmong congregation has grown to more than 70 families. His experience made him exceptionally valuable in ministering to older Hmong people, who respected his experience. He also helped in doing evangelism work to the Hmong in California.”²²

During his work at Emanuel, Ger Yang made another close friend. This one happened to be a close friend of his daughter. Pheng Moua was a member of Emanuel, and began to fill in now and then for Ger with the translating work. Pheng was a bright young student attending St. Cloud State. He became Ger’s substitute, and was proud of the fact that Ger trusted him. Pheng assured me that learning Greek and Hebrew was very important to Ger Yang. It was absolutely essential that he be able to read the Scriptures in their original language. From time to time, Ger would even use his knowledge of these languages as a sort of pre-evangelism. He could get a person’s attention with this skill. But Ger worked very hard studying his Greek and Hebrew.²³ He was also attending Metro State University at the same time. Ger was a very dedicated student!

Ger’s ministry soon expanded to the international level. He began contacting family, friends, and other Hmong acquaintances back in Thailand and Laos, and telling them of their Savior by both letter and phone call. He began by trying to contact students, people he could relate to. “The first time

I wrote them so that we might be friends, and also about their education. The second time I tried to tell them a little bit about God. The following times I wrote to them about the Gospel. The first time some of them rejected it, but I tried to explain it more and more. They started to accept it.”²⁴

Supported by the pastors who were training him, Ger wanted badly to travel to Thailand and Laos to do mission work there. Pastor Steele updated Ger’s outreach efforts in this letter:

“Ger Yang has been working hard, writing many letters to people in Laos. He has obtained contracts from our Hmong congregation members, from friends, and from relatives. The result has been amazing. As I write, we have one hundred and twenty families requesting Bible study materials! That translates into nearly 1000 people when you consider Hmong family size. This seems to be only the tip of the iceberg. Ger is currently working to get the Lao language on computer so that he can write the Laotian peoples. Those are the people he has always believed will really be interested in the Gospel.”²⁵

Steele and the rest saw the value of sending such a man to do mission work where he would have the ability to communicate well with a people starving for the Gospel. So they began to put a lot of work into preparing Ger Yang for this task and convincing the Mission Board that this would be a worthwhile endeavor. The Southeast Asian Mission Board would agree that the potential was tremendous. The task lay ahead now to make sure all was prepared for such an undertaking.

The Twin City area pastors working with Ger petitioned the Chairman of the Minnesota District as well as the Mission Board to back a missionary trip into Thailand and Laos. In the Spring of 1994, there was a heavy flurry of correspondence, phone conferences, meetings, and mail between all of the people involved. It involved pastors from the Conference of Presidents, the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the Minnesota District Mission Board, the Board for Home Missions, two committees of the Board for World Missions, both the Southeast Asian Committee and the Multi-Cultural Ministry Committee, as well as the pastors who were training Ger.

There was concern that in order for Ger to embark on such a mission journey that he be sound in his knowledge of the truth of God's Word. This, as it naturally should have been, was the most important concern. Some of the other challenges faced in putting this mission together were: 1) How is Ger Yang to be "credentialed"? 2) What is his title to be? 3) Who or what position will supervise him? 4) Where will he be domiciled? 5) How can he serve now and later most effectively in the World Mission arena? 6) How can he serve now and later most effectively in the Home Mission arena? 7) Can he be used to stem the back door losses of the Hmong who heed the powerful call to return to the clan? 8) How will his salary and expenses be covered? 9) How will the audit and oversight function be utilized when abroad? 10) What is our vision for him two years after graduation? Five years? Ten years?²⁶ The Conference of Presidents, in a due and orderly process resolved that Ger Yang would be "credentialed" through the colloquy process.²⁷

Pastor Larry Cross, the Minnesota District President, was to be in charge of the Colloquy Committee. President Panning from the Seminary would supply the delegation from there. Pastor Wayne Hilgendorf, Chairman of the Minnesota DMB, would help evaluate the potential fields of service, Pastor Dan Koelpin, Chairman of the SEA Executive Committee, would evaluate short range and long range work to be done with him overseas, Pastor Roger Sprain would affirm the cooperation of the Multi Cultural Ministry, Pastors Steele and Kogler would give an overview of the education Ger had received, and Pastor Hagedorn of the Board for Home Missions did a lot of coordinating for the whole thing.

As he observed Ger Yang's knowledge of God's grace in the Scriptures, President Cross was not only satisfied, but impressed. In a letter, he wrote:

"On Monday, September 12, I was privileged to sit in on one of the classes

being taught to Mr. Ger Yang. It happened to be an exegesis of Romans 5 which is not exactly easy Greek. Ger really did quite well. He still has need of more study and refining of his skills but his progress is surely impressive, especially considering that he is probably going through a process of translating first into Hmong and then into English. In his comments he surely displayed a good understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ Jesus."²⁸

Eventually, that would be the opinion of the rest of the Colloquy Committee as well. They were more than satisfied with Ger's ability to teach God's Word in its truth and purity. That concern was put to rest. Now, as to how Ger's expenses would be covered on his trips, they would also soon find out that they would have had to search the world far and wide to find a missionary who could live and work more cheaply than Ger Yang!

There was a great deal of appreciation for the great gift the Synod had been given in Ger Yang, and for the time spent by the pastors in training him. Pastor Koelpin wrote to Pastor Steele,

"Let me tell you again that we very much admire your efforts in the Lord on behalf of the Hmong population. Your work has been a source of real inspiration for all of us. We are thankful that Ger Yang is receiving instruction and are filled with appreciation for the many hours given by Don Fastenau, Leon Piepenbrink and others involved in this training. The support given your work by Fred Kogler and Jim Bourman has also been noted by us with high regard. Finally, we agree with the sentiments of Robert Raasch that Ger is a gift from the Lord and one who can be used as a fitting tool for His work. We feel that the Lord has worked a wonderful zeal and courage in his heart."²⁹

At this point it would be fitting to speak a little about Ger Yang's character. I never met the man, but the admiration for him by anyone he came in contact with is overwhelming. Ger was a very hard worker. Not only was he going to full-time school at the same time he was studying for the ministry, but he was also working with a program called ACORN, to help out the poor, low-income, and Hmong people of the community. He began working to start up a school for deprived children. He was also active in writing letters to newspapers to combat the negative press about the Hmong.

Pastor Steele informed me that Ger was very demanding. If something needed to be done, he would do it. And he wanted those around him to operate in the same way. He would plop a pile of papers on the secretary's desk and want them done "yesterday." He approached everything 200%, and wanted others to do the same. His kids were expected to do 8 hours of homework a night, whenever they got it done! Because of it, they are also successes. He could not understand luke-warm Christianity. He was someone who did not always have that gift, and was now on fire for his Lord and for service to Him.³⁰

And once again, Ger was a leader. He was a leader to many in his congregation. He was also a leader to many people in the community. He would be missed by many more than just the church and its mission effort. Ger meant a lot to many people, especially the many poor people that he helped out. He was looked up to a great deal by Jay Lo and Pheng Moua, who were inspired to follow in his footsteps.³¹

Pastor Steele adds that Ger had a very strong character. He had to battle his own Yang clan, because paganism was so strong in much of his family and they hated him for being a Christian. He had to face a lot of heat. He also had to face a lot of loneliness. But, none of this mattered to Ger as much as the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He had a Savior who died for him! So his attitude about being a herald of this good news was: "Death does not scare me - I am a Christian!"

FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Once all of the details had been set into motion, off Ger went with a head of steam. On October 14, 1994, Ger Yang began his first missionary journey. It was very exciting for him as he flew out of the Minneapolis Airport to Chicago and then Los Angeles, but as he made a transfer there

to the Thai Airline, he felt very lonely. As he lugged his suitcases all over the airport by himself, there were many people around him, but none of whom he knew. Loneliness would be a big part of his journeys.³² He began his twelve-and-a-half hour trans-Pacific flight to Seoul, during which the plane passed through a very dangerous storm. "Everyone's face turned pale," Ger remembered as the plane fell 6000 feet in the air. "I prayed and asked Jesus many times for help to save everyone's life."³³ The plane trip seemed to last two years, as far as Ger was concerned.

LAOS

From Seoul, Ger flew to Bangkok, and the next day to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Once again, this was a sad and lonely situation for Ger, as he saw everyone being greeted by their Hmong families. No one was there to welcome him. He recalled his prayer as he sat on a bench with a tear in his eye, "Oh! Jesus who is my Savior and Redeemer! Please help and encourage me to continue my journey. I am sitting lonely here not for my personal travel, but I want to serve you as you have called and chosen me to scatter your Gospel."³⁴

He then had to deal with taxi drivers who were trying to swash buckle him, and the Lao Domestic Travel Agency, in order to get his plane ticket to Luang Prabang. This took two days, and in the meantime, Ger stayed at his brother-in-law's house. There he met Mr. La Moua, who was one of his first contacts that had responded to Ger's letters. Mr. La Moua didn't know who he was at first, and they talked for hours. Then Ger told him that he was the one who had been writing all the letters, and La Moua was very excited and surprised. That evening La Moua brought his friend and his wife over and they talked until midnight.

The next morning, October 19th, Ger went to the airport to fly to Luang Prabang. After the

short but scary flight in a plane that had mechanical problems; he arrived in the Luang Prabang Airport, where he met his brother Yia. It was a happy reunion. Yia insisted on giving him a visiting tour of the entire city and staying over at his house. Ger consented, and then that evening discussed with him about God. His brother Yia told him that he would be able to introduce him to many of the Hmong leaders.

And that is just what Ger did during the first week. He spoke with Mr. Vang Choua Xiong, once the vice-mayor of Xieng Ngun, Bee Xiong, who is a military commander of the province, Ger Lor, a leader in the police department, Faidang Xiong, mayor of Luang Prabang, Blong Lee, a captain, Nhia Chong Vang, leader of Xieng Ngun Justice Court, Boon Ngang Vang, a Xieng Ngun vice-mayor, Mai Pao Xiong, a university professor, Her Xiong, leader of L.P. Construction, and Kaying Vang, a high school teacher. "I spent the rest of my time visiting other people such as the university students, high school students, and ordinary people, those who were writing letters to me, and those who never even knew me."³⁵

He had a lot of questions for these government leaders as to whether or not it was allowable to worship God in this country. They explained to Ger that the Lao constitution allowed people to worship as they pleased. However, it also seemed to them that those who did worship God were discriminated against if they were holding government jobs. Farmers were not affected, but Ger was told that some people lost their jobs because of Christianity, because the Laotian government was more impartial to shamanism.³⁶ But it was not illegal to be a Christian.

On October 28, Ger had a meeting with Mr. Mai Pao, the professor of Luang Prabang University. Ger told Mai Pao to invite his students over also for their 5 o'clock meeting. Ger's brother Yia also showed up for the meeting. Ger told them about God. They spoke about education.

Then Ger began to tell them the purpose of his trip. He told them about their Savior Jesus Christ. They listened very quietly. As he taught them about God, he asked them questions, and found out that even though they were university students, they knew nothing about their Savior. They then responded with many questions of their own, which Ger said were easy to answer.

Ger then spoke with more of the government officials previously mentioned and was told that the government discriminated against Christians sometimes only if they feared political problems. There were previous instances of people like Boon Mee, who claimed he was a religious leader after graduating from a Bible college, got a large number of people to support him, and then staged a political uprising. This is why the government had a bad taste in their mouth with "American religions." Ger assured Mr. Vang that he was different from those people, and that it was very important for these people to hear about God.

On November 1, Mr. Vang called Ger and eight other Christians to his house. After dinner, he informed them that the police department wanted him to call all of the Christian leaders together and tell them not to worship God. He even threatened them with jail. One of the men there that night was Mr. Bee Cha, a Christian. The next morning, as Ger and his brother left the house, Bee Cha ran up to Ger and expressed his fear, because they were being forced to give up Christianity and worship shamans again. He said some had already given in, but he had refused to. He began crying, and Ger comforted him and promised to pray for him. He assured Bee Cha that God would protect him. A day later, he was told that Bee Cha had not yet been allowed to come home.

Ger had not told the people in Laos that he was coming, in fear that the Communists might have arrested him. That set the stage for this next event:

"After I left Luang Prabang to Vientiane, I went to see a group of students.

Some of them are university students and some are high school students. When I entered their house, we talked nicely to each other. But they did not know who I was. After they knew that I am the one who wrote them very often, they cried to me as I am their father or brother. When they cried and cried to me, I also cried to them because some of them were orphans since they were six years old. I love them as though they are my real children or brothers and sisters. Every morning I went to visit them before I left them to see other people... I was so glad when I got into Vientiane because I had met and talked about God to many university students.”³⁷

Ger met with many other families, bought books and pencils for those who were going to write him, and conducted Bible studies in Mr. La Moua’s home. He found many, many people who want to find out about their Savior, and some of these university students even expressed the desire to become Hmong pastors like Ger. And many of them asked Ger, “When will you come back to visit us?”

THAILAND

On November 15, Ger went to the town of Thadeu to cross into Thailand. He bought a bus ticket, and then two hours later, the bus took him over to Nongkai, Thailand. Nothing is easy in Thailand. The telephone system is a big trouble for anyone using it, and Ger had to place calls to his family and a few pastors, Steele, Hartwig, and Meister, because he was lonely. There are no traffic rules - that are obeyed anyway. Thieves are very prevalent. It costs money to use a restroom, and then extra for the toilet paper! From there, Ger took a 14 hour bus ride to Ban Ruamthai 9, one of the villages of Ban Ruamthai, a project that is filled with people who live in the mountains and hunt ^{animals} wild life.

“After I made the calls, I continued to visit every village because I wanted to know and see what the people are like. I traveled many hours to reach the villages. Some people who live in different villages saw me and they were surprised because they have not seen a Hmong missionary from the United States. Everyday I went to visit many families. Mostly I spent a half hour to talk with them about their life. After

that I continued to tell them about God or Jesus. People who live in these villages knew very little about Christ. They call a believer "Jesus." They also called me "Jesus." But I told them that I am not Jesus, but I am the one who teaches or scatters His Word and Gospel to everyone who never knew about his work of redemption."³⁸

At this time, Pastor Meister and his wife visited Ger. They had a large gathering of people in Ban Ruamthai 9, and it was Ger's wife who put the party together. She had now joined him on the trip to help share the Gospel with the women and the children. They went around that village, and here Ger used his new mission strategy. He rented a VCR, a TV, and a power generator (because they didn't have enough electricity there). For three nights, he set this equipment up and showed "The Complete Story of Christ Faithfully recreated from the Gospel of Luke" to the nearly 300 people who showed up each night. This was very popular, and he wanted to show more people. He found many other people in those villages who wanted to hear more about Christianity.

On December 8, it was time for Ger and his wife to return home. After a tearful goodbye with his family, they went to the bus station at Maesot to buy a ticket to Bangkok. They bought their tickets, but then were pulled off the bus by the Maesot police because they were overstayed on their passports. The police demanded a \$1000 bribe. Ger argued as much as he could to get out of that, but feared what could happen to him and his wife. Their flight would be leaving soon, so Ger bluffed that he wanted their telephone so he could call the American ambassador in Bangkok and his American friends in the U.S. The police were soon very quiet. They finally asked Ger, "How much would you pay us in a bribe?" Desperately, Ger whipped out the \$80.29 that he had in his pockets and they let him go. They made it to the Bangkok airport just in time.

Ger's final thoughts on this trip were as such:

"It is not easy for us to go to Thailand and Laos. But we should pray to God to open the door for our mission work to go there. We are God's servants and we

should take risks to serve Him. He will protect and bless us. We, who are part of WELS, should help and support our missions to reach every part of the world. Taking a trip to serve God is different from one country to another. We have to be careful because some countries are poor. Each day the leaders or workers are looking for a bribe. They are like the wolves who tear wild life. Whoever is stronger than others he gets more meat. It is easier to travel in Laos than Thailand because they have fewer robbers and thieves than Thailand. In other words, people in Laos respect the tourists more than their own residents.

Finally I appreciate and thank God and the WELS World Mission Boards who provide me finance to take this journey. This journey made me learn lots of things which I had never learned in my past life. I think that if we help our WELS Mission to spread God's Gospel to those countries, there will be more and more pagans come to join us because many people are waiting for us to teach them the Gospel. But we should follow up soon. I hope that God would bless all of you and keep you in peace. Amen."³⁹

Ger returned safely home with a detailed journal of his trip, from which he wrote his "Summary," and a detailed list containing every last thing that he bought, down to the last can of Pepsi, and returned the remainder of the Synod's cash advance. He dived back into his studies, but eagerly awaited his next trip.

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Ger wanted very much to make a return follow-up trip to Thailand. He wrote this in a letter to the SEA EC in March of 1995:

"In November 19, 1994, when I returned from Laos, I tried to visit and walk from village to village. I talked and taught about God's love and mercy with thousands of people. After I returned to this country, I continued to write to them for following up those I had met before. I have received some responses from those people (almost 30 families about 200 people). I think that if we want our WELS to proclaim God's Gospel to the Hmong and the other people who are living in that country, I should return to teach those who are willing to serve God and who are willing to spread His true Gospel and doctrine. It would be better for them to teach their own group. But we, who stand firm in the truth of God's Gospel should help them to instruct their deacons or church elders."⁴⁰

Ger got his wish. His second journey to Thailand began on May 12, 1995. The primary purpose of this trip was to follow up with those people he had met the previous trip. Once again, this journey to a country so far away from his family and close friends was a very lonesome experience for Ger. He recalls, "Going to teach God's Word to those who never know about God's love is not a thing that easy for a Pastor or layman to do...Sometimes you would feel lonely or sad. But when we face a real bad situation, we should not give up. To me, sometimes I was very sad and lonely because there were thousands and thousands people sitting and talking in the airport or restaurant, but no one wanted to talk to me. When I was sad, weak or discouraged, I always prayed and asked Jesus to be my side."⁴¹ A few passages from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy (2:15 and 3:10&11) often gave Ger comfort in these situations that the Lord would rescue him from these sufferings and hardships.

THAILAND

On this trip, Ger returned straight to Ban Ruamthai 9, Amphor Phoppra Changvat Tak. This was the village that he had spent a good deal of time in on his first journey, teaching and showing his video. At midnight of his first evening there, Ger was given a rude awakening. Grenades, dynamite, mortars, and missile launchers woke him out of his sleep, hearing these sounds for the first time in many years. The Burmese soldiers were attacking the Thai soldiers at the Karian position. The skirmish was a safe enough distance away, but it was a bit frightening as some of the Thai soldiers even ran through the village warning its inhabitants that there could be a possible evacuation. But things quieted down soon after that. The fighting was held to the country of the Burmese.

On May 18, Ger got to work. He began trying to contact his good friend, Mr. La Moua. But once again, the Thai telephone service was not very cooperative. Every call there must be placed

through an operator in a long and drawn out process, and Ger did not have La Moua's Lao country code, so it took an extra day just to contact the man! On May 19, Ger made contact with La Moua and two men he brought with him, Mr. Seng Khane, a former police chief, and Mr. Sophap Visai, a Laotian lieutenant. He took the opportunity to witness his faith to these men. After that meeting, he went to rent a room to teach Bible class in, and reported to the leader and the boards of the village.

Monday, May 22, was the first day of Ger Yang's Bible class. At this time they were not using black boards and chalk; they didn't even have a table! They sat on the floor to teach and learn. Each morning after breakfast he would hold these Bible Studies from 9:00 AM to noon. That night the fighting began between the Burmese and the Karian again. Ger's friends thought they should move their study operation to Maesot Town, where it might be safer, but due to the expense of that, and after prayerful consideration, they decided to stay in Ban Ruamthai 9 for the remainder of their class. On May 24, things improved greatly for this class: Pastor Meister visited them, which seemed to strengthen their morale, and Ger bought a black board and some chalk! With these valuable teaching aids, he pressed onward. Ger was following a set of twelve lessons that were outlined for him by Pastor Steele. These served to instruct the basic teachings of the Bible, to share what our Savior has done for us. Then, Ger also studied Romans 5 with them, which was the chapter that he and Pastor Piepenbrink had presented to the Minnesota District Pastors' Conference on April 26, 1995. He would also give them assignments and ask them to teach, to see if they understood what he had told them.

These classes ended on June 1. The next day, these men, Mr. La Moua, Ti Seng Khane, and Veunh Sophap Visai, had to return to Laos. It was a rather depressing good-bye. Ger would miss them.

On June 3, Ger went to see the Thai military leaders who were posted in Ban Ruamthai 9, to ask them permission if he could teach God's Word to the people of the village. They were very skeptical at first, but Ger said he began to explain to them about God's love, and what it could do for a people who had suffered so much. They explained the reason why they were skeptical. They filled Ger in that the Burmese and the Karians, who had been fighting in the distance during the evening, had been fighting for almost 40 years. The fuel that stoked their fire was a religious one: Buddhism against Christianity.⁴² This is why missionaries made these soldiers a little nervous. But, Ger shamelessly told them about God, as one of his favorite passages directed him, *"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."* (Ro. 1:16).

The Thai leaders permitted Ger to teach in their village. So the next morning, he began to teach Mr. Cha Moua and Teng Yang. They wanted to spread this Gospel to the rest of the village, as well as the surrounding villages. Through the whole month of June, Ger taught these two men from 7:00 to 9:00 AM every morning. From 4:00 to 6:00 PM, he had a class of more than forty kids between the ages of 9-13. He would take one hour for his dinner, and then teach a group of more than fifty teenagers and adults from 7:00 to 9:00 PM. Ger was given help in advertising these Bible classes by Dang Yang, a village leader. Dang had a microphone which much of the village could hear, and helped Ger to announce that these Bible classes were for anyone willing to listen. Ger liked the microphone!

The first three days, the children Ger was teaching seemed to be disinterested. But eventually things got better. Ger began teaching them some songs. It was a slow process, because they had never heard about their Creator or Savior. Ger also showed them a video, "The Life of Jesus Christ."

they enjoyed this. He taught them the basics about Jesus, and also showed them how to pray. He also began with these very basics in his teenage/adult class. Ger pointed out, "Before I would open my Bible, I told them that I am from WELS. I am not a person who seeks personal gain but I am here only to scatter God's Gospel."⁴³ He also taught them about the importance of prayer.

The next week as a person would have walked past the room that Ger's gatherings were in, he would have heard strains of hymns like "Amazing Grace," "Go Now in Peace," and "We are Believers" sung in the Hmong language coming from within the walls. Ger was teaching them hymns with the hymnals that Missionary Meister had sent him. And he once again taught them the truths of Scripture using the 12-part outlines that Pastor Steele had set up. Ger also admitted a little frustration:

"Many people wanted me to see them and teach them about Jesus loves in other villages, but I am too busy to go to see them. The great major problem that causes me not to see them is that I don't have a car. I always hired a person to drive me in his motor cycle. But when he went to farm or was busy, no one drove me."⁴⁴

On this trip, Ger bought a television, VCR, and a power generator, so he would no longer have to deal with renting. As well as his tape on the life of Christ, he also had a film about Moses delivering the Children of Israel. He wanted to show them as much as possible, but was only able to get to four villages with them. Each time took four hours, as there would naturally be discussion along with the movie.

"One night I went to show the movie about Jesus' life in Ban Ruamthai 4. There were about two hundred people watching the movie. When the soldiers were nailing Jesus' hands on the cross, a Hmong woman shouted very loud. She seemed to be crazy. I ran to the TV and turned it off. I asked, what has happened? She told me that she loves Jesus so much because Jesus loves everyone. He healed poor people and saved them. She does not want other people to cause him problems. I explained to them that Jesus paid for our sins. Not to be scared, you will see what happens three days after he died. At that time you will be proud, but you have to believe Him. After

the woman saw that three days later Jesus was alive, she was happy. She told me that she believed Him. 'Did I have time to teach her family?' she asked, I answered her, 'next time I would come back again. And I will teach not just you, but all those who wanted to be God's children.'⁴⁵

Ger recalled that when he showed the movie in Ban Ruamthai 16 and 17, there were about 500 people watching. He noticed that many of them got down on Jesus when they saw him being crucified, but after He rose again, they praised Him. He explained that while he was showing one of these movies, he would wander around the room, answering questions, and listening to what people felt or were saying about what they were seeing.

"On June 16, 1995, was the first Sunday of our WELS to worship God in Ban Ruamthai 9, in Thailand," Ger proudly announced in his report, "There were 46 people show up to worship God with us at 8:20 AM. The next week people increase up to 60 including, kids age of 9-13, teenagers, and adults." Many people came during the following days to ask Ger to baptize them. At times he refused, because the people had no intention of studying about Jesus. Others told Ger that they wanted to be trained to also teach God's Word. Ger had to explain to a few that it is God who calls people to spread his Word, but also encouraged them with the desire they had. At the end of the month, Ger once again returned home to the U.S., this time uneventfully.

The August 1995 issue of the "Asia-USA" newsletter read, "Thinner, browner, Ger Yang walked off the airplane. Home, to St. Paul. Ger's grin said it all. His second trip to Thailand was a success!⁴⁶ It certainly was a success, and Ger certainly was thinner. He lost a lot of weight on both of his trips. He was very frugal with how he spent the Synod's money! He watched every cent. And being a model example of Christian stewardship, he recorded every cent that he spent and every purchase that he made, down to the last square of toilet paper! And he also submitted a nine page

report to prove it. Along with that, he returned a check for over \$2000 of the cash advance that he did not use.

In the summary that Ger wrote about this trip, he included an epilogue telling about his friend Bee Cha, the one who was arrested after Ger's first trip. Ger and others had feared Bee Cha may have been dead. He never saw him during his second trip, but as soon as he returned, Pastor Steele handed him five letters that had arrived for Ger, one of which was from Bee Cha! He was alive and well. It turns out that no physical harm was done to him, but that he and a few others were given some "rules." Here is a portion of that letter:

"After they separated us to stay alone for three days, they gave us Five Rules to ties us: (1) Not allow us to scatter God's Word around the province, (2) Not allow any person to go to worship God in the church, (3) Not allow us to pray when a believer was sick, (4) Not allow us to have or receive any International Christian gift which does not have permission from the Lao government, and (5) When we wanted to go to see La Moua or other Christians in Vientianne, we should ask permission from the Mayor and Province. If we missed any of these, we will encounter problem. But I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is not my word. It is God's Word and power. Last month I went to see two families, and they agreed to be in our fellowship, too. Now I already baptized them. Brother! We want you to send us a cassette songs and continue to write us to teach us and strengthen our faith. Please don't forget those you left behind. May God bless all of you and keep you in peace. "Amen."⁴⁷

And once again, Ger closed his report by thanking the WELS Mission Boards, the SEA EC, and the Kingdom Workers for financing and supporting him for this trip. He also immediately expressed his desire to make another trip:

"I think that if we help and support our Southeast Asian Mission to spread God's Gospel to Thailand and Laos, there will be more and more pagans come to join us because many people are waiting for us to teach them how to worship God. I hope that in my third journey, the Holy Spirit will turn more people and strengthen their faith to be in our WELS fellowship. May God bless and keep, all of you who support the SEA Missionary and also those who read this article, in peace. Amen"

THREATS

Ger Yang's enthusiasm didn't wane much, as Pastor Steele wrote in a letter "Well, as you know Ger is back. And he is chomping at the bit, wondering when we are going to get off our duff and begin "Seminary" classes again. Sounds like Ger!!"⁴⁸

September would also be a very exciting month for Ger. The colloquy process that had begun would be finalized. He was questioned by the men involved and they were satisfied with his progress. The Synod was able to place their full confidence in Ger Yang as a national pastor. Ger would be given the title "Pastor to the Hmong." The scope of his service would include ministering to the Hmong both in areas like St. Paul and the overseas work that he had been doing in Southeast Asia. The original plan was that he would then be ordained sometime late that Fall, or early Winter, before he went on his next trip. However, Ger pushed the date back to the Spring of 1996, so more of his family could be there.⁴⁹ Ger was now on the payroll, receiving his first Synod paycheck that September. Ger immediately began sending letters to Pastor Meister in Thailand asking him to check out government regulations about him doing mission work in Thailand. He wanted to be assured of his safety.

You see, Ger had also gained some enemies among his native people. Christians were not very popular among the shamanists. As much as Ger was respected by many, he was also hated by many, it seems. Steele writes in the "Pointman" article of an "Asia-USA" newsletter: "We were right [about Satan's plans to try messing things up]. Soon after Ger's return we received a letter from a believer in Thailand. It warned Ger that those opposed to Christ were plotting to have him arrested if he returned. Meanwhile, plans are being made for a third trip this December. Christian faith sometimes means risking everything for Christ. After all, He gave His life for us! Please pray that the devil's

plans are foiled.”

Pastor Piepenbrink wrote in his report: “At the end of November, Missionary Yang was making preparations to travel to Thailand for a third mission trip. He had been hearing reports of threats against his life by enemies of Christianity in Asia. He had heard similar reports before his second trip to Thailand. But his response was, **‘I am not afraid to die for the Gospel of Jesus. People need to hear the Gospel.’** Included on his agenda was the baptism of 70 Hmong in Thailand who had come to faith in Jesus.”⁵⁰ Jay Lo, who talked with Ger only a couple of days before he left, observed that there was a lot of tension in his family. Ger’s family was very worried about his return trips to Thailand⁵¹. But Ger convinced his family that “scattering God’s Gospel” is the highest calling.

LAST JOURNEY

Ger left for his third missionary journey, which was expected to last six weeks, on Wednesday, November 29, 1995. Two days later, the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, called Ger Yang home. Ger would never get to that Spring ordination service. Nor would he proceed with the follow-up work and the baptisms on his agenda. The Lord had other plans for Ger Yang. In His gracious wisdom, He wanted Ger to be at his true home in heaven with Him.

Ger’s dying body was found in his room in Phop Pra District, Mae Sot Province, Thailand, by traveling companions, and he was pronounced dead en route to Phop Pra Hospital on December 2, 1995 at about 8:00 AM on that Saturday morning. The cause of death is not known, according to his death certificate, filled out by Jill Esposito, the Vice-Consul of the American Consulate General in Chaing Mai, Thailand. His body was embalmed and sent to the United States for the funeral. This process would take over two weeks!

The cause of Ger's death is still not known. An autopsy was done here in the States, and no medical reasons were found for his death. "The vital organs were in good shape. No signs of an aneurism or a stroke. No blood was available for testing, so the results of the autopsy are inconclusive so far. An investigation by the St. Paul Police Department is continuing."⁵² Thus, since no cause of death could be found, the circumstances behind Ger's death were certainly suspicious. He had been a very healthy man. Two days later, he was dead.

Pastor Steele writes in a letter immediately following Ger's death:

"His death is being investigated through autopsy reports to determine if he died by natural causes or at the hand of his enemies. There had been death threats against Ger since the time of his last visit. Few knew the severity of these threats against his life that had come back to the states as rumors. Ger did, and even though he had been told by relatives in California that the rumors about plans to kill the "Yang" man who had come to Thailand to preach the Gospel were real, he resolved in his heart and mind to return to "his" land to tell his people about His Savior Jesus Christ. We cannot tell you how confusing this divine wisdom is at this point, but we do believe as the Lord promises "all things work for good to those who love him."⁵³

Because of the facts that no cause was ever found for Ger Yang's death, and that he would have had plenty of enemies back "home" in Thailand, there is the definite feeling by many that Ger's death was a murder. This certainly could be a possibility. The body was hard to recognize, so much embalming fluid was used. Ger's organs were all healthy, no cause of death could be found. And there were a good number of his countrymen practicing shamanism and black magic that would have been better off without this minister of the Gospel around. These are facts that we cannot deny.

But there are also facts that point to a natural death. According to Missionary Meister, who was there to check things out, the preliminary indication of the doctor who examined the body was that the cause of death was "fever." Ger seems to have died of natural causes. His traveling companions also noticed that he complained of feeling sick and having a fever already in the final

stages of the flight over.⁵⁴ And finally, it seems unlikely that if it were a poisoning, there would be no trace of the poison. It would be very difficult to murder a person in this way. And Missionary Meister confirmed that no one except Ger's wife's brother's family was near him when he died. They had no reason to kill him. These facts also must be considered.

When it comes down to it, we just don't know exactly how Ger Yang died. The truth may never be found out. As Meister concluded, "We ask God 'Why?' but no answer is likely until eternity. We continue to put everything in His hands."

When we remember Ger Yang, we do not want to let the question of his mode of death be our foremost recollection of this man, this instrument through whom God spread His Gospel so zealously. The "scattering of God's Gospel" is, and will always be, the heart and core of this story about a man named Ger Yang. And now that he is in eternal bliss with his loving Father, we need to be concerned with the family that he left behind and the work that he had only begun.

THE FAMILY

Mrs. Yang, Ger's widow, and the rest of his family, went through quite a struggle since the death of their husband and father. Piepenbrink reports: "Hmong traditions can be cruel to widows. Clan leaders had been working to marry her off to a pagan man so that she would forsake Christianity. Hmong visitors, including shamans, had invaded her home for two weeks demanding meals and making plans for her life."⁵⁵ They were trying to empty the family of their Christianity. They were working her to death like a slave. There was no safety for the family. And now, she faced the challenge of trying to support eight children with donations and government aid. Not to mention the fact that she missed her husband. Things were no better for the children who were missing a

father.

Pastor Steele told about it in the letter he sent to the pastors inviting them to the funeral:

“We write this letter to you and your congregation because we would like you to understand the burden of Ger’s wife, 8 children, and mother as they mourn the loss of their husband, father, and son. Having made a commitment to Christianity as they have, they are feeling a special need to be embraced by those whose faith they have come to share. Most of their relatives are pagans and follow the old ways. The influence of the shamans is ever present: At every corner or step in planning Ger’s funeral there has been distraction, wicked suggestions, and selfish and unchristian influence brought to bear.”⁵⁶

And fellow Christians did show their love to the Yang family. Cards, letters, and checks came in and shared a message of Christian love and concern, which helped the family to come through this hard time. A memorial fund was set up to pay the expenses for Ger’s children. The family expressed its heartfelt thanks to all who care. None of them have lost the real battle.

CONTINUING TO “SCATTER GOD’S GOSPEL”

By no means has Ger’s death meant the end for this mission work. Ger was only the beginning. Ger was a very unique person, whom God gifted especially for the work Ger did in starting these mission contacts. No one we know would have been able to be the pioneer that Ger has been. But there are certainly others that can take the work from here: Two evangelists from Emanuel, the Hmong congregation in St. Paul, are studying for the ministry right now. Jay Lo and Pheng Moua are studying to be “Pastors to the Hmong.” Both of them are very talented men, and have the potential to be more than qualified to pick up the work that Ger began. Their language skills could even be sharper, and if God wills, their understanding of Scripture could even surpass Ger’s. And they have two very enjoyable personalities, as I was privileged enough to experience when they sat across

the table from me in an interview. God-willing, they will be fine servants for the continuing of the spread of His Gospel. What's more, there are nine ^{men} guys studying the Bible with Pastor Meister in Thailand right now who also have the desire to serve their Lord.

And is there still work to do? Another one of Pastor Piepenbrink's memories from the funeral was the sight of Ger Yang's brother, speaking in the closing comments, holding up a bundle of 400 letters from Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, from people who had recently written to Ger Yang urging him to visit them and teach God's Word. The harvest is certainly ripe.

Finally, a word or two about the title of the paper are in order. As Jay and Pheng sat across the table from me during that interview, there was a twinkle in their eye as they pointed out fondly and light-heartedly how they used to refer to Ger as the "Hmong Apostle Paul." And light-heartedly, we can share their fun by drawing more than a couple parallels between Ger Yang's Ministry and the Apostle Paul's. Ger Yang was an unbeliever for half of his life. Not only that, but with his fellow pagan family, was a hater of Christianity. By the amazing grace of God, Ger was led to move to a different country, where he was converted and made a child of God. Because of so great a gift, he was tireless in his efforts to spread that good news. The thought at the very heart of his message was always justification and the peace which comes with it. Ger went on three missionary trips. The latter two were to follow up the work started on the one before. His body was unmistakably marked by the prosthesis that replaced his missing arm and the scar on his face from the explosive. That could certainly keep a man trusting in God as he spread His Word. Does it sound like Paul yet? If it already did to you, then you would also have noticed how he and Bee Cha closed their letters, in Paul's familiar formula. And as Paul was primarily the missionary to the Gentiles, Ger was the missionary to the Hmong.

It is certainly fun to remember Ger in this light. Of course, we are not saying that any of these parallels are without their limping, nor are we placing Ger on equal par with an inspired writer of God's Word. But God definitely displayed His grace through Ger Yang's life, a missionary who was not ashamed of the Gospel. God used this man to be His faithful servant to the glory of His name!

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26. Raasch, Robert: *Letter written to pastors involved on March 23, 1994*
27. Hagedorn, Harold: *Letter to pastors involved with the ministry of Ger Yang, May 11, 1994*
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33. Yang, Ger. "An Exciting Journey to Laos and Thailand" - *A short Summary of my trip to Laos & Thailand.*
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