

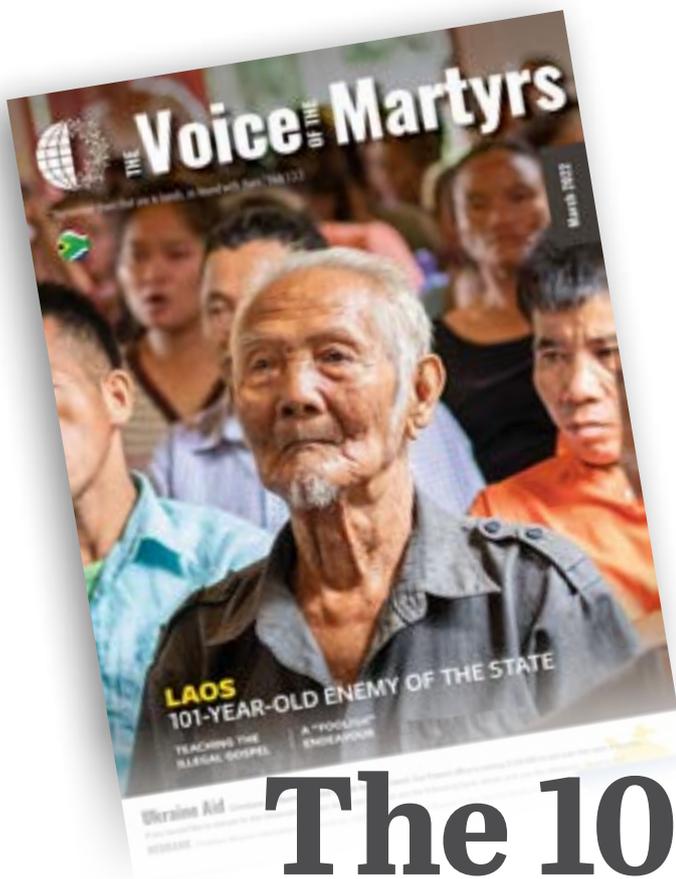


THE Voice OF THE Martyrs

July 2022



“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” Heb 13:3



In our March Newsletter this year, we focused our stories on the persecuted in the country of Laos, however, we never shared the story of Bounsaen.

Here is Bounsaen's story.

The 101-Year-Old Enemy of the State

Having witnessed the introduction of Christianity under French colonialization, harsh persecution under a Communist government and, more recently, a greater openness and church growth, a Laotian Christian is growing "impatient" to be with the Lord.

How old are you, Grandpa?" a Front-Line Worker asked, using a traditional East Asian term of respect for elders. At age 101, Bounsaen is an elder statesman in the relatively young Laotian body of Christ. And while he can't remember the exact date of his birth, he knows he placed his faith in Christ at age 20.

When Bounsaen came to know Christ, he was working as a witch doctor, a common occupation among animistic tribes in Laos. In cultures centered on ancestor worship, community members turn to witch doctors for medical treatment, financial advice, requests for favourable weather for their crops, help with insomnia and innumerable other needs. Accidents, illnesses and any other unwanted occurrences in the village are generally attributed to someone having angered the spirits or neglected to adequately appease

them.

After memorizing a number of incantations, Bounsaen was able to earn a good living as a young witch doctor. "I was worshiping spirits," Bounsaen said. "I was a wicked and clueless person. When people talked about Jesus, I did not like it."

His attitude toward Christianity



▲ Bounsaen was conscripted into the army in the 1960s. He took his Bible and a hymnbook with him.

changed, however, when he fell in love with a Christian. "I saw her at first glance, and I wanted to marry her," Bounsaen said with a laugh. "She wanted to marry me too." His chosen spouse, a young woman named Term, lived in the village of Om Jun, where a large number of people had come to faith in Christ during French colonialization.

Determined to win Term's heart, Bounsaen went looking for a Bible. "I was reading the Bible all the time," he recalled, "and it made me know firmly that there is a God and He is real. I saw the truth deep down in my heart. That is why I wanted to passionately believe the Lord in my heart."

In retrospect, Bounsaen sees how God used his attraction to a Christian to, in turn, draw him to Himself. Soon after coming to faith in Christ, Bounsaen led his mother, father and several others to the Lord.



“Some of the village people who were worshiping spirits got sick, and the spirits did not cure them,” he explained. “I went to pray for them, and they were healed. This opened many people’s eyes.”

Bounsaen continued to worship with Christians in Om Jun during the country’s civil war between Communist Pathet Lao insurgents and the Royal Lao Army. As the only Christian village in the province, the Om Jun Christians welcomed the encouragement, fellowship, Bibles and hymnals they received from Believers in nearby Thailand.

Then came the Communists.

Imprisoned Under Communists

After the Lao Patriotic Front, the political party of the Pathet Lao, came to power in 1975, they worked to eradicate Christianity from their newly conquered country. And they saved the harshest persecution for those who had been Christians for decades. “Many people renounced their faith during that time,” Bounsaen recalled.

A foreshadowing of the

Communists’ policies had occurred years earlier, in the 1960s, with the kidnapping and murder of long-time church leader Pastor Laa. The pastor, who lived in a nearby village, travelled to Om Jun every Sunday to lead worship. At the urging of local Communists, villagers abducted Laa and interrogated him for three days before shooting him and leaving his body in the jungle. “They killed him like he was nothing,” Bounsaen said.

At the time of Laa’s murder, Bounsaen was serving in the army. As one of only a few Christians forced to join, he carried his Bible and hymnbook alongside his rifle. When authorities tried to extend his army service, Bounsaen explained that he had to quit because the Om Jun church needed a leader. Bounsaen volunteered to replace Pastor Laa, as everyone else in the church was too scared to take his place.

As the Communists’ power increased throughout the 1970s, so did the pressure they placed on Bounsaen and other Christians. “Many came to persecute me,” Bounsaen said. “They were police

▲ For Khmu Believers, baptism symbolizes leaving traditional, animistic ancestor worship behind for a new life in Christ.

officers and some soldiers. They came to investigate and interrogate me three times.”

Soon, Communist authorities decided to take the Christians’ Bibles in hope that the church would fall apart. Soldiers swept into town, gathered all the Bibles, poured gasoline on them and set them on fire. But the only result was that Christians were more careful to hide their Bibles.

“We hid the Bibles in the jungle,” Bounsaen said. “For my Bible, I wrapped it tightly with cloth and hid it in the trees. When I wanted to read the Bible, I would go to the hiding spot and unwrap it. Those were some tough times. I and the other Believers had to have so much patience.”

As a form of persecution, Bounsaen was often forced to provide manual labour on building projects, like a school. As he worked, authorities

continually pressured him to abandon his faith. Bounsaen said they hoped to get rid of him so others would also renounce their faith. "They did not want others to be like me," he said.

Finally, in December 1980, Bounsaen was arrested and imprisoned for three months. He spent his days performing manual labour, using prayer to help him endure the hardships. "I asked the Lord for help," he said. "Let persecution not be the reason for me to reject the Lord. May the Lord help me overcome and be victorious over this tough challenge."

Prisoners received no blankets or clothes, and even food had to be provided by their families. When Bounsaen's family came to deliver food, he had them write down his messages to the church. "I wanted to write those letters because I was afraid that Christians in the village would no longer have a heart for the Lord, become discouraged and eventually want to stop their faith," he explained.

He exhorted his church to keep meeting and to stay strong. He told them he was sure he would be released soon.

"I was not scared during my time in prison," Bounsaen said. "I was full of joy and happiness to the Lord in front of the police. I knew that the Lord would help me, because in the Bible the Lord said ... 'Do not be afraid, as the Holy Spirit will be with you and prepare you for this.' I kept thinking like this and stood firm because of the Lord's words."

After about three months, authorities had had enough. They told Bounsaen that if he could complete a "seminar" on communist principles, they would release him. They thought that if they showed him the "truth," he would change his mind. After concluding that Bounsaen had read the training material, the authorities took him before a judge and released him. "They thought I understood the seminar," Bounsaen said with a laugh. "Why they thought that was up to them, but I stood firm in my faith."

Bounsaen was arrested two more times during the 1980s for his work as a pastor, spending more time in prison each time.

Worship in the Jungle

The next decade was a time of hardship for the church in Om Jun. But as the Communists tried to close the church, Bounsaen's message remained the same: "They can do whatever they want," he told the congregation. "If they want to kill or keep us alive, it is up to them. We must be solid in this village. We cannot love our bodies. Our bodies will return to the land. Our spirit will be with the Lord. We have to stay

other events that would happen.

"For worship, we would gather in a circle — under a tree or anything that gave us shade," he continued. "There were a lot of insects that bite, too! We did not have any instruments.

▼ Though persecution is less intense than it was when Bounsaen was a young man, new Believers are often kicked out of villages. It is important for Bounsaen to build up the faith of the younger generation.



solid in the Lord."

As authorities applied more pressure, the church was forced to meet in secret. Each week, church members would leave the village at different times, carrying bags as if they were gathering food, and vary their routes to a predesignated meeting location. For regular worship they chose a location that was about a 30-minute walk from the village, but for special celebrations they travelled farther into the jungle.

"To communicate, we would not talk much face to face," Bounsaen said, "because everyone knew the days, their role and where to go for worship. Once we gathered for worship, it was easier to announce where we would worship next and

Our instruments were just our hands for clapping. We would worship with prayer, songs and preaching."

The services lasted close to two hours, with Bounsaen preaching to about 15 people most days. At times, however, as many as 50 people met for worship. "It was a very tough and testing time," Bounsaen said.

In late 1983, Bounsaen and several other church leaders decided to visit the governor of the province and tell him they wanted to build a church in their new village. They told government officials that they no longer worshiped spirits, that several of them had been Christians for generations, and that they wanted a place to worship. The authorities begrudgingly approved their request. "Once we heard that,"



▲ The freedoms Bounsaen's church enjoys today were won at a great price. He continues to lead prayers and visit the sick.

Bounsaen said, "we built the church!"

Despite ongoing pressure from Communist authorities, the church kept growing and more people came to know Christ. "I recalled Jesus' words, 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,'" Bounsaen said. "When I was struggling and facing a tough situation, my heart was with this church and the people. Seeing the church grow was so joyful to me. The Lord has His plans."

When authorities saw that they weren't going to be able to stop the Christians, the persecution waned. And with less persecution, the church grew faster. Some officials even seemed to understand that the Christians had a positive influence on society. "When we have our Christian celebrations now," Bounsaen said, "we invite the officials of the Lao Patriotic Front to come join us at the church."

Not Too Tired

Today, the church Bounsaen led is almost 100 years old. And with more than 500 members, it is the largest church serving the Khmu ethnic group. Bounsaen no longer preaches

every week, but he occasionally gives the opening prayer and continues to visit and pray for those who are sick. He requests prayer for his own health too, as he is no longer able to move around as he once did, and he also expressed concern for his family.

"Now I am tired physically, but my heart is not tired for the Lord's work."

"Do pray for my family to be solid in the Lord," he said. "My son-in-law does not want to go to church. His faith is getting smaller and smaller. May the Holy Spirit light a fire in his heart to come back to seek Him." He assured his family that after he passes away, he will be in heaven, and that if they trust and love the Lord, they will join him there.

Though his body has grown frail with age, Bounsaen's spirit remains strong. He told a Front-Line Worker that he would like to go to Bible school now. "My heart has just wanted to serve the Lord since I was 20 years old," he said. "Now I am tired physically, but my heart is not tired

for the Lord's work."

VOM provided hearing aids for Bounsaen last year, which helps him listen to Christian radio programmes in the Khmu language. And he also listens to sermons on an MP3 player. "It encourages me so much," he said.

Having lived a long and fruitful life, Bounsaen eagerly anticipates something better. "I am really looking forward to the day that I am going to be with the Lord," he said. "All my sufferings in this world will be gone. ... I am looking forward to the reward He has for me, too. I wonder what kind of retirement I will get. I am getting impatient, to be honest. He has prepared a home for me."

Bounsaen's message for his brothers and sisters in Christ around the world reflects his love for those he has served so faithfully for more than eight decades: "Do not forget the Christians in Laos." ●

BANGLADESH: Christians Determined to Worship Despite Attacks by Militant Buddhists

After gathering for worship in a small hut for more than a decade, more than 20 Christian families from the Chakma people group decided to build a church to accommodate their growing congregation. "Now other people can see how we worship and pray, and they can follow," said a Believer named Rashir. "We want it to be a symbol that there are Christians in the village."



Buddhist insurgents destroyed this church building before it could be completed.

While some Christians in Bangladesh worship in unregistered churches, many meet publicly. "Having a physical building gives you a form of legitimacy and permanence in the community," a Front-Line Worker said. "Building a church can either intensify persecution by painting a target on the Believers or ... pacify the community and signal the rights of the Believers to gather and worship."

When the Chakma Christians began building their new church, a group of mostly-Buddhist insurgents known as the Underground Army broke windows in the new building and threatened to torture or kill Christian men. The men fled into the jungle and remained there for nearly seven weeks.

While the men were in the jungle, the women and children hid in a single home. The insurgents eventually found the women and beat them with canes before looting the Christians' empty homes and stealing their crops and livestock. The Underground Army also threatened to kidnap the children, who have not been able to attend school since the attack.

Many of the Christian families remain firm in their faith despite the persecution. "Even if they destroy our building, we will still worship together under a tree," Rashir said. "When persecution comes, our faith becomes more and more strong. The Bible says persecution comes; if persecution doesn't come, it means the Bible isn't true."

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: Trauma Training for Victims of Rebel Attacks

When Seleka rebels attacked a church in Kaga-Bandoro in 2014, many Christians were killed, including the wife, brother and two children of a man named Ipolite Kimono. Ipolite, who escaped through a window, has struggled with grief for the last several years. "My heart was broken," he said. "I constantly think about the situation. The visions come back into my mind, and I relive that awful moment."

In July 2021, Ipolite attended VOM-sponsored trauma training, which helped him heal and gave him the opportunity to minister to others who have experienced trauma. "I have been able to forgive those perpetrators totally since the training," he said. "I now help other people in the church who have been traumatized."

Christians have been targeted in successive waves of violent attacks in the region since 2013. "Muslim neighbourhoods were intentionally spared in the attacks," a Front-Line Worker said. Many Christians were displaced by the attacks and continue to struggle with emotional wounds.

Rebel forces were pushed out of the region in early 2021, allowing Front-Line Workers to begin meeting the needs of those affected by the violence through trauma workshops, medication distributions, education initiatives and Bible distributions. "The needs of persecuted Christians in the area are great," the Front-Line Worker said.



Ipolite said trauma training helped him recover from rebel attacks, and now he helps others heal from similar trauma.



Where Are They Now? FENNY FROM INDONESIA

Fenny Suryawati was attending church with her daughter, Clarissa, on 13 May, 2018, the day suicide bombers from the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) killed 15 people at three Indonesian churches. Ten people from Fenny's church were killed.

Fenny was standing near the main entrance to the church when a black minivan rammed the church's gate, striking two parking attendants. Five bombs inside the vehicle exploded, igniting the gas tanks of cars and motorcycles in the parking lot and causing multiple secondary explosions.

Fenny suffered burns to 85 percent of her body, and Clarissa was also injured. A fellow church member rushed them to the hospital, but Fenny's survival was uncertain.

Fenny spent three months in the hospital. And when she was eventually released, she required months of physical therapy to regain the use of her hands.

With VOM's help, Fenny receives ongoing medical treatment and rehabilitation. She has undergone multiple surgeries and still has more to endure. A surgery to remove some large scars around both ears had to be postponed because of the Covid-pandemic.

While Fenny's recovery continues to be a long and challenging process, she hopes God will use her story and her pain for the advancement of His kingdom. When people ask about her scars, she eagerly tells them about Christ.

Where Are They Now? ROBERTO FROM MEXICO

Roberto Santo Gomez is an indigenous evangelist in Chiapas state who takes the Gospel to remote, unreached communities where there is little Christian presence. A former rebel turned itinerant preacher, Roberto walks for days, often with little or no food or other support, to preach God's Word. "He is going to communities where no other Christians will go," a Front-Line Worker said.

Roberto came to faith in Christ after an accident in which he fell from a train and lost his left arm. As he lay on the ground in agonizing pain, he recalled the words of a street preacher he'd once heard and asked God for help. When God answered his prayers, Roberto dedicated his life to advancing His kingdom.

Roberto's ministry is dangerous, and he experiences ongoing persecution because of his work on the frontlines. In February 2020, two different rebel groups warned him to stop preaching in the local markets. Then, in April 2020, he was beaten by angry villagers in another village. "He is constantly threatened by the people in the villages he visits," the Front-Line Worker said. "Nonetheless, he remains faithful to the calling God has placed in his life."

For the past several years, VOM has supplied Roberto with Bibles and training materials. In addition, VOM has helped him with medical care, transportation and communication tools so he can continue sharing the Gospel on one of the most difficult and dangerous mission fields on earth.



Prayer Diary

July/August 2022

JULY

- S 17 OMAN** Pray that missionaries in Oman will continue to share God's love with boldness and zeal.
- M 18 UNITED ARAB EMIRATES Pray that Emiratis will encounter Bibles and other Christian resources.
- T 19 BAHRAIN Pray for the encouragement of women who worship in secret for fear of losing their children and families.
- W 20 MAURITANIA Pray that Christians who worship in secret will find fellowship with other Believers.
- T 21 LAOS Pray for the spread of the Gospel among Buddhists.
- F 22 YEMEN Pray for displaced Believers who are leaving the country as refugees.
- S 23 COMOROS Pray for wisdom in how to reach Comorians with the Gospel.
- S 24 KYRGYZSTAN** Pray that churches will minister to migrant workers who have returned after losing jobs elsewhere.
- M 25 QATAR Pray for missionary families deported from the country because of their bold witness.
- T 26 KAZAKHSTAN Pray for the encouragement of Believers who face continual pressure from their hostile government and communities.
- W 27 ETHIOPIA Pray for peace and stability in the Tigray region and between different ethnic groups.
- T 28 COLOMBIA Pray for churches in the "red zones," as Marxist guerrillas have been closing churches.
- F 29 ALGERIA Pray for the many who hear the Gospel through social media evangelism.
- S 30 CHINA Pray that young Believers will stand firm under any circumstances and stay close to God.
- S 31 INDIA** Pray that God will touch the hearts of government officials trying to stop evangelical work.

AUGUST

- M 1 JORDAN Pray for a young mother held hostage by relatives for several weeks because of her Christian faith.
- T 2 AFGHANISTAN Pray that our brothers and sisters will persevere through opposition and persecution.
- W 3 UZBEKISTAN Pray for more fellowship and collaboration among churches.
- T 4 LEBANON Pray for Christians whose houses were destroyed in the Beirut Port explosion on 4 August, 2020.
- F 5 CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC Pray for traumatized Believers who have lost loved ones and seen unspeakable acts of violence.
- S 6 IRAQ Pray for Brother Ahmed, a former Muslim who went missing in Baghdad in October 2020.
- S 7 NEPAL** Pray that laws designed to restrict churches will not be approved.
- M 8 ALGERIA Pray for Christians whose churches were closed by the government.
- T 9 SRI LANKA Pray for those ministering in Buddhist-controlled areas.
- W 10 TUNISIA Pray for Christians who are isolated by distance from other Christians.
- T 11 CHINA Pray that God will provide protection and mercy to those in difficult situations.
- F 12 ERITREA Pray for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of recently released prisoners.
- S 13 KENYA Pray for a Somali Christian family who returned to their community to share the Gospel.

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