

# Greetings from Durham, England

## News from the Lai Family

Issue IV, Decemeber 2007

To our dear friends 'scattered' around the world,

Happy New Year to you! May the grace of God and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ always comfort your hearts, wherever you are.

The last time we wrote to you, we were still enjoying the warm sunshine of Singapore. Ten months later, we are now trying to keep ourselves warm, as we brave the frigid weather of our first winter in Durham, England. Yes, life has changed for us, once again. But before we speak of our life at Durham, let us, first of all, share with you our short stay in Singapore.



**Fide's Birthday Party in Aug 07**

Barely a month after our return, PW was given an opportunity to tutor classes in history and theology at the Biblical Graduate School of Theology (BGST). This is where he would eventually teach after his studies at Durham. Established in the 1980s, BGST offers post-graduate theological training primarily for lay Christians, i.e., ordinary Christians with regular jobs, who study not to become full-time ministers, but simply to know and love God better. This tutorship was an enriching experience for PW, as it provided him with ample opportunities to interact with students from all walks of life: engineers, teachers, quality surveyors, business women, lawyers and pastors. PW certainly learnt a lot from this interaction, since the questioning of these street-wise students often required him to reflect deeper on his theological knowledge and, therefore, helped him to better contextualise his teaching for the everyday life and struggles of Christians.

### Our Sojourn in Singapore

As we mentioned in our last newsletter, Pak-Wah completed his Masters of Theology program towards the end of last year. On that note, we ended our 2.5 years stay in Vancouver and



**'Regent' Friends in Singapore**

returned to Singapore. On the day we arrived, a pleasant surprise was waiting in the mail: PW was awarded a substantial scholarship to pursue his PhD studies at Durham University! We can only attribute this 'miracle', with gratitude, to the loving providence of our Lord God. And in our subsequent eight-month sojourn in Singapore, we were to continue to witness our heavenly Father's generous providence in our lives, in ways both big and small.

As some of you know, PW was a former lecturer at the School of Business, Singapore Polytechnic. In an unexpected change of events, his successor resigned early this year. Consequently, PW was appointed as a part-time lecturer with the school, teaching a subject that he had formerly developed: Supply Chain Management (or production and logistics operations). For PW, it was sheer pleasure both to re-teach this subject and to know that God had, through this job, provided the necessary income to meet our financial needs in Singapore.

The same may be said for Rina. When we left for Vancouver 3 years ago, Rina had to put aside her love for singing and desire to participate in some form of music ministry. After we returned to Singapore, however, she was invited to sing again

in our church's musical, *Love Above All* (LAA). LAA is a story of the love shared by the 1950s Christian missionaries, Jim and Elizabeth Elliot, and how Elizabeth persisted in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the Auca Indians of Ecuador, even though they had murdered her husband. For Rina, this was a God-given opportunity to be re-acquainted with friends in church, both old and new, and also to share the wondrous love of God with the many who have not known His goodness yet.



**The cast of *Love Above All* 2007**

God's provision for our lives could also be seen in smaller and, perhaps, less dramatic ways. For example, we received generous financial support from friends, both known and unknown. We were also pleasantly surprised by friends who kindly lent us their cars, so that we might drive to Malaysia and visit Rina's parents and relatives. When we were planning our relocation to Durham, we were also providentially put in touch with new friends in the city, whose love and concern for us continued even till now. Finally, we also had the joy of witnessing the spiritual growth of Rina's father and PW's mother, who became Christians not too long ago.



**Rain-Soaked day at the zoo with PW's sister and family**

Three years ago, when PW first resigned from his job to follow God's guidance towards a teaching vocation in theology, we could never imagine how God could have met our needs in so many ways. Honestly, when we left Singapore, we departed with much doubts in our hearts, wondering whether God will, in reality, provide for our needs as He promised in the Bible. These doubts, of course, had much to do with us being Singaporeans.

When Singapore became independent in 1965, we were a small island of about 650 km<sup>2</sup> (still growing, due to reclamation), with no natural resources, and massive unemployment. Four decades later, we had emerged to become one of the most competitive and technologically advanced nations worldwide. This feat was achieved primarily through the shrewd and meticulous planning of our pioneering leaders. Since then, their preoccupation with control and planning has been so deeply engrained in our psyche that one might expect a Singaporean to say, "*God forbid that I am separated from my plans and Excel spreadsheets!*" (Rina, the Malaysian, begs to differ, of course)

**Fide and friends**



Nurtured in such an environment, it is no wonder that we had little faith when it came to trusting in the *invisible* God to provide our needs. Three years later, our faith is still inadequate in many ways. Nevertheless, we now know and can testify that God is, indeed, real and alive in this world. He is neither a theoretical abstract of the philosophers (which one can, therefore, rationalise away), nor a subjective conjecture of one's religious preferences. Instead, He is the living God described by the Bible – the God who loves us very much.

Recently, I (PW) was reminded of how precious this realisation was. While I was walking along the river beside the Durham cathedral, an indescribable joy filled my heart as I gazed upon the cathedral glowing in the setting sun.

At that moment, I realised that because God exists and loves us, there is true meaning in this beauty. God has created it and has meant for us to enjoy it. Hence, I can rejoice in it. I no longer need to doubt that my joy is a mere self-deception or illusion. Well, I hope that friends who struggle with this doubt may find some comfort in this thought.



**Durham Cathedral at sunset**

### **Life at Durham**

In early Sep 2007, we packed up and left Singapore again, to continue the next stage of our life's pilgrimage in Durham. Here, PW would undertake his PhD studies in early church history, focusing on the teachings of a fourth century pastor called St. John Chrysostom.

Durham is a beautiful little city, quite unlike those commonly found in the rest of England. In its centre is a breathtaking cathedral and castle, built almost a thousand years ago by the Norman rulers. These, in turn, are surrounded by rows of dainty looking houses, some dating, perhaps, to the medieval times. Outside the boundary of the city are undulating hills of agricultural fields, dotted by occasional houses and small towns.



**A wheat field adjacent to our house at autumn**

Since our arrival, we have been living in one of these small towns. Our house overlooks a wheat field, which glows in the evening sun (and, unfortunately, for Rina and the kids, also introduced a mouse into our living room!). Home is the place where we spend most of our time, with PW studying upstairs with his stacks of books, and Rina home-schooling Fide (and occasionally, Isaiah) downstairs (Yes, Fide has switched to home-schooling after two months in the British public school system. This is to better prepare her for Chinese education and eventual return to school in Singapore).



**i) Fide at Neville's Cross Primary School; ii) Fide ploughing through her home-schooling books, which had just arrived!**

As for the kids, both of them have grown so much since we relocated to Durham. Isaiah (2.5 yrs) is now a stout little boy who is up to much mischief throughout the day. While his cheeky grin always makes us laugh, his stubbornness frequently drives us up the wall. The boy has also picked up a lot of verbal skills and is now quick to complain about his sister (if she teases him). It is amusing (and worrying) to see him imagining anything that comes into his hand, whether a piece of cardboard or Lego blocks, to be a sword or a gun – clearly traits of a boy! Yet, Isaiah also seems to have a sensitive heart and is able to intuitively sense whether one of us is melancholic by asking, "Are you sad?" Conversely, whenever we laugh at him, he would loudly protest, "Don't laugh at me!"



It is also a joy to witness how much Fide (6.5 yrs) has grown this year. She is a great help for us, playing her role as elder sister by taking care of Isaiah and playing with him whenever we are busy. Just a year ago, Fide was only beginning to learn how to read. Now, she thoroughly enjoys reading a wide variety of literature: Egyptian and Greek histories, arts, biographies of famous people, and novels. . Indeed, she has even started writing and illustrating stories of her own! Oftentimes, she is deeply engaged by the stories she reads, laughing at their humour, rejoicing with their characters' triumphs or disturbed by their struggles. For example, just a month ago, we were reading *Charolette's Web* for Fide at a chapter a day. Visibly excited about the future plight of Wilbur the pig, she decided to curtail our reading process by completing the remaining chapters on her own. Later, while watching the movie herself, she was so touched that she even wept for Charolette's death.



In terms of community life, we are blessed to have pleasant neighbours next to us, who generously gave the kids Christmas presents and lent us tools for PW to set up the shelves! We have found a church, St. Nicholas (Anglican), where we are comfortable to worship in and have made several friends. We are also participating in a weekly Bible study conducted by the church for Chinese students from the university, so that we may be able to show hospitality to these students. At school, PW has gotten to know a Malaysian cum fellow PhD student well enough to lunch together regularly and enjoy lively conversation on a diverse range of subjects, be it life, work, music or theological studies.

And for our friends at Regent College (a theological college where PW studied previously): Education in a university setting is quite unlike what we had experienced at Regent. At the university, PW spends most of his time alone, whether it is taking lunch, or studying in the library. It is harder to know his classmates better and, consequently, students' conversa-

tions are often confined to what is safe, namely, a discussion of ideas. Regent, in comparison, was such a different world and a great blessing. Its *ethos* of developing a communal worship life within the school had made it conducive for our family to make very good friends with fellow students. Even our daughter, Fide, found good friends among so many of you.



We also fondly remember the weekly chapels, which introduced so much praxis into our studies and lives. The mutual sharing of our cultural experiences, spiritual reflections and personal struggles (whether it was the terminal illness or a fellow student or the tragic suicide of another) nurtured our spiritual authenticity. In retrospect, we now know and are thankful for these blessings.

As we settle down into a rhythm of life at Durham, we sometimes ask ourselves, "What does God want to do with our lives here?" On the surface, our lives are pretty mundane and nothing much ever seems to happen. All that PW does is studying, tutoring Fide in Maths and playing with the kids. As for Rina, she is mostly pre-occupied with the kids, especially Fide's home-schooling, and feeding the family.



**First story that Fide wrote & illustrated:  
*Ribbons in Togo***

All these do not seem significant at all. Yet, deep within these simple structures of life, God is still at work in His primary purpose for us: transforming us into the glorious image of Jesus Christ – a life of perfect love, wisdom and holiness.



**The kids & their Christmas presents; Fide & Rina's sister, who visited us recently**

“Spiritual transformation,” as James Houston, a retired Regent faculty often remarks, “is the slowest of all human movements.” Is this not true when we examine ourselves? A great part of our lives – the inner depths that only we, or our spouse, know – remains in a state of disrepair. Our anger and judgmental attitudes continue to be out of our control most of the time. Our tongues still mutter words that we later regret not to have kept our silence. Our prayers continue to be sparse, except in times of desperation. On occasions, we may even sink into depression when we face the continuous whining of our children, or spouses who cannot meet our expectations. Yet, these *are* the primary frontiers where God is working within us, the same areas where we, too, must persevere by His grace.



Indeed, we are like disfigured stained glass windows, shattered in some places and covered by thick dust in others. And when God restores us gradually, we will become the pristine stained glass windows that we are meant to be. Through the beauty and glow of our lives, many will see the brilliance of the sun illumi-

nating our panels – the light and the glory of God's love and holiness!

As we conclude, Durham will be our home for the next three years. If you are keen to visit or join us at this little corner of northeast England, you are always welcomed! If you would like to write or email, our contact details are as follows:

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With love,  
Pak-Wah, Rina, Fide and Isaiah Lai  
31 Dec. 2007

**Visit to Raby Castle, one of the many castles near Durham**



**Pray for us:**

- That our desire for God may deepen each day and not be crowded out by the busyness of care for the kids and studies at school. For PW, please pray that his studies would not degenerate into a mere curiosity about ideas, but would be enriching for our lives instead.
- That we may develop close-knitted friendships in Durham.
- That we may have the wisdom to nurture a love for God within our children; Particularly for Fide - we need much wisdom to know how to teach and mentor her, as we embark on her home-schooling curriculum for the new year.