



### About the Author

The Rev. James Estes graduated from Yale Divinity School in 1961. He has served parishes and missions in his home state of New Hampshire, as well as in Malaysia, Hong Kong, New Mexico, and southern California. Father Estes currently resides with his wife, Virginia, in San Diego, California. You can reach him at [gray4391@gmail.com](mailto:gray4391@gmail.com).

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# VINTAGE VOICE



## Cloudy Vision, Clear Sight

by the Rev. James Estes

It feels like a lifetime ago that my vision was up for nearly anything. I could stare at pages in a book for hours, drive all night, or take an exam and then play 18 holes of golf. As I would look out over a congregation on a Sunday morning, I could easily note when even a single person was missing.

And then slowly, my sight began to change. My ophthalmologist saw the beginnings of macular degeneration, a disease that distorts my central vision.

As the years went by, I felt like macular degeneration was pushing me into a corner. I depended on my golf buddies to keep an eye on my drives. Tennis balls were hitting me before I even saw them. I began to avoid driving after dark, and then I gave up my license.

My current predicament has given me a blurry view of my present environment. But before you think I feel sorry for myself, I want you to know that I view my life as blessed. Most of my neighbors are unaware of my limitation because I am determined not to appear helpless. And I have set a goal for myself of trying to cheer up at least two people every day. The coronavirus pandemic has made that more difficult, but at least I can still get a smile from my wife, Virginia.

And I can look back and clearly see the amazing changes that we made in the lives of others. Let me share with you two stories that stand out for me.

### North Borneo Christmas

Virginia and I met at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1960. Shortly before we married, we talked with the Overseas Department of The Episcopal Church to become missionaries once we completed our studies.

Halfway through our second year of serving a church in Walpole, New Hampshire, the department asked us to service a Chinese community in Sandakan, North Borneo (now known as the Malaysian state of Sabah). We were to assist a Chinese priest with a church and three schools. Virginia and I arrived in Sabah with our 10-month-old son, Christopher—and quickly realized there was much to do.

Upriver from Sandakan, most people had never heard about sheep, shepherds, or camels, much less seen a white person. So when we returned upriver for 10 days at Christmas and told the story of Jesus's birth, we focused on the bright star that marked it. This resonated with our listeners, as they could see stars almost every night, and births were an exciting event in the community. I think of our visit as a "pure Christmas." We had none of the usual distraction of the commercial aspects of the holiday—just the birth of Jesus and the love of God.

I also taught people that Jesus healed the sick. One Sunday, the head of the village asked me to cure his transistor radio. I could see that the battery had corroded. My spoken Malay was quite limited, but I tried to tell him that God does not heal "things." Sometime later I was able to give the village chief a new radio and extra batteries as gifts. He was delighted.

Another man was gored by a wild pig while out hunting. I was able to clean his wound with a healing salve, and I prayed for him. Two weeks later he was in church walking on his own. God found special ways to heal through me!

Our years in North Borneo provided us with a wonderful opportunity to live anew the simplicity of the good news. A superstitious people responded with joy to the message of God's love. The seeds that we planted all those years ago have sprouted 100-fold. Our congregation is now the largest in the Diocese of Sabah.

### **Beijing Easter**

Shortly before Easter 1975, my wife and I received an invitation to visit a friend in Beijing.

It was an interesting moment in China's history. The Bamboo Curtain—the Cold War standoff between the communist and non-communist countries of Asia—was coming down. The two planned Easter services in Beijing (I would unofficially be conducting a third) marked the first approved Christian observances in more than a quarter-century.

When we arrived for mass at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (popularly known as the South Cathedral), we found 1,200 congregants filling the pews!

There have been Protestant and Catholic gatherings for Christian services in Beijing ever since. Life for Christians in China today is not without challenges. Aside from a few small favored groups, Chinese Christians remain under government scrutiny. While it is not an environment we would like to experience, I think such difficulties may bring out the best in Christians.

I have been a part of remarkable transformations in my lifetime. To grow up on a scruffy farm in New Hampshire and make my way to North Borneo and Beijing to spread the love of God has been an incredible privilege. As my eyesight worsens, I find peace knowing that the good in which I played a role continues, even if I can see it only with my mind's eye.



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