



Physician for God: David Weng

ALICIA LEE

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.
—John 10:10a

I have known David Weng for more than fifteen years, and I am privileged to introduce him to the readers of *Word & World*. David's full name in Chinese is Red-Helm Weng (David is his English name). People here in Taiwan are used to calling him Dr. Weng.

Before entering the MDiv program of China Lutheran Seminary in Taiwan in 2003, David had been a medical doctor for twenty-six years. After graduating from the seminary, David began his current ministry, serving as a head chaplain at Chia-Yi Christian Hospital in south central Taiwan.

Due to his contributions to society, David is quite well known to both Christian and non-Christian communities in Taiwan. In his life as a medical doctor, David served as president of three different Christian hospitals from 1981 to 2000. Because of his expertise and outstanding leadership, he was then appointed by the central government to be the Director General of the Bureau of Health Promotion from 2001 to 2003. In 2006, David was awarded The Prize of Medical Care and Devotion in the Republic of China, which acknowledged David's obvious achievements in the society, and serves as a sign of his positive witness for the gospel.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

David Weng was born in a non-Christian family in Tainan City in 1950. His

David Weng has been a medical doctor in Taiwan, then a hospital chaplain. Now, he takes up a new calling as a medical missionary in Thailand. His story belongs among "the cloud of witnesses" that others need to hear.

parents were faithful believers in Taiwanese folk religion. Growing up in a traditional family, David followed his parents in ancestral worship and accompanied his mother to the temples where they worshiped different gods.

Raised by well-educated parents, David is the second child among five siblings. Due to his diligence, obedience, intelligence, and discipline, he won the favor of his parents and teachers when he was a schoolboy. He behaved well and did an excellent job in his schoolwork. After a competitive exam, he entered the number one senior high school in his hometown. With the influence of his medical doctor uncle, David's parents encouraged him to follow his uncle's steps when he grew up. He passed the very tough exam to the Medical Department of Taiwan University—the number one university in Taiwan—to do his medical training from 1968 to 1975.

TURNING POINTS OF LIFE

The year 1969 was the turning point in David's life. God prepared some "holy angels" around David who led him to come to know Jesus in the university. Since only three percent of the Taiwanese people are Christian, it was quite unusual to have six Christians in David's medical class. His Christian classmates were so devoted to their God that they could live out their faith in joy and peace. As a faithful believer in Chinese traditional folk religion, David was nevertheless very impressed with the life of his Christian classmates. With their invitation to an evangelism meeting for young people, David confessed his faith in God and became a Christian when he was a sophomore in the university.

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Like many people who turned from Chinese traditional religions to Christianity, David had to face the disappointment of his parents. As a typical Chinese son, David had to keep the filial piety by postponing his baptism until he received permission from his parents. Eventually, David's persistent faith in Jesus moved his parents' hearts and they respected his decision, with the condition that he work hard and not fail in his schoolwork. From then on, he felt much relieved and studied even harder to please his parents as well as to please God. He was eager to learn more about God also. He joined the fellowship with his six Christian classmates that made the number of the group perfect—seven in all. They regularly studied the Bible together, prayed together, and practiced God's teachings in their daily lives. They encouraged each other spiritually and started seeking God's guidance for their future steps after their graduation. In addition, they developed a medical student fellowship on campus to meet with other Christians from all medical departments at the school once a week. In the fellowship, David met his life partner Susan Tsai, and they were married in 1976. Both David and Susan are first-generation

Christians in their families. They bear the same vision to devote themselves to the medical fields with special missions.

In the 1970s, there was a great need of medical doctors everywhere in Taiwan, particularly in the remote places in the countryside; but most medical graduates preferred to stay in the big cities for a better income and life. When David completed his first term of residency in Taiwan University Hospital, he was invited to join the Taiwan Medical Team to support Saudi Arabia, but he decided to give up this opportunity to earn a higher salary and to stay in Taiwan to serve his people in need. He knew that many doctors would line up to join the medical team to Saudi Arabia, but not many would stay in Taiwan to serve those in the remote areas. One inspiration for this decision was the good example of other Christians he had met in the hospital. He was particularly touched by a group of missionaries from FELM (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission) working in the Heng-Chun Christian Hospital in south Taiwan, which was short of many resources at that time. Regardless of the cultural differences, the language barrier, the different lifestyles, and the distance from their comfortable countries, the missionaries served the local patients in the hospital without any complaints. David strongly sensed God's calling through those faithful missionaries.

From then on, David and his wife Susan, with their two children, were called to start their medical ministry in south Taiwan. As a president of the Heng-Chun Christian Hospital in 1981, David sought not only to provide people with medical care in the hospital, but also to create different programs to serve the community in Heng-Chun to promote better health and life. In a short time, the hospital was growing and expanding in size and quality under David's leadership. Because of the needs of another Christian hospital in the neighboring town, David was entrusted with another presidency and took charge of Ping-Tung Christian Hospital in 1983. When his missions in Heng-Chun and Ping-Tung were fulfilled in 1987, David was called to serve at Chia-Yi Christian Hospital in south central Taiwan, which was founded by Dr. Marcy and Mrs. Joyce Ditmanson, American missionaries who were assigned by the Lutheran Board of Mission—Lutheran Free Church to come to Taiwan to establish the ministry of Christianity through medical care in 1957.

As Chia-Yi Christian Hospital was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in April this year, David expressed his gratitude for God's guidance in leading the hospital to move ahead. David has devoted himself to the medical ministry at CYCH for more than twenty years. His thirteen years of presidential leadership at CYCH have led the hospital to be evaluated as the Regional Teaching Hospital. In fact, it became the largest regional teaching hospital in YunLin-ChiaYi area already in 1991, only four years after David became president there.

FROM MEDICAL DOCTOR TO CHAPLAIN

David's contributions to the medical fields and his outstanding leadership in

the hospitals were remarkable. He had been working in three Christian hospitals, all of them bearing witness to God's love for the people of Taiwan. David's expertise and gifts were not limited to the Christian community, but were valued also by the Taiwan government. He was appointed to be the Director General of the Bureau of Health Promotion in 2001, as his work at CYCH could be entrusted to a new leader. After having worked in the government for two years, David's heart was moved to serve the Lord in the public ministry of the gospel, for he had seen the real need of human souls. His major job in the Health Council was to help people live a healthy life, but what he could do there had little to do with their spiritual care.

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About five years ago, when the disaster of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) hit Taiwan and other Asian countries, David was working day and night in the Bureau of Health Promotion to help people escape this danger, but he felt desperate and helpless with his work for his fellow Taiwanese. At the time, God gave him a vision and challenged him to be a full-time student at China Lutheran Seminary in Taiwan. He was fifty-three years old and became a good model for young students to follow in the seminary. His humble spirit had a great impact on others in many ways. In 2005, David received his MDiv degree and returned to serve as the Director of the Chaplains at Chia-Yi Christian Hospital. (David completed his course work in two years, for he had taken many courses offered by the Theological Extension Education of CLS before he went to the seminary in 2003.)

HEARTS FOR MISSION

At the hospital, David continues to commit himself to medical missions. He has developed many projects for people who have not had the chance to hear the gospel, including locals and outlanders, such as starting programs for the elderly, hospice care, and medical mission trips to people living in the mountain areas and foreign countries. About twelve years ago, when the foreign laborers working in Taiwan became legal, more and more Filipinos, Indonesians, Thais, and Vietnamese came to Taiwan to make their living here. Among the foreign laborers, Thais were the largest group. When David was the president of Chia-Yi Christian Hospital, he started fellowships for foreign laborers to help them make feel at home in Taiwan. This made CYCH the first hospital in Taiwan to extend hospitality to strangers and foreigners, as Paul commends in Rom 12:13b ("extend hospitality to strangers"). The hospitals in which David has been or is working have served as healing centers, not only places for people to get physical rehabilitation but also to get rest for their souls. Many people's lives have been touched and changed by the

Christian care and services of the chaplains, doctors, nurses, staff, and volunteer workers in the hospitals, and many foreign laborers have become baptized Christians through the fellowships sponsored by CYCH.

In August 2008, David and his wife Susan began their new life journey in Thailand, a country to which they have been traveling back and forth every year to do the regular medical mission there. Now they will remain for at least three years to help the Thai churches. It is amazing to see the work God has done among the Thai laborers in Taiwan. Many were converted and baptized, and some of them became devoted to mission work to their own people with the help of the missionary pastors from Thailand. As more and more Thai laborers became Christians in Taiwan, CYCH established a connection with the Bangkok Bible College Seminary (BBCS) to offer special theological training programs for those interested in church work. After fulfilling their work contracts in Taiwan, these students returned to their own country for further theological education at BBCS. Up to now, two Thai congregations were founded in Northeast Thailand by those who became Christians in Taiwan under the support of CYCH. Due to the shortage of church workers and human resources in Thailand, David and Susan felt a burden to go and support them.

FOLLOWING JESUS' STEPS—A NEW CHALLENGE

When a local reporter from the *Christian Tribune* asked David why he was going to be a missionary in Thailand rather than in another country, David replied briefly, "Where there is need, there I am willing to go. Thailand is a Buddhist country full of idol worship. In response to God's calling, my wife and I are eager to share the Gospel with people there, for what we can do is so limited, only the Gospel could set people free from the bondage of their false faith in heathen gods."

To be missionaries among the people of Northeast Thailand, David and Susan have to learn the Thai language. This is a great challenge for them in their late fifties, but they seem ready for it. They believe God will grant them the needed faith and wisdom. Because they have been involved in the Thai ministry in Taiwan for many years, they know the importance of the language as a tool to build relationships with foreigners. Only the language can tear down the communication barrier between people. Moreover, studying the language is required and essential to better understand the Thai culture and the personal needs of the people. Before undertaking the mission work in Thailand, David and Susan will take six months of full-time language study in the International Language Institute in Bangkok.

"Where will you start the mission work in Northeast Thailand?" the reporter asked. David answered that he and his wife had no exact answer yet, but there were some things they might like to try, to see how God would use them in the place they are going. As he is a medical doctor, David is concerned first about the medical care and treatment in Thailand. There is great poverty in the place where they are going; sanitation is a problem also, so most people are struggling with diseases due to the

lack of food and nutrition. David is convinced that the medical ministry in Thailand can serve as a connection to relate people's physical need to their desire for the gospel. God has equipped him to be a physician as well as a giver of soul care. David responds to Jesus' call in Matt 25: "I was sick and you took care of me...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

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David remains grateful to God for his wife Susan, who has been supportive and helpful to him throughout his life. Susan has cared for him and the children, enabling David to concentrate on his work. In many ways, she deserves to be called "a capable wife" in whom "the heart of her husband trusts" (Prov 31:10–11). Susan's hard work for the family was not in vain. God has blessed their family through her. Both of their children are now medical doctors, too. Apart from her major in medical technology in the university, Susan also got an MDiv degree from China Lutheran Seminary in Taiwan, even before David did. She has led the Synodical Women Ministry of Taiwan Lutheran Church for many years and worked as an interim pastor in a Lutheran church for one year. She has joined the mission trips with David every year so that she could have the same heart for mission.

REFLECTIONS

I have been able to tell this story with the special permission of David and Susan, and with their help. As I reflect on their story I realize that David, as a first-generation Christian, was fortunate to receive permission to be baptized without suffering persecution from his non-Christian parents. But David did not take this for granted. Instead, he emphasized, "I love God because he first loved me. God has loved me and blessed me so much, so that I could serve him in return." Only a person who has tasted God's grace and deeply experienced God's goodness can become an instrument of this grace for others.

Second, I recognize that significant others contributed greatly to David's life and ministry. These include his parents, classmates, his wife Susan, and the FELM missionaries. Without them, David would not be the person he is now. God blessed him through these people so that he could be a blessing to many others.

Third, David's faith, working through love from God, enables him to serve the Lord consistently. His life has been deeply rooted in God's word, transforming him to witness God's glory by bearing fruits through his medical missions. David proclaims God's love for the world powerfully not only because he is a medical doctor, but also because he is submissive to the Lord's Great Commission, responding to Jesus' call to bring the good news to those who are in need. David's

beautiful faith in Christ is made real in the work he has done and in the people around him.

Fourth, I see that God's call to become an overseas missionary can come at any age to a person who, like David, is ready. David's commitment to mission work did not just happen by chance in his late fifties. At the beginning of his Christian life, David had entrusted himself to God's hand. Jesus himself was the first missionary by his incarnation into this world. Jesus' ministry in the world becomes the ministry of his people, who are called to follow and serve him.

Finally, one of David's favorite passages is Matt 9:35–38: “When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Since “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,” David and Susan do not only “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest,” but also respond themselves to God's calling by starting their faith journey in Thailand. God said, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Rom 10:15)—true, indeed, for David and Susan, and I pray God's presence with them as they follow in Jesus' steps. ⊕

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