

Letter from Rebecca Young in Indonesia

August 27, 2008

Friends,

It's funny (as in funny-strange) to live on the equator and realize that, because there aren't four seasons, it's hard to know how to refer to certain periods of the year. It's August now and as the seminary students have returned to begin a new semester, I keep wanting to say, "How was your summer?" But there is no such thing as summer here. They translate the English word "summer" as "hot season," so I would have to say, "How was your hot season?" and would get the same puzzled looks as if I said that back home. Similarly, they don't refer to a fall or spring semester, but instead they say "odd semester" for the fall term and "even semester" for spring.



Becca and her missiology students: Arman, Sergio, and Toar, at the Seminary chapel.

So as of August 13, we have begun the "odd semester" of 2008 at Jakarta Theological Seminary. I am teaching two courses: one in Christology (the study of Jesus Christ) to third-year students, and one on missiology (the theology of mission) to the fourth-year class. They come directly from high school to seminary, so my students are from 21 to 23 years old.

Last year, when I first arrived, I was team-teaching the class on Jesus Christ. This year I am teaching it on my own and have designed my own syllabus. I've asked that each week a few of the students prepare a short presentation on the topic for the day. At our first class meeting, I allowed the students to read the syllabus then choose the topic they were most interested in. There

are a total of nine topics, including "Jesus' Resurrection: Truth or Myth," "The Historical Jesus," "Jesus in Film and Media," all of which are hot topics these days. But surprisingly the top choice of nearly half of my 35 students was "Jesus as Viewed by Other Religions." The second most popular is "Jesus and Women," and the third is "Jesus and Liberation Theology."

I think these preferences reveal much about the context my students face. They are a minority religion in Indonesia. The overwhelming majority (80 percent) is Muslim, with Christians at around 12 percent and Hinduism and Buddhism about 2 percent each. Another 3 percent of the population follow indigenous religions and a fraction of 1 percent are Confucian. Therefore, it's a serious struggle for my students to know how to speak openly about Jesus Christ. The message I sense from their selections is that they want to know what other religions say about Jesus so that they will be better equipped to face questions and engage in dialogue with their neighbors of other faiths.

As I sorted through their choices and tried to decide how to allocate the groups, I was careful not to look at the students' names or give preferential treatment. So it was big surprise after I had finished to see that I had inadvertently assigned the topic of "Jesus and Women" to four male students. I may go back and regroup so that women's voices are included in the discussion, but I find it fascinating and encouraging that so many men are eager to know more about the role of women in the meaning of Christ.

Their third choice of “Jesus and Liberation Theology” is also interesting, and I look forward to hearing their reasons for pursuing this topic. I will hazard a guess and say that they want to learn more about a view of Jesus Christ that does not come from a Western point of view. They are eager to explore what is referred to as a view of Christ from “below,” that is, from people who are poor, oppressed, and seeking to know how Jesus liberates them from the many causes of their suffering.

Indonesia continues to be one of the poorer countries of the world in spite of its abundant natural resources. This poor status is due largely to rampant corruption and the ongoing legacy of 50 years of military dictatorship that ended in 1998 and left the ousted dictator with an estimated wealth of \$65 billion. I recently heard a statistic that 77 percent of Indonesia’s wealth is held by the residents of the city of Jakarta, which represents 5 percent of the population of Indonesia. No doubt my students, who have come from rural areas where a majority of the people live in abject poverty, are shocked by the extravagant lifestyles of Jakartans. They seek a way to rectify their faith in Christ with the disparities in wealth they see, not between rich Westerners and their poorer Asian neighbors, but among the people of their own country. I look forward to exploring with them how Jesus can be the answer to helping the poor of Indonesia overcome the injustice of their exploitation by the wealthy.

In my second class, on missiology, I am team-teaching with Chung Seung Hyun from the Korean Presbyterian Church, a recent graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary in California with a Ph.D. in missiology. Since he is the expert in mission, I am there mostly to help with his Indonesian and with the technical issues of teaching.



Becca and Dr. Chung Seung-Hyun, her co-teacher in the missiology class. They're standing in front of Dr. Chung's office at Jakarta Seminary.

In our first class session last week, Dr. Chung set the tone for what will clearly be an enjoyable semester. He told the students that we had limited the amount of homework assignments in order to make the class less of a chore and more of a pleasure. He wants them to have a positive view of mission. His specialty is the use of communications and mass media in mission, so I am sure he will be using lots of multimedia presentations. With this Internet-savvy generation, I think his young, enthusiastic, visually-oriented style will be a true plus in making the study of mission a lively one. My sincere hope is that the students will see how mission is the way we as Christians with joy and thanksgiving participate in the *missio Dei*, God’s great “Yes!” to the world, including to the beloved folks of Indonesia.

Rebecca Young

The 2008 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study, p. 94