

EIIT students bring the Gospel home

"A Christian school brings children, children bring parents, families go to church and churches grow leaders ... and just like that people are reached by the Gospel."

– Philip Gai

As the face of North American Christianity changes, outreach to ethnic groups and immigrants will become more important as Christians seek to live out the Great Commission. To respond to this growing need, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, developed The Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT) program. This unique program enables men and women who are already involved in ministry within their ethnic immigrant or urban cultures in North America to be ordained as pastors, missionaries, and deaconesses.

courses each year for four years and work closely with a local mentor and ministry supervisor.

To find out more about these students and the work they are doing, we caught up with a few of them while they were on campus for their annual weeklong seminar. They shared a little about their current lives, their future goals, and how their experiences at Concordia Seminary are preparing them to better serve their communities.

Philip Gai is originally from the city of Fangak in South Sudan, a predominantly Christian country in northeastern Africa. Tensions between Christians and Muslims have been simmering there for years and the region has been plagued by civil wars and general unrest. In 2000, Philip immigrated to Canada and settled in Mississauga, Ontario, joining the substantial South Sudanese population there.

Rachel Deng, have five children, three boys and two girls, and are members of St. Mark Lutheran Church, where Philip serves as a lay pastor to their Sudanese congregation under the guidance of Pastor Jeff Miskus.

It was the needs of his Sudanese congregation that pushed Philip to accept God's calling for his life and enroll in the EIIT program at Concordia Seminary. "The South Sudanese community comes from a war experience," Philip said. "There is a mistrust of God and people, and hatred between tribes that needs a solid biblical church. The Lutheran Church has great tools and resources to teach reconciliation and point to the Gospel with the message that Christ died for all of us and for our sins."

Philip has a few goals in mind as he works through the program. "I want to train myself to be aware of the word of God and interpret and teach the Bible according to Lutheran doctrine and confessions," he said. "Then I can give communion and teach the scripture in Nuer, which is the native language of many people in my congregation." Balancing work, ministry, family, and his studies is a challenge, but Philip sees signs of encouragement as he follows his calling. "I've been really blessed with my work as a security guard. I have to be at work at 6:00 a.m., but I'm there alone until 8:30 every morning, so I've been given permission to spend that time studying. God's given me good health and a job that allows me to do my assignments at work."

Coming from a different background but heading in the same direction as Philip is Vue Lee. An ethnic Hmong, Vue was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and came to the United States at the age of three. While living in California with his wife, May, and three daughters, Vue felt called to be a pastor to Hmong refugees. The family moved to Roseville, Minnesota, where he serves as a deacon at King of Kings Lutheran Church and also leads their Hmong ministry.



HAMEED ALTAI

"After seeing Christian schools opened by Lutheran missionaries in places like Brazil and Haiti, he (Hameed) knew he wanted to start one in Iraq."



Vue chose the EIIT program because although he was committed to studying the Scriptures and Lutheran doctrine, he didn't want to leave his new ministry behind. "I had started the Hmong ministry and wanted to continue to serve and study," Vue said. "I decided to stay with my congregation and gain some life experience while I studied through EIIT."

Bringing the Gospel to the Hmong community has some challenges. "The people I serve already have a religion," Vue said, referring to the widespread practice of shamanism. "When they become Christians they give up their culture and heritage, which is difficult. My passion is to help save one soul at a time by bringing people to Christ and helping them grow in faith."

Another challenge is how to effectively communicate the Gospel in a different language. Vue has found that he can't simply translate a sermon for the native congregation at King of Kings into Hmong. Although the Gospel is the same, the Hmong need to hear it taught from an eastern perspective. Through his studies Vue is learning to dig deep into scripture and convey the message from the Bible more clearly to both cultures.

Like Philip and most of the EIIT students, Vue also has a "day job." His job at CenturyLink keeps him very busy, but it all fits into his vocation. "I don't go evangelize, I evangelize as I go," he said. "No matter where I am, I always try to go and do what God has called me to do."

Some EIIT students' dreams reach all the way back to their homeland. Not only is Hameed Altai a vicar at Faith Lutheran Church in Troy, Michigan, but he is also working to start a Christian school in Iraq. To Americans that might seem crazy, but Hameed sees children in a heavily Muslim, war-torn country as just that, children in need of the Gospel. Over the years Hameed has maintained his connection to his home country. After seeing Christian schools opened by Lutheran missionaries in places like Brazil and Haiti, he knew he wanted to start one in Iraq. It turns out that the northern region of Kurdistan may be a good place to start a Christian school. Relative to other parts of Iraq, it has been relatively safe and secure, but there is one other important factor: the role of the government. "In Northern Iraq the government is very open," said Hameed. "They will provide land and even finance the startup costs for a Christian school because they support education."

Conditions in the Middle East can change quickly, so Hameed is acting right now. He is in the process of forming a 501(c)(3) organization to start the school and has the blessing of his church and the Michigan District. Very recent fighting in nearby provinces is sending thousands of refugees from the city of Mosul into Iraqi Kurdistan. It's unknown how this will impact the future of Hameed's school, but it does serve to highlight more than ever the need for God's grace and mercy in this broken world.

VUE LEE

"My passion is to help save one soul at a time by bringing people to Christ and helping them grow in faith."

Philip Gai would also like to start a Christian school in a place of upheaval – in his case his home country of South Sudan. "A Christian school brings children, and children bring parents," said Philip. "Then whole families go to church, leaders are formed, and just like that, people are reached by the Gospel." The discouraging headlines we see everyday are, if nothing else, a reminder of the urgency and importance of reaching people with the Gospel.

As we move into the future, our culture, and therefore our church, will continue to change. It may not look like it has for the past 175 years. The students of the EIIT program are reaching out to the people in their ethnic communities to share the Good News of Jesus in new and different ways, and strengthening the foundation of our church for the next 175 years and beyond.

For more information visit www.csl.edu or contact Dr. John Loum at loumj@csl.edu or 314-505-7076.

PHILIP GAI

"I want to train myself to be aware of the word of God and interpret and teach the Bible according to Lutheran doctrine and confessions."



Most EIIT students have families, full-time careers, and serve in volunteer ministry at their LCMS churches. On this path to ordination, they also study scripture and Lutheran theology through 16 distance education courses and four annual trips to the Concordia campus in St. Louis, Missouri for in-depth seminars. Students typically take four 10-week

Philip spent five years working for the South Sudanese Settlement Agency helping newcomers assimilate into their new lives in Canada. When the agency lost its funding, he took a job as a security guard and started working with an organization called Africa Inland Mission as a director of ministry to Africans in Canada. He and his wife,