

PAPUA NEW GUINEA - OH, THE WHEEL NUT!

Following WWII, the first Baptist ministry began in Papua New Guinea in 1949. Now, there are over 400 local churches with over 60,000 believers! Global Interaction Consultant Geoff Cramb recently visited church leaders to support and encourage them in their striving toward their vision of 'Believing God and Serving Holistically'. During this trip he also witnessed a very significant event.

During the drive into the Baiyer Valley I thought, "could there be a more beautiful country than this?!" It's a spectacular journey down the Rugli gorge into the valley. I was on my way to a baptismal service on the site where many locals reckon the first baptisms had taken place in 1956.

I knew this would be a special trip.

Half an hour into the trip I pulled over to the left on one of the sweeping right hand bends as I needed to "go to the post office" (translating the local pidgin idiom). When I returned to the 4WD I saw Ben, the National Youth Coordinator had a wheel spanner in his hand. "It's always good to check the wheel nuts", he called out. While not a totally bad idea, I've never done so early in a trip like this.

Well, he found a loose nut on one of the wheels! Not only loose, but broken, so that it served no purpose! We checked the others and decided they were good enough to carry the work and decided that on returning to Mt Hagen at the end of the day we'd get the mechanic to add a new nut.

The incident became a bit of a metaphor for what we were to observe.

Driving down that gorge always provokes an emotional response in me. I remembered my first glimpse of the lush, green Baiyer Valley 39 years ago when I entered as a missionary with my young family. Now, we drove past the Bible College at Kwinkya, through Kumbareta where a new hospital is being built and turned off at Munduwasa. We parked in school grounds after enquiring where the baptisms were taking place. It was not a long walk, but a testing one for a not-so-young bloke, down a steep slope to the stream.

I recognised a pastor I'd first met a dozen years ago. He'd left the Baptist fold for other spheres and here he was back again. The word was that he has been quite influential in the lives of many young people who were about to be baptised.

What a spectacle it was! The 123 people who were preparing for baptism were seated in rows according to their clans. The men wore white shorts but no shirts, as they were emulating the service 60 years earlier and dressed to match photographs they'd seen. Mostly young people, they had come from four congregations in Manduwasa, Kulimbu, Mara and Pakela. About 500 people stood around the banks of the dammed-up stream to witness the event. Most protecting themselves from the midday sun, some with umbrellas, others under the shade of a tree on the steep inclines of the small gorge. They were all fixated on the baptisms, listening as names were called out.





Of course hundreds of people had been baptised over the years; what was so special about today? It was significant because the churches had experienced a few years of decline, but now is in a period of revitalisation. The Spirit of God is at work particularly in a movement among young people. Services like this one are planned for other regions too, such is the turning to Jesus in faith commitments.

Four pastors baptised four people simultaneously and at the half way point the pastors were replaced by another four. As the names of each group were announced and they emerged from the water, a singing group burst into song. Order, dignity, worship and ceremony marked the proceedings.

After the baptisms we climbed out of the cutting near the stream and gathered under a large temporary sail (a huge series of poly tarps) erected for the occasion. It was time to share in communion together. Those baptised moved along the large crowd warmly shaking hands.

One man sang a self-composed song by way of testimony. He knelt at the communion table and leaders gathered around and prayed for him. He and two others had been 'away from home' and were returning to faith. They were warmly embraced and welcomed back into the fold.

Yes, the good wheel nuts, the faith community, had been working and moving and now they could welcome back the broken and celebrate!

Ben was invited to bring a greeting. I was too. Somehow, in the minds of the people, I represented all previous missionaries who brought the Good News and the thousands of Baptists in Australia and New Zealand who sent them! An honoured role. The preacher encouraged everyone. There was not an expectation that an easy life of godliness lay ahead, nonetheless, the risen Lord Jesus would be with all.

You might have heard of tribal fighting in recent years. You might have heard that the church was not as strong as it once was. Yet, many have expressed that God is at work doing a new thing. The upcoming generation is evidencing a spiritual vitality that is honouring to God. The future looks bright.

After more worshipping, talking and of course eating, it was time to begin the journey back out of the valley. Quite a day! It was a day I will never forget and I thank the Lord for the opportunity of witnessing the events. I was challenged, again, to continue to take my part in restoring and influencing those not currently in the community of faith.



Baptisms in the Baiyer River, 1976. Photo taken by Ian Walsh (left).
Baptisms in Kumbareta, 1976. Photo taken by Ian Walsh (top right).
The communion table following the recent baptisms.
Photo taken by Geoff Cramb (above)

Opportunity to serve in PNG

The Baptist Union of PNG leaders have identified the need for a new Global Interaction worker to live and serve among the team. The focus of the role is to equip pastors and develop and deliver units of training.

For position description, visit:
www.globalinteraction.org.au/join/PNG

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