

“Stuttgarter Zeitung - Strohgäu und Umgebung” July 11, 2012:

A Missionary in Austria

Mission is still a current matter in Gerlingen, says Jürgen Schilbach, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Rebmann Foundation Gerlingen/Germany.

Translated into English from the German text of Klaus Wagner

Herr Schilbach, the Rebmann House Museum is worth a visit even for Christians from China. Can you tell us why?

We are attempting to keep the memory of the old missionaries alive. This memorial should also be a sign that missionary work begins at home. Different people associate mission with very different things, on the good side people think of aid work for instance, on the bad side people think of subordination, etc. Here we wish to portray the positive side of mission.

What role does Gerlingen still play today in world-wide mission?

We still have serving missionaries from Gerlingen, for example Hans-Georg Hoprich who has been in Burgenland since 1998. Mission begins at home.

That means Herr Hoprich is working as a Protestant in Catholic Austria?

It's not about being Protestant or Catholic, but about Christian values.

In 'Holy Korntal'*) missionaries are still being trained. Shouldn't Gerlingen also be seen as 'pious' in view of its missionary history?

We are labelled 'pietist' and 'pious'. For us the church is part of the wider community.

On the other hand the significance of the church is diminishing in our society. Is a missionary museum still relevant?

Precisely so. For us, the question is how we can still win people for Christ. The history of mission is part of the history of the town. Even the 125th anniversary of the Gerlingen YMCA being celebrated this year is important. Each has its place.

**) Korntal is not far from Gerlingen. More missionaries have been sent out from there than from any other place in Germany – hence its 'holy' reputation.*

A Gerlingen Man in China

Visitors from Hong Kong come to the Strohgäu*) - to find the roots of their church which has 10,000 members.

Wilhelm Maisch from Gerlingen and Thomas Tsang from Hong Kong have a connection. Tsang rejoices in it. The man from China, head of a 15-strong delegation, was even happier at the Rebmann House Museum in Gerlingen yesterday. The visitors from the Far East were convinced that the roots of their church were there. The 'Tsung Tsin Mission of Hong Kong' (TTM) was founded by missionaries from Basel in 1847.

Wilhelm Maisch from Gerlingen went to China in 1904. In a mountain village he set up not only a TTM mission station but also a school and a farm. On Sunday the delegation had been to the cemetery in Kornwestheim to pay their respects at the grave of TTM founder Rudolf Lechler who came from there.

"We are looking for our roots," said Thomas Tsang, "Through Wilhelm Maisch we have become an independent church." In Europe they wanted to find out, "where the people who founded our church came from and how they lived." The visit and the impressions gained at first hand are helping to give them a better grasp of the living conditions of the time. With the help of cards and other documents, "we are forming a picture in our heads." Beate Wagner brought some remarkable material with her from the town archives, including letters and notes from Maisch, as well as photographic glass plates, the forerunner of camera films.

The Tsung Tsin Mission of Hong Kong was one of the very early churches established in China of which there are many today. Since 1979 the Christian churches are "growing very quickly," reported Vicar Dieter Bullard-Werner of the German branch of the Basel Mission who has been loosely involved with the visit. About ten percent of the 1.3 billion-strong Chinese population belong to a Christian church. Tsung Tsin has at present about 10,000 members in 26 fellowships. The church oversees six childcare centres, five nurseries and ten schools. In addition there is youth work and social care for the elderly.

The visitors were impressed not only with the Rebmann House and the missionary room but also with the history of Gerlingen especially with regards to missionaries. This part was undertaken by Imanuel Stutzmann who knows every nook and cranny of Gerlingen. On the subject of mission he didn't go back to Adam and Eve but started with the Basel Mission House which was set up in 1815. Many farming lads were sent there to become missionaries. Among them were several Gerlingen men – and a forefather of Wilhelm Maisch by the name of Jakob was one of the first. His Christian name links him to Thomas Tsang and the Christians from China: they often give their children European first names with a Christian connection.

**) Strohgäu is the name of the wider rural area around Gerlingen.*