

GOSPEL HIGHWAY
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2007/2 Tribute To Dr. Ham Tjeng Sin (1959-2006)

by B. S. Poh

It is with a heavy heart that I write this tribute to Ham Tjeng Sin. He was a close friend and a dear brother in Christ, who departed to be with the Lord on 18 September 2006. He has left the fragrance of his life, ministry, and testimony with us such that I write with much fond remembrance of him.

Growing years

Brother Ham was born in Jakarta on 27 April 1959. His parents passed away when he was still a young boy. He was raised by his grandparents, who had to care for a large family. He developed into an independent-minded, resourceful, and streetwise person as he struggled to supplement the family income, by selling eggs in the streets of Jakarta and doing other odd jobs.

Ham adopted the Indonesian name of Hanafi Yahya. He was known as “Pak Hanafi” to people in Indonesia, while his friends overseas knew him as “Tjeng.” I was one of the few who called him “Brother Ham.” He told me once that he knew who was calling on the telephone by the voice of the caller, and by how he was addressed. He graduated from the Jakarta Education and Training Institute with a Drs. degree, and from the University of Jakarta with a law degree (Ll. B.).

Ham was converted when he was a student and was very active in Christian activities. He became a member of the Holy Word Church (Gereja Santapan Rohani Indonesia), which was established through the ministry of the well-known Chinese evangelist, John Sung (1901-1944). Brother Ham taught in the Jakarta Christian Senior High School for seven years before going to study at the Capernwray Bible School in the United Kingdom, from 1990 to 1991.

Before leaving Jakarta, he had the painful experience of determining God’s will for his life. As a teenager, he frequented the cinemas and enjoyed watching the kungfu shows produced by the Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong. He also enjoyed the romantic shows put out by the film companies in Taiwan. One particular show that left a deep impression on him was “Good Morning, Taipei.” Little did he realise that he was to experience the heartaches of romantic relationships himself. After much internal struggle, he became convinced that he should pursue theological education in UK, leaving behind all such relationships. All these experiences would have been used by God to mould his character such that he could relate well to young people in later days.

Life in UK

At Capernwray, Ham came to know the director of the Bible School, Mark Thomas, very well. Ham

looked upon him as an elder brother, who demonstrated his care to him in practical ways. On one occasion he generously paid for Ham's trip to Europe. That trip was of great significance to his life. He was able to meet up with close friends, including one Daniel in Austria, who had been a fellow-student at Capernwray. Ham was to be Daniel's bestman during his wedding. While at Capernwray, Ham held the honourable record of being a dish-washer who never broke a single dish.

After his time at Capernwray, Ham studied at the London Reformed Baptist Seminary. There, he made many friends and had his theological convictions sharpened. He also met people who knew me. These friends told me about him. He proceeded to Wales in 1993 to pursue a Ph. D. degree at the Evangelical Theological College of Wales. His doctoral thesis was on mixed marriages in Indonesia, covering the theological, ethical and legal aspects. We began corresponding at this time.

Ministry in Indonesia

After his return to Indonesia, he attended our Reformed Ministers' Conference in Kuala Lumpur, in 1995. In 1997, he invited me and my wife, Goody, to his wedding in Jakarta. We were unable to attend at that time due to financial constraints. Jakarta seemed so far away in those days, when it is only a two hour flight from Kuala Lumpur. Ham kindly sent us a wedding photo after that. He told me of how some well-meaning friends and relatives had pressured him to get married. He resisted them, until he met Yuni, who became his wife. We were to share in their joys and sorrows over the years.

Ham was invited to establish a seminary by a church. After its establishment, politicking among the staff and personal attacks against him caused such pain that he resigned from the seminary. Ham and Yuni attempted to plant a church, using their house as the meeting place. Sadly, it had to close down a year after because his wife was "not ready for this kind of work." Together, they lived a truly sacrificial life for the Lord. Ham's salary as a lecturer was used totally to support the ministry in West Kalimantan. He also sold off his car so that the money could be used to purchase a four-wheel-drive jeep for the ministry there. He purchased a second-hand motorcycle for Yuni to use, instead. Yuni worked at a university, being in charge of the printing of the university bulletin. It was during one of the trips to-and-fro that she met with an accident and sustained a broken arm. They lost a child during birth, which was a painful experience. Ham decided to have Yuni accompany him in some of his trips. We met together in Kuching, Sarawak, during one of my regular trips there, not long after they lost their child. They were subsequently blessed with two daughters.

Ham had started a Christian Foundation (called Paguyuban Kristen Bina Muda Wirawan) which deals with Christian education of all sorts. The Foundation runs seven centres scattered throughout Indonesia, each of which has a theological high school, except for the one in Jakarta, which is a centre for training Sunday School teachers. The centre in West Kalimantan also has a primary school and an orphanage. He placed able people to run these centres, visited them regularly, and handled only problems that these individuals could not solve. Ham was well-respected by the churches and was often called upon to help in resolving problems, in getting approvals for projects, and in speaking at seminars. I was privileged to be involved in teaching in some of the Christian centres, and in the church seminars, in the past three years. The first seminar, for church leaders, which I spoke at was held in a village deep in the jungles of Kalimantan. We had to travel by bus on bumpy roads, then by speed boat along the

Kapuas River, and finally by jeep into the jungle. Ham had the foresight of bringing for me a mosquito net from Jakarta. In the evenings, we enjoyed soaking ourselves in the cool, clear stream nearby.

Disaster relief

Ham was well-placed to play a very important role in the relief efforts following the series of disasters in recent days - the tsunami which affected north Sumatra and the islands on the west coast, the earthquake on the island of Nias, and the earthquake at Yogyakarta. He organised the relief efforts by getting the church leaders to form a committee, each with his own role. He ordered for tonnes of rice and bags of sugar to be transported by lorry and boat to the islands of Nias and Banyak, built temporary houses for the victims, and had vaccination for the children. He planned for long-term relief such as helping the victims to start new vocations, rebuilding churches, and establishing theological and vocational schools.

When the tsunami first occurred, Ham was invited by the army commander of Indonesia to fly by helicopter, together with the United Nations representatives, to survey the extent of the disaster. When the earthquake occurred, Ham was saved providentially from certain death as he was delayed a day arriving at Nias, having been diverted to deal with tsunami relief in Aceh. Consequently, he was at the forefront of the rescue and relief effort a few hours after the disaster occurred - being addressed as "Doctor" while he administered first-aid and gave directions to other rescue workers.

I travelled with him on a number of his trips - by land, sea, and air. It was during these trips together that he shared some of his personal thoughts and experiences with me. Ham showed himself to be extremely resourceful, willing to listen, and able to give directions. He led by example, being willing to "get dirty" when necessary. I was with him in Nias, after the earthquake, when he crawled into a collapsed concrete, three-storey, house to look for the personal documents of the owner. He awoke early each day to read his Bible and pray.

Last days

Ham was invited to UK in July this year, to attend the School of Theology at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. He also travelled to some churches to give a report, since they had contributed substantially to the disaster relief. Goody and I, together with our third son, went to UK in mid-July to attend our second son's graduation at the University of Sheffield. We made arrangement with Ham to meet at Sheffield, and travelled together for a few days in a rented car. He made a quick trip to Capernwray Bible School to arrange for his sabbatical leave next year. We had a happy time together, travelling along country roads and visiting friends along the way.

In September, Ham came with a number of delegates to the Reformed Ministers' Conference in Kuala Lumpur, as he had done in the past few years. He acted as translator for some of the talks, for the benefit of the Indonesian delegates. After the conference, I took him to see a heart specialist in a private hospital in Kuala Lumpur. It was a routine check-up. The doctor found nothing irregular. The last e-mail I received from him was on 15 September. He said he was about to leave for Nias to oversee the relief work, and would be there till the end of the month. He also acknowledged receipt of

a sum of money I had collected for the relief work.

On the morning of 18 September, at 9.00am Malaysian time, I received a telephone call from one of the men in Nias informing me that Brother Ham had passed away in his sleep. They were at a loss as to what should be done. I counselled them to calm down, to appoint a certain pastor to act as leader, and to arrange for the body to be sent back to Jakarta. I advised that a close friend in Jakarta should be sent, accompanied by a lady, to break the news to Yuni as soon as possible. I told Goody the sad news, and asked that she and our guests, Dr. and Mrs. Oliver, had a time of prayer together while I e-mailed the news to all our contacts overseas. I telephoned Mark Thomas of Capernwray Bible School, who said he would inform Daniel in Austria. I telephoned Dr. Peter Masters, the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. I also called Pastor Jeyakanth in Sri Lanka, and Pastor Samuel Rai in Nepal. Samuel was a close friend of Ham's. I learnt, later, that Brother Ham had severe chest pains at 10.00pm the night before, was sweating profusely, and had difficulty in breathing. He vomitted as well. The men had wanted to send him to hospital, but he had refused to go, saying that he would be alright in a moment. The pain subsided. He fell asleep at about 2.00am. He was found lifeless at about 6.00am. He was rushed to hospital, but was pronounced dead. It was obvious that he had died of heart attack.

Yuni called that morning to request for my presence at the funeral. She called again the following day to asked me to take part in the funeral services. Goody and I left for Jakarta that afternoon, after we had seen Dr. and Mrs. Oliver off at the airport. In Jakarta, wake services were held in the mornings and the evenings of the two days before the funeral. Different groups - churches, seminaries and alumni - led the services. Each service was attended by well over 200 people - which was testimony to the many lives touched by Brother Ham. I contributed to the eulogy on the first night, delivered the word of God on the second day, read out e-mails from abroad on the second night, and gave the closing prayer at the burial. At Jakarta airport, while on the way home, I sent Yuni a telephone message, saying that I was missing Brother Ham, and that she must be missing him more. I could hardly hold back my tears.

The future

We have been in touch with Yuni. She is coping well. The Christian university where she works has offered to subsidize the education of her two young daughters up to university level, and to pay for their medical expenses. Yuni will appoint two close friends of Brother Ham to supervise the work in Nias and West Kalimantan, as she would not be able to be on the field. All the people involved in the Christian centres and the relief work have resolved to carry on the projects started by Brother Ham. I will be helping out, short-term, in raising funds to complete the projects. Longer-term, I will be helping in the teaching in the Bible schools and in sourcing for teaching materials, while continuing with church planting in Indonesia. Brother Ham had said to me that he was not worried about the future, knowing that God would raise up the right people to continue the works he had started.

While travelling together in UK in July, and again at the Reformed Ministers' Conference in Kuala Lumpur in September, I discussed with Brother Ham His plan for the future. He had wanted to phase out of disaster relief work by the end of this year, and spend three months of sabbatical leave at

Capernwray Bible School in UK round about April next year. His family would accompany him there for two months, while he would stay on an extra month to finish writing a book on “Church Order.” He would then return to Jakarta to establish a Reformed Baptist Church, probably in the western suburb of the city. He believed his wife was “now ready” for such a work. He had given up lecturing at a university in Jakarta, and in a couple of seminaries, when the disaster relief needed his full attention. He was planning to do part-time teaching again, as time permitted. We also planned for our two families to travel together around Java and drive to Bali, at the end of this year. God, however, has other plans for us.

You will understand why we miss this dear friend. Our four sons miss their “Uncle Tjeng.” He was a tremendously energetic, gifted, and humble servant of God. He was 47 years old when called home, but he had accomplished more than most people who are twice that age. He had been such a testimony in life and in death, living out the truth, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). We accept his home-calling with humility. Truly, “the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

In Memory Of A Beloved Brother

*On bumpy roads through swelt’ring days,
We travelled together;
How we shared our hopes, dreams, and thoughts,
Too sacred to utter.*

*On bumpy seas ‘neath clear, blue, skies,
We travelled together;
Speeding to needy souls afar,
God’s mercies to render.*

*In aeroplanes, through silky clouds,
We travelled together;
Our Lord we served as best we could,
In word, works, love and prayer.*

*Called home by God, you left this truth
For us here to ponder;
Who is that Friend of friends who sticks
Closer than a brother?*

*Sweet memories of you we keep,
In our hearts, dear brother;
O Lord, keep us faithful to You,
Till in heav’n we gather.*

By BS Poh, October 2006.

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