

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO CONTEXTUALIZATION IN NORTHEAST THAILAND

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This thesis describes the development of a multi-dimensional approach to contextualization in Northeast Thailand by the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission. It presents an historical, political and cultural overview of the Isaan people group and of the Christian missionary effort in the region. The research includes specific examples of contextualization in the areas of relationship, truth, power, and ceremonies and concludes with missiological implications.

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## **THAI LANGUAGE DISCLAIMER**

There is no official English transliteration for the Thai language. Though Thailand's Royal Institute has laid down an official system showing which Thai letters correspond with which Western ones, the issue of the tones and the actual length of vowel sounds makes the task even more challenging. I have attempted not to include too many Thai words but those I have included I have transliterated in what seem to me as the most logical way considering the limitations of one not familiar with official linguistic format. I have

included a glossary of Thai terms used in this paper to assist the reader on page 102. Any inadequacies in this approach I accept as my own and encourage the reader to delve more deeply into the beauty and complexity of the Thai language.

The Isaan language spoken in the northeast region of Thailand is called Lao amongst the speakers themselves. Although significant cultural variances have developed over time, it is closely linked with the official language spoken by the residents of the left bank of the Mekong River in the People's Democratic Republic of Laos. Lao has seven tones: high-falling, lower high level, lower high-falling, mid level, low level, very low low level, and rising (two more than Central Thai). It lacks ch and r, common in Central Thai and has a consonant phoneme ñ (the palatal nasal) not found in Central Thai (Haas 1978:20). Meaning varies significantly between the two languages even for the same word. I have chosen to transliterate Isaan words as clearly as possible as well as listing their meanings in the glossary at the end of this paper.

### **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CCPCG	Center for Church Planting and Church Growth in Northeast Thailand
CCT	Church of Christ in Thailand
C&MA	Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination
CSTC	Christian Service Training Center
ECCA	Evangelical Covenant Church of America
ECCTM	Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission
EFT	Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand
IACM	Institute for Applied Church Ministry
IDF	Issan Development Foundation
NGO	Non-government organization
TCC	Thailand Covenant Church
TEE	Theological Education by Extension
WRC	World Relief Corporation

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO ISAAN

The Thai-Chinese doctor was incredulous. "You're going where?!" Like many missionaries preparing for service, I'd heard this shocked tone before in America. This time, as I lay vulnerably on the examining table for my annual physical in a Bangkok hospital, I was the one to be surprised. Somehow I had expected this urban Thai doctor, who was also a Christian, to understand. Just to make sure, the doctor rephrased herself, "Why are you going to Isaan?" The northeastern region, known as Isaan, is the part of Thailand that most people, even the Thai, never see. This well-educated woman could think of no logical explanation why we would leave the comforts of Bangkok for the rural backwoods of her country.

Yet Isaan is home to one-third of the Thai population. It is a land of economic poverty but also a land with a rich cultural heritage. It is land where people know hardship firsthand and yet laugh in the face of tragedy. It is a land of people do not know Jesus.

Since that day on the examining table I have heard the same question repeated again and again. Most Thai people assume (incorrectly) that I have an Isaan wife. My American wife and I have been privileged to live among, work with, and learn from, Isaan people for the last fourteen years. During that time we have gained an appreciation for the perspective of Isaan followers of Jesus who are being transformed by the reality of the power of God's grace in their life, and are using the best of their culture to express that new life to others around them. This is their story that needs to be told.

#### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to follow the development of a contextualizing movement of followers of Jesus in Northeast Thailand begun by the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission in 1971. It is not an anthropological attempt to describe the complexity of an amalgamous culture going back a thousand years, nor is it a religious treatise on Folk Buddhism as practiced in Thailand's northeast. Instead, it is a missiological effort to describe, with insights from the view of Northeastern Thai believers themselves, how Isaan cultural history, traditional religious beliefs, and Christian missionary efforts have all contributed to the creation of an on-going, culturally-appropriate process of contextualizing the relationship, the truth, and the power found in the good news of Jesus Christ.

#### *Definitions*

The term "contextualization" has remained highly controversial. Since its first use, it has been bantered about without consensus or a clear definition. A

review of the origin and development of the term "contextualization" is beyond the scope of this work and has been attempted elsewhere. For my purposes in this paper I use the term to specifically refer to effectively communicating the message of God's grace to humankind through Jesus Christ in culturally appropriate ways to which the receptor can freely respond and be transformed by the power of God. Contextualization is what God has been doing all along and continues to do in our world today. Contextualization is an on-going process and not a one-time event. Nothing, therefore, is ever completely and finally contextualized. The goal of contextualization is not to change meaning but to communicate meaning in such a way that the recipient can hear it, understand it, and put it into practice.

There are many aspects of the ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission in Isaan which could become worthwhile studies in themselves: the Biblical basis of contextualization, methods of church planting and evangelism, the training of lay leadership, the aquaculture system developed, the integration of evangelism and development in a holistic ministry approach, the issues of Isaan worldview and spiritual beliefs, to name a few. This study attempts to focus on the development of the contextualizing aspects of the ministry as they grew out of the cultural, political and historical framework and from there to derive some missiological implications.

### ***A Multi-Dimensional Model of Contextualization***

Dr. Charles Kraft, in *Contextualizing in Three Dimensions*, summarizes that most missionary effort at contextualization has been one-sided, concentrating primarily on the contextualization of theological knowledge in the cognitive realm:

As I look at the literature concerning contextualization, I note a tendency to focus exclusively on what I will call a *knowledge about* approach to Christianity, rather than a *practicing of* approach. We have focused on contextualizing *theology*, not behavior. We have shown a major concern for truth, but truth defined theoretically and academically, rather than truth as something that is lived (1999:4).

The problem with this is that "the peoples of the world don't seem to be much interested in contextualized theology" (Kraft 1999:3). The many dimensions of life that are not addressed within the realm of *knowledge about* leave people with needs unmet and disillusioned with what Christianity has to offer. Kraft calls for a multi-dimensional approach to doing contextualization that would integrate knowledge with practice through the contextualization of truth with the contextualization of relationship and the contextualization of power. By contextualization of relationship Kraft is referring to transforming allegiances primarily to God and then the resulting expression of love to others. In contextualizing power he is concerned primarily with God's spiritual power which is seeking to free people from bondage to Satan both cognitively

and experientially. Contextualization of knowledge must also continue in tandem with the other two, but it must be re-defined to become practical and not merely theoretical:

There are three kinds of knowledge in human experience: observational knowledge, intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge. And it is this third kind, experiential knowledge, that is usually in view in the Scriptures. Furthermore, when knowledge is in view in the Scriptures, it is strongly implied that there is a moral obligation to live up to that knowledge (Kraft 1999:12).

All three of these dimensions must work together to change allegiances, transform understanding and bring freedom in a holistic contextualization that will powerfully bring the reality of Christ to the culture:

In each area there will be encounter. The object is never to avoid change but to help those new in the faith to base their changes on things that are both meaningful in their lives and appropriate to Scripture. But, as in Scripture, God is willing to start where people are and to patiently bring them towards His ideals. He will, however, want to confront their primary relationships (usually to family) with the need to relate primarily to Him – as He did with the Jews. He will also want to confront their powers with His power and their concept of appeasing evil powers with His desire that they come to Him to let Him deal with the evil powers. And He will, of course, want to confront their truths with His Truth (Kraft 1999:14).

Using Kraft's multi-dimensional model we will review the development of the contextualized approach used by Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission as it relates to contextualizing relationships Godward (Chapter 4), contextualizing God's Truth (Chapter 5) and contextualizing God's power (Chapter 6) with Isaan people.

Jesus Christ himself, however, is the ultimate contextualization model. He demonstrated this in his incarnation, bringing relationship, knowledge and power together in one as the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6 NIV). By literally coming and pitching his tent with us, Jesus embodied multi-dimensional contextualization. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 NIV). In Him is seen both the model and the mandate for contextualization that relates, communicates and allows us to respond to Him as God desires.

## **MAP OF THE KINGDOM OF THAILAND**



**MAP OF THE NORTHEAST REGION OF THAILAND  
ISAN**





## CHAPTER 2

### A POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS OVERVIEW OF ISAAN

Isaan is the name of the people, the language, and the region of Northeastern Thailand. The spelling of this name can be, like much of Thai writing, transliterated into English in many different ways: Esarn, Issaan, Issan, Isan, Isaan. For this study I have chosen "Isaan" (pronounced ee-saawn) because of the long "a" vowel in the Thai spelling. This name, according to the Isaan linguist Preecha Phinthong, traces its origin to *Pra-I-Suan*, the Lao name for the Hindu god of Destruction *PraShiwa* or, as known in English, Shiva (1989:976). Isaan is home to the second largest people group of Thailand, nearly 25 million according to Char Karnchanapee (1995).

Geographically, the Isaan region is a wide sandy plain of 62,000 square miles known as the Korat Plateau. Bordered by the Petchabun mountain range on the west and the Dong Rek mountain range to the south, this vast region drains north and east into the Mekong river which serves as 600 miles of the present border between Thailand and the People's Democratic Republic of Laos to the north (Karnchanapee 1995). Average elevation is about 200 meters. Average rainfall is between 1,200 and 1,400 mm per year falling primarily during the months of June to September in great flooding rushes carving the tributaries into deep inaccessible ravines. The Korat Plateau is known for its infrequent rainfall, poor soil quality, widespread poverty and

resulting distinctive culture spread over nineteen provinces (see map page 7). One visitor, Walter Armstrong Graham, described his impression of the Korat plateau less than one hundred years ago:

The plain is for the most part sandy and almost barren, subject to heavy floods in the rainy season, and to severe drought in the dry weather. The hills are clothed with a thin shadeless growth of stunted forest, which only here and there assumes the characteristics of ordinary jungle. The river Nam Mun, which is perhaps 200 miles long, has a large number of tributaries, chief of which is the Nam Si. The river flows eastward and falls into the Mekong at 15 degrees 20 minutes N. and 105 degrees 40 minutes E. A good way farther north two small rivers, the Nam Kum and the Nam Song Kram, also tributaries of the Mekong, drain a small part of eastern Siam. Nearly two million people, mixed Siamese, Lao and Cambodian, probably among the poorest peasantry in the world, support existence in this inhospitable region (1911:2).

### ***The Political Development of Isaan***

In spite of its harsh conditions the Korat plateau has been home to several civilizations over the centuries. Archeological discoveries in Udon Thani province in the northern section of the region have unearthed a civilization existing during the Bronze age in a village known as Ban Chiang dating back to 3,500 BC:

Because of the relatively continuous occupation of the site for perhaps as long as 4,000 years, the evolution of pre-metal to Bronze to Iron age can be traced.... While the chronology at Ban Chiang is somewhat controversial (some of the earliest dates for the Bronze Age occupation are 1,500 years earlier than any other in Thailand, and roughly equivalent to the date for the Chinese Bronze Age), the site is without a doubt one of the more important sites in southeast Asia, providing us a glimpse into the peaceful village life of a bygone age (Ban Chiang 2002).

The Korat plateau has served as an important buffer zone between cultures for centuries. Early in the twelfth century, the Khmer Empire spread its influence north and west from the magnificent capital at Angkor in what is modern day Cambodia. The Khmer Empire expanded northward and westward until at its peak in 1,200 AD it encompassed not only the entire Korat plateau, but north across the Mekong valley into Chiang Hung (present day Hunan, China) and west to include Chiang Mai and south past present day Nakorn Sri Thammarat (Wyatt 1984:26). In the late thirteenth century the Siamese dynasty at Sukhothai came from the west and drove out the Khmer. They then used the Korat plateau region as a buffer between Siam and the Angkorian Empire to the south. In the two centuries following, the Lan Chang (Million Elephant) Kingdom of Laos spread south from the northern capitals of Luang Prabang and later Vientiane and incorporated the Korat Plateau as part of its kingdom in order to control the Mekong valley south to the remnants of Cambodia (Wyatt 1984:83).

In 1778 the Siamese attacked and conquered both Vientiane and Luang Prabang taking the sacred Emerald Buddha image which was the protector of Vientiane and the Phra Bang image which was the protector of the ancient Lan Chang capital Luang Prabang, to the new Siamese capital city of Bangkok (Hall 1964:646). The Korat plateau stayed a neutral zone for a short period and its local small fiefdoms remained autonomous. In 1804, however, Rama I of the new Siamese Chakri dynasty, placed his personal friend, Chao Anou, as the new ruler of Vientiane under Siamese control (Karnchanapee 1995). The Phra Bang Buddha image was later returned to the Lao people. But despite repeated requests, the Emerald Buddha has never been restored to its empty shrine in Vientiane. According to Noble Ross Reat, to this day, the Emerald Buddha remains "the primary symbol of Lao resentment against Thailand" (2002).

In 1820, after the death of Rama II and after enduring several years of Siamese repression, King Anou of Vientiane led a rebellion against the Thai which was brutally crushed. According to Ruth Benedict, retaliation Rama III of the Chakri Dynasty of Siam (later Thailand) laid siege to Vientiane in 1828 desiring its total and utter destruction:<sup>1</sup>

As usual in Siamese warfare, they laid waste the country, plundered the inhabitants, brought them to Bangkok, sold and gave them away as slaves. The king (Anou of Laos) was confined in a large iron cage, exposed to a burning sun. In this cage was placed with the prisoner, a larger mortar to pound him in, a large boiler to boil him in, a hook to hang him by, and a sword to decapitate him; also a sharp-pointed spike for him to sit on (Benedict 1963:9).<sup>2</sup>

As further retribution, Rama III forced the relocation of large numbers of people from the former Lao capital into the Siamese controlled areas of the Korat plateau. Erik Seidenfaden states, "The left bank of the Mekong, formerly densely populated, was almost depopulated by the mass evacuation of the population there to the right bank in the years 1828-1830" (1963:77). Also at this time, the towns on the Korat Plateau, which had formerly been under the control of Vientiane, were placed under the supervision of the Interior Ministry of Bangkok (Gustafson 1994:2). For more than a decade starting in 1834, the Thai made a sustained effort to move all of the Lao population on the left side of the Mekong to the Korat Plateau and parts of central Thailand. During this period approximately forty new *muang* (cities under feudal leadership known as *Chao muang*) were established throughout the Korat Plateau, some completely new creations and others formed by the immigration of whole communities including its *chao muang* and family. "What had been an extremely thinly populated region, densely forested, now began to be filled up, while the population of the east bank of the Mekong dramatically declined" (Wyatt 1984:172).

Eventually it became evident that while the relocation of the Lao was initially an act of retribution, there was a secondary motive in creating a buffer zone

between Thailand and Vietnam for what would ultimately develop into the Thai-Vietnamese war (1834-1847). It is estimated that some 80,000 Lao were initially removed from Vientiane in 1827 and that the total resettlement numbers might have been several hundred thousand people (Breazeale in Gustafson 1994:38-39).

Beginning in the mid 1850's France began to follow an expansionist policy in southeast Asia. "Britain annexed areas where she had interests to protect, whereas France annexed areas where she *wished* to have interests to protect" (Hall 1964:643). In 1883 France forced Vietnam to become a protectorate and from this point on advanced the theory that territory held by Siam to the east of the river Mekong, having at one time formed part of Annam,<sup>3</sup> should be restored now that Vietnam was a French protectorate (Hall 1964:647). Arthur Judson Brown records the historical event this way:

After many disputes and under a threat of bombardment, the King of Siam (Rama V), on Oct 3, 1893, was forced to sign a treaty which designated the Mekong River as the boundary between Siamese and French possessions, gave France all the islands in the river, and forbade Siam to fortify any point in or to send any armed force into a strip twenty-five kilometers wide on the west bank (1925:66).

By signing this Franco-Siamese Treaty, Siam agreed to withdraw from the left bank of the Mekong and to recognize Laos as a French protectorate. Knowing that resistance would mean ultimate subjugation, Siam made this territorial sacrifice and was thus also able to maintain her national sovereignty. It was at this time, according to Harvard anthropologist Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, that the entire area of the Korat Plateau bordered by the Mekong river, finally passed into the undisputed political control of Thailand (1970:31). Thailand's present day borders with Laos (as seen on the map on page 6) were finally established in 1904 (Karnchanapee 1995).

Today the diversity of the people of the Korat plateau speaks of this political history of dislocation and relocation both voluntary and imposed. Most of the residents are predominantly Lao in ethnic make-up due to the migrations mentioned above (Gustafson 1994:2-3). Many of the Isaan living on the northern border provinces of the Korat plateau have family members on both sides of the Mekong river. Certain pockets of Isaan are known to speak Vientiane Lao (such as in central Isaan), rather than other variations. In the southernmost provinces of Isaan bordering Cambodia there are still large pockets of Khmer speakers. In the mountainous regions tribal groups still exist with other distinctive languages and cultures. The southwest corner of the Khorat plateau, is home to the so-called Thai Khorat. These are the descendants of King Ramathibodi's Thai soldiers with Khmer woman when the former wrested the Khorat province from Cambodia in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Seidenfaden 1963:104-5). All of these cultures are part of contemporary Isaan.

## *The Repressed Culture of Isaan*

To the central Thai, the language, region, and people of the northeast of Thailand are known as Isaan. Amongst themselves however, the 25 million Isaan people refer to their own language, culture and people group as Lao. Central Thai people view the Isaan and their culture with humor and a certain degree of disdain. In the media the Isaan figure is typically presented as the butt of the jokes speaking his backcountry drawl and eating sticky rice with his fingers dipped in *pla rah*<sup>4</sup>. Many Isaan attempt to hide their cultural background when coming to work in the central Thai capital city of Bangkok.

With the official annexation of the Isaan region into Siam in 1893, the Thai government began a policy to change Isaan's local governing system as well as to introduce Central Thai language education to the region. From the Bangkok perspective the threats from foreign governments at the time required that Siam become a united nation to ward off Western colonialization. "But the victim," says Isaan historian Artha Nantachukra of Mahasarakam University quoted by the Thai journalist Patima Tha Hla, "was Isaan culture" (1995:29). Today, even though all Thai government schools are officially taught in the Central Thai language, the Isaan heart language still thrives outside of the classroom. It is often traumatic for young children from the remote areas to begin to speak good central Thai when they first enter a classroom at age seven or eight having spoken nothing but Lao from their birth.

The following incident, told to the author by fellow teammate and Isaan friend, Rev. Banpote Wechkama, would have occurred sometime in the early 1950's. During this period of time the Thai government put considerable pressure on outlying regions to promote central Thai as the standard language to be spoken by everyone throughout the kingdom. For those in the Lao-speaking northeast there was an additional issue that threatened national stability. A troubling upsurge of interest and support for communism was growing throughout the region and in the neighboring kingdom of Laos. The Thai government, with full support of the United States foreign policy, took a strict non-tolerant view to any communist activity.

When government policy first began to practice a non-tolerant view of other native tongues used in the school classroom, there was strong negative reaction from Isaan families. In order to promote the "unification" policy, local political leaders were urged to think of ways to generate adult support to the program. In status-conscious societies such as Thailand, public recognition is very powerful. Therefore, the government organized "book-burnings" to eradicate "foreign" propaganda and help purify and unite the country.

Banpote's village, *Ban Tdat Tong*, was located on the far western boundary of the eastern Isaan province of Ubon Ratchatani bordering southern Laos. Generations before settlers had migrated from Laos and built their small feudal kingdoms there, which were eventually united under the present

Chakri dynasty as part of Siam. During the time of the incident it was still common to hear people talk about their loyalty to Vientiane, the capitol of the Kingdom of a Million Elephants across the river in Laos.

When time for the book burning came to Ban Tdat Tong requisite volumes in the ancient Mon and Lao script were produced. Some of these texts would have been handwritten on the hinged dried leaves of the sugar palm which were then tied together with ribbons in accordion fashion. Some of them were written folklore and recordings of ancient legends known as *Payaa* stories that were usually memorized and chanted at festivals and weddings. Those who brought books to be burned were highly praised. Others were also encouraged to participate. Undoubtedly, there were political and social implications that were critical for villagers seeking positions for their children in government employment. Finally, when repeated requests failed to produce any more contributions, the pile of ancient writings was sprinkled with kerosene and set ablaze. It is impossible to estimate the value of the many irreplaceable volumes and scrolls which were disposed of in this way.

Later, when all the important people were gone and darkness had spread over the cold fire, Banpote witnessed something which he never forgot. The old people came out of their houses and began poking through the ashes of the fire. In the same way that people go through the ashes after a cremation looking for bone fragments, these elders were carefully using bamboo tongs and picking out any recognizable pieces. The ashes were mixed with clay and made into beads. After they dried they were strung on consecrated strings and worn around the neck by the elders in order that they would never forget their Lao heritage (Wechkama 1994).

Lao culture continues to be oppressed in subtle yet significant ways but in spite of this continues to survive. Amongst themselves there is a saying describing the central government's policy towards Isaan, *Mai hai dtai, deh mai hai dee* (We won't let them die but we won't let them thrive either). In spite of the fact that roads are good throughout the region, investment and infrastructure still remains limited. Opportunities for advancement are scarce. However, with a heritage used to hardship, the Isaan continue to survive with gradually more and more of the best from the Isaan region successfully integrating into the mainstream of Thai society. When in Bangkok, however, most Isaan leave their heritage behind as much as possible and seek to make a new identity in order to fit into the dominant culture.

### ***The Syncretistic Reality of Folk Buddhism in Isaan***

From an outsider's perspective, Thailand seems to demonstrate faithful devotion to its national religion: Buddhism. This has often been given as the reason why there has been such a strong resistance to Christianity in that country. In reality, "Thai Buddhism is more a national ethic and culture than pure Buddhism itself" (Kim 1980:14). Much of what is seen is in actuality a

deeply entrenched, long-standing amalgamation of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Animism:

Although Thailand is considered to be technically a Buddhist nation (Buddhism is the state religion), in actuality it is not. No more than from 5 to 10 per cent of the entire Thai population can be said to be Buddhists in the "pure" sense of the word. Close to 90 per cent of the Thai population are syncretistic in their practice of "Buddhism." They practice some of the moral teachings of Buddhism and follow the structure of the religion to a certain extent. At best, however, Buddhism is a superficial veneer under which both Animism and Brahmanism flourish. For these reasons, it may be somewhat correct to say that the 5 to 10 percent elite Thai Buddhists are resistant to Christianity because of a firm anchorage in Buddhism, but the same would not by any means be true of the rural Thai Buddhist who comprises the majority of the population in Thailand (Gustafson 1970:237-8).

Throughout the country of Thailand, both in urban and rural areas, this syncretism is obvious. In urban areas alongside the Buddhist temples and the presence of monks, there are a proliferation of spirit houses, shrines to Erawan, Shiva, Mae Toranee, and other mythical and historical figures. In nearly every market area and shopping mall in Thailand, a section can be found which trades in amulets, sacred images and spiritual paraphernalia. There is an entire industry that sells nothing but books, magazines (and now websites) in the Thai language about what are currently the most helpful and powerful of these various spiritual accouterments. Throughout the northeast region, syncretism is obvious in additional ways, such as the use of sacred strings, sacred cloths, phallic symbols in front of houses, rocket festivals and a wide range of ceremonies and seasonal rituals. To most Thai (including the Isaan), it is impossible to distinguish their Buddhist practices from those that are animistic as both are now closely woven together. In fact most Thai people take the pragmatic view that whatever works religiously to help them practically is what will be followed—particularly if it can help financially. This all-inclusive syncretistic mix can be called Thai Folk Buddhism.

Buddhism in its purest form deals primarily with death. Merit-making opportunities within Buddhism are for the benefit of either the future reincarnations of the living or for those already dead. Except for the elderly, most Thai people are not preoccupied with thoughts about their ultimate future but are living on the edge of survival for today (refer to Summary of 25 Thai Social Values in Appendix C). They are seeking solutions to the issues of the here-and-now: success of the rice crop, finding work, supporting family, and staying in good health. It is from animistic practices, however, that most Isaan people find the security and much of the assurances that allow them to continue to survive the struggles of daily life. Buddhism, in order to survive, has adapted to accommodate some of these demands by adopting animistic practices. Those few Buddhist monks, include the venerable Buddhadhasa Bhikku Rajjayakavi, who complain about Isaan people's religious



inconsistencies and syncretistic habits (1962) are dealt with in the politest possible manner of that society—with humor.

Within Isaan culture the assurances for solutions to the issues of today are dealt with often not by Buddhist monks but by those who lead the wide variety of animistic rituals and ceremonies. In Isaan they are called the *pham*. The *pham* is a Shaman whose name is linked to a *Bhraman* priest. These men are generally local village elders, usually not currently wearing the yellow robe of a Buddhist monk but many have been ordained in their past, who know the rituals involved in animistic practices and provide these services to the community for a fee. The *pham* can do exorcisms, healings, protections, and even cursings. While these rituals are not purely Buddhist and/or not purely animist it would be impossible for most people to be able to distinguish between them. "It is unthinkable in Thailand that a local brahman can be outside the Buddhist faith, or that his rites and those of the monk can be mutually exclusive" (Tambiah 1970:256). An attempt to integrate these seeming paradoxes has been made in an overview chart by Tambiah listed in Appendix A.

### **The Importance of Ceremony**

As is true for most societies worldwide, ceremonies play an important role.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the importance of ceremony within Thai Folk Buddhism cannot be overstated. As Paul G. Hiebert explains in his book with R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou, rituals play critical functions within animistic societies and serve a variety of necessary social functions:

Rituals can be divided into three major types: rites of transformation (to create new order and move individuals and groups through life), rites of intensification (to reinforce existing order), and rites of crisis (to enable people to survive emergency situations). Each of these serves an important function in the life of communities and individuals (1999:302).

From an insider's perspective, Isaan culture requires ceremony to be able to specify the significant starting points and rites of passage throughout life. Rev. Tongpan Phrommeda, a Christian Isaan leader and evangelist explained it this way:

Why do we need ceremonies? You need to understand this part of Isaan culture. Ceremony is the traditional way in our culture to officially mark a new beginning. If there is no ceremony then there has been no new beginning. If we do a ceremony, then it means we have now received or started something new. These ceremonies address our cultural need to show that something has begun. They come from our cultural background and address the deep need we have as Isaan people to show "beginning" (Phrommeda 2001:35).

### **The Concept of the *Khwan* and *Sukhwan* Ceremonies**



Within Isaan culture perhaps no ceremonies are more important for the day to day survival and well being of Isaan people than those ceremonies coming under the category of *sukhwan* ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> The concept of *khwan* probably dates back to the earliest animistic traditions of the area (Bailey 2000:17). *Khwan* is a difficult term to define but has been described by Thai informants as the essence of life, a principle vital and essential for all sentient beings (Heinze 1982:17). It resides (or enters and exits the body) at the tuft of hair at the top of the head (Bailey 2000:21), the area of the scalp referred to in English as "the crown."

In Thailand every individual has 32 members and each of these members has its own *khwan*. When a baby is born in good health the proud father will announce, "*Kroh p samsip song!*" (Born complete with all 32!). Few Thai actually know what each of the 32 members are but individually and collectively these are known as that person's *khwan* or life-essence.<sup>7</sup> The word *khwan* is used in everyday vocabulary in such terms as the word used for gift (*khong khwan* "something belonging to the *khwan*"), words of encouragement (*kam khwan* "words for the *khwan*"), and many others. Heinze has listed 36 common occurrences of the word "*khwan*" used in daily Thai language (Heinze 1982:35).

Even though *khwan* is essential to successful life, it is fickle and can come and go. It can be scared off, it can be disturbed, and it can vacate the individual, thus leaving the person open to disaster. According to the Isaan thinking, "the *khwan* must be recalled and aggregated to the body in order to make the person whole" (Tambiah 1970:243). This is done through a variety of ceremonies all known as *sukhwan* (to the *khwan*) or *tham khwan* (literally making the *khwan*). These two terms are used interchangeably to describe the ceremonies for bringing the *khwan* back or insuring that it continues to reside with the person.

Tambiah has noted in his research on northeastern Thai spirit-cults, six major categories of the *sukhwan* ceremonies: 1) rites of passage; 2) pregnancy; 3) threshold ceremonies before starting an enterprise; 4) ceremonies of reintegration; 5) rites for those suffering from prolonged illnesses; and 6) rites for dispelling bad luck betokened by inauspicious happenings (1970:224-226). Another study done by UC Berkeley professor Ruth-Inge Heinze also listed six major occasions for *tham khwan* ceremonies. These are: 1) illness and mental stress; 2) first hair-cut of a one-month old baby; 3) coming of age (cutting top-knot); 4) ordination into monkhood; 5) weddings; and 6) "when a person returns home after a long absence or, especially in the northeast, for almost every life crisis, that is, when a person changes status or residence and when visitors are given a welcome or farewell" (1982:45).

### **The Use of Strings in the *Sukhwan* Ceremonies**

The essence of *sukhwan* ceremonies revolves around the use and tying of cotton strings onto the wrist of the recipient. Usually these cotton strings are

gathered in strands of three and knotted together and then these threads are knotted onto a stick and collected in a special flower arrangement known as the *don bai sri* (a bouquet made of flowers and banana leaves) and placed on a low bamboo tray called the *phakhwan*. The strings in the *bai sri* would have been consecrated before the ceremony by "having hot wax of burning candles drop on them while *mantras* (mainly verses from the *Pali Canon*) are chanted (preferably by monks), or by having lustral water (*nam mon*, produced by the same process) sprinkled on them" (Heinze 1982:140-141). This empowering process is known as *puk sekkatah* (tying on the consecration).

The consecrated strings are then used to tie onto the recipient's wrist with an oral blessing. This, in effect, ties the words of blessing and the *khwan* to the person at the same time. Traditionally it was believed that tying the right wrist let the *khwan* come and tying the left wrist let the *khwan* stay (Heinze 1982:77). According to the author's observations in northeast Thailand today, there is little attention paid to this detail anymore. What is significant, however, is that the wrist be tied. Why the wrist? "The most frequently given reason (for this) is that the life, that is, the beating of the pulse, can best be observed at the wrist" (Heinze 1982:77).

It is interesting to note that unlike Buddhist ceremonies that are chanted in Pali (which is unintelligible to most), the *sukhwan* rituals are therapeutic in nature and therefore must be given in the local language. This allows the meaning to be clearly conveyed to the recipient of the ceremony and all those in attendance:

The words recited in *sukhwan* ritual have necessarily to be understood by the participants. In so far as the ritual is instrumentally constructed to act as a prophylactic or therapy, the contents of the verbal message have to be understood for achieving the specified effect, which is of course buttressed by the other message contents and the role of the elders. By contrast, the semantics of the rituals conducted by (Buddhist) monks are more complex and the effects sought non-specific (Tambiah 1970:242).

*Khwan* ceremonies hold an important function within the Thai folk Buddhist social context. They provide a way for problems and personal psychological disturbances to be solved before they reach dangerous levels. They can restore a sense of well being after a tragedy or accident. Perhaps most importantly on the cultural level they can bring on a renewed sense of community within the social context:

The symbolic act of tying the wrists has the following functions: (1) to keep the *khwan* inside the body of the recipient and to strengthen his essence of life; (2) to protect the recipient against evil forces from the outside; (3) to seal a contract between the individual and the supernatural; and (4) to assure the recipient of the care and goodwill of those close to him by means of a socially sanctioned rite (Heinze 1982:83-84).

Isaan culture is a complex, evolving combination of political history, cultural repression, religious syncretism, and economic constraints. A missiological approach to reach such a people for Christ would need to be functionally practical and relevant to all the needs of a person's life, in order to be accepted by people with such a worldview.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **AN OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY EFFORT IN ISAAN**

Several writers have collected data on the history of the work of Christian mission in Thailand<sup>8</sup> but little is mentioned of the work done on the Korat plateau among the Isaan. The reality is that until the twentieth century travel in Isaan, as was true throughout most of southeast Asia, was extremely difficult and was done either by boat along the few existing, and often treacherous, waterways or overland by elephant (Brown 125:21). For many centuries most of the Isaan region remained beyond the reach of outside missionaries because of formidable physical and cultural barriers.

#### ***Catholic Mission in Isaan***

The first missionaries to Isaan were the European Catholic fathers who accompanied early explorers seeking to establish trade with Laos. Traveling up the Mekong river valley these men would have had some contact with those living along the northern and eastern perimeters of the Korat plateau:

In the seventeenth century, under the reign of King Souliyavongsa, the Lane Xang Kingdom entered its most illustrious era. The country (Laos) established first contacts with Europeans. In 1641, a Dutch merchant of the East India company, Geritt Van Wuysthoff, and later, the Italian missionaries Leria de Marini visited the Kingdom of Lane Xang and described Vientiane as the most magnificent city of Southeast Asia (Lao History at glance 2002).

The extent of the Christian missionary influence in these early years in the capital cities of Laos or in the region of the Korat Plateau is unknown. In neighboring Siam, however, Christian influence began as early as 1511 when Roman Catholic priests accompanied the Portuguese Embassy of Alfonso de Albuquerque. According to missionary researcher Alex G. Smith, two Dominican priests were martyred in that same century (1977:95). Catholic missionaries first arrived from Spain in 1584 (Kim 1980:35). French Catholic priests began to work in Siam in 1662 and within twenty-five years had established a seminary and a number of chapels within the Thai capital of

Ayutthaya. Along with the missionaries, however, 1,400 French soldiers were also stationed in the Siamese capital (Kim 1980:36). While the missionaries endeared themselves to the Siamese King Narai, the increasing political maneuvering of the French soon began to muddy the waters. Strong anti-foreign sentiment began to grow among the Siamese nobility led by Narai's designated successor, Phra Pitraya. The betrayal of Siam to the French in 1688, by an English adventurer, Constantine Phaulkon, who had managed to endear himself to the monarch Narai and be raised to the title of Thai nobleman was the final blow. Pitraya had Phaulkon beheaded and as soon as Narai breathed his last, he expelled the French soldiers from the country (Kim 1986:38). Kenneth E. Wells writes, "Upon the death of King Narai that year (1688) an anti-French reaction swept the capital of Ayutthaya and the French priests and monks were driven from the country or jailed. Their work among the Thai languished during the following 140 years" (1958:5).

One century after these incidents Catholic missions was still considered as making little inroads among the Siamese population (A. Smith 1981:9). In 1850, after the English victory with China in the Opium wars began to distress Siam's King Rama III, England's attempts to seal commercial treaties with Siam resulted in threats on the lives of the missionaries (1981:23). Any Catholic or Protestant missionaries were at that time put under severe restrictions. No new mission outposts were started in the area of the Korat plateau until after the beginning of the twentieth century when work was started in the Mekong valley border with Laos in Nong Khai, Nakorn Pathom and Mukdahan areas where more than 50 percent of the Catholic communities exist today (1977:96).

### ***Protestant Mission in Isaan***

Protestant mission first began in Thailand in 1828 with the arrival of Dr. Carl Augustus Gutzlaff, a German medical doctor, and Jacob Tomlin of the London Missionary Society. According to the Thai researcher, Dr. Virat Koydul, these two were given permission to work among the Chinese and to live only in Bangkok (1990:16). They left four years later with no converts (A. Smith 1977:97). 1858 marked the arrival of Daniel McGilvary, of the American Presbyterian mission board. This early missionary pioneer would eventually feel God's call to work among the Lao-speaking people in Siam's northern region. For nearly fifty years he operated what was referred to as the "Lao Mission" in Chiang Mai. His extensive ministry (1858-1911) took him traveling north into the Lan Chang kingdom and farther into China but according to his writings it is evident that in all his explorations among the Siamese and the Lao he never traveled east beyond the western border of what is today known as Isaan (1912:430).

While missionaries were joining the Lao mission work in the north, for most of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century the interior of the Korat plateau, with its ancient cities and newer towns remained for the most part untouched by Christian mission. Even as late as 1925 the observation was

made "A region in eastern Siam (Isaan) as large as the State of Minnesota and with two and half million people has not one resident missionary. There are literally thousands of villages within the nominal area of existing stations which the scanty force of missionaries is unable to reach" (Brown 1925:188).

### **The Work of the Christian and Missionary Alliance**

In the late 1920's, however, one man had a growing burden for the Khmer speakers of Siam who lived in the southernmost provinces of Isaan which adjoined Cambodia. Dr. Paul Gunther, a Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary in Cambodia who was fluent in Khmer, first entered Thailand in 1928 through Ubon Ratchatani. In those days, according to David E. Fessenden, this took several days by boat and bus across dense Cambodian jungles (2001:57). Gunther soon learned he would need a translator to speak Siamese and hired a local teacher who spoke enough English to help. However, after the translator received his first paycheck he went out (in typical local fashion) and invited all his buddies to a drinking party where they proceeded to get stone drunk. Needless to say Gunther was less than pleased. He was able to communicate to the teacher that no more paychecks would be forthcoming and that the whole forward movement of Gunther's mission was on hold until this man had a change of heart, accepted Christ as Savior and Lord and sobered up. It took several months of fervent prayer but this man, whose name is unrecorded, finally met Gunther's terms. According to the northeastern Thai church history, Dr. Somdii Putsawtsee, they then together they went on to plant churches throughout the province of Ubon (1995). In the May 11, 1929 issue of *The Alliance Weekly* announced:

One more unoccupied field has been entered. Protestant missions have been working in Siam for one hundred years having only recently celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the first Protestant missionary's entrance to this land. Missionaries have gone north and south, but have never crossed the mountain ridge that separates east Siam from the rest of the country to open work in that district. Thus the Alliance, ever true to its original call to the untouched regions, has taken over east Siam...one of the newest responsibilities to the heathen world (2001:57).

Rev. and Mrs. Paul Gunther were transferred from Cambodia to Siam in early 1929. They settled in Ubon Ratchatani and were joined by the Rev. and Mrs. Peter A. Voth six months later. When the Rev. and Mrs. R.M. Chrisman arrived in 1930, the Voths moved to the northeastern city of Khon Kaen. Three other couples joined this mission during the pre-war years. They initially operated a Bible Training School in Korat which was later moved to Khon Kaen where it continues today (Wells 1958:200).

Reporting on the mission activity in Thailand of his time, missionary historian Alexander McLeish recorded that in 1938 the Seventh Day Adventists reorganized its work to include a mission in Ubon on the eastern border of Isaan (1942:13,26). Along with the C&MA, these two missions were the only

Protestant missionary organizations working in Isaan until the outbreak of World War II. During the war, when Thailand was under Japanese occupation and all foreign missionaries were repatriated, two Thai evangelists supported by the Maitri Chit Church in Bangkok looked after the Christian and Missionary Alliance churches in the Northeast. Mr. Chrisman, the Board Representative, and Mr. Ziemer were the first missionaries to return after the war. The new missionary couples that soon arrived took up residence in the cities in the Isaan provinces of Surin, Buriram, Srisaket, Roi Et, Loei, and Mahasarakam (Wells 1958:200).

In the post-war period bands of armed robbers menaced many Isaan districts. On April 18, 1952, such a band attacked a religious service held at night in a village sala in Udon Thani province. "Using shotguns they fired without warning upon the Rev. and Mrs. Paul Johnson. Their two children were unhurt, but Mrs. Johnson, who was seated at the organ, was hit and died almost immediately, and Mr. Johnson died three days later, after being brought to Bangkok" (Wells 1958:200).

In the decade following World War II the Christian and Missionary Alliance mission work in Isaan expanded into ministries of compassion. They founded rural clinics for treating leprosy patients, increased the production and sale of publications, opened a literature department and book room in Bangkok, prepared radio broadcasts in Thai for use abroad, and developed two Bible Training Schools with an enrollment of fifty-four in 1957 (Wells 1958:200).

Change, however, was on the way. Growing anti-missionary sentiment, combined with new thinking on national leadership began to develop. "In 1953 and 1954, the Christian and Missionary Alliance mission sought to change the work into a more indigenous movement and so they changed the support from mission centric to native centric. This move resulted in defection, division, and dissension for some time"(Gustafson 1970: 170-171). Norman Ford says that the real problem started in 1953 because of the mission's policy to cut off financial support to Thai pastors and evangelists. When that policy was initiated, "all hell broke loose" (1982:9). In spite of a desire on the part of missionaries to introduce and implement a more indigenous model of the church in Isaan, the general understanding among the (northeastern Thai) people was that the C&MA mission policies had changed very little since World War II. Many Christians in that area were dissatisfied with what they felt was a paternalistic attitude on the part of the missionaries toward nationals and an over-emphasis on self-support (Kim 1980:199). Missionary implementation of their interpretation of indigenization was resented. "Unfortunately, as it happens, the champions of indigenization in Thailand are all foreign missionaries. The very emphasis on an indigenous movement, when pursued by foreign missionaries, gives the impression that indigenization is itself another theological package from the West" (Kim 1980:133).

In 1958 the C&MA had fifty-six missionaries in seventeen stations in Northeastern Thailand. That year the Gospel Church of Thailand (the Thai name for the denomination) had thirty-four organized churches and 961 members throughout Isaan (Wells 1958:200-1). In spite of this distribution, other Protestant missionary groups began to see the need to do evangelism in Isaan as well.

In 1960 a formal decision was made between Protestant groups working in Thailand at that time to dissolve former territorial agreements. The reasoning was that if a group had the financial and human resources, they should be free to be able use them for the glory of God and the growth of the church wherever God calls to serve (P. DeNeui 1995). This agreement remains as of this writing .

Indigenization was a new buzzword among missionaries in the 1960's. Conferences were held around the world to promote the freeing of the church from western domination and allow local leadership not only to take control but to take on the task of mission. These issues had already been festering among the churches in C&MA churches in Isaan for several years when the topic resurfaced, with wide acclaim by William T. Bray and G. Edward Roffe, at a meeting held in Thailand in 1969:

When future historians record the end of the West's great missionary movements, they will doubtless stress the developing countries nationalism and the casting off of colonial chains. Less noticed may be major international meetings like the Berlin and Singapore evangelism congresses, which help make missionary withdrawal possible. Another key meeting was held recently in Bangkok, Thailand, the fifth in a series of Asian conferences of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. ...the Alliance conferences have come to be synonymous with sweeping reforms and a loosening of foreign missionaries' grip on the national churches.

(C&MA Indian pastor R.P.) Chevan was back in 1969, playing a key role in the most promising development in Bangkok: an inter-field national mission board for Asia. The new agency will send out Asian missionaries, with Asian funds, selected by Asians, under Asian standards. Already C&MA national churches have sent out some twenty-nine missionaries (1969:51).

Clearly the intent was that missionaries were no longer needed to forward the task and should go home. Nationals now led the day. With great celebration the independence of the church was at last now being achieved! But how did that transition really work?

For the C&MA churches in Isaan the transition was one of the factors that caused the church to plateau during the years from 1970 to 1974. The church was plagued by internal strife. What gains were made in new members and churches was offset by losses to other groups and missions coming into the

northeast. In 1972 the C&MA had eight mission stations in the northeast manned by 52 missionary personnel (Kim 1980:198).

The 1980's brought a major directional change for the C&MA work in Thailand shifting from a rural to an urban focus. Following the patterns of Isaan people to migrate to Bangkok for work, the mission decided somewhat suddenly to move its missionary personnel to the city (Fessenden:2001). Unfortunately, this left the few remaining rural Isaan churches to survive on their own. The Gospel Church of Thailand in Bangkok has since been able to mother several daughter churches in the greater Bangkok area.

### **The Work of the Church of Christ in Thailand**

The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) was organized originally in 1934 with the hope that all Protestant mission agencies in the country would become members of this autonomous national church. Initially, only two groups did: the Presbyterians and the American Baptists (Koydul 1990:45). From 1934-1974 the CCT focused primarily on work in Bangkok and the north; it had no work in the northeast region of the country. This changed in 1974.

Over twenty years of disharmony between local pastors, church members and missionaries finally resulted in nineteen C&MA churches in the Udon Thani area (of Isaan) withdrawing from the Gospel Church and applying for membership with the Church of Christ in Thailand which, as Roy Stanley Rosedale notes, was "the World Council of Churches related body in Thailand" (1983:8). Initially this request was rejected by the CCT as they had no work in the region. However, the following year (1974), the CCT approved their second request and accepted them as a new district (#13) of the national CCT church (Kim 1980:199). Thus, CCT churches in the Northeast grew from zero to 376 members in 1974 completely by this transfer growth (Koydul 1990:75). Among the remaining C&MA churches, the disenchantment continued with the Gospel Church of Thailand leadership and this Thai leadership was completely replaced in 1978 (Rosedale 1983:8). Kim notes that in 1980, "this kind of internal disharmony and poor national leadership is still a problem. And yet, the people's receptivity toward the Christian Gospel is improving" (1980:199).

### ***Establishing a Student Center for Christian Training in Isaan***

While attending Fuller Theological Seminary, a gifted, energetic young student named James W. Gustafson, was invited to join the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) in their new outreach venture, working with a number of CCT churches in the northeastern Thai province of Udon Thani. Jim was a natural for this position as his parents were career Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries in Laos and he had a passion for that part of the world. During his years at Fuller, Gustafson had joined the Evangelical Covenant Church of America (ECCA) and after some deliberation was able to convince the Covenant denomination to open a new mission field in Thailand.



In June 1971, Rev. Jim and Joan Gustafson were commissioned as missionaries of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America (ECCA) to join the work of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT). In April of 1973 upon successful completion of the Thai government's fourth grade Thai language exam for foreigners, the couple moved to Udon Thani in the northern part of Isaan and began working with the CCT churches there. Gustafson wrote in 1975:

In 1971 my wife and I were sent to Thailand as Covenant missionaries to work with the oldest and largest Christian group in Thailand, a united body called The Church of Christ in Thailand. This body is almost 150 years old and has some 27,000 Christians (out of a total 37,000 Christians in the country, less than one tenth of one percent of the total population). The CCT was begun with the uniting of the Presbyterian, American Baptist, and Disciples of Christ groups. Over the years others have joined the adventure of working in this union. Today eleven groups cooperate by sending missionaries to share in the work, the Covenant being the most recent. In a real sense, we had to be free to risk losing ourselves as a denomination for the sake of working toward the growth of the Church. We did not work to plant Covenant churches; we worked to help the churches already united with the CCT to grow and expand in their ministry to the Thai people. This very freedom enabled us as Covenanters to play a very important role in the work of the Church in Thailand. There are quite a number of evangelical groups who are working outside of the CCT, doing their own thing and planting their own kinds of churches in Thailand. We found that we were accepted by these groups, too, since the Covenant is evangelical; yet we were also accepted by the CCT groups which had been classified by the other church groups as "liberal." In many instances, we became the bridge between divided parts of the body of Christ and were able to be instruments of reconciliation between them (1975).

The initial strategy centered around establishing a local training center for Isaan men with the goal of training them to pastor the local CCT churches. This program, called the Christian Service Training Center (CSTC) was initially developed in 1961 by the CCT, in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand as an alternative to a full seminary education "not to produce academicians or theological degrees, but the most practical and dedicated preachers for the rural churches (of the north)" (Kim 1980:148). Funding for a CSTC which would address the needs for leadership for the CCT churches in Isaan was raised by the ECCA. Property was purchased on the main highway twelve kilometers north of the city of Udon and in January 1974 construction began. The Isaan CSTC was the continuation of a school at the Udon CCT church named the Fellowship Church, which was originally C&MA. According to an interview with Walt Wolf, the faculty of the CSTC were five Thai men and women with CCT background: Rev. Manun Chaisri, Rev. Somchai Buaphet, and Miss Montee Kanchanawichai<sup>9</sup>, Rev. Tongpan Phrommeda, Rev. Banpote Wechkama, and one missionary from the ECCA as acting director, Rev. Jim

Gustafson (1997). Classes began in June 1974, with twenty young male students ages 17-21 in the resident program.

A grant from World Relief Commission (later renamed World Relief Corporation) enabled the CSTC to begin a self-support program on some farmland directly across the road from the school. The goal of this program was to generate income within the country to help support the work of the center. Phase one of the program started in September of 1974 concurrently with the school program which had started in June (Gustafson 1977:1). In January of 1976 the addition of an industrial-size rice mill gave added input into the program and was a major component of an integrated agricultural system that began to attract the attention of the surrounding community.

### **A Radical Realization**

Two of the Thai staff on the CSTC faculty, Rev. Tongpan Phrommeda and Rev. Banpote Wechkama, began to explore with Gustafson the meaning and implications of God's grace for Isaan. As they began studying the Scriptures together, initially Galatians then Romans, both of these men underwent a real conversion. The idea of grace was not at all what they had been taught to believe. Traditional Thai Christianity was basically Buddhism with a new dressing, "you have to be good to be saved" (Wolf:1997).

Rev. Tongpan had graduated from the C&MA Bible school in Khon Kaen and was an accomplished preacher. One day, after they had been working together for a period, he was challenged by Gustafson to consider his message. As Tongpan reflected:

When I first began to work with Jim Gustafson he told me one day, "Tongpan, you aren't preaching the gospel. You are preaching religion. Can you tell the difference between the gospel and religion?" I was furious! Then he began to explain it to me and I started to understand. The gospel is what God has done for us. Religion is the good moral code that teaches us what we should do—but it has no power to help us do good. Some people compare it to the mirror we look at to see what we should do to improve our face. But it can't do anything about the way we look—we've got to do it ourselves. That is the way with all religions. I realized that I really had not been preaching the good news of what Jesus had done. I was preaching what I was told people should do to become good Christians. I had to change (Phrommeda personal conversation).

This message of grace spread beyond the normal day program of student training. After their work at the center was over, this team of three began going out into the surrounding Isaan villages with this Gospel, studying it (not preaching it) in the Isaan language with interested villagers. These Bible discussions took place in the evenings after the villagers had returned from their work in the rice fields. Together they would sit around a candle with the

Bible talking until late into the night. Through this method about 30 village churches were formed (Wolf 1997).

As Isaan villagers began to understand and respond to a Biblical concept of grace, God used one old woman to bring about a radical paradigm shift that changed the way worship would be expressed in the indigenous rural Isaan churches from that time forward:

It was during one of these local-language Bible discussions, as people sat on the straw mats in the home of a believer, that one elderly woman stood up from her squatting position, stepped into the middle of the circle and suddenly began to dance the traditional Isaan steps. Her thin arms and fingers waved gracefully back and forth in rhythm to her small delicate steps. It was a familiar sight at drunken parties—but this was *Christian worship!* There was no music, only a stunned silence.

Finally one voice called out, "Grandma, sit *down!* What do you think you're doing?"

Without a break in her motions she simply stated, "You don't tell your old grandma to sit down. I'm 90 years old. I'm just thanking the Lord that you're here" (P. DeNeui 2001:19).

### **Reaction to Contextualization**

As village churches began to grow and began to incorporate dance, music, and other Isaan cultural forms into the life of their community, there was a definite negative reaction among the westernized Thai Christians. All of this, along with the growing interest in helping meet physical needs through agricultural projects, was definitely outside the norms of the CCT or C&MA. There were serious questions in terms of worship style, church logistics and control, and especially doctrine. As the villagers studied more, the Thai church leaders and the students began complaining that the villagers would know more than they. The simple solution of continuing to study themselves was not attractive. The historical pattern had been for theological students to get their education, graduate, and pass this knowledge along to their churches. The idea of Biblically educated lay people, especially those who had new ideas (grace) was very threatening.

At this time an incident arose in a village about 30 kilometers south of the city of Udon Thani:

There was a large Christian population which was being physically beaten by the other residents. Much of it somewhat deserved—they had taken the very typical, judgmental approach, (we are much better, Buddhists were a bunch of devil-worshippers, etc.). The team began meeting with them, presenting the alternative Gospel of grace, and emphasizing that the difference between Christians and others was mostly in the heart, and that they were called to

minister to their neighbors, not condemn them. After a year of this, the local church made plans for a big Christmas celebration as a means of reconciliation. They invited the entire village, especially the headman and other leaders and the local Buddhist priests, giving them an honored position, and made gifts to be distributed. The comment from the headman in his remarks was that there had been a remarkable change in the church community over the last year, all for the better.

All went fantastically, except the other CSTC faculty and Christians from the CCT church that attended were horrified. "How dare you!" they thought, "You can't have anything to do with Buddhist priests, they are the enemy!" (Wolf 1997).

### ***Political Developments Affecting the CSTC***

In order to understand the events that eventually followed, it is important to have a clear perspective on several factors affecting the Isaan area in that particular time in history. These factors include the Vietnam conflict and threat of communism in Isaan, a growing anti-American sentiment throughout southeast Asia, a desire on the part of the missionaries to see the indigenization of the church, and others.

The mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was a volatile period for Southeast Asia. America had become heavily involved in military conflict with Communist forces in North Vietnam. In 1962 the Geneva accord established the kingdom of Laos as officially neutral in the conflict yet only two years later America deliberately went against this agreement according to Michael Buckley:

Because of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Laos was subjected to saturation bombing by aerial raids launched from Thailand and from within Laos. In this undeclared dirty war, the tonnage of bombs dropped by US bombers on the northern Lao provinces of Xieng Khuang, Sam Neua, the Phong Saly between 1964 and 1973 exceeded the entire tonnage dropped over Europe by all sides during WWII.<sup>10</sup> It is estimated that US forces flew almost 600,000 sorties—the equivalent of one bombing run every eight minutes around the clock for nine years. This air assault was shrouded in secrecy, since under the terms of the Geneva Accord of 1962 no foreign personnel were supposed to operate on Laotian territory. The Vietminh and the Chinese also violated Laos' neutrality with infantry divisions deployed in the north. In the early days of the bombing, American pilots dressed in civilian clothing flew old planes with Royal Lao markings; Thai and Hmong pilots were also trained to fly missions (1999).

Once again, as has been seen repeatedly over its recorded history, the Korat plateau was used as a buffer zone by larger opposing powers. The obscure rural city of Udon Thani became a key military base of operations due to its strategic location over the mountains of Laos from Hanoi. With full cooperation from the Thai government, the US government began to build an

infrastructure that would, supposedly, see the end of the communist threat. A major highway, known as the Friendship Highway, was built from Bangkok all the way through Udon Thani to the northeastern Thai/Lao border town of Nong Khai on the Mekong river making efficient transportation of equipment and supplies possible. "The transportation and supply profile of the country was reshaped almost overnight" (Karnchanapee 1995). An airbase was established sufficient for the refueling of B-52s and other more modern aircraft used in the bombing of Laos. In early 1969, there were approximately 50,000 American servicemen stationed in Thailand...: 36,000 in the Air Force, 12,000 in the Army, and 1,000 military advisers (Karnchanapee 1995).

Western-style housing, shopping, a thriving nightlife and sex industry began to mushroom in all directions in Udon Thani and brought a huge influx of Western culture and ideas (Wyatt 1984:288-9). The growth was unlike that seen anywhere else in Thailand outside of Bangkok. "At one stage Udon Thani housed more than 10,000 American soldiers as B52s took off at night to carpet bomb neutral Cambodia, Laos and war-torn Vietnam" (Davies 1996:11). This was also the area in which the CCT began its new Christian Service Training Center to train church leadership for churches in Isaan.

In the early 1970's, as disturbing reports about the nature and the high casualty costs of the Vietnam conflict began to filter back, opposition to the American involvement began to grow both in the states and among southeast Asians. When a military coup dissolved the first freely elected Thai parliament and restored military dominance over the Thai government under an interim constitution, the reaction among Thai students was swift and strong. They felt betrayed. In mid-1973 they became a major political force with massive demonstrations (Wyatt 1984:297-299). In October 1973 the student uprising became so extensive that the Thai army was called in to suppress it, however the students, according to Moshe Lissak, were successful in forcing changes (1976:88). Over two hundred students were killed, with many more arrested and tortured. Further tragedy was finally averted only through the unprecedented personal intervention of the highly respected Thai monarch who actually arrived with a megaphone and walked through the mobs urging students to go home. Only his authority averted a huge national disaster (1976:107). On Oct. 14, 1973 the military leaders Thanom and Praphas were forced to resign and were exiled abroad (Wyatt 1984:299). Upon the return of the former prime minister Thanom to Thailand in 1976, and in reaction to implied supportive visits to him by members of the Thai royal family at the monastery where he was residing as a Buddhist monk, student demonstrations again resurfaced. These were met with massive military assaults. "Students were lynched, burned alive, and beaten on Oct 6, brutally ending the brief democratic experiment as the military again moved in to suspend the constitution and clamp down on political expression" (1984:302). The period of unrest continued until 1980 and the Tinsulanonda era (1984:304).

### **Reaction within the CSTC**

For the missionaries, living and working in northeast Thailand became increasingly difficult. Because heavy CIA presence in the area already created an atmosphere of suspicion, the presence of any foreigners in a village setting was questioned, including missionaries. Udon Thani, located less than 50 kilometers from the Lao border, was a target for communist infiltration and all activities became suspect. Indirectly, the missionary's lives were endangered.

The Bible students in the school in Udon caught some of the spirit of the times. Though they continued to study, they recognized that their diploma could be a step up and out to an assumed better life working in the capitol city of Bangkok. As Thai faculty and missionaries of the school began to reach out in church planting among poor village believers, the students (and some of the faculty) at the CSTC began to raise questions. The decision by the missionary and Thai-team to employ the use of the local language (Lao) in church worship, and the gradual incorporation of local music and other cultural forms, all became further points of tension both with students and CCT officials. When local villagers were taught to lead Bible discussions themselves the students asked, "Why do that? We will tell them what they need to know! That's why we're going to school!" Small agricultural farm projects to help the lives of poor church members were called into question by CCT authorities as not being evangelism (Wolf 1997).

Finally, in 1975 the crisis exploded on all sides. In swift succession Thailand's neighboring governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia all fell to Communism within the month of April. The Thai government, under Prime minister Kukrit Pramot, finalized an agreement bringing an end to a visible American military presence on Thai soil (Karnchanapee:1995). As the military evacuated Udon Thani, an orphanage, the Udorn Christian Orphanage built and sponsored by U.S. military personnel was turned over to the ECCA (not the CCT) along with 23 orphans. Over the next two years these children were all placed in families in Thailand and overseas (Gustafson 1983).

During this time general student unrest existed throughout the entire country. In 1976, during one of the hottest months of the year, the CSTC Bible students in the school in Udon Thani, sensing their moment had come finally made their move as reported by Gretchen DeNeui:

A crisis occurred when the CSTC student body rebelled in May of 1976. During a twelve hour long strike they grilled the teachers and demanded that they be guaranteed a salary and a church on graduation. At that point it became evident that the students, 20 in 1974, had come to the CSTC to get jobs, not to grow in their ability to study and understand God's word (1991:3).

When the students revolted, the teachers split into two groups: Rev. Manun, Rev. Somchai and Miss Montee<sup>11</sup> were sided with the students, Rev. Tongpan and Rev. Banpote sided with the missionary director, Gustafson. Without a word, Rev. Tongpan left immediately for Bangkok where he worked with the

CCT in evangelism for about five months (Wolf 1997). Rev. Banpote applied and was accepted to work with a CCT school in Phetburi (Wechkama 1997).

### **Changes in the CSTC**

At the annual meeting of the CCT in June 1976, Gustafson proposed closing the resident program and turning the CSTC into a center for Theological Education by Extension (T.E.E.) for three reasons: 1) to teach and equip the real leaders of the church, 2) the cost of the overhead of the resident program was too high, and 3) to better use the students as teachers. Incited by students and displeased faculty, the annual meeting reacted negatively to this proposal. Instead, a counter-proposal was suggested that the agricultural self-support program be sold and the money given to the churches (1983).

In July, Gustafson resigned as director of the CSTC but stayed on as a teacher and consultant (1977). Gustafson continued to work to encourage T.E.E. education through the CSTC out into village churches. He convinced Rev. Banpote not to take the job in Phetburi but to stay and work in T.E.E. Rev. Banpote was able to persuade Rev. Tongpan to return from Bangkok and help with this new venture. Together this team worked with 58 elders in eight churches teaching extension courses out in the churches using the same basic curriculum as that taught in the CSTC resident program.

In November a replacement director arrived, a well-known CCT Thai conservative from the north, Rev. Prayun.<sup>12</sup> In December of 1977 the T.E.E. team moved their office from the CSTC to the now empty orphanage and continued to work with local Isaan elders training them in the methodology of T.E.E. While church elders responded positively and the church began to expand, official CCT clergy in the district and resident program teachers of CSTC moved to force the closure of the T.E.E. program. There was a suspicion that the team was actually trying to rally churches in order to take over the district. Why else would they spend so much time with churches? There was additional concern that the elders would actually know as much as the clergy did which would make it difficult to preach to them. What will they preach about if elders know as much? There was also a claim that the teachings on the grace of God in Romans being propounded by the T.E.E. team were in reality a heresy (Gustafson 1983).

When the agreed period of T.E.E. training was completed in March 1977, it was evident that no further support for the program would be coming. The entire Thai staff of the T.E.E. team resigned from the CCT. Thus were severed the last ties with the CSTC. Rev. Prayun continued to direct the residence program of the CSTC for two more years when a second student rebellion finally caused the program to close, though this was attributed primarily to lack of funding (Wolf 1997).

### **The Work of the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission**

Operating from the abandoned orphanage building, the new organization began to regroup. After a period of planning, a new strategy developed and in April of 1977 this small operation took on the name of, "The Center for Church Planting and Church Growth in Northeast Thailand" (CCPCG). In order to avoid some of the mistakes of their own past and those of others around them, it was decided that the CCPCG would follow five key principles which were reported by Tetsuano Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers and David Conner in their book *Serving the Poor in Asia*:

1. Equip and enable local churches to enable themselves through doing holistic development. The CCPCG would not allow itself to become a burden in any way to the local churches but would seek to address the needs of the church in order that they could help themselves.
2. CCPCG would not be the church but would be a resource for the church. It would be independently funded with a goal that all or a majority of support would, in the future, come from in-country, locally owned and operated income generating projects.
3. CCPCG would train and equip local church leaders in their own contexts and work to find ways to address the physical, spiritual and social needs of these people and their families.
4. The role of the missionary was to be an enabler of local Thai leaders, not the one in charge.
5. Churches planted by CCPCG would use local cultural forms whenever possible in communicating and living out the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1995:26-27).

What were the issues that led to the establishment of this new para-church organization? According to Gustafson, five major issues: 1) Biblical Theology; 2) Cultural barriers; 3) Theological education; 4) Socio-cultural development; and 5) Church leadership.

### ***A Grace-Oriented Biblical Theology***

The message of the good news of Jesus Christ had not been able to penetrate the barrier of religion. A true Biblical theology was lost in the message of doing the Christian practices. The Thai church in northeast Thailand, both the leaders and the members, had retained the essential elements of Buddhist values and beliefs. This meant that salvation was primarily by works. The emphasis was on individual self-effort and personal merit. While the external forms were different, the essential meaning to Thai people was that they had now changed from one set of forms (Buddhist) to another (Christian). At the level of heart values and beliefs there had been no confrontation with the Word. The forms of preaching and teaching simply



reinforced the old Thai Buddhist values and beliefs in a new set of forms. The message of the teaching was not on solid biblical exegesis but on the experience of the clergymen. The basic theology was still a religious attempt to do good works to be saved, no different than pure Buddhism.

### ***Removing Cultural Barriers***

A second issue was that of communication strategy. Thai Christians believed that to be Christian meant to use only the western forms of Christianity. This destroyed the communication process. Translating the lyrics from western Christian music into the Thai language skewed the tones of the words and only caused a confusing and often comical message.<sup>13</sup> This merely served to reinforce the widespread belief that to follow Jesus Christ meant becoming a westerner; that one had to give up one's Thai identity in order to become a Christian. This was a major social barrier to Thai people coming to Christ which continues to the present.

In addition to using Western forms, the Thai church strongly held to the belief that in order to show respect to God one must use the central Thai language. The common Isaan language was not considered appropriate for church. This meant that people not only could not hear about God in their mother tongue, but they could not pray to him in a natural way either. The end result of this kind of thinking again reinforced the concept that Christianity is another set of rituals which must be performed (to gain merit) and not a living Word which must be understood and allowed to transform the heart and change the way of thinking.

The emphasis among westernized Christian churches in the Northeast was upon the essential differences between Christianity and local cultural forms and expressions. This served to successfully separate the members of the Christian church from their own cultural context. It caused discontinuity and discord within the community and for many westernized Christians brought upon themselves unnecessary social pain:

To be sure if the Church in Thailand were to actually give formal expression to its Christianity through its own indigenous forms it would hardly be recognizable as a "church" in the western sense. But is this really necessary for the growth of the Thai church or is this requirement merely the result of insecure westerners who cannot trust the Holy Spirit to lead the Thai church into meaningful forms and expression of their own? The tendency to hold on to our own western forms of the church and of the Christian life and to insist that these are the cross-cultural expressions of the church of Christ is basically the result of a very paternalistic attitude on the part of the missionary (Gustafson 1970:252).

### ***A New Focus in Theological Education***

In Asia, the educated are held in high esteem. In traditional Thai Christianity the basic focus of theological education for most students was for academic achievement which would lead to personal advancement. The reason the young men chose to study at the CSTC was that it was seen as a steppingstone up and out of the poverty of Isaan rural life and a possible way into the urban scene.

In addition to encouraging up and out individualism, the type of theological education promoted in Thailand was geared for the young and was therefore training the wrong people for leadership. In Thai culture young people are never leaders. The older and more experienced person, is the leader. The older person was not able to take time out for full-time study nor were they allowed to enroll in classes geared for those much younger.

Finally, much of theological education as it is done in Thailand does not prepare students to study and teach the Word. The emphasis is not on how to study Bible (good solid exegesis) but on memorizing what Christianity says. The emphasis becomes not teaching the Word but preaching Christianity, often based primarily on the preacher's personal experiences.

### ***A Holistic Approach for Socio-Cultural Development***

It was obvious from the experience of the self-support project of the CSTC that the church had a "Give me!" mentality. What the church wanted (as requested at the annual meeting) was cash and not self-help programs. The same three principles for development projects throughout all of Isaan were the same values held by the Christian church: 1) "Easy"—work was involved, no way; 2) "Quick"—if it takes too long they lose interest; 3) "Much"—returns must be large or no participation.

### ***A New Understanding of Church Leadership***

Leadership in the traditional Thai church was directly tied to the Northeastern Thai understanding of leadership based on power, status, position, and reputation. A typical Bible-school education reinforced these values. The basic concern of most students who became church leaders was one of status and not service. This became obvious when the concern was raised about teaching lay elders in the churches (They may know more than us!). Ordination was tied to education rather than function and there was certainly no ordination without a traditional seminary graduation. The real leaders of the local churches (the elders and deacons) were completely left out and beyond the reach of theological and practical biblical training. Those who actually did the work of serving the church (actually doing the job of pastor) were relegated to doing so with little or no training (Gustafson 1983).

In May of 1977, the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission (ECCTM) applied for and was accepted into membership with the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) with which it continues its membership today

(Gustafson 1977). Later that same year, the Center for Church Planting and Church Growth in Northeast Thailand (CCPCG) was also admitted as a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (Yamamori et al 1994:23).

The CCPCG began the process of developing contextualized practices and forms over the next several years. These contextualizing efforts built upon the experience with the CCT at the CSTC as well as earlier lessons learned from ministry with the C&MA. All of these factors, along with the cultural, historical, and political background of the Isaan people as represented by the staff and church members involved, contributed to the development of a method of viewing and communicating the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that Isaan people would be interested in hearing, receptive to and through which they would be able to experience the power of God and begin the transformation process.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONTEXTUALIZING RELATIONSHIPS IN ISAAN**

Scripture, from the second chapter of Genesis, tells the story of God's desire to relate to his creation. God made the first move in contextualizing himself with people. He spoke in a way that humans could understand. Later he came personally and made himself one of us. Media consultant Viggo Søgaaard writes, "When we look at God's incarnation, we are looking at the center of communication...By this action God was bending down to disclose himself through ordinary situations of human life, thus becoming completely relevant to the context of human beings" (1993:14).

John 1:14 expresses the model and the mandate for contextualizing relationships which the work of the CCPCG has followed. In this incarnational way, God desires to encounter every people of every culture in ways that build relationships in order to communicate knowledge and demonstrate his power effectively and clearly. The Thai worldview has seen Jesus Christ presented as a foreigner, leading to a set of foreign practices, for so long that the majority of Thai people see no relevance in him for their lives. For most Thai, there is nothing in Christianity with which they desire to relate since Buddhism is already more of a religious requirement than they are able to handle.

So-called pure Buddhism does not demand relationship, it requires religious obedience. As was stated earlier, Buddhism is not where most people seek the solutions for the major events of their life. Buddhism serves as the veneer for deep-set and ongoing animistic practices:

Although Buddhism is the most obvious influence in Thai religious life, it is in some respects not the most important. In times of crisis, sickness, and anxiety, very few Thai depend upon their accumulation of merit; instead, the Thai turn to their age old objects of propitiation, the animistic spirits. Indeed, the belief in spirits is by no means limited to country folk (Koydul 1990:10-11).

Unlike pure Buddhism, Animism as practiced within the Folk Buddhist tradition, presupposes relationship and in fact counterfeits what is available in Jesus Christ. The terminology used within Animism is not coincidental. Guardian spirits, according to B.J. Terwiel, are often represented by pillars or shrines to which devotees make their supplications (1976:159-171), are addressed as *Chao Phau* (honored father) and sometimes *Chao Mee*<sup>14</sup> (honored mother) (A. Smith 1977:80). The assumption that these forces will care for the practitioner in a parental, beneficent manner disguises the reality of spiritual enslavement. Within Folk Buddhist belief, the gods (or even The God) are perceived as far away, but the spirits are intimately close. They are referred to as Respected Father and Honored Mother who know about and are able to deal with the issues of daily life. Eventually, according to W.T. Harris and E.G. Parrinder, through increasing devotion, the follower begins to delegate an authority to the spirit so that for that individual it now becomes a god:

From the beginning there is an attempt by (humanity) to place himself in the right relationship to unseen powers, to deprecate their hostility and to secure their good will. With deliberate acts of worship we come to a personal approach to the spirits and often they are regarded as gods (1960:14).

Deep within all humans is the need for relationship. The promise of a presence upon which to rely has deep appeal within the human psyche. Whereas pure religion offers good moral teaching, in and of itself it cannot address the need for relationship. The religious teaching must be put into practice by the individual. Religion itself cannot bring assistance since humans cannot build a relationship directly with religion. For many folk religionists it is within the spirit world that these spiritual relational needs are addressed. The spirits demonstrate appealing abilities that offer hope yet often directly counterfeiting what Christ offers.<sup>15</sup> The appeal of a helper is there but the reality is false. It must be remembered that Satan is an excellent contextualizer (Kraft 2002:15).

Dealing with these spiritual realities not only deals with the area of relationship but also the area of spiritual power, which will be discussed in Chapter 6. The reality of spiritual relationships becomes transformed when the focus of primary allegiance is on God the father, as creator and initiator of reconciled relationships.

### ***Contextualizing Spiritual Relationships in Isaan***

In order to contextualize spiritual relationships within Isaan, the staff team of CCPCG found it was necessary to allow Jesus to be born anew into the Isaan culture. This required stripping away the external religious forms that disguised Jesus as a foreigner and allow the essence of his truly human and truly divine aspects to be seen:

The first thing I would like you to understand today is the absolute necessity to have Jesus be reborn into the local culture. Jesus as a central Thai, a northern Thai, a southern Thai, an eastern Thai, or an Isaan person. Beloved, if Jesus were to be born here in Khon Kaen,<sup>16</sup> what would he eat? Would he eat bread? No! Jesus would eat whatever the local people ate. What is the staple of life for Isaan people? Sticky rice! So if Jesus was born here in Khon Kaen I am convinced he would eat sticky rice. And Jesus would *lom*<sup>17</sup> too! He would be the best *kaen*<sup>18</sup> player around! He would be totally incarnated into the culture. So the first thing for us to understand is that Jesus needs to become one with the local culture. If we are in Khon Kaen, in Isaan, Jesus needs to be Isaan. Whatever culture we are in Jesus needs to be reborn there.

Take a look at Buddhism. A lot of people are convinced that Buddha was born in our country of Thailand. They firmly believe it! If we notice how Chinese people make their Buddha images what do they look like? They have this big growth out of the front like I do—great big bellies! The images look like the Chinese. If Indians make images they do it another way that looks like them. If Thais make them they look like something else altogether. So if Jesus were to be born in Khon Kaen, in Isaan, he would take on the look of that culture...

This is what is important, that Jesus be reborn in the culture—in the best things about the culture. The best and most beautiful things, understand—not reborn in the wrong things. For example, idolatry. There is none of that in Christ. Not reborn in drunkenness so that dog's lick your lips – no! We don't want the bad things we want the best!

Lots of churches complain of how difficult it is for them to bring people to Christ. We don't have that problem because we don't do it. We don't take people to Christ—we bring Christ to people. We don't have a problem in our churches of people not wanting to come to Christ or not understanding Christ. Christ is being reborn in ways they can clearly understand him (Phrommedda 2000).

### ***Contextualizing Human Relationships in Isaan***

It has become a critical focus for the enabling work of the CCPCG that no barriers exist that would prevent Christ from relating to people's lives in ways that they would clearly understand. The direction has never been to change people from where they were towards God. The direction has always been

that God comes to where people are, as per John 1:14. This has been his action in the past and even today he still desires to do so.

One of the major barriers between Isaan people coming to Christ has been the use of specialized Christian lingo used by westernized Thai Christians. The term "Christian" in the average Thai mindset usually connotes a follower of the foreigner's religion. Those few Thai who follow the westernized Christianity are generally accused of being traitors to their nationality and presumed to have entered the foreigner's religion for ulterior motives. "If any Thai person does become a Christian, Thai people suspect that the Thai Christian is a Christian for pay or for employment; not because the religion of the Christian's God is a superior religion" (Koydul 1990:13). For this reason the village churches related to the center do not use the term "Christian" but prefer the term *Luuk Prachaeo* which means "Child of God."

### ***Contextualizing the Church in Isaan***

After having worked within the oldest existing Protestant mission/church structure in Thailand for his first term as a missionary, Gustafson wrote an article in 1975 for the Covenant denomination in which he summarized his experiences:

During the past four years in Thailand I have learned how the Church is being held down and bound up at just these problem points: 1) it does not experience the cooperative unity between various groups and thus is robbed of the power which comes from unity in the Spirit of God; 2) it has not been incarnated into (put into the flesh and form of) the various cultures existing in the world today and so is stripped of clarity in its communication of the Gospel; 3) it does not have the flexibility needed to change or modify its strategies of mission (1975).

From a missionary's perspective, the Protestant church as it existed in Thailand was viewed as divided, foreign and inflexible. What did "Christian church" mean to Isaan village people from their perspective?

Because there is not a word in either the Thai or the Lao language for "church" most of the westernized Christians in Thailand have attempted to describe their church in terms of the structure in which the Christians meet as if that gave their church its identity. Most Thai Christians have simply used the Buddhist word *boht*<sup>19</sup> which describes the structure in a Buddhist temple ground which houses the image of the Buddha.<sup>20</sup> However, when the average non-Christian Isaan person actually views a Christian *boht* for the first time they usually have two impressions. First of all, they see the simple construction style of most westernized church structures and immediately think, "How pathetic!" In their minds they cannot help but compare in their minds with their own local imposing Buddhist *bohts* which glisten in the sunlight, shining with expensive gold leaf trim and brilliant orange and red tile roofs, beautifully detailed in painting, carving and stylized detail. Secondly,

not only does the Christian *boht* look pathetically simple with its plain white walls, dark windows (through which nothing can be seen), and large (intimidating?) doors; the entire structure speaks of privacy. A typical Isaan villager wonders, "What goes on in there? Why can't I see in? What are they hiding?" The only other place that most villagers would know in their towns that are closed in this way would be brothels.

Because western-style structures spoke so loudly of foreign-ness and became a financial burden to the church, the ministry of the ECCTM has avoided building *bohts* altogether. They use another word for church, *christachak*, which, admittedly is a Christian-ese invention but roughly translates as a gathering place of Christians. It is not a widely understood term outside of the Christian community but it definitely does not mean *boht*.

In order to describe the contextualized Isaan church it is necessary to begin with a scriptural definition used by the group. Matthew 18:20 says, "Where two or three come together in my (Jesus') name, there am I with them" (NIV). Neither the number nor the location is significant. The significance is in the name of the one in whom the people purpose to gather. The church, therefore, is the collection of the followers, the seekers, the believers, even the doubters, with their families including children and elderly who come together specifically in the name of Jesus. This is one expression of worship<sup>21</sup> and where this happens those who come together to practice it form the body of Christ, the church.

The churches with which the ECCTM work meet in the homes of the believers in the villages where they live. The worship experience looks very typically Isaan to local observers. An open area under a roof is set with straw mats. This can be in the common living area below the second floor of the home or upstairs on an open landing. If songbooks are available they will be distributed. Most members will bring their own Bibles if they own one. As people gather there will be a natural division of men and women sitting on separate sides in a circle around the perimeter. The instruments will begin – the *kaen*, a Lao bamboo panpipe, being the most important. The two-sided drum will start and the *ching* may join in for rhythm. Worship has begun. There will be music, singing and often celebrative dancing. The singing will be to local tunes with a new message. Lyrics written by local followers of Jesus describing the experiences of God in their lives. This will be followed by a lengthy Bible discussion (described in Chapter 5).

In northeastern Thailand the staple food is glutinous sticky rice. This rice is often roasted into small loaves as a delicious Isaan breakfast food. It is this form that is used in celebrating the Lord's supper, clearly contextualizing the meaning of Christ's relationship to Isaan people as the food of life. The bitter red juice made from a local flower, *krachiap daeng*,<sup>22</sup> is used to represent the blood. According to Donald K. Smith, the communication system which most profoundly speaks to the heart and is most believed is the olfactory



(1992:162-163). Is it any wonder why Christ commanded that we eat his body and drink his blood regularly to remember our relationship with him?

Following communion, an opportunity will be given to contribute to an offering (a small bag is passed around the circle) and then a time of sharing and praying together aloud will end the worship time. Sometimes there will be a meal together afterward. This is no somber event. There will be many voices, lots of laughter, a wide variety of loud, joyful noises, the sounds of celebration of new life. Whether there are microphones involved or not, the sound of the kaen, the drum, and the talking will carry beyond the meeting area out into the surrounding village. It will not be boxed away nor will there be any attempt to do so. "The church and the Christian community are fish swimming in the same water as anybody else in the society" (Hoefler 2001:173). People understand what is going on.

What is the reaction by the neighbors? Some wonder at these adults singing like children and (the extreme oddity) dancing out in the open without having touched a drop of alcohol. The music is very attractive and people come to look as closely as they dare. If the gathering is upstairs they may be unwilling to climb the ladder to show that much interest. Some will listen from a distance, or pretend not to care until they are noticed by one of the participants who may follow up with encouragement or a personal visit later.

The reaction among villagers to the children of God in their midst is mixed. The changed lives of individuals speaks a more powerful witness than do even the words of the Bible discussion. Often the persecution that believers experience comes when ungodly social patterns are challenged by the new standards of the heart which come through encountering Jesus Christ. In this way the context of Isaan village churches is much the same as that of the early church. Michael Green writes from the perspective of the early church, "The "world" does love its own, and it does hate those whose standards show it up; particularly is this the case when the standards of pagan society are unusually low, and those of the Church unusually high, as in the first and second centuries they were" (1970:46).

One of the primary barriers for many Isaan and Thai people coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ are that the forms used to worship him in the churches in Thailand are foreign to Thai people. To become a follower of Jesus means to join a foreign religion which uses foreign forms and meets in a foreign style building. According to mission strategist Donald Anderson McGavran this is one of the greatest factors in resistance to the gospel around the world:

The resistance of Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, and Moslems to the Christian faith does not arise primarily from theological considerations. Most of the adherents of these faiths do not prefer their religion as religion to Christianity. Most of them, being illiterate, know very little about their religious system. Most Hindus are more animist than Hindu, and the same may



be said for each of the other religions. Their resistance arises primarily from fear that "becoming a Christian will separate me from my people." ... The greatest obstacles to conversion are social, not theological (1980:215).

Social barriers are relationally based. When the relationships within the church are transformed into culturally appropriate expressions many of the so-called barriers can be removed. This means the expressions may not look familiar to people outside of that culture but are speaking to the hearts of those from within the context. As Father Vincent J. Donovan reflected upon his own work with the Masai:

What we are coming to see, now, especially in this context of bringing the Christian message to pagans of many different cultures, is that there must be many responses possible to the Christian message, responses which are filled with promise and meaning, but which have hitherto been neither encouraged nor allowed. We have come to believe that any valid, positive response to the Christian message could and should be recognized and accepted as church. That is the church that might have been and might yet be (1978:83).

### ***Contextualizing Isaan Church Leadership***

The former strategy of taking teenage Isaan boys from their village contexts and giving them biblical instruction in an academic setting in preparation for Christian service to their church and community had failed. These young men were not necessarily good scholars initially, nor had they received support or calling from their local congregations. Nor were they the natural leaders of their communities; in the eyes of their elders they were just kids! As became evident very quickly, the boys who signed up did so with a desire to receive a diploma that would enable them not to reach further down and into their community but to raise them up and out of it, to church work in the cities or even better, all the way to Bangkok.

It was the desire from the beginning that the CCPCG would train and equip local church leaders in their own contexts and work to find ways to address the physical, spiritual and social needs of these people and their families. They would model and enable a down-and-in servant attitude based on Philippians 2:5-7. Leaders in the Christian community, both men and women equally, who demonstrated God-given gifting should be enabled to serve the church. The focus became equipping for doing ministry within the context, not educating for leaving the context.

Even the terminology was different. Instead of using the academic term of *Acharn* (professor) as was common throughout the westernized Christian church in Thailand, the house churches referred to those who served as the *phu rap chai*, literally "the one who is used," or the servant of the body. These *phu rap chai* had different responsibilities according to gifting. Some would do teaching of the word, others would do ministry with youth, others lead music, singing or dance, and others would be involved in organizing acts

of service to the community. All were considered equally important as part of the body and all were voluntarily giving their time for the work of the church of Jesus Christ.

Initially the training of the *phu rap chai* was done by center staff who traveled to the villages on motorcycles on a routine schedule. The *phu rap chai* then used this training in their own village churches and also trained others in nearby village churches that they had been involved in planting. Today this training is going on through area meetings of those responsible for mother churches. Local church training at the daughter church level is done by those serving in the mother churches. It is all based upon relationship networks:

Christianity within any culture, if it is to be truly biblical, will need to focus squarely on what the Bible focuses on, regardless of what our western academic approaches focus on. Indeed, as we look crossculturally, we note that relationship is the primary focus of most of the societies of the world. The bridge between the peoples of the world and the Bible becomes shorter when we focus on what the Bible focuses on (Kraft 1999:7).

### ***Ceremonies that Contextualize Relationships Godward***

As was discussed previously, Thai Buddhism actually includes a thriving collection of animistic practices and therefore is better labeled Thai Folk Buddhism. To the Isaan Folk Buddhist mindset, ceremonies hold a highly significant role in religious matters. Harris describes the role of ceremony in the animist worldview thus:

The Animist is a member of a sacramental society. At his many praying-places he often takes part in ceremonies which involve a common meal and food shared with spirits. It is pathetic to find that so often, when a man becomes a Christian and has renounced spirit-worship, he is only able to attend a service of Holy Communion two or three times a year....The Animist has a genius for sacramental worship, and everything should be done to see that it find its fullest expression in the Christian rite (1960: 61-62).

Within their own tradition, Isaan ceremonies play several important social functions which are not always appreciated by outsiders, particularly western missionaries:

I have a good friend named Ron, who is a New Tribes missionary. We can call each other any time and help each other because we are

*seow*.<sup>23</sup> When we talk we can even disagree and still be good friends; that's the kind of a relationship we have. One day he came to me concerned about something he felt I was doing wrong.

"Tongpan, you're making a big mistake. You have a ceremony for new believers. I don't do any such thing for people. You should just pray for them

and that's enough. What you do is you pray for them and then you repeat everything over again and welcome them with a ceremony of blessing as new believers. That's wrong. You shouldn't do that."

I told him, " We don't force them to believe. When they are ready they believe. The ceremony merely shows the beginning. It says to everyone that so and so has made the decision at such and such a time to believe and be a follower of God."

We talked some more and he still didn't agree with me. That was fine. He wasn't interested in changing what he thought. We believe in the same God and salvation only by grace but he doesn't see the need for ceremony. For Isaan people, ceremony shows the new beginning. Look at what happens in Buddhism. Buddhists have all kinds of ceremonies. When people look at western Christianity they feel it isn't complete. "What kind of a religion is that?" they ask, "There are no ceremonies!" (Phrommeda 2001).

Early on in the ministry of the CCPCG, it became clear that ceremony would play several important roles in the life of the church and in the community. Ceremonies in the animistic tradition, according to Hiebert, serve three major social functions: transformation, intensification and crisis resolution (1999:302). In attempting to contextualize relationships, the transforming function of ceremony became extremely important in the life of the church. Most important to Isaan believers was the ability to clearly communicate the message that Jesus Christ is not a foreigner but has come and identified himself as one with Isaan people, to help redeem and transform them. Church communities who use these ceremonies regularly are enriched by them both in numbers and in spiritual maturity. They experience God's grace as a body and are drawn closer together by it:

In rituals a group experiences itself most intensely as a unified community, and members recognize themselves as belonging to one another. The performance communicates to all the participants the strength that lies in solidarity and collective existence. If an individual can claim any significance, it is only by virtue of belonging to the collective, and this is determined by being allowed to participate in the rituals of the group. Moreover, it is during ritual performances that individuals take and are allowed to take their place in society. This provides them with their own self-identities (1999:301).

From the period of 1977 to 1982, the CCPCG staff researched several Isaan traditional ceremonies, doing what Hiebert refers to as "critical contextualization" (1994:75). Each of these ceremonies was reflected upon in the light of scripture with groups of Christian Isaan leaders and missionaries working together. Several resulting ceremonial orders of service were written, practiced, evaluated, and revised. Some things were rejected, some remained, and others were changed, but ultimately the decision was left with the Christian Thai leadership:

It must be remembered that the missionary will always face another society with a certain amount of bias toward his own western society. As a result, he will never be able to totally identify with the other society no matter how hard he tries. As a result, he will never be able to be sure of which forms and cultural expressions of the society are redeemable and which are not. In the light of this fact it is and should be the task of the national church (or a national body of believers) to decide which of their cultural forms are capable of being vehicles of the Gospel and which must be illuminated and replaced by functional substitutes. This presupposes that the nationals have been firmly grounded in the supra-cultural elements of the Scripture and have a good knowledge of what is the central Gospel message and what is merely formal and cultural expression of this central form. It also assumes that the Holy Spirit is far more capable of helping the national church decide which forms to keep and which to reject than is the missionary. In this situation, the missionary should remain an advisor to the national church, but not the decision-maker (Gustafson 1970:250-251).

Eventually fourteen of these ceremonies were collected into one volume entitled *Bible References for Ceremonies and Order of Ceremonies* and was published in 1993 in the Thai language. Six of these Isaan Christian ceremonies focus primarily on contextualizing transformation of allegiance, and changes of relationships both spiritual and physical while secondarily contextualizing power and truth. These are the following:

1. Ceremony for the Dedication of New Leadership
2. Wedding Ceremony
3. Conversion Welcome (to God's family)
4. Reconciliation Ceremony
5. Baptism Ceremony
6. Communion Ceremony

The joy and love expressed during these ceremonies powerfully demonstrates the presence of Christ relating in and through the midst of his people. From this experience many participants have been motivated to go back to their families and friends and share what God had done for them, tying them also in the love of Christ. It is an unforgettable experience from which others in Thailand and even those outside the Thai Folk Buddhist world can greatly benefit:

When we celebrate one of these ceremonies we are publicly showing our identification with a new way. For example, when a person becomes a Christian we welcome them into the family of God with a ceremony of blessing. This welcome ceremony shows that the person is now a child of God and wants to walk in God's path. Isaan people see this and they understand it (Phrommeda 2001).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONTEXTUALIZING GOD'S TRUTH IN ISAAN

The primary concern in contextualization is relevant communication. The highest priority of this communication must be given to explaining and establishing a relationship with Jesus Christ. "Relationship is the most important of the three dimensions of contextualization" (Kraft 1999:8). However, in order for this relationship to begin and from there to continue to grow, it is necessary to contextualize the forms of communicating God's truth about himself to Isaan people. This involves contextualizing the media that communicates knowledge in ways to which Isaan people can respond. It is essential that this indigenized message of truth come from the insider's perspective:

Actually the Asian religions are themselves basically syncretistic because they have no claim to absolute truth. In this stronghold of syncretism there is no other way for Christian missions but first to proclaim the absolute truth, and encourage the national churches to grow in their traditional way and to produce matured leaders. Then, secondly, the matured leaders can themselves develop the Christian church in an indigenous cultural setting. If, however, we foreign missionaries try to develop indigenous forms and discover dynamic communication and equivalent meaning in the local culture, it may end up in hopeless syncretism and nullify fundamental meanings (Kim 1980:133).

Occasionally visitors (both Thai and foreign) have observed the indigenous style of worship going on in the Isaan house churches connected with the TCC ministry, using local instruments, song and dance, and remarked that it was good to see local tradition being preserved. In actuality this has never been a goal of the contextualized approach. Successful communication involves using the media that best speaks to the heart of the receptor. If any form of communication is no longer able to convey a message clearly, then reasons for its continued use must be carefully evaluated. Tradition alone does not guarantee receptivity. In fact, as Dr. Eddie Gibbs once said, "communication is inversely proportional to its predictability." If a local cultural form successfully communicates to the heart of Isaan people it is naturally to be preferred over other forms and this has been found to be the case with the rural Isaan villagers. Preservation of cultural forms is merely incidental.

In their effort to convey the truth of Jesus Christ clearly into Northeast Thai culture, the work of the center has attempted to utilize the best of Northeastern Thai communication media: group discussion, teaching styles, song, dance, instruments, and ceremony. All of these are useful media and

culturally appropriate ways to contextualize the communication of God's truth to Isaan people.

### ***Contextualizing the Communication of Scriptural Truth***

Contextualizing communication of biblical knowledge requires using forms to which the receptor has a desire to listen. Rev. Tongpan remarked of the Thai Folk Buddhist tradition, "There are four things Isaan people don't like: Vaccinations, taxes, envelopes (including an invitation and an obligation to give money towards a social event), and sermons." Yet the monologue sermon form is still adhered to religiously throughout the westernized churches in Thailand. In fact, many Thai Christians quickly connect listening to preaching as synonymous with going to church, in a similar way that Thai Buddhists connect going to the Buddhist *wat* to hear the Buddhist chanting of sermons.

More than anyone else, Thai students of the Bible recognize these cultural feelings firsthand and yet often have no other communication options from which to choose. The historical pattern of theological preparation for Thai students is for them to get their education, learn what needs to be said, graduate, and pass this knowledge along to their churches in the form in which they received it. As one Thai Christian leader shared:

When I finished Bible school I had thirty-six sermons. I had learned these topics during my time of training from the teachers there. These were all sermons which I knew I could preach. After I left the Bible School I began working as an assistant pastor in a church where I did a number of things including preaching all of my thirty-six sermons. When I had preached my last sermon I was done. That was it; I was finished. I didn't have anything else to say because I did not know how to come up with new topics.

It had also become more and more difficult for me to preach. I noticed that while I was preaching some people in the congregation would stare up into the ceiling. Some others would sit and just close their eyes. There were others who would chat the whole time with their neighbors. What was I as the preacher supposed to do? I was just supposed to keep on preaching. So I stood there and I talked on and on and on until I was finished. I had done my duty as a preacher (Wechkama 2001).

Communication is in the receptor and must be therefore, according to ethnomusicologist Joyce Scott, be receptor oriented (2000:75). The problem is that the communicator doesn't know what is going on in the mind of the receptor and has no idea what message has been received. Rev. Tongpan loves to tell the story of the preacher who felt he was truly connecting with his congregation through his powerful preaching:

There was once a preacher who wore a goatee. One Sunday morning he preached what he thought was a very powerful sermon. An elderly woman in

the front row seemed to be especially moved by his words and began to weep. The more powerfully he preached the more the tears just rolled down her cheeks. Finally at the end of the sermon she came forward, sobbing as she made her way up to the pulpit. "Grandma, " the preacher asked, " Have you been convicted? Have you come to confess an area of sin in your life?" "No, it's not that" she answered, "It's just that as your chin bobbed up and down I kept thinking of my goat that died this morning" (Phrommeda 2001).

There are other cultural factors as well which make the use of the traditional monologue sermon an ineffective form of the communication of truth among Isaan villagers. One analyst, Stephen T. Franklin, after observing the work of the center, wrote:

Why does preaching fail to communicate in these villages? To find the answer, we must examine the popular expectations produced by the local religions. At the Northeast weddings and funerals ...none of the monks understood the *Pali* sutras they chanted. Even less did the laity understand. During these chants, the villagers freely chatted and joked. During the weddings, when the *sukhwan* practitioners chanted in the Thai language, not even the bridal couples paid much attention. And when the Buddhist monks, at the *wat* festivals, do preach a sermon in Thai or Isaan, the congregation will continue to converse among themselves. And yet, the villagers always stay within earshot of the chanting. The fairly obvious conclusion is that the chants and sermons are thought to have sacred power in themselves, which is effective quite apart from anyone's comprehension of their meaning. Merely hearing the sacred words brings merit.

When Christians preach sermons in churches, this same attitude remains. What counts in the popular mind is the attendance at the Christians' sacred words rather than understanding the sermon (1983:89).

What could be done to counter this Isaan worldview that believed that merely to hear the sound of the teaching was to make merit for the soul? How could a syncretistic understanding that listening to a Christian sermon was to make merit the so-called Christian way be avoided? This led to a re-evaluation of what the Bible says on the topic. Several authors have suggested that instead of using the word "preach" in the scriptural translation of the Greek word *kerusso*, a more appropriate rendering would be to use the word "communicate" (Søgaard 1993:17, Kraft 2000:28), as in Mark 16:15b, "Go throughout the whole world and communicate the gospel." How, therefore, is this communication of the essence of the scriptural message of the gospel best communicated in the Isaan context?

The staff of the CCPCG finally decided that sermons were unusable. As a tool for communicating an understandable, as well as applicable, Christian message, they have consistently found the sermon form to fail (Franklin 1983:89). They turned instead to a dialogue form of teaching that brought every person within earshot into personal contact with the word and gave

opportunity for interaction. Bible discussions were encouraged and the local leadership was able to adopt this format quite readily because it was patterned after a very effective cultural form already operative within the context.

One of the *phu rap chai* prepared questions from a scripture passage beforehand and brought them to the group. All who read have a Bible in front of them and even those who cannot read must now interact with the Word as they banter back and forth to observe, interpret and apply the scripture to their lives. There are no status barriers between the discussion leader and the respondent or between the believer and the seeker. All are asked to participate in the discussion. Questions are encouraged. Contributions to the dialogue bring the issues to the practical levels of life and assist in the contextualizing of the learning process. The discussion leader is not considered the expert but a guide. The answers are found in the Word— together by all. In this way the learning is very much Spirit-led, and is also reinforced, remembered, and made much more enjoyable.

While at the same time the discussion method confronts a non-Biblical religious worldview in order to contextualize truth, it also employs a very familiar cultural form for discussing major ideas and concepts which is used within Isaan society:

The dialogue form of teaching, however, is sufficiently unlike Buddhist chanting and sermons, as well as unlike the repetitive Thai educational style, that it succeeds fairly well in communicating conceptual meaning. . . .

When confronted by a serious problem, the village leaders typically gather in one of their homes, perhaps that of the headman, to discuss the problem. Chairs not being common in the village, the leaders sit in a circle on the floor. Unlike the case of the religious chanting, the leaders of necessity listen carefully to each other. And unlike the Thai classroom, the participants, of necessity, contribute to the problem solving. In short, the center's teaching method is an adaptation of the traditional dialogue of the village council, focused on the gospel and given additional structure by such items as the worksheets and assigned Biblical texts (Franklin 1983:89-90).

### ***Contextualizing Isaan Musical Forms to Communicate God's Truth***

Music has been an important media in contextualizing God's truth to Isaan people. It may, in fact, be more effective in conveying knowledge than other forms. "More teaching is gotten across via music than from the pulpit – if the musical vehicle is appealing to the audience" (Kraft 2000 :126). Music, particularly their own style of *maw lom* ballads, is one form that speaks deeply to the people of northeastern Thailand. This testimony by Rev. Tongpan demonstrates the impact of the sounds of Isaan music upon the Isaan psyche:



Our group started a ministry in Bangkok to Isaan people working in the city. We sent one of our group down there, Pastor Inchai, and for six months nothing happened. No one spoke Isaan – only central Thai. I told Inchai—since he is a good musician—take your *kaen* outside and play it up and down the street for awhile. So he did. Inchai took his *kaen* outside and started playing. And people starting coming! They trailed after him as he walked along, asking, "Where are from? Where are you staying? Where's your place?" They started talking in Lao! They started talking to him and to each other—"Oh, I'm from Khon Kaen, how about you?" Before that they would only speak Thai but once they heard the sound of the *kaen* they opened up. You see, language shows from which group you come. For us Isaan people the sound of the *kaen* is deep in our bones. It is the sound of our people (Phrommedda 2000).

Some of the first contextualized songs were written by Rev. Banpote, a gifted writer and Isaan cultural historian. By 1977 he had written more than two dozen songs, some of which are still being used in churches today. As other Isaan musicians and singers joined the ministry of the CCPCG the collection of local songs began to grow. In 1979 the collection had grown to 54, then by 1986 more than ninety songs had been written and were being sung in the churches (Wechkama 1997).

After using individually copied sheets of song lyrics for years it was decided that there were enough songs to produce a songbook for use in the church. This first effort was entitled, *Pleng Sieng Isaan Sanrasern PraChaow*, which translates into English as *Isaan Songs Praise God*. It was published by a printshop in Bangkok on Christmas Day 1986. It was decided by all those contributing that this would be a joint effort and no one person's name would appear with their songs. Two well-known Thai Christian songs of unknown authorship were also included after being adapted to the Isaan language.<sup>24</sup> On the cover of this volume are shown the four main instruments used in Isaan worship: the *kaen* (a bamboo panpipe held vertically and used only in Isaan or Lao culture), the *phin* (a four string instrument used similarly to a guitar), the *ching* (small brass hand cymbals for keeping rhythm), and three ceramic jugs of varying sizes with strips of motorcycle tire inner-tubing stretched over them which were plucked for the bass beat, known as the *hai*. Because of its dark green cover this book became affectionately known (and is still referred to) as the "Green Book."

In 1990 the musical notes for the 90 songs in the 1986 green songbook were published in a separate volume as a way to encourage musician's participation in the churches. A handbook for playing the *kaen* was added in 1982, another for the *pin* in 1986 and other for the *saw* in 1987 (Wechkama 1997).

From its inception those involved in the musical aspects of the CCPCG recognized the powerful potential in using the best of local Isaan forms of music in the church. One particular form of local music became troublesome

and this form was known as *maw lom*. This type of music involved using the *kaen* and other Isaan instruments but certain tunes in this genre were used specifically in animistic practices to call upon spirits. Especially perplexing was the time-honored ceremony, *wai kru*, which was done before the performance of *maw lom* in which the musicians would bring all their instruments together and offer gifts to the spirits of the teachers of the instruments and ask for their favor before they began to play. These offerings could be as little as a package of cigarettes and a joss stick to quite complex offerings of alcohol, flowers, money and other valuables. Could this type of music be used in the church?

One of the benefits of the *maw lom* type of music, besides being extremely popular, was that it had high content and could tell a story in an entertaining way that Isaan people could easily remember. In fact, a really talented *maw lom* singer would be one that not only could perform the songs well but could also develop them further with more elaborate word play as they went along. These songs were often lengthy ballads, typically telling the tear-jerking stories of lost love or the pain of experiencing unfaithfulness. Was it worth the risk to use them in the church?

Even before all of the issues were decided some of the tunes had already crept into popular usage among the believing community. The very popular song in the Green book #81, Jesus Loves Isaan, used the well known *Lom Duay Khoong* tune (Mekong River tune) which is still played on both the Thai and the Lao side of the border of Isaan. This tune is commonly used with lyrics written and rewritten for it simply because it represents a deep expression of the Isaan people. Therefore putting the words that "Jesus Loves Isaan" to that particular tune remains especially meaningful to Isaan people today. Other songs rewritten to popular *maw lom* tunes were also included in the green book and recorded for use in the church.<sup>25</sup> It was obvious when *lom* tunes (as opposed to central Thai or other new tunes) were being sung in church simply because at that point most people became extremely attentive and many could not resist getting up to dance.

Many gifted *maw lom* singers had become followers of Jesus and were eager to use their gifts in writing new music for the church. One particularly gifted man could do spontaneous *lom* singing, that is, given a topic could sing a song on a topic in a lengthy ballad song complete with Lao style of poetry rhyming and tempo. One of his giftings was the ability to sing the names of all the *tambon* (subdistrict) names in every *amphur* (district) in all the nineteen provinces of Northeast Thailand. This would be similar to someone listing all the major cities in every county in the state of California in perfect poetry and fitting the music. It seemed obvious that God had given this gift to be used.

Eventually it was decided that most of the tunes could be used but there would be no *wai kru* ceremony beforehand for the spirit of teachers or instruments. Instead, all instruments used were to be dedicated to God

beforehand. Eventually, several of the men of CCPCG began to learn the skills to be able to make the instruments themselves and this has developed into another means of supporting the work of the center as well as equipping the church with what it needs for worship.

Collections of Christian *maw lom* tunes began to gather and finally a rough draft of a *maw lom* songbook was developed. It was first printed in 1996 and later revised in 1998. The CCPCG had by this time changed its focus and expanded into the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD) and it was ISD which printed the second songbook entitled *Lom Isaan Sanrasern PraChaow* or as it is known in English, "Isaan Lom Ballads Praise God." Once again, the decision was made that this be an anonymous work dedicated to God for the use of his church throughout Isaan.

The two songbooks continue to be used by the churches and organizations started by the CCPCG work in Udon Thani. Cassette tapes of the songs in these two volumes have been produced and are used as training tools in the churches. The tapes have also been used successfully as a popular media for evangelism. New music continues to be produced today by the church.

### ***Contextualizing Evangelism in Isaan***

This focus on the reality of the good news of God's grace is clearly distinguished apart from religion, particularly when doing evangelism. Center staff, and the local *phu rap chai* emphasize this in their dialogue with others. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne included Gustafson's article in their 1999 edition of *Perspectives on the World Christian movement* describing that once relationships of trust are established:

Team members gifted in "holy gab" go out into villages to talk about Jesus. They don't talk about religion. Instead they say, "We're not here to change your religion, because all religions are basically the same; they're all about making people good." They talk about knowing the Word, the Living Word who is Jesus Christ, Jesus who is above all religions. Many who have responded positively to this method of sharing the gospel were religious people searching for truth, yet not finding it in Buddhism. They agree that they can't possibly live up to the demands of religion, but by accepting Jesus they can find salvation. These new believers quickly began sharing the Good news with their family members and friends. In this way, the Church continues to expand spontaneously (Gustafson 1999:677-678).

The social relationship of trust must be built first, then communication begins at a deeper level. This often takes more time that cross-cultural missionaries are willing to give. To Thai people a message of importance must wait for the appropriate setting before being presented in order that the full impact of it be properly recognized:

I always knew that the Christian missionaries had something important to say. They left their homelands and the life style from their countries and spent lots of money to come all the way to Thailand. They spent lots of time and effort going to language classes and trying to learn our language. I knew they had a significant message to communicate but what I couldn't figure out was: *if it was so important why did they have to try and say it all in the first ten minutes?* (Mejudhon 2001).

Even the best contextualized message of God's good news does no good unless it is communicated with relevance. Rev. Tongpan's gift and model of holy gab has encouraged others to share in a non-threatening way that Isaan people find very attractive and interactive. Barriers to sharing this good news exist in every culture and he deals honestly with these apprehensions and the spiritual forces behind them which would desire for believers to say nothing:

Many Christians listen to teaching week after week every Sunday and that's it. They hear the preacher and go home. Ever notice the water buffalo? It goes out and grazes all day and then you bring it back home and there it is still chewing on the cud—all that saliva dripping down. How many people are like that? They eat and eat and eat but if it doesn't change life and get shared it doesn't do any good.

Christians have a problem. Satan uses them a lot more than God does. Talk about the lottery and they've got lots to say. Talk about their husbands, talk about neighbors, talk about other people—what a lot of juicy chat! But talk about God—sudden lockjaw! Zipped shut. Not a word! Carrying a Bible to church, someone asks where you're going. "Oh, I was just going to get something to eat." Because we don't open our mouths nothing comes out.

If we want Jesus to be born again in us we need to share him with others. But we get lazy. I ask if people have shared with their friends they say, "What's the use? They don't believe it." Have you talked to your neighbors across the street? "Teacher, those people don't believe." We decide in advance that they won't believe. Our role is to share. Decide right now and pray that God will lead 10 people to you to share with this year (Phrommeda 2000).

### ***Ceremonies That Contextualize God's Truth***

Five ceremonies of the CCPCG help to concretely contextualize for Isaan believers the intensification of truth while also being secondary means of contextualizing relationship and power. These are:

1. Communion (also listed under relationship)
2. Infant or Child Dedication
3. Visitor Welcome Ceremony
4. Send-Off Ceremony
5. New House Dedication

## CHAPTER 6

### CONTEXTUALIZING GOD'S POWER IN ISAAN

I cannot help but feel that we should try to divorce ourselves of our western concepts of proclamation as a logical propositional process and realize that the Thai peasant is not so much interested in logical proof as he is in practicality. I feel that to approach a Thai peasant as a philosophically minded Buddhist is the worst possible thing that one could do. Day by day, these people wrestle nature and their land in an effort at survival. Their interests are in everyday life and the fears, needs, and emotions which arise out of everyday living. This is the main reason why they are syncretistic in their "Buddhism." Buddhism does not meet their everyday needs, but Animism and Brahmanism do. If Christianity is to be effectively presented to them it must not be presented on a purely philosophical or logical basis. It must be shown to meet the everyday needs of the people if they are to be expected to put full credence in it (Gustafson 1970 243-4).

All people are seeking resolution to the personal crises that arise in their life. There is a need to have enough power to control, or at least deal effectively with, the difficult situations that life brings. Perhaps the main appeal of many animistic practices within Thai Folk Buddhism is that they promise, in a timely manner, more knowledge, experience, or access to, some greater degree of control or power than that possessed by the average human being. In fact, for however brief or long the period, the goal with connecting to this power source is to somehow allow the follower to ultimately become like God himself. This is the most ancient strategy employed by satanic forces known in scripture (Genesis 3:5) and directly counterfeits the work of Christ who, being God, became human in order to allow all of humanity to experience the fullness of God through him (John 1:14, Colossians 1:19,20).

Human access to spiritual powers does not come without a corresponding price. Many Isaan believers give testimony to the fact that the spirits continually seek and require compensation from their followers at an ever-increasing expense (Matthew 4:8-9). People desire to connect with power. An example of this comes from the Roman Catholic missionary and former Theravada Buddhist monk, Michael A. Wright who described a scene occurring before a Thai theatrical performance:

Before the stage is a table with the usual paraphernalia of worship: a pig's head, whiskey, a chair with a parasol over it.

"Who are the offerings for?"

"For the Great Father."

"Which Great Father?"

"Our Great Father, the *phra* (image) that resides in the *boht* (chapel)."

I doubt if the spiritual Buddha is considered as existing apart from his images. He does not "come down" to reside in a statue; instead, he is induced, perhaps even created, in the ceremony of consecration. He is *power* rather than *person* (1968:2)

The price for spiritual assistance in many cases is a lifetime of bondage and fear. Christ came to bring freedom. The contextualization of God's power means to experience God's freedom just as Christ displayed it during his own ministry (Luke 4:18,19). The reality of spiritual bondage of Thai people must not be downplayed. Spiritual freedom, more than religious knowledge are what draw people to Christ:

One day when Grandmother Somli was at the peak of her popularity as an herbal medium and the misery of spiritual bondage, she had a vision of a great serpent rising from the east over the trees where she lived. As it drew nearer and loomed larger, a growing fear came over her. Then, just as it was about to devour her, she saw someone dressed in white also coming from the east. He said, "Don't be afraid. I have come to drive out Satan." Not knowing who this person was she waited. But for the first time she knew to whom she was enslaved.

A short time later two of our Thai church workers moved into the house next to her place. One day they came walking toward her from the same direction as the vision she had seen. They explained who they were and what they were doing and presented her with an opportunity to accept Jesus. Immediately she did so with joy and relief.

That night she had horrible dreams. She felt demons pulling on her legs, her arms and even on her chest. They threatened to kill her. Not knowing what else to do she called out, "Jesus, Help me!" A stream of light shone down on her and the tugging instantly stopped. That incident convinced her of the truth. The scattered spirits never came near her again. She had freedom at last (P. DeNeui 1997:2a).

## ***Contextualizing God's Power in Prayer***

As followers of Jesus, prayer is the most available way to access God's power directly. In Isaan churches, the believers are encouraged to depend upon God's power in every area of their life and to seek that power through daily interaction of prayer:

How did God first come to reveal himself? Through his son Jesus. He died. Three days later he was back to life through the power of God. Satan was defeated through the work of Jesus Christ. That power needs to be realized anew in our lives everyday. For example, if we fail to pray before we go to bed Satan has an opportunity to defeat us all night long. Prayer is tapping into the power of God. If we don't pray we won't have this power. If we claim to be church leaders and fail to pray, any power we have is our own. There is no place for the power of God to work in our lives (Phrommeda 2000).

### ***Contextualizing God's Power to Address Isaan Worldview***

Spiritual power to be accessible must be personalized. This relates back to the Isaan and Lao worldview which believes in the concept of the individual *khwan* life essence. If this *khwan* is disturbed a person cannot function properly. He or she becomes powerless and emotionally troubled. In the Isaan context *sukhwan* ceremonies provide a contextualized way to address many emotional problems as well as other crises related to a need for power and freedom.

What is the Thai Christian's perspective *khwan*? Most westernized Christian groups ignore the issue of *khwan* entirely and do not address it in the church. This does not mean that the Thai believers in these churches do not believe in *khwan*. In fact they may covertly seek out *pham* to perform *sukhwan* ceremonies when they are needed, and in a sense go underground with their beliefs. If this were to be discovered it would be considered idolatrous and syncretistic among all Christian groups.

There are, however, a few Thai Christian groups which view the concept of *khwan* and its corresponding traditions differently. Rev. Sinchai Khaochareonrhat, writer and evangelist with the Thailand Southern Baptist gives some advice regarding *sukhwan* ceremonies to Thai Christians in his book, *Christians on the Thai Path* (Thai language). Khaochareonrhat prefers not to attempt to defend or deny the existence of *khwan* but instead focuses on appropriate ways to deal with it:

Some of our ancient traditions had their origin in truly meeting a felt need but some of the original meaning may now be lost. An example of this are the *sukhwan* ceremonies for those who have experienced some kind of accident. The ancients believed that each of us possesses *khwan* residing in our body and whenever there is some accident or some startling experience the *khwan* will flee from the body. At this point it is important to have a *sukhwan*

ceremony in order that the *khwan* return to the body of that individual. It is obvious that this was developed as merely a way to encourage and console those who have experienced something traumatic in their lives. Since this is the case Christians can keep this ceremony and may continue to practice it while giving a clear explanation of the historical origin and meaning behind it (1998:25).

The ministry of the CCPCG saw that in addition to a Biblical understanding on the purpose and nature of prayer, there was also an important cultural need for Christian ceremonies to address the issues of the *khwan* and other power-related needs within their church community. They have researched the forms used in *sukhwan* and developed Isaan Christian ceremonies which are practiced in their churches. Many of these ceremonies use string as a physical media, not as a means of power, in order to effectively convey a deeper scriptural meaning to the recipient. These are strings, however, which have not been consecrated by Folk Buddhist practices. This is carefully explained as part of each of the ceremonies. The strings are used as a visible representation of what is not seen, that is, the love and power of God available to us in Jesus Christ. Usually the following words are included in the words of blessing to the recipient, "While this string will eventually break, the reality of God's love will never break and can never leave us." The individual is then tied in the name of Jesus Christ.

### ***Ceremonies that Contextualize God's Power***

Overcoming fear is major barrier to many Isaan coming to Christ. "It is less often a lack of knowledge that hinders people from coming to Christ than a lack of freedom" (Kraft 1999). An experience of freedom is what many in Isaan are seeking. Using a culturally appropriate form of ceremony can serve this important function. Ceremonies which serve primarily to contextualize the reality of God's powerful freedom in solving crisis, while secondarily contextualizing knowledge about God's power and a relationship with God are the following:

1. Healing Ceremony—seeking freedom from physical or spiritual affliction
2. Restitution Ceremony (*sukhwan*)
3. Freedom from Addiction Ceremony
4. Funeral Ceremony—seeking freedom from fear of spirits of the dead.

### ***Steps in Contextualizing Isaan Ceremonies for Communication of God's Power***

How are these ceremonies specifically contextualized to emphasize God's power and become useful for Christian witness? From outward appearances some of the ceremonies as done among the TCC group look very similar to that of ceremonies practiced in the Thai Folk Buddhist community. While this



is very attractive to those from outside the family of faith does this not border upon syncretism? Upon careful study five major areas of difference can be observed.

### **Use of Artifacts**

The materials used for the Christian *sukhwan* are all materials that have been dedicated to God and not dedicated to any other powers or beings. This would include not only the strings but the flowers, the banana leaves, the bowl, the tray—everything used. The string can be purchased in skeins in the local markets and the flowers and banana leaves are easily collected from the kitchen gardens of the members. There are also several objects normally used in *sukhwan* ceremony which are obvious in the Christian ritual by their absence. These would include candles, incense, boiled eggs, whole or partial chickens, special sacred cloths, and rice powder. Each of these objects were discarded because they serve as intermediary elements in the transfer of communication to either spirits or the spirit world. Christians do not need intermediary objects to communicate with God because, through the Holy Spirit, they are able to approach his throne directly (Hebrews 4:14-16, Romans 8:26-27).

One element which was discussed and decided as unusable for believers was the use of the boiled egg. This has been incorporated into many of the *sukhwan* ceremonies and is used to represent a number of things in the animistic tradition.<sup>26</sup> In the following example a boiled egg takes on a prophetic purpose as it is used in the traditional northeastern Thai Folk Buddhist *sukhwan* wedding ceremony:

A boiled egg (placed in the blessing bowl earlier) is shelled and cut in half. The bride and the groom then feed each other one half of the egg and then they have to eat it down quickly to symbolize that marriage is not such an easy proposition. There is no water given to wash it down. This actually has a very good meaning but the problem comes when the egg is used to predict the future of the couple. All the stages of this event are interpreted. From the peeling of the shell to the cutting of the egg even to the feeding and the chewing and swallowing are all used as means to determine how stable the marriage will be. Because of all this fortune telling we have had to say no, we, as followers of Jesus, cannot use the egg. We use what is meaningful but nothing that is idolatrous. We explain that we believe the lives of this couple are in the hands of God and pray for his blessing upon them (Wechkama 2001:39-40).

While it is not impossible to "capture" this form and use it for the gospel, here in this case it was decided by the Thai staff at the CCPCG that other forms communicated Christian marital success in more appropriate ways.

### **Preparation and Performance**

Another significant difference that distinguishes Christian ceremonies from the *sukhwan* ceremonies of the Thai Folk Buddhist context is in regards to those involved. Typically only married women still living with their husbands could assemble the *phakhwan* (floral arrangement) used in *sukhwan* for weddings; widows and divorcees could not be involved due to taboos related to belief in these participants' possible negative influence on the stability of the marriage (Tambiah 1970:230). Leadership of all *sukhwan* ceremonies would typically be a male *pham* elder, paid for his services. In the TCC churches women of all ages help to make the *phakhwan*. Leadership of the ceremony, though typically male, is not limited only to this gender. More importantly, all those involved in the preparation and the performance understand that they are doing this ceremony as a service to their Christian community and therefore also to God.

### **Integration with Worship**

The Christian ceremonies do not stand alone as demonstrations of power or of the leader's connections to power. Except in case of emergency or extreme illness, the Christian Isaan ceremonies are ordinarily incorporated into part of the regular worship experience of the church community. The focus is therefore not upon the ceremony itself or the rituals practiced by the participants but upon the expression of the members of the worshipping community as they serve one another and their community. In comparison to most Isaan Folk Buddhist *sukhwan* ceremonies, the Christian version is relatively brief in length of time depending on how many participants desire to tie the recipient(s). This brevity is due primarily to the fact that there are no alcoholic beverages served.

### **No Money Involved**

The *phu rap chai* in the church does not demand financial payment for holding a Christian ceremony. This is part of the life of the worshipping community. In the same way, anyone wishing to tie a blessing upon the recipient is able to do so without obligation to pay money (which is typically required in the Thai Folk Buddhist tradition). This freedom for any and all to express words of blessing is another indication of the freedom found in the grace of Jesus Christ. In the case of a wedding where guests want to give a financial gift to the couple, gifts of money are frequently given to them, but are never required in order to tie on a blessing.

### **Different Focus**

In contrast to the typical Thai Folk Buddhist *sukhwan* ceremony which emphasizes the solution found in the combined powers of consecrated strings, powerful leadership, and group participation to "cure" the recipient, the focus in the Christian *sukhwan* is on what God has already done. The children of God who participate understand (as it is repeatedly explained during each ceremony) that it is not personal achievement through any ritual

or performance which brings transformation but it is in fact God's power which has brought the assembled family of believers together in the first place. Together the community of faith comes in mutual need seeking the blessing that God has to offer. The media used (in this case, strings) is not an object of veneration but is merely a representation of that deeper truth found only in God. The strings serve as physical symbols used to communicate the invisible reality of the love and power of God. They serve as a means of experiencing God's grace. The focus is neither on the strings nor the ceremony but on God and what he has graciously done for humankind. Further considerations on the use of contextualized *sukhwan* ceremonies in Christian worship can be found in Appendix B.

## CHAPTER 7

### MISSIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE CONTEXTUALIZATION IN ISAAN

By the grace of God the original work of the ECCTM has been able to plant forty mother churches and two hundred and fifty daughter churches in six provinces throughout northeast Thailand<sup>27</sup> (Gustafson 1999:678). In addition to local church planting and enabling, the original center has been able to give birth to several other organizations in Thailand and the neighboring country of Laos. In 1989 a staff team was sent out from Udon Thani to begin a sister work in the central Isaan province of Roi Et. In 1991 a new work was begun with Isaan migrant workers in Bangkok. This ministry has since developed into two organizations working in Thailand's capital. In 1992 a team was sent to begin a project in northwestern Laos and in 1994 another team was sent to the northern city of Chiang Mai to begin a contextualized church enabling work there (Yamamori 1995:24). All of these organizations work in team partnerships with national and foreign staff. Those in Thailand are members of the TCC and would adhere to the distinctives listed in Appendix D.

The original center in Udon Thani, true to its commitment to relevance, has gone through several stages of structural re-organization. Today, the original work has become two separate organizations known as the Institute for Applied Church Ministry (IACM) and the Issan Development Foundation (IDF), set up out of legal necessity (Gustafson 1985:2). The IDF, a registered non-government organization (NGO), operates a support base farm and works in the area of integrated holistic development. The IACM continues to equip and enable local churches as well as produce materials useful to the church throughout the Isaan region. There is a growing number of individuals and organizations from the traditional Christian community in Thailand who

appreciate the fact that using local forms speaks to the heart of people and have expressed interest in learning how to contextualize their own ministry practices. While this is still many years from becoming a nationwide reality, the IACM in Udon Thani is growing as a resource for training interested parties from outside the TCC network in the area of contextualizing ministry.

The challenges to practicing a contextualized ministry are many. Four of these have particular missiological significance and will be focused on in the remainder of this paper. These four areas are the need to remain focused, the need to remain flexible, the need to practice effective partnership, and the need to consider the costs involved. The following reflections from the Thai and missionary founders of this work give insight into dealing with these difficult issues.

### ***Remaining Focused***

For those practicing a ministry which attempts to make God's message relevant to people in their particular cultural context there is a need to be focused. Too much can be attempted without anything of significance truly being accomplished. The work of the ECCTM has a threefold focus which includes first, a commitment to God's authority and to his message of grace, second, a commitment to allowing Jesus to reach the needs of whole people and third, a commitment to clear, culturally-appropriate, Biblical communication.

#### **A Commitment to God; a Dependence on Grace**

The first priority for a contextualized ministry focus is upon a relationship with God through Christ and a commitment to the daily experience of new life in his grace:

Central to all of our activities is a firm belief in the authority of the Word of God. Stemming from this is a belief in and commitment to the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, which is the heart of the Gospel. The gospel of God's grace, with all its implications, forms the set of beliefs on which all policies and practices of the ministry are based (Gustafson 1985:3, 1999:679).

#### ***Not Religion but the Gospel***

As was mentioned previously in Chapter 5, the truth of the gospel must be freed from the confines of a westernized religious paradigm. Conveying meaning in a way that people are eager to hear it may require non-traditional approaches to communication which provide dynamic equivalent meaning in the receptors. The essence of the message remains intact. For followers of Jesus, the core of the gospel message revolves not around a western religious form but around the good news of what God has done through the work of his son. This is the powerful message of grace that once experienced can transform lives and whole communities:

Religious efforts to please God by obedience to the law are bound to fail. There is no way man can be saved by obedience to the law (Romans 3:20). The basic role of the law is to drive man to despair and total dependence on the Grace of God which is God's power for salvation and transformation. It is not enough to be a Christian. Religion is powerless to help man, as its basic appeal is to man's self efforts at being morally acceptable to God, which is categorically impossible.

. . . The goodness of God is the power of God (Romans 1:16-17) which will utterly transform man and enable him to become what God originally planned him to be (Gustafson 1985:7-8).

### ***Not Christianity but Jesus***

Loyalty to a westernized religion has caused numerous problems in Thailand, both socially and theologically. Much of the confusion about what it means to be a Christian revolves around the issue of using foreign forms. In the midst of this confusion a new understanding that Jesus Christ is not Christianity needs to be revealed. As Rev. Tongpan has shared with Thai Christians, "Brothers and sisters, there is a real problem. Many Christians have lost Jesus to religion. They can't tell the difference. Jesus is not Christianity! These two need to be separated" (Phrommeda 2001). Ralph Winter stated that, "There are millions of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other people who desire to follow Jesus Christ but will never be willingly labeled "Christians." The most urgent task today is to redeem Jesus Christ from Christianity." <sup>28</sup> The need to contextualize the message and the relationship of Jesus Christ within every cultural context is far from being accomplished.

### ***Not Personal Effort but God's Power***

As long as the church in Thailand continues its loyalty to western forms there will continue to be a focus on personal effort to do good. The Thai saying, "Do good, get good; do evil, get evil" is true. God's power needs to be allowed to speak into every cultural area and be freed from individual efforts of being good to being willing to accept what God has already accomplished:

I knew a missionary who was in Thailand for forty years. He has since gone home. He had a real hard time in Thailand because he found so few people interested in doing good. He told me once, "Tongpan, you can't just preach the gospel. It is not enough. Thai people just won't do what is right." He was so afraid of this that he didn't share the gospel but rather focused on obedience, telling people what they should and should not do. And sure enough, people around him didn't drink or smoke. But they were only working off of religious effort (Phrommedda 2000).

Understanding and internalizing the gospel of grace means total dependence upon God's ability and not human effort. It is a message that while talked about is rarely put into practice in many places:

The Gospel of God in Jesus Christ is the only source for the transformation of man. . . . It is the Word that all man has to do is to receive in faith and trust what God has done for him in Jesus Christ. The Gospel unleashes the power of God to transform man on the condition of the willing dependence of man on that power!

The problem faced by the World Mission of the Church today is that the above message is the hardest of all concepts to believe and act on. . . . I have had national evangelical leaders from evangelical organizations throughout countries in Asia tell me that Law, not grace, was the basis of their church's belief and value system! I am concerned that the Church of Jesus Christ does not know the Gospel it so blithely espouses and as a result cannot possess the power of God's Grace which is the basis of all transformation in this world (Gustafson 1985:6-7).

### **A Commitment to Bringing Christ to the Whole Person**

The second priority for a ministry which desires to contextualize the message of Jesus Christ in a way to which people can respond is to maintain a commitment to reaching whole people for Jesus Christ. Reaching the whole person for Christ means addressing values of the heart which are counter to the gospel and incorporating Christ into every area of life, spiritual, physical, social, and all others. It means being holistic in contextualization's purpose and focus. This multi-dimensional contextualization approach used by the ECCTM is referred to by the organization's members as "integrated holistic development." attempts to integrate a relationship with Jesus Christ into a lifelong response in every area of the human existence:

The focus of Integrated Holistic Development is the development of the "total man." It emphasizes the functional relationship between the various aspects of man which are the focus of true development (spiritual, physical, psychological, social, economical). The result of Integrated Holistic Development is the development (transformation of something from what it is to what it is meant to be in Jesus Christ) of the natural creation by people who have been and are being "transformed" by the renewal of their minds in Jesus Christ (Gustafson 1985:5).

This transforming process of Integrated Holistic Development occurs through seven basic steps which can be briefly summarized as:

1. Know the message of the gospel.
2. Know the people and the local culture.
3. Contextualize the message of the gospel.
4. Encounter the value system of the local culture with
5. that of the gospel.
6. Establish dynamic equivalent churches in local culture.
7. Establish socio-economic projects in dynamic equivalence
8. churches.

9. Enable the church to do Integrated Holistic Development
10. in its own community (Gustafson 1985:5-19).

### **A Commitment to Communication**

Since its inception the ECCTM and associated organizations have been committed to effective communication of the gospel in forms to which Isaan people respond through clear understanding. This process of contextualizing the message, though widely discussed, is actually rarely seen put into action in Thailand either by westerners or by Thai Christian leaders who have been trained in the west in contextualization theory:

Although contextualization is a popular word in the theoretical jargon of the study of World Mission of the Church today, it is difficult indeed to find anyone actually practicing contextualization. Most mission and national Christian organizations are so locked into their Western forms of Christianity, that they would believe it tantamount to heresy to express the Gospel in culturally relevant forms and expressions. There is also an abiding false fear that expressing the Gospel in the forms and expressions of a local culture will create a syncretistic and, therefore, non-Christian movement. In fact, Christianity around the world is largely Western in form and expression, and largely contains the value system of the local culture housed in those forms! What we currently have is a Christianity which is highly syncretistic and non-Christian in its values and belief system (Gustafson 1985:11).

### ***Remaining Flexible***

The church structure is often accused of being one of the most inflexible of all organizational structures. Within the history of the work in Northeast Thailand the tendency has been for structures to become very rigid and thus unable to effectively address the issues of the rapidly changing society to which it wishes to minister. In the past, as Paul Tillich wrote, it was considered the responsibility of the missionary to give the answers that lost people needed to hear:

The difficulty with the highly developed religions of Asia, for instance, is not so much that they reject the Christian answer *as answer*, as that their human nature is formed in such a way that they do not ask the questions to which the Gospel gives the answer. To them the Christian answer is no answer because they have not asked the questions to which Christianity is supposed to give the answer (1959:204).

Today, however, the church is more often accused of answering questions no one is asking and not addressing contemporary issues.

The ministry of the ECCTM has stressed flexibility, enough to maintain effective communication. Gustafson often spoke of having a rip and tear mentality. "We try to do everything possible to allow God's grace to be

communicated to the Northeast Thai. To reach that goal, we are willing to change anything and everything about our organizations if necessary" (1999:679). Allowing for structures to change and operate outside of the organized church has been viewed with suspicion throughout Protestant church history (Winter 1999:228). And yet this is critical if organizations are going to minister with any degree of relevance.

### **Dealing with Generational Issues**

If a method does not work why use it? As Robert E. Coleman asks in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, "Does it get the job done?" (1977:11). Should something continue simply because it has always been done that way? One of the factors that will force change are those which come from within the community itself, primarily as experienced from one generation to the next. A contextualized approach requires constant honest evaluation and a willingness to change methodology while keeping firmly committed to the focused vision that has been established:

Satan doesn't want us to do this! "Use the old way," he says, "So you don't get anyone it doesn't matter just keep on trying." So we don't change. We don't think we can change. Lots of Christians fall into this. They are incapable of creating a new way or of trying something new. They are traditionalists, they want to keep up the old ways of doing things. They aren't progressive thinkers. Progressive thinkers are those who are willing to change, to try new methods. Allow Jesus to come to people in many different ways (Phrommeda 2001).

Jesus Christ needs to be brought to every generation, therefore contextualizing needs to remain an on-going process. Communication methods need to be re-evaluated. There are no grandchildren in the kingdom of God. If a method is found to be no longer effective in communicating then it must be replaced. Each new generation will have its own input into what styles it enjoys and what forms are appropriate.

### **Dealing with Globalizing Influences**

Why contextualize if everyone wants to be western anyway? This is a question which anyone involved in a cross-cultural ministry will need to be able to answer. Certainly the effects of globalization are being felt even in the most remote corners of the earth's population but is it true that everyone wants to be western? There are some who would see contextualization's efforts as counter-productive and not worth the effort:

The author considers the over-stressing of indigenization by Western missionaries as a Western guilt-complex deriving from colonial rule and Western domination for the past 400 years. . . . We Christian missionaries should . . . have discernment on the world-wide double currents which flow in both directions; one current is the world-wide resurgence of national culture



and of the restoring of indigenous traditions while the other current is the strong desire for people to identify themselves with and assimilate to a developing world-wide culture" (Kim 1980:136).

One of the myths of the cultural effects of globalization is that in the not-too-distant future all of the world's people will speak one language, eat one type of food, and the whole world will become one place. In fact, the speed of globalization's influence has served to reinforce the diversity of our world, often building factions which, according to Samuel P. Huntington, war with one another (2000:3). The desire to become like others does exist in a certain element of the world's population motivated perhaps by economic concerns more than anything else. However, the cultural diversity of the world continues and is in fact finding ways to adapt to the pressure of globalization's effects.

### ***Practicing Effective Partnership***

An important part of contextualizing relationships in mission today is putting into practice the highly heralded and rarely seen concept of partnership. Talking about contextualized relationships takes on another dimension when it is actually modeled by those who are doing the talking. It is not an easy task but one with which the church in Isaan, and in fact all of Thailand, has struggled since John Mott raised the issue at his meeting in Bangkok of 1929 (Koydul 1990:37-40). Since then the following statement by Andrew J. Kirk has become truth: "Partnership is a wonderful idea; pity about the practice!" (1999:191).

### **The Role of the Missionary in Partnership**

In terms of developing a contextualized ministry, missionaries as outsiders, can have an important affirming role in the process. As much as they may not like it, their influence is strongly felt by national church leaders and what missionaries approve of can often determine how quickly certain forms are adopted or rejected. This can be used to advantage when it comes to researching into the use of cultural forms. "In many church situations we have seen outsiders provide the incentive that will make a group feel free to use their cultural heritage in worship and in proclamation" (Søgaard 1993:197) One of the roles that missionaries can provide is that of the neutral outsider simply to ask questions, based upon a Biblical perspective about the emic meaning of rituals and thereby seek to find answers as to why certain practices are performed.

### **The Role of the Para-Church Organization in Partnership**

Structurally, the CCPCG was started outside of the church to plant, equip and enable local churches to be centers for outreach. As the original center developed into other structures (IACM, IDF and other daughter organizations)

it continued the role of the enabler, not to support the church but to equip it to minister locally:

The institute and foundation are in a process/broker relationship with the local church. *Process* means going "down and in." Development starts with people themselves, especially with the poor at the bottom of society. It begins with dialogue that involves them in a participatory approach. The *broker* function involves going "up and out." The foundation can link local churches to outside settings and resources. It can assess markets, research technology and so on (Gustafson 1999:679).

### **The Role of the Church in Partnership**

The para-church organizations working within the ECCTM have endeavored to allow the church to grow indigenously yet not without resources. As the church began to grow, and with the encouragement of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, a loose association was formed in 1995 which is called *Ongkarn Kristachak Prakhun Khong Prachaeo* (literal translation: Association of the Churches of the Grace of God, KPKP). In English this group has been called the Thailand Covenant Church (TCC). The TCC is now a member of the EFT and sends its representatives to the national meetings of the EFT. One of the tasks set before the church organization was to define for itself what it means to be the "Church of the Grace of God." This discussion later became a document of distinctives given in Appendix D. The infant church group is still in the process of defining its mission:

Repent, believe, be baptized, witness to Christ in the Spirit until he comes again. This is the response to the Christian message. That is the church.

Such a description of the church is both rich and deep, and yet free and open. It by no means leads one to come automatically to the form of the Western, Roman church we know, nor to the parish church we live and work in.

Historically, a single form of this response to the Christian message has grown and thrived. It is a response embedded in the culture from which it arose, with all the social, moral, and power structures of that culture remaining intact. It is the white, European response, with its Roman-Byzantine face. Until now that is the only response that has been allowed to the Christian message. That is the church we know.

What we are coming to see, now, especially in this context of bringing the Christian message to pagans of many different cultures, is that there must be many responses possible to the Christian message, responses which are filled with promise and meaning, but which have hitherto been neither encouraged nor allowed. We have come to believe that any valid, positive response to the Christian message could and should be recognized and accepted as church. That is the church that might have been and might yet be (Donovan 1978:83).

It is the hope of the work of the ECCTM that the local church can continue to be enabled to be the center of outreach into its local community. "The local church as the basic unit of Christian society is the obvious starting point for this holistic development. The final goal is that the local church become the local development organization that impacts its own larger community with the transforming power of God's grace" (Gustafson 1999:679).

### ***Considering the Costs Involved***

The work done by the ECCTM did not come without cost. For several in Thailand, over the years this cost has been too high and they have remained within traditional western Christianity. God can certainly use many different approaches to build his kingdom. There is a certain percentage of the Thai society that seeks to be western and may find the westernized form of Christianity appealing. However, the ECCTM has targeted the rest of the population who will have nothing to do with a westernized Jesus. How can these people be reached?

Western Christian communicators working in the Thai Folk Buddhist context will need to discuss the implications for their own team's ministry in relation to animistic concepts and practices present within the worldview. They will need to decide on such concepts as *khwan* and the *sukhwan* ceremonies. The majority of cross-cultural workers in Thailand (and most westernized Christians) have simply ignored these issues and hoped they would go away. Their position towards cultural ceremonies is therefore also communicated in the process. Churches need to talk together and discuss the role of *khwan* in the life of the believer and how it is to be addressed in Jesus Christ else people go outside the church to have their needs met.

There are some difficult questions which need to be addressed. Is *khwan* the same as the spirit of a person (*winyan*)? Is it a representation of a person's psyche (Heinze 1982:108)? Is *khwan* idolatry or not? How will the felt needs of those with a worldview of *khwan* be met in a Christian perspective? It would be beneficial to investigate the effect of contextualized Christian *sukhwan* ceremonies. Have they contributed to better communication of Christ and the expansion and maturity of the church? What has been the effect on the believer's lives who have participated in these contextualized ceremonies? What has been the effect on the church overall?

### **What Traditional Christians Think**

In status-oriented Asia, there is a major concern for what others think. Most Christians are not immune from this—even missionaries! It has been said that "good contextualization will be offensive to someone." Certainly there are many examples of those who would see using dynamic equivalent forms to convey Christian meaning as a watering down of the gospel and seek to discourage it:

Another serious problem for the Asian church today is the discontinuity between Christian faith and the new cultural relativism which tries to set up a synthesis between Christian theology and elements of the Asiatic religions. The artificial drama of an ineffective indigenization makes thousands of good solid Christians disappointed and confused in their religious life and as a result they lose their fervor for outreach. Furthermore unreasonable attempts for Christian identity with local culture not only spoil the internal evangelistic zeal of the church but also give a wrong impression of Christianity to non-Christian people. I have met a good many Thai Buddhists and animists who say that they would like to see Christianity as it is now. They respect Christians, simply because of our absolute claim of salvation and characteristic style of life and moral creeds. They say that they don't want the Christians to imitate the corrupted Buddhist culture. The Buddhists know that their religion fails to give eternal promise and values. They long for something steadfast and trustworthy. Therefore, precisely the distinctive and particular identity of Christianity which differs from their culture is a great attraction to Buddhists (Kim 1980:134).

However, if the percentage of declared Christians in Thailand are any indication, it would appear that only a very small number of Thai are willing to admit that they are attracted to a westernized form of Christianity. Today, according to research done by Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk less than 2% of the total population of the country are willing to be known as Christians<sup>sup>29</sup> (2001:619).

### **The Personal Cost**

Those who have attempted to contextualize the communication of the Christian message have been the target of a wide range of reactions. The rejection by traditional Christians may bring on isolation from the larger Christian community. This cost must be considered when one is involved in doing a ministry that may not be appreciated by those practicing more traditional methods:

The response on the part of the traditional Thai church has been everything from dismay to disbelief. We have been accused of being demonic by some fellow Christians and our salvation has been questioned by others. We are rocking the cultural "boat" of traditional Christianity in Thailand. Those who listen long enough to understand that what we are doing is "contextualization," voice support. When questioned, however, about why they are not doing similar things, they shake their heads and say that although their organizations give lip service to contextualization, they would never dare actually do it (Gustafson 1985:12).

Those who are going to attempt contextualized ministry need to take the plunge and carefully follow Biblical standards in their effort to do critical contextualization. The reaction from traditional Christians may be negative but the question again needs to be raised, "Is it getting the job done?"

(Coleman 1977:11). Taking the risk in order to communicate clearly is the mandate of John 1:14 as John R. Davis writes:

Both the Word of God and the Spirit of God have been given to guide and ensure what the appropriate parameters of contextualisation will be.  
*Contextualisation is as great a risk for the servant of God as exercising faith and trust in Him!*

. . . There will always be the danger of syncretism; in fact all expressions of Christianity are in some way culture-bound and therefore by definition syncretistic to some degree. The key is to discern between '*legitimate, critically-determined syncretism*', and '*uncritical syncretism*'. The former will be authentic, constructive, will validate the Scripture, and affirm the Culture, resulting in an unambiguous application of the 'good news'. The latter will be confusing, destructive both to Scripture and Culture, leaving no Scriptural 'good news'. *With the assurances already indicated, our task must be to contextualise for the sake of Christ and the Gospel* (1998:232).

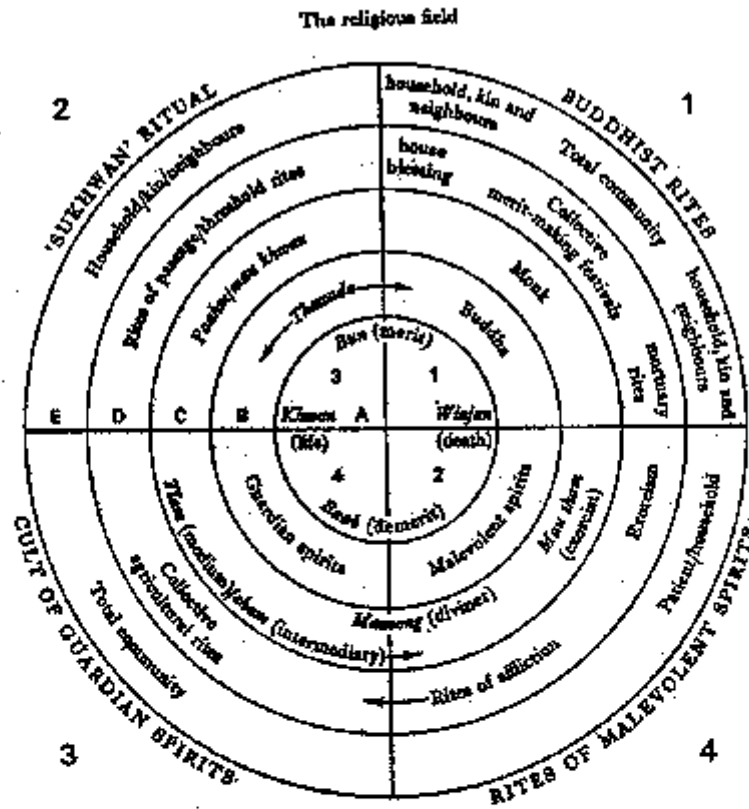
### **The Eternal Cost If We Don't**

In 1968 Alan Richard Tippett predicted the demise of animistic religions, "I give it (folk religion) ten years, at the very utmost twenty" (1968:9). Contrary to these words we have seen the exact opposite occur. Animistic practices and Folk Buddhism are not dying out. The rapid spread of Folk Buddhism in the west proves this. How can the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ become a reality for those who are not interested in a westernized form of Christianity be they Asian or North American? When traditional Christian religion no longer communicates we cannot fault the message from the God who created all peoples and cultures, but we need to review the method being used by his servants in sharing it:

It is our understanding and experience that if the church of Jesus Christ can understand the Gospel, understand the local people and the culture it addresses, contextualize the Gospel message into the forms and expressions of the local culture, encounter the local value system with the value system of the Gospel, establish dynamic equivalence churches, establish socio-economic development projects in the local churches, and enable the local church to do Integrated Holistic Development in its own community, the World Mission of the Church will begin to turn people and culture and the natural creation right side up (as they are meant to be) by the grace of God in Jesus Christ! (Gustafson 1985:20).

## **APPENDIX A**

### **TAMBIAH'S FOLK BUDDHISM OVERVIEW CHART**



THAI RELIGION (TAMBIAH'S OVERVIEW, 1967, 1970)

1. THAI RELIGION IS A COMPLEX OF DIVERSE RELIGIOUS FIELDS
2. EACH RELIGIOUS "FIELD" COMPRISES A NETWORK OF COGNIZABLY INTERRELATED STRUCTURAL COMPLEXES.
3. THE FOUR MOST DISTINCTIVE "FIELDS" AND COMPLEXES ARE: BUDDHISM, BRÄHMANISM, THE CULTS OF "GUARDIAN SPIRITS," AND THE CULTS OF MALEVOLENT SPIRITS.
4. THESE ARE COMPLEMENTARY SYSTEMIC APPROACHES TO "THE SUPERNATURAL."
5. THIS COMPLEMENTARITY, HOWEVER, DOES NOT CONFUSE THEIR IDENTITIES WITHIN THAILAND'S RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC SOCIO-CULTURE.

(Tambiah 1970:180)

**APPENDIX B**

**CONSIDERATIONS IN USING CONTEXTUALIZED SUKHWAN CEREMONIES IN THE CHURCH**

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Speaks to the deepest levels of the Isaan person's being.</li> <li>2. It is wholistic—it addresses and integrates the social, spiritual and psychological needs of the recipient and his/her community.</li> <li>3. Expresses unity with local tradition.</li> <li>4. Expresses unity with local church community in a meaningful way.</li> <li>5. Allows opportunity for individuals to share deeply and honestly with each other.</li> <li>6. Provides a physical way to represent restitution, reconciliation, and healing.</li> <li>7. It is a means of God's grace both to the recipient and the participants.</li> <li>8. It is non-western and helps contextualize the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ for Isaan people.</li> <li>9. It is equally fitting for men or women and can be used by all ages.</li> <li>10. It is inexpensive; materials to do it are readily available</li> <li>11. It can be done almost anywhere and can be easily performed by lay leadership.</li> <li>12. The purpose of the ceremony is clearly communicated in the cultural context.</li> <li>13. The transformational effect of the ceremony on the recipient is often obvious to all involved.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can be viewed as syncretistic</li> <li>2. Not readily appreciated by westernized Christians.</li> <li>3. Requires repeated clear explanation that the strings are not consecrated and have no power in themselves. They merely serve as a physical representation of something we cannot see which is the love we share in Jesus Christ.</li> <li>4. Local <i>Pham</i>, who receive money for performing <i>sukhwan</i> may not appreciate Christians providing a similar ceremony for free.</li> <li>5. It is culture specific (but can be effectively translated into many cultures).</li> </ol>

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>14. It can be readily adapted and repeated for a variety of situations.</p> <p>15. There are a number of references in the Bible to being tied together with Christ and with his body. This ceremony reinforces these concepts.</p> <p>16. It is often the first time a person from a Thai Folk Buddhist background truly experiences an integration of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and still remain a Thai.</p> |  |
|---|--|

## **APPENDIX C**

### **SUMMARY OF 25 THAI SOCIAL VALUES**

1. Respect Buddhism
2. Lift up money as supremely important
3. Lift up power
4. Lift up those with status  
Respect those with seniority
5. Lift up educated
6. Don't like to disagree with anyone
7. Lack patience
8. Like to gamble (risk luck)
9. Like fun
10. Like to be extravagant when competing in society
11. Like it easy
12. Like ceremonies
13. Believe in spirits and luck
14. Lack order and discipline
15. Don't care for corporate things
16. Individualistic
17. Don't like to see others as good (or better) than self
18. Love "face and eyes" in society
19. Love groups to which one belongs
20. Like to put things off
21. Gratitude as a response to supporters or patrons
22. Curious (nosy) about the affairs of others
23. Forgive each other easily



(Apapirom 1976, Soontawn 1979, Soupap 1975)

## **APPENDIX D**

### **DISTINCTIVES OF THE THAILAND COVENANT CHURCH**

#### **1. Contextualization**

Make use of the best of local Thai culture from the particular target group in doing the gospel (for example: use the local language, musical instruments, cultural ceremonies, local forms in worship). Help plant and equip churches to enable them to grow into fully indigenous expressions of the gospel in their community following the principles of the Scriptures.

#### **2. Church Leadership Qualifications**

- 2.1 Not based upon social status, education, or gender.
- 2.2 The individuals demonstrate spiritual gifts and willingness for God to work in and through them and help them mature according to the principles of the Scriptures.

#### **3. Church and Para-Church Organizational Structure**

Work together in team ministry stressing the importance of group decision making and implementation.

#### **4. Evangelism**

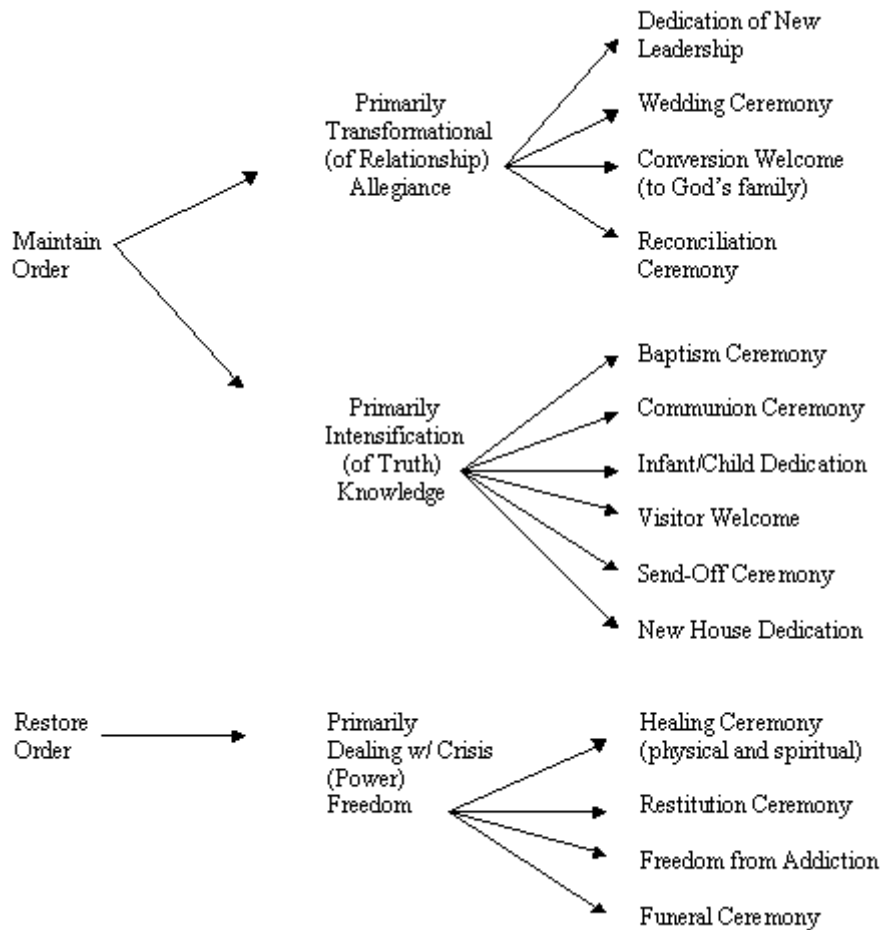
- 4.1 Culturally sensitive and appropriate to the local target group
- 4.2 Stress long-term, on-going relationships
- 4.3 Wholistic approach, reaching the whole person for Christ: spiritual, social, economic, etc.
- 4.4 Evangelism is the task and responsibility of every believer.

#### **5. Relationship of the TCC with Other Church Groups and Denominations**

- 5.1 Foreign missionaries partner with local Thais in equipping and enabling roles.
- 5.2 TCC has partnership relationships with other Christian groups, both international and domestic.
- 5.3 Members from other church denominations are not accepted as members of TCC churches without written consent from their former affiliation and/or approval from the Board of the TCC.

## APPENDIX E

### FUNCTIONS OF CEREMONIES IN THE ISAAN COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS



### GLOSSARY OF THAI WORDS

<i>Acharn</i>	An academic or religious honorific, as in "professor" or "reverend"
<i>amphur</i>	Provincial districts
<i>baan</i>	Village
<i>boht</i>	Temple building which houses Buddha image
<i>chao muang</i>	Local leader of a feudal kingdom or city/state
<i>don bai sri</i>	Banana leaf arrangement for <i>sukhwan</i> ceremonies
<i>kaen</i>	Isaan bamboo panpipe
<i>khwan</i>	life essence of each individual

<i>khrop samsip song</i>	A saying indicating a healthy child
<i>krachiap daeng</i>	<i>Hibiscus sabdariffa</i> , dried calyx used in making red juice
<i>Luuk Prachaeo</i>	Child of God, preferred term over "Christian"
<i>maw lom</i>	Isaan ballad style of music and singing
<i>muang</i>	Local kingdom or city/state
<i>phakhwan</i>	Flower arrangement used for <i>sukhwan</i> ceremonies
<i>Phayaa</i>	Lao stories of philosophical and moral teaching
<i>Pham</i>	Brahmanistic ceremony leader from "Brahman"
<i>phii</i>	Evil spirit
<i>Phra</i>	Sacred honorific
<i>Phu rap chai</i>	Servant (the one who is used by others)
<i>Prachaeo</i>	God
<i>puk sekkatah</i>	Literally "to tie powers to," to consecrate
<i>siew</i>	Isaan bond of friendship, blood brother
<i>sukhwan</i>	Ceremony for the <i>khwan</i>
<i>tambon</i>	Provincial subdistricts
<i>wai khru</i>	Ceremony to honor the teachers and mentors
< wat/td >	Buddhist temple

(Phinthong 1989, Yanbrateep 1987)

## NOTES

- 1 "Forty years (1868) later when a party of French explorers reached Vientiane, they found nothing but forest and decaying ruins" (Wyatt 1994:171).
- 2 Most sources agree that the deposed Lao monarch and his family died in 1828 after several days of torture in the cage (Benedict 1963:9, Karnchanapee:1995, Wyatt 1984:17). However, one source suggests Anou survived four years of this type of captivity (Hall 1964:421).
- 3 Annam is the ancient name for Vietnam.
- 4 *Pla rah* is the widely-popular odiferous fermented fish paste used as a flavoring in many Isaan foods.
- 5 "Ritual play a central role in most societies. They are multilayered forms of communication that have the ability to grip people in ways verbal explanations cannot. They express what words cannot convey—not the trivialities of life, but its immensities. If missionaries hope to win converts and plant vital churches around the world, they need to reexamine the role of rituals in human societies, and their own antiritual

- biases" (Hiebert et al 1999:283).
- 6 Many other Isaan ceremonies not involving the khwan also exist but are beyond the scope of this paper.
  - 7 Thirty-two parts are mentioned in the *Khuddakapatha* (a prayer book for daily use in the *Pali Canon*): *kesa* (hair of the head), *loma* (hair of the body), *nakka* (nails), *danta* (teeth), *taco* (skin), *mamsam* (flesh/muscles), *naharu* (sinews), *atthi* (bones), *attjo,omka*, (marrow), *yakkam* (kidneys), *hadayam* (heart), *yakanam* (liver), *kilomakam* (membranes), *pihaham* (spleen), *papphasam* (lungs), *antam* (intestines), *antagunam* (entrails), *udariyam* (stomach), *karisam* (faeces), *pittam* (bile), *semham* (digestive juice, phlegm), *pubbam* (pus), *lohitam* (blood), *seda* (sweat), *meda* (fat), *assu* (tears), *vasa* (lymph), *khela* (saliva), *singanika* (snot, mucus), *lasika* (synovial fluid of the joints), *muttam* (urine), and *matthaka* or *matthalungam* (head or brains) (Heinze 1982:128).
  - 8 Alex Smith's volume *Siamese Gold* analyses church growth in Thailand from 1816-1982. Virat Koydul reviews the work of Thailand's largest Christian group in *The History of the Church of Christ in Thailand: An Evangelistic Perspective*. Kenneth Wells' *History of Protestant Work in Thailand* covers the period 1828-1958. In *The Unfinished Mission in Thailand*, author Samuel Kim reflects on missiological issues related to church growth in Thailand.
  - 9 These three names have been changed.
  - 10 "On a Per capita basis Laos is hence the most heavily bombed nation in history. Especially in the Northern Provinces such as Huaphan and Xieng Khouang, where international teams are still clearing the terrain of unexploded ordinance, people still suffer from the legacy of the war" (Lao History at a Glance:2002).
  - 11 It is common practice in Thailand to abbreviate names using only the first name as I have done here, rather than the last name as in done in western countries.
  - 12 Name changed.
  - 13 Several examples could be cited. Perhaps the most glaring is the familiar hymn *Nearer My God to Thee* which when sung to the Thai tones actually translates as, "The farther I get from God the better."
  - 14 "Cao Mee" (Honored Mother) at the south end of the Bung Kaen Nakorn park in the city district of Khon Kaen province is an example of a female pillar spirit.
  - 15 Specifically note tactics imitating Christ words, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20, Acts 18:10), "I am the Light" (John 8:12), and issues relating to false servants masquerading as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14-15).
  - 16 Khon Kaen was the location of this seminar and is located in the middle

- of northeast Thailand.
- 17 *Lom* is traditional Isaan ballad singing. A singer of lom songs is known as a *Maw Lom*.
  - 18 The kaen is the traditional bamboo reed instrument essential to all Isaan musical events.
  - 19 *Boht*, low tone, is pronounced as rhyming with the English word "vote" with a long "o" vowel.
  - 20 The author's personal observation with westernized Thai Christians in Isaan is that once they met a fellow believer they will immediately ask, "*Bai boht nai?*" ("Which *boht* do you go to?") in order to place them into groups.
  - 21 As it is practiced and taught among our churches the three parts of worship include corporate group worship of God, personal devotion to God and service to others.
  - 22 *Krachiap daeng*, variously known in English as roselle, Jamaican flower or Jamaican sorrel, is *Hibiscus sabdariffa*. The dried red calyx of the flower is boiled to make juice, wine and food coloring and is said to have curative powers.
  - 23 The term in Isaan is pronounced "see-oh" (low tone). This is a special relationship, usually based on facts of similar age and gender, similar to "blood brother."
  - 24 These are #28 *PraYesu Phu Aphai (Jesus the Forgiver)* and #73 *Sing Prasert Khue PraKham (The Holy Word)*.
  - 25 Songs that use various *maw lom* tunes found in the green book include #30, 31, 41, 42, 44, and 74.
  - 26 According to Heinze in the Thai Folk Buddhist tradition, "There will always be an egg on top of any *bai sri*. The *khwan* egg is interpreted as the world egg and symbolizes the second birth of the candidate" (Heinze 1982:70).
  - 27 Udon Thani, Nong Khani, Nong Bua Lomphu, Roi Et, Mahasarakham and Kalasin.
  - 28 Answering a student's question, "Now that we have identified all the remaining unreached people groups, what is the most urgent task in missions today?" Fuller Theological Seminary lecture November 21, 2001.
  - 29 Johnstone and Mandryk cite a figure of 994,668 profession Christians equalling 1.62% of Thailand's total population (2001:619).

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## VITA

Paul Henry DeNeui was born in Inglewood, California to Henry and Eleanor (Wilson) DeNeui on August 5, 1959. Paul's father was an Internal Auditor and his mother worked in secretarial positions as well as other jobs to provide money for their children to attend a Christian elementary and secondary school. Church involvement was a vital part of Paul's growing years. Along with his three younger siblings, he was exposed to the life of the Christian community and to world mission from a young age.

Paul graduated with a B.S. in Ornamental Horticulture, Landscape Design from California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo in 1982. In August of 1982 he married Gretchen Marie Strickland whom he had met at the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship on their college campus. Together they worked and attended Fuller Extension classes from 1982 to 1985. In 1985 they attended North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois in preparation for missionary service with the Evangelical Covenant Church. In 1986 they returned to California to attend Fuller Theological Seminary where both attended classes full-time. Paul graduated with his Master of Divinity in Cross-cultural studies in June of 1987. Their first son, Joseph, was born during finals week of that month. Two weeks later they were commissioned as missionaries with the Evangelical Covenant Church and in September left for two years of Thai language and culture training in Bangkok, Thailand. In 1991 Paul was ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

From 1987 to 2001 Paul and Gretchen worked with the ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission in Bangkok, Udon Thani and Roi Et, Thailand focusing on wholistic development, youth and leadership training, and contextualized church ministry. Three more children were born to them in that country: Anna (1990), Andrew (1993), and Jeannette (1995). In April 2000 Paul and Gretchen were asked by the director of the Covenant's department of World Mission to become resource people in the area of contextualized church planting for the Covenant's work in world mission. This also included the encouragement to pursue further studies.

In September 2001 Paul re-entered Fuller Theological Seminary to pursue the Master of Theology in Missiology degree. He plans to continue on with doctoral studies in the Fall of 2002. His plans are to return to Thailand in the summer of 2003 to work with the Institute of Applied Church ministry in Udon Thani as a researcher and enabler in the area of contextualized ministry within the Thai Folk Buddhist context.