

The 1975 Unification Church Missionary to Suriname's Testimony

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Photo date and location unknown

In 1975, as an American foreign missionary I was sent to Suriname to work with a Japanese brother and a German sister. Suriname is a South American country with a tropical rain forest climate and a small diverse population of beautiful, racially mixed people. During my time there I had deep experiences with God and our True Parents. Through this testimony I hope to share some of those experiences.

After receiving the blessing and attending a 120 day training program in Barrytown, New York where we studied the Divine Principle, Unification Thought and Victory over Communism and where True Father came and poured out his heart to us almost every other day, I was deeply inspired. Father was sending missionaries to some 120 countries throughout the world, one each from America, Japan and Germany, and I had been selected to go to Suriname. One evening as the workshop was drawing to a close I went to the dining room to pray for my assigned nation. As soon as I began, I was overwhelmed with a feeling of utter grief. I wept profusely and inconsolably for a while and when I was done, I noticed that my tears and mucous had formed a small pool on the table. How could I feel this way for a country to which I'd never been? I wondered. The answer was obvious: God exists and is the Heavenly Parent of mankind; as such He is grieved to see His children suffer; He was sending me to Suriname on His behalf to help end that suffering. That profound experience formed the basis of my understanding of why I was being sent.

On his way to Suriname, the Japanese missionary, Shinichiro (Mike) Mikuni, flew to New York to meet up with me. As we set out to Suriname together, a small country on the Atlantic coast of South America bordering Guyana to the west, French Cayenne to the east and Brazil to the south, I felt he was truly my brother. Suriname has a population of around 350,000 people made up of various races living mostly in the capitol city of Paramaribo and another smaller city, Nickerie, both on the Atlantic coast. The rest of the inhabitants, descendants of run-away-slaves known as Bush Negroes and native Indians, live in small villages in the interior, a thick jungle of which the rest of the country is comprised.

At that time Suriname was transitioning from a colony of Holland to an independent nation and the entire country was in turmoil. To work the land, slaves had been brought from Africa. After slavery was abolished, indent workers were imported from countries such as India and Indonesia. Consequently, the population became quite diverse. To represent these various peoples, separate political parties were created. Suriname was also the home to an American Aluminum mining company named Suralco through which it had strong ties to America. It also had ties to South Korea through a shrimp company that fished off Suriname's coast. But Suriname had a communist party, too and Guyana, together with their

embassies from Cuba, Mainland China, Russia and North Korea, was also seeking a foothold in the newly emerging country. All of these parties and their varied interests were represented in a Parliament with a President. It was this political body that was charged with making the new country's constitution. As the various parties vied for power, there was much tension, both within Parliament and in the country at large.

When Mikuni and I arrived in Paramaribo late one evening, we went directly to the main hotel. The German missionary, a young sister named Barbara Joosten, had arrived several weeks ahead of us. We had not been in contact with her and didn't know where she was, but luckily she had left a note for us at the hotel. She was staying in a rented room several blocks away so instead of checking into the hotel, we carried our luggage through the hot, dusty streets of Paramaribo to where Barbara Joosten was staying. There we rented another room from the Christian woman with large-framed, thick-lensed glasses who had taken Barbara under her wing. When we awoke the next morning we learned that the hotel where we had originally planned to stay had been engulfed in flames. It was allegedly the victim of politically motivated arson, but we missionaries couldn't help but see it as an assault aimed at us as well. Invisible spiritual forces were not happy that we were here, it seemed, and we felt this clearly. (That experience set the tone for me and for all of the time I would work in Suriname, I would feel and see clearly the many ways in which both God and Satan worked.) A few days later, we moved into an apartment on the second floor above a busy street in downtown Paramaribo.

There we faced our first challenge: how to work together. Father had clearly said there was to be no Cain-Abel relationship among the missionaries, yet a core structure of our church life was based on the importance of unity between leader and follower in just such a Cain-Abel relationship. Without this, it was hard to imagine, according to our understanding of the Principle, how God could work through us. Being Japanese, this was especially true for Mikuni.

At issue was the fact that we each had a different idea of how to accomplish our mission. Mikuni, who had come as a journalist, wanted to do research for the first six months or so while I was under the belief that, if we really had strong faith, we could accomplish our mission within the first 21 days. Both Barbara and I believed our main focus should be witnessing, so I began meeting people on the street below our apartment while she focused on developing her network of contacts. (Officially, as I remember, she represented herself as a student. I applied for a visa as a businessman with IL HWA Ginseng from Korea and Mikuni applied for a visa as a journalist for our church's newspaper in Japan.) The climate in Suriname is hot and rainy and people tend to move about slowly. For example, they go home from work from 2 till 5 in the afternoon to have lunch and take a nap then return to work in the cool evening. It is not important to arrive at an appointment on time and many things can be put off till the morrow. Filled with zeal and being from industrialized countries, in stark contrast we were quite busy, bustling about there in the nation's capital within walking distance of the presidential palace and national government buildings. During such a critical moment in the country's history, we must've stood out like apples in a basket of oranges. (I know the government was aware of our presence and at least once we were called in for questioning. By the time I left, I had yet to be granted a visa.)

The first thing we did together was to set up a holy ground. One day we were out walking through the city when we came to a palm tree garden behind the Presidential Palace. In the garden was a large rock about six or seven feet tall and three or four feet in diameter. We decided to make this our holy ground. The rock is Christ and the tall, straight palm trees were like righteous believers; it was a wonderful place to pray and we would often go there.

Through street witnessing I met a young man, a Bush Negro who had come to Paramaribo for school. After learning The Divine Principle (mostly with Barbara because the official language in Suriname is Dutch and being German she could communicate much better than Mikuni and I), he accepted our teachings and decided to join us. He was living with his Aunt at the time. Shortly after joining, he would move in with us and we would treat him like a son, buying his clothes and books, helping him with his studies and teaching him Divine Principle. Not long afterward he would introduce another young Bush Negro man who would join and move in too.

In the meantime, Barbara had been busy cultivating her friendships. The lady who had rented a room to her and whom Barbara felt had been prepared by God to take care of her when she had first arrived (the woman had been like a mother to her) was a member of a prominent Baptist church. Barbara attended their services at times and eventually Mikuni and I would go too. The minister--a warm, round-faced black man with a large, racially diverse congregation, was very outspoken about the dangers of communism. Besides preaching about this in his church, he would often warn the country at large of its dangers through pamphlets and newspaper articles. True Father had told us that when we went to our countries God would prepare a John the Baptist figure for us beforehand. Seeing this man as our possible John the Baptist, we began to cultivate a relationship with him and his elders. Because our church was being persecuted worldwide, we decided that we should focus on developing close personal ties with the minister first before letting him know of our affiliation with Rev. Moon. Hopefully this would help us to overcome controversies and doctrinal differences that were sure to arise.

His was a spirit-filled evangelical church. The congregants sang and prayed fervently, the minister gave fiery sermons, some members spoke in tongues, the minister and his aids laid hands on people to cast out demons and effect healings and performed full-immersion baptisms which they would conduct in a small, glass-lined pool behind the altar. Attending their services, I would often have a curious feeling: it was as if I was a disciple of Jesus visiting a Jewish temple two thousand years ago.

There was a lot going on in the country politically and as a journalist, Mikuni was attending press briefings, keeping abreast of the latest developments and writing articles for his newspaper in Japan. Fascinated with the diversity of peoples, cultures and languages in Suriname and coming to see the country as a kind of mini world, he would eventually start a monthly publication called "The Mini-World News". It was in English and I would help him to write it. It was the only such publication in English and as more foreign journalists began to arrive in the country to follow its development towards independence, the government would make Mikuni's newsletter available to them as a news source.

As the impending day of independence drew nearer, political tensions increased. Most of it was focused on the wording of the new constitution. At one point there was a proposal made by the party representing blacks that frightened and alarmed some of the other parties. Although they were opposed, this party had just enough votes to push it through. When the day came to vote, however, the nation was shocked to learn that one of the Parliament members had left the black's party to side with the opposition, tipping the balance in their favor and blocking her own party. The woman's name was Albertine Liesdek/Clark. A school teacher before being elected to public office, she was a brave, powerful outspoken representative of the people. Some considered her a traitor and her life was threatened. To others, though, she was a hero. Either way, the whole country was talking about her.

Mikuni was inspired by Albertine and wanted to meet her. One day he called her. When she asked who he was, he said "Mikuni from Japan". There was a well-known politician in Guyana named Jagan. Thinking Mikuni had said "Jagan" and not "Japan" and that he was the Guyanese politician's representative, Albertine told him to come over. We went together and when we met with her in her house, somehow Albertine was deeply moved. When we introduced our church and the Divine Principle to her, Albertine began to have dreams and spiritual experiences. These would convince her that indeed this teaching was the new truth that God had sent to mankind through Rev. Moon. In this way Albertine became the third Surinamese to join our church.

One day, I believe it was through our minister friend, we met a Baptist missionary who had come to Suriname from America. I don't know how he happened to come, or why, but he seemed to be keeping an eye on how the independence was unfolding. We had yet to inform our minister friend about our affiliation with Rev. Moon. We had also moved from the apartment to a flat where we lived together with our first two members. Albertine was a public figure and her relationship with us was known to only a few. Mikuni was busy with the Mini-World News. I was helping him and also developing a ginseng business.

Barbara was keeping up with her network of friends and translating for us. (While Dutch was the official language, Surinamese also spoke a pidgin-English type of language called "Taki-taki" and many also spoke English, not to mention the languages of the countries from which people's forbears had come. Gradually Mikuni and I would learn Dutch.) Things were going smoothly for a while but then our first member seemed to have a change of heart. I don't know if he became jealous of our second member or exactly what, but he started acting strangely. Eventually he left us and went over to the Baptist church. When he told them of our affiliation with Rev. Moon and the Unification Church, the minister became negative towards us, warning us strongly not to follow Rev. Moon. Meanwhile, learning of our affiliation with Rev. Moon, the American Baptist missionary acquired pamphlets from Holland where our church was heavily persecuted by Christians. He then distributed these pamphlets, which were in Dutch and which condemned our church in the strongest of terms, to all of the religious leaders in Suriname and told them about us.

Through these leaders, practically the entire nation came against us and based on these pamphlets, negative articles were written about our church in the newspapers. (I believe it was at this time that the government brought us in for questioning.)

Things were looking dark. We thought we might be expelled. The matter even came up in Parliament. I don't remember the details but when it did, unexpectedly Albertine spoke up on the floor in our defense. The nation was shocked. She was so popular, no one could come against her and our opponents didn't know what to do. It was an amazing turn of events.

Through Albertine, it seemed, God was shielding us and there was nothing anyone could do. Our minister friend stayed adamantly opposed to us but through Barbara's contacts we were able to meet some of the other top religious leaders in the country and mollify their fears.

It would even happen that, through Albertine, a close aide and representative of Rev. Moon, Col. Pak,

would be officially invited to Suriname to meet with the president. It was an amazing, total turnaround to be sure.

We were able to stay in Suriname and would eventually establish an official Unification Church. More members would join and at one point we would air a Sunday morning program on a national radio station teaching a simple version of the Divine Principle in "Taki taki".

This is but an outline of my time in Suriname. There were many challenges we missionaries faced-- internally with ourselves, with each of the other missionaries, with our circumstances -- challenges that would bring us to our knees in desperate prayer in the prayer room or have us pouring our hearts out at the rock at our Holy Ground. In this way I believe each of us forged a deep connection with our Heavenly Parent and with our True Parents with whom, through our experiences, we could feel very close, even though they were physically far away.

I will never forget my time in Suriname where God allowed such an unworthy representative as myself to taste something of the depth and power of His love. Those experiences, which are treasures I will always keep in my heart, remind me of these words of Jesus: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."