



# GARUNA MINISTRIES

A ministry of sharing the “grace, mercy and compassion” (Garuna) of Jesus in Thailand, Cambodia and surrounding countries.

GARUNA MINISTRIES | 11034 North 36th Street, Phoenix, AZ 85028 | www.garuna.org | info@garuna.org | Volume 26, Issue 1 | Easter 2026

## THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE!

“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them.” Acts 4:33

Garuna exists to share the Good News of Easter around the world. This message is not confined to a day or season. It is a year-round, life-changing, amazing promise of eternal life for us all. **Though we know the story well, God’s love for us remains a surprisingly joyful reality!** In the following pages, we will share some of the “Ministry Joyful Surprises” we’ve experienced in the past few months through Garuna Ministries!



Garuna Christian School #12 dedication with Principal Nol Samol, 300 students, and the village parents and families.

family continue the legacy by building and funding the annual operation of a Garuna Christian (Lutheran) School in Cambodia? This idea continued to blossom, and the topic resurfaced at the next reunion in 2023.

A family fundraising challenge was kicked off in 2024, and in 4 months’ time, there were gifts and pledges that far exceeded the goal. Next, Garuna located the land for the site, the plans were drawn, and the school was constructed in 2025. In January 2026, 19 members of the family traveled to their school for a special day of dedication with the villagers, teachers, students and families. These 19 represented a far larger number who were part of the project. **As of today, there are**



In the summer of 2021, there was a family reunion in Madison, Nebraska attended by several generations, including most of the 25 adult cousins and 2 of the 8 original siblings. Most were familiar with Garuna Ministries, and many were already sponsors and donors. The reunion was at St. John Lutheran Church near the original homestead. The 8 siblings had all attended the rural Lutheran school next door. **The cousins spoke about the amazing Christian influence of that one Lutheran church and school in the lives of the family, impacting the 3rd, 4th and 5th generations of family even today.** An idea began to germinate – could this multi-generational

– could this multi-generational family continue the legacy by building and funding the annual operation of a Garuna Christian (Lutheran) School in Cambodia? This idea continued to blossom, and the topic resurfaced at the next reunion in 2023.

**300 students enrolled who hear about Jesus each day and many attend Sunday School on the weekends at the multi-purpose site.**

The family patriarch and matriarch, Henry and Laura (Freudenburg) Demmel, were born in 1896 & 1900. They were married in 1920 and had 8 children. From that marriage, there were 27 grandchildren, 68 great-grands, and 119 great-great-grands (and still counting). **The “Demmel family” now welcomes 300 Garuna Kids who are part of the Demmel legacy.** These Cambodian students are now learning about Easter, as well!

## A SURPRISING REQUEST: “Can Our Family Build a School?”



19 family members traveled to Cambodia for the dedication of their “family” school. They are pictured with Garuna’s project coordinator and the contractor.



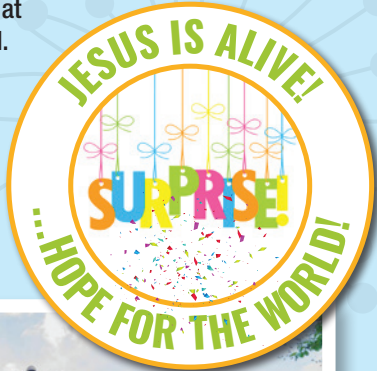


### **SURPRISE! "I GOT TO MEET MY SPONSOREE!"**

When a sponsor and sponsoree live 12 time zones apart, they seldom get a chance to meet in person. But when that happens, it's a very special day. **Recently, Garuna math teacher Ms. Sami enjoyed meeting her Garuna Teacher sponsors who visited from the Omaha, NE area.** It was a special day for all three! Garuna has three sponsorship programs: 1) Garuna Kid students, 2) Luther Institute SE Asia adult Bible students, and 3) Garuna School teachers, too! For more information go to [www.garuna.org](http://www.garuna.org).

### **SURPRISE! CHRISTMAS PARTIES ARE A SPECIAL TREAT!**

Though it's Easter season, we can't help but remember that Easter doesn't happen without Christmas! This year's Garuna Christmas events were held at each Garuna school in Cambodia and at many ministry sites in northern Thailand. **The holidays are a great time to share Jesus with 4,500 participants in Cambodia and 3,500 in Thailand.** Each party is planned by the local teams and include the story of Jesus' birth and promise of salvation.



### **SURPRISE! BAPTISMS ABOUND!**

Since the last newsletter in early December, **there have been 115 baptisms – 113 students, 1 teacher aide, and 1 Garuna teacher!** Sometimes these are part of the Christmas celebrations held at each school and several nearby Lutheran churches. In each case, the parents give approval before it occurs.

### **SURPRISE! THE PURCHASE IS COMPLETED!**

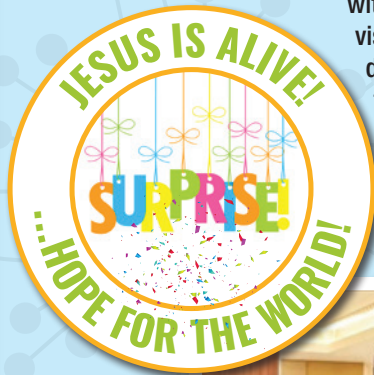
It was a happy day when the Thailand Garuna team heard that **the paperwork was finally completed to purchase a new Luther Institute-Thailand Ministry Center in Chiang Mai, Thailand.** It has taken many months to get this final approval. An even bigger surprise: During that waiting time, the first-choice option was still available, and the owner was willing to lower the price! We are excited to move in.





## **SURPRISE! THAI GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS ARE VERY WELCOMING!**

Thailand is 95% Buddhist and only 1% Christian, so it is sometimes surprising to see Garuna's Thai team being welcomed into many government schools to share art, music, Bible, and English activities with the students. They also regularly visit older teens in a Christian dormitory. On a recent visit, the teens wrote a letter to themselves to help them remember that they are deeply loved and wonderfully created by God – which is wonderful news for us all.



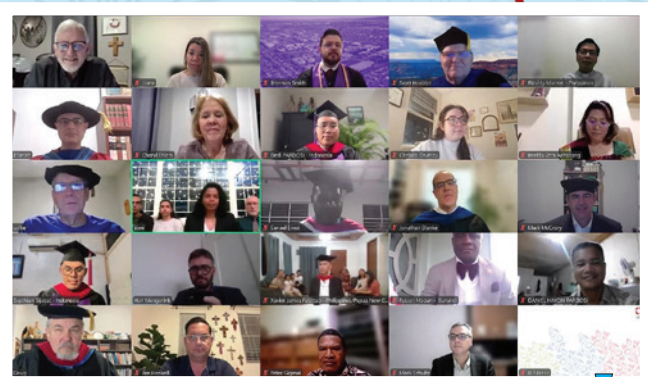
## **SURPRISE! THIS IS REALLY NO SURPRISE!**

Pastor Bun Phanna (Peter) was recently named Executive Director of the Garuna Cambodia Organization. He has served with Garuna since 2017 as the Luther Institute SE Asia director and has capably managed Garuna's system of schools. **Garuna is strongly focused on the development of indigenous country leadership, and Peter has proven to be dedicated to all aspects of the ministry.** We thank Peter and his team for their wonderful leadership and ask God to continue to bless this ministry in the years to come.



## **SURPRISE! TEACHERS LOVE TO LEARN, TOO!**

There are 89 Garuna Teachers involved with the 12 schools in Cambodia, teaching 2,625 students. We see many pictures posted each day about their classrooms and ministry. One day, we saw pictures of 20 teachers from the 3 regional schools in northern Siem Reap province gathered and sharing teaching ideas. They had initiated this on their own. **Next fall, we look forward to gathering the entire Cambodian staff for a planning, training, and Bible study retreat.**



## **SURPRISE! A ZOOM GRADUATION!**

How do you gather faculty and students from Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Netherlands, Philippines, Burundi, and multiple USA time zones together in "one place" to celebrate the completion of the Grand Canyon University (GCU) – Garuna M.A. in Christian Ministry program? You do it online via Zoom! This 2nd cohort graduated in February, and families and students gathered at various times (5 a.m. until 11 p.m.) in their unique parts of the world for this celebration. Each cohort lasts 2 years and is taught by Lutheran professors. **There is another big surprise and blessing – a 3rd cohort will be offered again this year for Lutheran leaders around the world.**



## FROM THE CHAIRMAN:

### *Easter Blessings to you in Jesus' Name!*

What is your greatest fear? You might be thinking, "That's none of your business"! Or maybe you're thinking, "How much time do you have?"

As a young person, my greatest fear and worry was a life separated from God – both now and in eternity. My worry was "How could I possibly be certain that I will live

with Christ in paradise?" But Easter helped me face my greatest fear. **The events and promises that the resurrection gives overcomes that fear by His love, mercy, and power over death and the grave. He is alive!**

The resurrection of Jesus transforms our lives moving us from fear to courage, from despair to hopefulness, from sadness to joy, from aimlessness to meaning, from death to life. A living Savior was not

what the women expected when they went to visit the tomb that first Easter morning. **What a wonderful surprise that was!**

The theme of this issue of Garuna's Easter newsletter is, "Elements of Surprise". **We are so thankful and 'surprised' at all the wonderful ways God is bringing the Easter message to friends in Southeast Asia.**

Paul writes about the **powerful surprise of the resurrection**, *"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."* (1 Cor. 15:57-58)

**May we share the wonderful surprise of Easter with others to the glory of God!**

Sincerely in Christ,  
**Rev. Dr. Jeff Ehlers, Chairman  
Garuna Ministries**



## SURPRISE! COMING SOON: A BIG CELEBRATION!

Did you know Garuna was founded in 2001? Can you believe it's been 25 years already? **Stay tuned for more details about plans for a 25th anniversary campaign to thank God for his many and abundant blessings...and that includes YOU!**



## GENEROSITY OPTIONS

**Your Gifts Make a Surprisingly Huge Impact**  
Thanks for sending your gifts to fund Garuna ministry projects in SE Asia

- **Where Needed Most Gifts**
- **Sponsoring Garuna Kids, Teachers, Bible students**
- **Want a Funding Project?** Send us a note!
- **IRA Charitable Rollovers or IRA RMD's** can provide an opportunity for stewards over the age of 70-1/2 to make gifts to Garuna from their IRAs directly with no income taxes due on the rolled over or donated funds.
- **Gifts of Appreciated Stock** – We can help you with this!
- **Donor Advised Funds** – Garuna welcomes gifts from your donor advised funds.
- **Employee Match** – Ask your employer if this option exists for you!
- **Estate Planning** – Have you considered Garuna in your estate planning?

- **Endowment Fund Gift** – Helps us plan for the future!
- **Thrivent Choice** – Garuna is eligible to receive Thrivent Choice Dollars.

If you are led to donate, your check may be made **payable to Garuna**. Gifts may be mailed to **Garuna at 11034 North 36th Street, Phoenix, Arizona 85028**. You may also donate online by visiting our secure online giving page at [www.garuna.org](http://www.garuna.org). Your gift is tax-deductible as allowable by law. The Garuna Foundation is a 501-c-3 nonprofit (EIN number: 86-1037570). Garuna will mail a gift receipt to the address you provide. Thank you in advance for your partnership in prayer and financial support.



**For more information on making gifts, please call (602) 765-7613 or email us at [jeff@garuna.org](mailto:jeff@garuna.org)**

