

“And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’”

Matthew 18: 2, 3

Black Robes and Palm Oil

After years of enjoying its reputation as an out-of-the-way place where nothing ever happens, the Luwuk area of West Timor is experiencing the rapid destruction of indigenous forests by oil palm plantations. We recently held a Christian education seminar there.



JOHN AND KAREN
CAMPBELL-NELSON

Our host in Luwuk was Rev. Chris Warkula, the General Secretary of the Christian Church of Luwuk-Banggai (GKLB). He looked a bit

worn after a two-day hike into the forest highlands where he had hiked to baptize 25 children of the Wana tribe. The Wana are hunter-gatherers, living in zealously guarded isolation. A hundred years ago they were “Christianized” by a Dutch missionary, but in view of the fact that there are no Wana language scriptures (and they don’t speak Indonesian), and there is no regular pastor or worship service.

To be baptized, the children had to be captured by their parents, who held them down while they were being anointed. (It turns out the children were afraid of Rev. Warkula’s black robe.) He explained to us, “A palm oil conglomerate has its eyes on their forest range, and is trying to either bribe or frighten the Wana into leaving. If we baptize the children and keep some sort of church presence there, then we are entitled to speak on their behalf in dealing with the government and the palm oil interests. I wish we could do more for them, but at least we can do that.” Strange evangelism—but I believe it is still pleasing to the One in whose name they were baptized.

John and Karen Campbell-Nelson serve with the Evangelical Church of West Timor. John serves as staff support for the Synod’s Theological Commission and Synod programs. Karen serves as a professor and human rights publications editor.

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