400 Saved hoax/urban legend

In our January/February 2005 TACL we briefly mentioned that the story of the saving of 400 Christians in Meulaboh – after they gave in to Muslim pressure not the celebrate Christmas in the city and went up a mountain – was not true. The story is now on numerous websites around the world and gaining additional 'life' as it circles the globe through forwarded emails, and is repeated in church bulletins and from numerous pulpits as Christian 'Good News' or as a sermon illustration. As it circulates, it is gaining additional comments and introductions – even slight rewording.

A full and more detailed report, which also shows some of the variations, is available from our office.

Most who repeat the story trace it back to Willem (Bill) Hekman, the Pastor of Calvary Life Fellowship in Indonesia and repeat that version as he apparently gave it initially. His name is often given at the end of the account:

'**God Protects His own!**

We know that 80% of the town of Meulaboh in Aceh was destroyed by the Tsunami waves and 80% of the people also died. This is one of the towns that was hit the hardest. But there is a fantastic testimony from Meulaboh. In that town are about 400 Christians.

They wanted to celebrate Christmas on December 25th but were not allowed to do so by the Muslims of Meulaboh. They were told if they wanted to celebrate Christmas they needed to go outside the city of Meulaboh on a high hill and there celebrate Christmas. Because the Christians desired to celebrate Christmas the 400 believers left the city on December 25th and after they celebrated Christmas they stayed overnight on the hill.

As we all know the morning of December 26 there was the earthquake followed by the Tsunami waves destroying most of the city of Meulabohand thousands were killed. The 400 believers were on the mountain and were all saved from destruction.

Now the Muslims of Meulaboh are saying that the God of the Christians punished us for forbidding the Christians from celebrating Christmas in the city. Others are questioning why so many Muslims died while not even one of the Christians died there.

Had the Christians insisted on their rights to celebrate Christmas in the city, they would have all died. But because they humbled themselves andfollowed the advice of the Muslims they all were spared destruction and can now testify of God's marvelous protection.

This is a testimony of the grace of God and the fact that as believers we have no rights in the world. Our right is come before God and commit our lives to Him. Our right is kneeling down before the Lord almighty and commit our ways to Him. He is our Father and is very capable to care forHis children. Praise the Name of the Lord.

Bill Hekman

Pastor Calvary Life Fellowship in Indonesia.'

We were disturbed by the danger of distorted theology promoted by this message, which, even if the incident was true, raised serious questions. Questions, it seemed, that very few Christians were asking as they triumphantly passed it on to friends or promoted it on their websites.

Some Muslim Fundamentalists, as well as some very conservative Christians, referred to the tsunami as God's judgement. In a number of places, including Meulaboh, the only, or one of the few, buildings not destroyed was the local mosque. Some saw ***this*** as the divine intervention of God (though it was more a matter of the kind and strength of the building and its construction, as well as its location – rather than anything divine or supernatural).

Many of the local community people who had miraculous escapes from the tsunami were not Christians. Many who died, were injured, or suffered loss of family, home, livelihood or more included Christians. Faith and religion were not an issue in the devastation caused by the tsunami, or in the miraculous escapes and rescues for some. People of all Faiths and backgrounds were

affected by this disaster. And the Bible makes it clear that God neither caused it, nor gave special protection to any one section of people. Consider the following passages: Luke 13:1-5; Matthew 5:43-48; John 3:16-17; 2 Peter 3:9; Isaiah 63:9; Romans 12:15.

There are important implications in all of these passages about a Christlike attitude to others, including all those affected by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami disaster – Christian and non-Christian alike. For the Christian there can be no triumphalism, or hint of such, in disaster.

We are NOT saying that this was the intention of those who passed the message along – but the danger is there.

Apart from concerns about Biblical teaching and the reflecting of Christlike attitudes to all who suffer, the major problem with this story of the 400 saved Christians in Meulaboh is that it is not true.

Did Willem Hekman actually have first-hand contact with any of those 400 supposed survivors? Was he personally told the story by any of the survivors, or their pastors or priests?

The answer to these basic questions is: ***NO!***

Calvary Life Fellowship - Lippo Karawaci Indonesia - does not have its own website on the Internet, but it does have a page on the Expatriates website: http://www.expat.or.id/ (http://www.expat.or.id/orgs/calvarylifefellowship.html).

The Expats website also has a discussion forum, which, for a number of weeks discussed the story of the supposed saved 400 Christians. The following statement was made on the forum:

‘**Author : webmaster @[66.224.154.199]**
Date : 02-15-2005 @ 3:21 AM

We have heard from Bill Hekman regarding his original source of this story ... he read it on this forum ... http://www.mail-archive.com/jesus-net@yahoogroups.com/msg01061.html

See the subsequent posting above the original posting ... where it says (in Indonesian) “rekan kami dari WFP mencoba mencari tahu di daerah Meulaboh ternyata tidak ada orang yg merayakan natal ke gunung,entah dengan maksud apa sseorang yang membuat rekaan cerita seperti ini.”

When roughly translated this means:

Our colleague from the WFP tried to find the source of this story in Meulaboh and it turns out that there were NO people celebrating Christmas on the mountain [the night before the tsunami]. We do not know the purpose of someone posting/making up a story like this.’

This made it very clear that:

A.) Bill Hekman got the information from an Internet website forum and NOT from first hand knowledge given him by people actually involved in the supposed incident. It seems he took the Indonesian account, translated it and put his name to it.

B.) The Expats forum revealed that subsequent information (actually the next day) on the Jesus-Net forum from which Bill Hekman copied his message made it clear that this story was not true.

It should also be noted that the Expats webmaster – responsible for both the forum AND Calvary Life Church page information – acknowledged on February 15, that the subsequent posting made it clear this story was NOT true.

Yet, in spite of this, he added the following comments to the church’s page:

‘**Saving of Meulobah Christians in the Tsunami of December 26, 2004**
We have confirmed the story via phone and email with Bill Hekman and through an Indonesian pastor who has heard the story from several persons with firsthand knowledge, as follows:
This is the account from the believers in Meulaboh. The 400 believers involved are from the Roman Catholic Church, GPIB Church and HKPB Church. They had requested permission from the District Leader (Camat), Police (POLRES) and DANDIM (Army) to celebrate Christmas in Meulaboh. They were told that since Meulaboh is under Sharia Islamic law it would better to go somewhere where there are no Moslems. So the believers left the morning of Dec. 25th and walked about 5 kms to a hill area. They were accompanied by some members of the Marine Corps who were also Christians. They celebrated Christmas the afternoon of Dec. 25th and stayed there for the night at a “Retreat”. They had brought food, etc. to camp there for the night. The tsunami took place the morning of the 26th of Dec. These believers are now refugees living in Aceh Jaya. Another accounting - Meulobah Testimony [MS Word 22 KB]’

To further add to the confusion, visiting the same church web page a few days later we discovered

that the reference to '**an Indonesian pastor'** was changed (without explanation) to read: '**an Indonesian-American pastor'**. Even more troubling, without any explanation, the webmaster altered his forum posting of February 15 (instead of posting a new message). After acknowledging the Internet forum from which Bill Hekman got (copied) his information, the webmaster deleted his comments about the subsequent posting denying the story and the question why someone would post such a story that was not true. In place of the deleted comments originally in his posting he substituted the following: '**We've also been in touch with his sources...who have CONFIRMED the story…see http://www.expat.or.id/orgs/calvarylifefellow ship.html Sorry for the up and down of this story .. but we were persisting to get to the source .. and got a firsthand confirmation!'**

Unfortunately this is both incorrect and unhelpful. There has been absolutely **NO** '**firsthand confirmation!'** – and the removal of contradictory information is not an appropriate way of dealing with lack of evidence.

The preceding comments posted to Calvary Life Fellowship's web page state that: '**The 400 believers involved are from the Roman Catholic Church, GPIB Church and HKPB Church.'** The GPIB Churches (Gereja Protestan di Indonesia Bagian Barat**)** are part of the World Reformed Churches network. The current minister of the Jakarta Community Church (a GPIB Church) is Peter Holden from the Uniting Church in Australia. The Protestant Christian Batak Church - HKPB Churches - are part of the worldwide Lutheran Church family.

NOT ONE of these church bodies, in Indonesia or elsewhere, has repeated the supposed miracle salvation story of their own members included in the 400 who supposedly missed being washed away in the tsunami disaster. Nor have any other groups that have been active in disaster relief in Aceh – from the UN World Food Program; the Singapore Red Cross volunteer teams; Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders); the Mercy Corps; Food for the Hungry and the City of Phoenix joint relief project. All of these groups (including the Christian groups and groups with Christians in them) have been active in Aceh, including Meulaboh, following the tsunami disaster. Not one of them has repeated the story of the 400 supposedly saved Christians, nor have any of the people involved in relief aid in Meulaboh told their friends and churches about the 400 when they returned to their home countries, families, friends and churches.

Pastor Paulus Surya, pastor of the Indonesian congregation at Bullcreek Westminster Presbyterian Church, spent three weeks in Indonesia in January and February 2005. He spent time with friends, relatives and others, particularly checking on the effects of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami disaster in Indonesia. He informed us:

'**I myself have met with the director of OBI (Obor Berkat Indonesia - a Christian organisation who work and help people in Aceh). We spoke about a similar story and had confirmation that there was no truth in it either.'**

To cap it all off, the story of Italian Roman Catholic Franciscan Friar, Ferdinando Severi, clearly contradicts the claims of the Bill Hekman story.

Friar Severin, a Roman Catholic missionary in Aceh, had gone to Meulaboh several days before the disaster, to celebrate Christmas Mass in the local Catholic chapel in town. He was still there on Boxing Day when the tsunami struck. He was later reported missing, believed drowned until he was found, safe and well (considering his experiences) some days later.

He told his story of preparing for Sunday Mass (having celebrated Christmas Mass in town the day before) and about to visit a sick parishioner when the tsunami struck. Hearing calls about the rushing water coming his way he ran and, with a number of other people, found shelter from the rising flood waters on the second floor of a high building,. The building was the local mosque. The Roman Catholic chapel was completely destroyed. Hours later, police and army personnel moved him and the others to higher areas towards the edge of town and eventually he was transported out of the area. He, and other Christians, were fed and cared for by Muslims in Meulaboh. He later told others that not only had the Roman Catholic chapel been destroyed, but out of 50 Roman Catholic members in Meulaboh, nine were killed by the tsunami.

Britain's Barnabas Fund reported: '***02 January 2005* From partners in Indonesia, received 2nd January 2005: "According to information from Mr. Fajar Tobing in Meulaboh: 43 members of the congregation died, 12 were injured and 3 are in critical condition. 62 have been rescued and are together with a total number of 125 refugees. At the time of writing, there are still many people missing."'**

Clearly both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians in Meulaboh, along with Muslims, died in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami disaster. The story of 400 Christian saved is NOT true.
Please carefully consider the evidence – don't be guilty of bearing false witness or fermenting further tensions between Christians and Muslims (in Indonesia and elsewhere), by passing on (through emails, sermon stories, Sunday bulletin announcements or otherwise) a story that is NOT true and therefore will ultimately be dishonouring to Jesus Christ.
IF you have already used, or passed on, this false story – please contact those affected, apologise for the unintentional error, and please be more cautious next time.
(A more detailed 7+ pp. report, including various other Internet links and more, is available from our office. Please enclose a donation to cover costs or paper and postage.)

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