

Thailand Mission Strategy

I.	Situation in Thailand.....	Page 2
II.	Strategic Objective.....	Page 6
III.	Strategy.....	Page 7
	A. Stage 1.....	Page 9
	B. Stage 2.....	Page 9
	C. Stage 3.....	Page 10
	D. Stage 4a.....	Page 11
	E. Stage 4b.....	Page 11
IV.	Conclusion.....	Page 12

Written by Missionary Jeff Lange

E-mail: langes@vmsea.com

A special thanks to Tom Gaudet for his help and insight, without which, this strategy would not have come about.

Situation in Thailand

Thailand has been open to missionaries for over 200 years. However, less than 0.5% of the population even claims to be a Christian, and a majority of those claim they are a Christian because their parents were Christian or that they observe and practice Christian activities (baptism, church attendance, etc.). It is not because they saw themselves as a lost hell-bound sinner in need of a Savior who in repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ receive him as their Lord and Savior. Most of the Christians are located in Northern Thailand and are among the tribal peoples. They are primarily Animist and not Buddhist.

Why have the Thai Buddhists been so resistant to the gospel? Many people have asked this is a question, but very few have provided answers. Alex G. Smith wrote "The failure of missions to make a significant impact, especially on Theravada Buddhists, is due to both Buddhist barriers and missiological weaknesses."

In reference to the Buddhist barriers, he mentions three. The first is the eclectic nature of Buddhism. In other words, Buddhism is flexible and adjusts to the local religious culture of the people adopting it. Buddhism selects and incorporates essential cultural and religious elements into its system. This means Buddhism compromises some of its teaching to mix in with the local beliefs. This is called syncretism. Therefore, Buddhism comes in many shapes and forms: in China, it is mixed with Taoism and Confucianism; in Japan, with Shintoism, Confucianism and ancestral worship; in Korea, with shamanism and Confucianism. Theravada Buddhism incorporated animistic spirits of the folk religion of the people into its worship. Lacking rituals, it also integrated Hindu rituals into their syncretistic mix. Buddhists would go even further to accept elements of Christianity as well, but there would be no room for a unique Christ. They even adapt Christian institutions. School children parade weekly in the uniforms of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides under the Buddhist guise. The eclecticism puts pressure on churches to remain faithful in a syncretistic society.

The second barrier is Buddhist solidarity. Buddhist philosophy is all pervasive, permeating the concepts and world views of a people and saturating their culture, language, education and attitudes with Buddhistic viewpoints. In fact, the social solidarity of Buddhism is so strong that the national identity of the people comes from Buddhism. To be Thai is to be Buddhist. Buddhist solidarity threatens the identity and survival of churches, because those who dare to stand out as Christians will suffer isolation.

The third barrier is theological barriers. Although there are similar words to Christian vocabulary such as hell, heaven, sin, salvation and born again, there remains significant differences in definitions of these words. A leading Buddhist scholar equated God with karma, thereby, rejecting God's personality in favor of impersonal 'nature' as the cause in life. He also identifies God the Creator with Buddhism's 'avijja', meaning 'ignorance' or 'lack of knowledge, a term which Buddhists identify as the cause of all evil and suffering.

Alex Smith pointed out three missiological weaknesses. The first weakness is mission strategy. Many volumes of books can be written on the strategy (or lack

thereof) of Western missionaries that has been detrimental to the growth of Christianity in Thailand. All too often, eager and assertive missionaries strive for results without studying the culture. Assertive behavior is translated as aggressive behavior to the Thai and therefore a barrier to the gospel has been created instead of a bridge. Using the traditional Western philosophy of ministry and strategy as taught in most Bible colleges has stunted the growth of Biblical Christianity in Thailand. It is true that churches are being started and people are getting saved, however, the meager growth rate is a wake up call for missionaries to re-evaluate their philosophy of ministry and strategy.

The second weakness is ineffective communication. Missionaries who proclaim the gospel have great difficulty transferring the meaning across cultures. Buddhists who hear the message will tend to only decipher bits of information. Often their assessment of Christianity is, "It is just the same as Buddhism". Unfortunately, many missionaries do not have a system in place to analyze the effectiveness of their communication. It is essential to listen to the receptor for feedback in order to know what is actually being understood. Missionaries need to ask; Is it reaching the specified audience? Does the audience grasp the main point? Is the feedback the missionary receives the same as his message? What is the level of their understanding? If communication does take place, where are they spiritually and how are their lives changed by it.

A recent survey of Thai non-Christians revealed that 89% of the people said the Christian message was UNINTELLIGIBLE. What makes this even more significant is the fact that the people surveyed had to have some knowledge of the gospel and had known Christians for more than three years. After knowing Christians for more than 3 years and having some head knowledge of the gospel, 89% still were unable to have any significant understanding of the gospel to be able to choose to accept Christ or reject him.

Can we say we have given someone the gospel if they did not understand the message? Can we write off someone who doesn't respond to the gospel right away because he doesn't understand it? Whose responsibility is it anyway? Is the target group supposed to change in order to understand our Western communication styles or do we as missionaries need to study the people and the culture in order to clearly present the gospel in a way they can understand?

The third weakness is a lack of indigeneity. Western architecture, institutions and decorations are not indigenous to Thailand. Churches look more like an import with its buildings, forms, music and methods which are so different from the society around it. Christianity is already viewed as a foreigner's religion, and when Buddhist's see the Western influence, that belief is only further imbedded into their mind that Christianity is only for the foreigners and not for me.

A Thai Bible college instructor said, "Christians have long lamented the lack of progress in Thailand. After more than 200 years of missionary enterprise, less than one percent of Thai people have faith in Christ. Thais' apparent resistance to Christianity may have more to do with the methods employed by the messengers than with the message itself." This is quite an indictment on Western missionaries.

A missionary must learn the heart language of the people he is ministering to, but also a study of culture needs to be done. A study of the Thai world-view, value system and behavior patterns reveal important information for the missionary to consider for his ministry.

For example, the Thai way is meekness. The typical Christian's way is assertiveness which to the Thai is seen as aggressive behavior and hence is offensive. How many people do you know have been won to Christ by the offensiveness of the messenger? The message wasn't offensive, but the messenger was. Thai are usually surprised that missionaries expect them to believe in Jesus so soon after presenting them the gospel. Most missionaries believe that after they give them the gospel that they understand enough to intelligently make a decision to reject or accept Christ. They think that if they didn't get saved right then, that they then choose to reject Christ. Is that true?

There are several types of responses. First, there is a sincere acceptance. There must be enough understanding by the receptor to make an intelligent decision to accept Christ. Second, there is a sincere rejection. Again, there must be enough understanding by the receptor to make a decision to reject Christ. Missionaries must beware that the receptor doesn't reject the gospel because they reject the messenger. The understanding of the receptor must not be hindered by a belligerent missionary. Third, there is a response in which the receptor misinterprets the missionary's communication. The missionary thinks communication took place, but in fact it did not. The fourth response is in which the receptor mixes (syncretizes) the gospel message with his/her own beliefs. The fifth response is called a protracted response. There is not an acceptance and there is not a rejection. They like the Athenians who said "We will hear again of this matter" (Acts 17:32). Often a postponed decision may very well be a genuine one. This response is not the same as procrastination. The sixth response is the receptor thinking this is ok for my spouse and kids, but not for me. So just because the receptor did not accept Christ, it does not mean that he/she has understood enough of the gospel to reject Christ. It is the missionary's responsibility to determine what kind of response was made and then react accordingly.

Thai Christianity follows Western methods of evangelism which alienate Thai Christians from the Thai way of meekness, a dominant value of Thai culture. Such evangelism violates self-identity, grateful relationships, and smooth interpersonal relationships. Thai Christian converts cannot fit in with their social networks because of their aggressive ways of witnessing, which are influenced by Western methods rooted in a different cultural context.

Spreading the gospel in Thailand has been difficult for more than 200 years because Christians in Thailand do not practice the Thai way of meekness. Thai individuals prefer group harmony and smooth interpersonal relations. American children are taught to be assertive, self-expressive and individualistic so they will fit well with their democratic system. Thai children are taught to be obedient, polite and subdued, so that they will live in harmony with their own hierarchical social order.

It is difficult for Westerners to understand the Thai, because Westerners emphasize the cognitive domain. Thai use their hearts to classify people as friends

or foes, insiders or outsiders while Westerners use their heads. Would Jesus use Western methods in the Thai cultural context? Can one be both a Thai and a Christian? The results from the above mentioned survey are quite interesting and shed light on the character of Thai people.

100% believed in self-worth, that we are all equal. Everybody is worthy of being respected, because we are all human beings. They suggested the following taboos for Christians: 1) Do not trample Buddhism; 2) Do not force or persuade Thais to make a quick instant decision; 3) Do not challenge Thais and 4) Do not contrast religions, because a Thai will do that on their own without the “help” of the missionary. Most of the people detested the contrast between religions and suggested not be boastful of your own religion. These non-Christian interviewees concluded that Christians can be both Thai and Christian. There are Thai Buddhist, Thai Muslims, and Thai Christians, but most important is that they are all still Thai.

Thai people value grateful relationships. Thais cherish generosity while they look down on stinginess. They tolerate lying to “save face”, because they value smooth relationships. One person interviewed said, ‘Christians are aggressive and threatening’, and another said, ‘The voice and tone of Christian preachers are aggressive. Missionaries can learn from these responses and need to observe that verbal and non-verbal communication communicates gentleness and meekness. Is this compromising the gospel? Many Western missionaries would think so. It can be difficult to separate convictions from Western culture. In this case, who is more like Jesus, the overly assertive missionary or the meek missionary? Jesus said he was meek and lowly in heart (Matthew 11:29). Others said Jesus was meek (Matthew 21:5). Meekness must not be confused with weakness.

All of those interviewed felt an overwhelming distaste for forceful communication and over-persuasive communicators. They all spoke negatively about the witnessing approaches designed by James Kennedy in Evangelism Explosion III and Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ International.

Taking into consideration that Thai people value grateful and smooth interpersonal relationships, a highly educated Thai Bible college instructor designed a theoretical model for evangelism and discipleship, then tested it and proved it to work successfully. The model was that evangelism and discipleship should be vulnerable, progressive, and meekly move them from where they are to where God wants them to be. Jesus was vulnerable. He stayed in other people’s houses, he asked to use a boat to preach to the multitudes. He worked progressively. He did not expect people to make instant decisions.

Prayerfully considering the information we have obtained, I now attempt with God's help to layout a strategy for our mission work in Thailand. At the outset, everything is “written in pencil”. We reserve the right to change our strategy at any time, if we observe that what we are doing is not effective. In the end, anything that is accomplished will be because God did it. He may use us as an instrument to further his work in Thailand, but it won't be by the power of our hand or our wisdom that will do it. We want God to have all the credit, glory and praise.

Strategic Objective

Strategic Objective: We would like to see a church planting movement throughout Thailand and S.E. Asia.

It is great and wonderful when a missionary comes to plant a church, but it is insufficient for a CPM (Church Planting Movement). A CPM is a multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment. A missionary can be a church planter, but if we believe he is the only one qualified to plant a church, then the result will be very few churches because there are few missionaries. If a missionary trains a group of men to be a “professional church planters”, then again we only limit church planting to a small group of nationals. However, if we stimulate and encourage lay movements, who with proper discipleship training, can take the responsibility to push into new frontiers, evangelize, disciple and plant other churches, then you have the resources and “man power” to saturate a region or country.

If we use first century Christianity as an example of a CPM, we will see that the lay people heavily influenced the multiplication of churches. Acts 8:4 says “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word”. Who went everywhere preaching the word? It was people who were being persecuted. With a few exceptions, the disciples stayed in Jerusalem. People who were converted in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost returned to their homelands carrying the gospel with them. It seems the church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to organize the church in Samaria started by Philip (Acts 8). Before Saul got saved in Acts 9, there were already a number of churches throughout Israel and as far as Damascus. More evidence can be stated to support the claim of a CPM movement in the first century.

It is dream of every missionary to have an entire people group come to faith in Christ. I have purposely tried to portray Thai Buddhism as an impenetrable fortress that has intimidating walls that are so strong that it causes our hearts to faint. Many missionaries have tried to beat down this wall or “find” another way in through a redemptive analogy of sorts and come up empty. Many missionaries have spent their life ministering in this country and only seeing limited fruit. If we are going to see the walls of Buddhism come down in Thailand, it won't be by our own wisdom and our own strength. This is a spiritual problem. Only God is able to cast down the walls of Buddhism in Thailand. Understanding this shows us the most important part of a missionary's life is that of an intercessor.

As already stated, Buddhism syncretizes with the local indigenous beliefs of the people adopting it. In the case of Thai Buddhism, it syncretized with the local Animistic beliefs of the people. Maybe there is a weakness in the walls of Buddhism after all? Perhaps intercession and strategic targeting can be made at the animistic cracks in the Buddhist walls while at the same time connecting with the “felt needs” of Thai Buddhists. For example, sickness (often related to the demonic world), bondage and fear of demons, concerns about black magic and witchcraft, uncertainty of the future are just some of the “felt needs”. It is possible to approach Buddhists by applying the gospel in the areas of freedom from demonic oppression, protection from sorcery, and hope and certainty for the future.

Strategy

In order to take these people from where they are to where God wants them to be, we first need to answer a couple questions?

1. Where are they currently at? We want to use a survey to help us determine where on the Ingall's scale the Thai people belong. We will assume at the lowest level, a -8 until we can prove it through testing. What is the Ingall's scale?

<u>Level</u>	<u>Description</u>
+6	Reproduction
+5	Stewardship (time, talent, treasure)
+4	Walking with God
+3	Spiritual Growth and change in behavior
+2	Incorporated into body of believers – church
+1	Evaluation (are you really saved)
0	Salvation
-1	Repentance and Faith
-2	Decision to act
-3	Personal problem recognition
-4	Positive attitude toward the gospel
-5	Grasp the implications of the gospel
-6	Awareness of the fundamentals of the gospel
-7	Initial awareness of the gospel
-8	Awareness of Supreme Being, but no effective knowledge

2. Who is our target? Our target is Thai Buddhist people. However, Thailand is the size of the state of California and about 65 million people. It would take great financial resources as well as a logistical nightmare to move everyone in the whole country from -8 to 0. Therefore, we need to determine the strategic areas of Thailand that we would like to work. Start in an area maybe within a Tambon or even smaller in a couple muubaans so we can evaluate each part of the process.

The strategy employed in planting churches is very important. Paul modeled his strategy after the Lord Jesus Christ. They both provide us a simple, and yet effective strategy (2 Tim. 2:2) which is vastly different from what Western missionaries are taught in Bible schools today. A brief summary of Paul's ministry would be; "Paul traveled extensively. He stayed anywhere from 3 weeks in Thessalonica to 3 years in Ephesus. Everywhere he traveled, he had several "key men" that he was able to disciple. Many times he would go into a city and evangelize and then leave a couple men behind to continue to teach the new church. He carried on an extensive writing ministry to those churches he helped start as well as with some of his key men. In this fashion he was able to push to new frontiers carrying the gospel with him. When able, he would return to visit some of the churches he helped start." The Apostle Paul received his philosophy of ministry from the Lord Jesus Christ. Today there are different Western philosophies used in Thailand which has produced little growth over the years. Although, the Lord's and Paul's are not the only philosophy, perhaps they knew something that we don't know

and a return to the practice of first century Christianity is certainly something that should be considered by every missionary.

The difficulty of a CPM will be to balance evangelism with discipling new converts. They are like two rails of a train track. They both should be kept running simultaneously. The purpose of evangelism is to find the “key men” who can be disciplined so that they can disciple others who can disciple others. In this fashion, a missionary doesn’t have a small group of professionally trained church planters, however, he has lay people doing the evangelizing, discipling and continuously spreading out into new areas. They are in several geographical locations and not in one location in a “Bible College” type environment. Churches did spread like wild fire in the first century. Paul also implanting the things he learned from Christ’s example also added fuel to the fires of Christianity.

Our Western concepts of a church also need to be re-evaluated. It is truly amazing how much of what we believe to be truth is nothing more that Western culture. For a CPM, churches must be indigenous. This may mean that people meet in house churches rather than at the “church” building. Any element of Western culture will inhibit the growth of the CPM. Many more things can be stated to expand this thought.

In our strategic areas, we plan to bring the people from where they are to where God wants them to be. That means several stages need to be passed until they get to salvation. Using the Ingall’s scale we first need to get them from a -8 to a -7, and then to the -6 to -4 range and then to the -3 to 0 range. This is just the beginning, because we now have the discipleship stage and “teach them to observe all things that he has commanded” (+1 to +6).

Each stage needs to be evaluated for what resources are available and what resources need to be developed. We need to ask ourselves at each stage “Is it a legitimate use of resources and finances?” We need to analyze the effectiveness of each stage by developing a post-evaluation process and change action when necessary to accomplish the goals. Each stage will have reproducible proof of what works and what does not work.

We are asking God to give us 12 key men that can be disciplined/mentored to facilitate a CPM in Thailand. Our strategy includes the continuing development of literature at each stage: tracts, Correspondence Courses, books, and other discipleship material. An evaluation process needs to be developed to determine the effectiveness of the literature. The non-effective literature needs to be thrown away or reworked to make it effective.

Stage 1: Soil Preparation: moving a people from a -8 to a -7

This stage can be equated to preparing the soil. Every farmer knows that before you can plant the seed, the soil needs to be prepared. Rocks, thorns, and clumps of dirt need to be broken up and made plain so the soil can receive the seed. We need to understand that not everyone in the target group will move, but that generally speaking as a whole, these people have moved from where they were at to closer to where God would want them to be.

Thai people value grateful and smooth interpersonal relationships. Therefore, a relationship is going to have to be made with the target group beginning here. Teaching English, and maybe a sports facility may be helpful in building a relationship with the community. A presence of some kind will need to be kept.

Resources:

Tracts: Tracts will need to be designed to prepare the soil.

Bible Correspondence Courses: These must be designed to prepare the soil
1. Creation to Christ – this takes them from where they are at to 0 (salvation)

Videos:

1. VCD of God's Story.

Use of radio/tv: Again programs need to be designed for soil preparation.

Creation Seminar: Use Dr. Pat Briney. The goal would be for people to come away at least thinking, "Well, maybe there is a Creator after all."

Post Evaluation: Evaluate what we're doing, proving it works or doesn't work as it relates to Stage 1 objective: soil preparation. If it doesn't then we go back and change it. We need to analyze the effectiveness and change actions when necessary to accomplish the goal.

Stage 2: Sowing/Watering: moving them to a -6 to -4 range

This stage can be equated to sowing/watering. A continual community presence to maintain relationships is required, for example, teaching English and community sports.

Resources:

Tracts: These tracts need to be designed for sowing and watering, and not necessarily a call to salvation (stage 3). Most tracts we have now can be used, but more need to be developed.

Bible Correspondence Courses: These need to be designed for sowing/watering

1. Creation to Christ
2. Gospel of John

3. Pope's John/Romans
4. Salvation Bible Basics

Videos:

1. VCD of God's Story

Use of radio/tv: Programs need to be designed for sowing/watering

Post Evaluation: Evaluate what we're doing, proving it works or doesn't work as it relates to Stage 2 objective: sowing/watering. If it doesn't then we go back and change it. We need to analyze the effectiveness and change actions when necessary to accomplish the goal.

Stage 3: Reaping: moving them to -3 to 0 range

This stage can be considered the reaping stage. The importance of have a community presence and relationship at this stage reaches is maximum importance as one on one dealing with an individual is preferred. Here is where it changes to personal work. At this stage, literature becomes its least effective until after salvation.

Resources:

Tracts: Tracts need to be designed to address the specifics of the "how to be saved". These tracts won't be used in mass evangelism, but would be used for very specific cases, for example, in a situation where the missionary is unable to travel to the individual. In situations with the correspondence ministry, if it's determined an individual is close to salvation, a tract like this can be mailed to them. These tracts can be used in personal work.

Bible Correspondence Courses:

1. Creation to Christ
2. Salvation Bible Basics

Post Evaluation: Evaluate what we're doing, proving it works or doesn't work as it relates to Stage 3 objective: reaping. If it doesn't then we go back and change it. We need to analyze the effectiveness and change actions when necessary to accomplish the goal.

Stage 4a: Discipleship: moving them from 0 to +6

This stage can be called the discipleship stage. A difference is made between discipleship in general (stage 4a) with discipleship with key men (stage 4b). This does not mean the people in this stage are unimportant. Our overall objective is a CPM. Therefore, our goal is to have some key men that can be trained to help facilitate the CPM. Everything we do is designed to find the key men.

Keeping a presence with the target group is still important in this stage. Literature becomes more effective again. This is the last step to bring them to the place God wants them to be.

Resources:

Tracts: Tracts need to be designed to address their new life in Christ, the Christian way of life and doctrinal (perhaps something along the lines of E.L. Bynum's tracts)

Correspondence Bible Course: Courses will need to be designed to address their new life in Christ, the Christian way of life and doctrinal issues. Discipleship courses abound and must find and catalog them

Videos: Need to address Christian way of life and maybe doctrinal. There should be some around and an effort should be made to look for them.

1. Pilgrim's Progress – In Thai already???
2. Sermons – vcd or cd. Need to be recorded

Post Evaluation: Evaluate what we're doing, proving it works or doesn't work as it relates to Stage 4a objective: discipleship. If it doesn't then we go back and change it. We need to analyze the effectiveness and change actions when necessary to accomplish the goal.

Stage 4b: Discipleship with key men

Everything is the same as 4a. However, a greater effort is made in personal work with these men than those in 4a. A great amount of time will need to be invested with these men. The purpose is to personally disciple/mentor these men to help them become future leaders and reproducers. The strategic objective is a CPM and these men are going to be the one to help start it. They will be the ones to continue to nurture it even after I am gone.

Post Evaluation: Evaluate what we're doing, proving it works or doesn't work as it relates to Stage 4b objective: discipleship with key men. If it doesn't then we go back and change it. We need to analyze the effectiveness and change actions when necessary to accomplish the goal.

Conclusion:

After 200 years of missionary enterprise in Thailand, can we write off these people and say that they rejected God? In order to reject God's salvation they would need to understand enough to reject it. I believe that Thai people do not have the understanding to make an intelligent decision to reject the Jesus Christ. Our philosophy of ministry and "church planting" is not your traditional missionary approach. Before claiming that the traditional method is the best method for this country, we intend to explore and try every other avenue first. What can it hurt to change our approach for 3-4 years and apply communication theory. At each stage we evaluate what we're doing, proving it works or doesn't work. If it doesn't then we go back and change it. We need to analyze the effectiveness and changing actions when necessary to accomplish the goal. If after 3-4 years, nothing has happened, then we have the proof and can go back to more traditional approach. No one will know it won't work until we try. We owe it to the Thai people to present the gospel as clearly as possible for them. The Thais accept the messenger before the message. God help us not get in the way and end up being a primary reason they never understand the gospel due to our perceived belligerent behavior.