

The Saints in Southeast Asia

By G. Carlos Smith

Mystery, intrigue, and suspense; a culprit lurking behind every bush; jungles full of wild animals, headhunters, and bandits—these would greet us in Southeast Asia, friends told us, after it was announced that my wife and I had been called to head the newly formed Southeast Asia Mission. This mission, with headquarters in Singapore, was formed on November 1, 1969.

We did have many apprehensions about going to this part of the world; but as I write these words upon returning home, my mind wanders back to my wonderful friends in Asia and our experiences with them. I love them; I miss them. Part of me is still in Asia and always will be.

Yes, life is different in Asia. There are foods strange to us, and many odd creatures. Occasionally a python invades man's domain, a tiger runs amok, a cobra bites someone. Water buffaloes labor in the rice paddies, and an occasional elephant is seen pulling his heavy load. Oxen steadily, doggedly move the wooden-wheeled carts. Dogs bark, roosters crow, and monkeys chatter at all hours.

A constantly hot climate is shared by all countries in Southeast Asia except West Pakistan and northern India, where it is cold in winter and hot in summer. Farming is the main industry in all these countries except Singapore. That small island, which is the city of Singapore as well as the country of Singapore, is a highly industrialized area at the southern tip of the Malaysian Peninsula.

This part of the world is unbelievably busy. At the seaports, thousands of ships come and go each day. Airplanes of all types crowd the busy airports. The roads are full to overflowing with buses, trucks, cars, and bicycles.

Our assignment to direct the Lord's work in this far-off corner of the world was an assignment we shall cherish forever. We met wonderful people and made new friends. We saw the Church grow and gain stature. We felt the presence of the Spirit and knew we were doing what the Lord desired of us.

We arrived in Singapore the last week of October 1969 in the company of Elder and Sister Ezra Taft Benson, Elder and Sister Bruce R. McConkie, and President and Sister Warren Brent Hardy. President Hardy was then president of the Southern Far East Mission, part of which would become the Southeast Asia Mission.

Selection of this city as the headquarters seemed to be a logical decision. Missionaries from the Southern Far East Mission had been first sent there in 1968 and had met with great success in their teaching of the gospel. In April 1969 Elder Benson had dedicated Singapore to the teaching of the gospel and had pronounced many blessings upon the government and the people. A branch was organized, and it grew and flourished. Many souls entered the waters of baptism, and in early 1970 the branch was divided into the Singapore and Singapore Second branches; a new chapel is now being built on Church property on Bukit Timah Road.

After we had been in Singapore for two and a half days and had located a mission office and purchased furniture and equipment, we went on to Thailand. There the Bensons left us and flew on to Europe, while we continued our business of organizing the mission.

Thailand, formerly known as Siam, had been dedicated to the preaching of the gospel by Elder Gordon B. Hinckley in 1966. However, missionary work had been slow, largely because of the language barrier. A branch had been organized in Bangkok consisting primarily of American citizens who were living there. There was also a small group of Thai Saints in Korat, about four hours' driving distance from Bangkok. A district had been organized, consisting of the Bangkok and Korat groups and U.S. servicemen from six U.S. air bases in the country.

The dozen or so missionaries laboring in Thailand met us at our hotel in Bangkok. Then for the next two days, Brothers McConkie and Hardy and I and the Thai District president, Eugene Till, visited our servicemen members.

Now, over three years later, we have some fifty missionaries in Thailand in nine different cities. There are four branches of Thai members plus the English-speaking branch in Bangkok and the U.S. servicemen's groups. A beautiful new chapel has been completed in Bangkok, and the Church is well established in Thailand. [*Note: The new Thailand Mission has been organized since this article was written.*]

We proceeded on to Vietnam, an hour and a half flight from Bangkok, arriving in Saigon on November 1, 1969, the official date the Southeast Asia Mission came into existence. Vietnam was part of our mission for one year, and it then became part of the Hong Kong Mission.

Sister Smith and I bade farewell to others in our party in Saigon and flew back to Singapore. We had many apprehensions, and we were a long way from home with a big job to do. But we were comforted, for we knew that we were in the service of the Lord.

Our mission covered a vast area, including Laos, Malaysia, India, and other countries where we have a few scattered members but no proselyting missionaries as yet. How is the work going in Southeast Asia? Perhaps the story of our growth in Indonesia will convey some idea of the way in which the Lord is blessing us in this part of the world.

Indonesia is a sovereign nation composed of many thousands of islands and 130 million people, most of whom are of the Muslim faith. This beautiful green country is replete with natural resources, dense jungles, high mountains, fertile plains, and succulent tropical fruits.

We had stopped in Indonesia on our way to Singapore to open the mission. On October 28, 1969, 23 of us climbed to the crest of the vine-covered hill that overlooks the valley of Bogor, on the island of Java. Those present included Elders Benson and McConkie, President Hardy, myself, our wives, and Brother Strisino, an Indonesian who had been baptized the week before by Saints living in Djakarta. He was the first Indonesian baptized in this dispensation in that country.

In the beautiful meeting held there, Elder Benson dedicated the land and the people to the work of the Lord. The Spirit was present in great abundance, and great peace came to me, an assurance that somehow the work would begin and that many would respond to the important message of our missionaries.

Now the problems began. Where and how could we start? How could we obtain permission from the government to commence our work, and how could we obtain visas for our missionaries? With the help of the few native Indonesian Saints plus other friends, we were able to receive the necessary clearances, and on January 5, 1970, the first six missionaries arrived in Djakarta. They had none of the tracts or other tools with which to teach, and they could not speak the language. But they worked hard, amidst many trials and hardships. They learned the language, taught the people, and established the Church in Indonesia. We now have some 200 Indonesian members with branches in three cities. Twenty-eight missionaries are now assigned to this country.

The Lord's church and the priesthood are now in Southeast Asia. As the people heed the message of the gospel, this vast area of the world will grow and prosper in goodness and truth. The blessings of heaven will be evident, and the kingdom of God will roll forward. I commend our wonderful brethren and sisters in Southeast Asia and join hands with them in a humble prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving for the Lord's goodness to us all.

Notes

Former president of the Southeast Asia Mission; presently manager of the Missionary Department of the Church