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Year Graduated: 2005
Occupation: Teacher
Place of Work: Sarawak, Miri, Bekenu – SMK Bekenu
Duration serving at your current place: Jan 2006 till present
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WSW: Hi could you give us a brief introduction to yourself & the place you are working (eg local culture, food, economical / social development, spiritual conditions etc)

TP: My name is Teorene Ponniah (female 😊). I'm a teacher in a small town called Bekenu. It's in Miri, Sarawak. I teach in a school called SMK Bekenu. It's a new school which opened its doors in March 2005. The school is not too big with about 600 students and 36 teachers.

Bekenu is categorized under "Luar Bandar". That means it's not a very rural place but it's also not very modern. It's somewhere in between. The native people of Bekenu are Kedayan. Kedayans are not the most popular tribe in Sarawak. Most people know Iban, Bidayuh and Melanau. Majority of the Kedayans live in Bekenu. So Bekenu is synonymous with Kedayan. Kedayans are Muslim. I have yet to meet a non-Muslim Kedayan. I'm not sure if there are any. There are also Ibans and Chinese but they are the minority.

Food is pretty much the same as any other part of Sarawak. Most of the people in Bekenu are farmers or fishermen. The others are shop owners, government officers or teachers! The town has a library, post office, internet shop, food stalls, coffee shops, electrical shops, grocery shop and of course the tamu (market)... Pretty much everything needed is there. Except a bank. Bekenu is about a 40 minute drive to Miri town. The road is new and quite nice. So getting to familiar settings of a big town is not a big problem.

Most of the Christians in Bekenu are Iban or Lumbawang. Some Chinese are Christians too. There is a SIB Bekenu (*the church I relate to*) which is more of a cell group than an actual church. There is also a Calvary church (*I have not gone to this church yet*) in Bekenu

WSW: So, what helped you to decide on embarking on working at smaller towns compared to the bigger cities?

TP: I feel this decision was made for me, so to speak, because I was posted to this place. So I either take it or leave it. So for me it was more about being obedient to this calling rather than actually making the decision to work in a small town.

I kind of had an opportunity to teach in a school in Miri town but I decided to stay on in Bekenu. It was just a sense I had to stay in Bekenu. Felt more at peace doing that even though I was unhappy about being in a small town. I think that peace was from God because He also put people (a principal in the Miri town school, he's a Christian) in my path who encouraged me to stay on in Bekenu. That made me feel better about staying in Bekenu.

WSW: How has this decision to stay in Bekenu impacted you thus far?

TP: It has impacted me in a big way because aside from working in Bekenu it's also where I live so my life there has been shaped by that. For example attending church there is so different from what I'm used to. Over there it's just a group of faithful people gathering to sing, hear the Word and pray. There's no music except for a guitar and everything is in Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Iban. It's all been good though....

WSW: What are your involvements presently in relation to Christian work?

TP: The members take turns to preach or share the Word in the church there. There are some very mature Christians there who preach with great passion. So they have given me that opportunity also... I must admit I'm not very good at it but they are all very patient and encouraging.

Most schools in Sarawak have an ISCF (inter school Christian fellowship). So we have just started that in my school this year. I was a bit worried that the school might not allow it because Bekenu is a very Islam area but "worry" is not from the Lord. With guidance from other Christian teacher friends I overcame that "worry" and now there is an ISCF in SMK Bekenu too. I really feel this is a good way to bear witness and testimony in that school. It's also a responsibility that God has graciously given me to carry out His work in that school.

WSW: What are the significant lessons learnt & the struggles you battle with working in smaller towns?

TP: I'm not so sure how to answer this because I have only worked in a small town. Prior to going to Sarawak to teach I have never worked. Not even part time anywhere... ☺

But I have learnt some lessons. The most important is to always trust in the Lord. In everything. When I first reached Bekenu, all I wanted to do was go home! But God was so good. I really had many friends (*and sometimes people I didn't even know*) helping me cope and adapt to conditions there.

WSW: What kept you going / what is your source of motivation & focus despite the odds?

TP: I believe this is where God wants me to be. So what keeps me going is that I want to be obedient to this call. Of course I do eventually want to come home but for right now and for the near future this is where I should be. This is where I can give the most. This is where I can learn the most. When not-so-nice things come my way I just surrender it all to the Lord cos I know He will take me through it.

WSW: Is there anything you'd like to share with the students to spur them on? (eg personal favourite verses, quotes, thoughts, books etc)

TP: Always trust in the Lord. If God calls you to be somewhere difficult He will never leave you to do it by yourself. You will be equipped with everything necessary to enjoy your time there. Even though it may not look like it at first... A friend shared a verse with me during those trying times... unfortunately I can't remember that verse, except for one word that stood out... "OVERCOME".