Garuna is a Bali Sanskrit word that means grace, mercy, and compassion. Garuna Ministries founder, Rev. Dr. Jeff Ehlers, used that word because people in Southeast Asia associate garuna with something good. While the people of this region may not connect garuna to Jesus Christ, sharing Christ’s grace, mercy, and compassion is exactly what Garuna Ministries is all about.

Working through Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) World Mission, Rev. Jeff Ehlers, his wife Cheryl, and their young children were missionaries in Bangkok, Thailand, for more than seven years. When they returned to the United States in 2000, part of their hearts remained in Thailand with the people they had grown to love and support. The members of the Lutheran Church in Thailand asked for continued training and support. This was the catalyst for Rev. Ehlers to start Garuna Ministries, a Registered Service Organization of the LCMS.

The core of Garuna Ministries is training indigenous people. American leaders work alongside the native people as a support. Cheryl says, “The sooner they are involved with the decision making, budgets, talent selection, teaching, and ministering, the better the ministry will be.” Garuna ministers in three areas: Bible training through Luther Institute Southeast Asia (LISA); Lutheran church planting and national church development; and ministry to children through both the Garuna Christian (Lutheran) Schools in Cambodia and in the government schools in Thailand, where evangelistic classes and clubs are held during the school day.
The LISA Program
LISA has a curriculum of 20 courses, covering topics on the Lutheran understanding of God’s Word and doctrine, such as Old Testament, New Testament, Worship, and Luther’s Small Catechism. Students can be lay people, teachers, principals, deaconesses, evangelists, or pastors — if they were recommended for the program. They attend classes in a variety of ways — week-long sessions, weekly classes, or online — and, ultimately, go back into their communities, sharing their knowledge of the Law and Gospel with those around them.

LISA classes were originally led by American pastors who taught the week long courses, but, in recent years, Thais and Cambodians teach the classes. As Cheryl says, “The indigenous leaders teach it best, because their knowledge of their culture and language allows them to connect the ideas and concepts in a way that Americans can’t easily do.”

Garuna Christian Schools
The Garuna Christian Schools in Cambodia have been a wonderful way to reach the people of Cambodia. Cambodia is 95% Buddhist, but its people are quite open to the Gospel. Due to genocide from 1975–1979, the population of the country is relatively young. The genocide targeted people who were educated, so there is a need for schools, teachers, and education, which is a great entry point for the Gospel of Christ.

The first Garuna Christian School was opened in 2013. In seven cities across the country, there are now nine schools with more than 1,800 students. There are plans to build two more schools this year. The government-run schools in Cambodia only offer half-days for each grade, so the Garuna Schools are open for “tutoring” the other half. Students receive additional education (leading to higher test scores) and have a safe place to be while their parents are at work. The schools serve the community by providing free education and study materials to children. They also help parents by taking care of their children so that all parents have enough time for work. “In addition, they hear the Gospel of Jesus,” says Elen Tong, a teacher in Siem Reap.

Students at Garuna Schools range from kindergarten to sixth grade. They learn reading and writing in their language (Khmer), math, English, and attend Bible classes. For many, this is the first place they are introduced to God’s saving grace and love.
Each student receives school supplies, a uniform, and *A Child’s Garden of Bible Stories* in Khmer. Since 2013, more than 260 students have been baptized.

Every teacher at the Garuna Christian Schools is a Cambodian national. About two-thirds of the 63 Cambodians employed by Garuna are Christian — in a country where less than two percent of the population is Christian. Non-Christian teachers do not teach Bible classes, but they are part of a weekly faculty Bible study. Bunthen Tong, a teacher at the first Siem Reap school, was baptized when he came to faith after hearing another teacher at the school teach from the Bible. He will soon begin the LISA program and learn even more about the Bible and Lutheran doctrine.

**Garuna Christian Schools are highly regarded in the communities, as the students achieve high test scores and are seen as being kind and respectful. Tong said, “I see students showing love, sharing, and helping each other, and they care about helping to maintain and clean the school grounds and in the community.”**

Sakana, a student in one of the schools said, “I help teacher, like cleaning [for] drama show in some event like Christmas.”

The Garuna Schools have started two new programs — Garuna Sports Ministry and the Teacher Aide Program. These are helping to keep Garuna school graduates connected to each other and to Christ. Garuna has sponsored youth soccer teams, where the teams spend time in the Word and in fellowship. In its first year, the Teacher Aide Program allowed 49 former students to help with Sunday school and to prepare for the evangelistic Christmas celebrations each school holds for the community.

It is clear to see the love of Christ shining through the people who are connected to Garuna Ministries as they serve their neighbors throughout Southeast Asia. Sakana shares that her “teachers are full of love and compassion.” Ms. Tong states it so eloquently, “My greatest blessing is to serve God and my people by bringing the Gospel of God to children and their families.”

Mission Editor Brianne Stahlecker, a middle school language arts teacher, resides in Texas. She traveled on a mission trip to Cambodia with Garuna Ministries in 2019, just days after returning from the 2019 LWML Convention. She continues to support Garuna and hopes to return to Cambodia with Garuna someday.

Some Quarterly readers may recall that the Ehlers were featured in the Winter 2012 issue under the theme “Better Together.” To read more about their marriage and how they have worked together in mission and ministry for 30 years, go to [lwml.org/lwq-winter-2012](lwml.org/lwq-winter-2012) or scan the QR code. Learn more about Garuna Ministries at [garuna.org](garuna.org).