

Summary

The Hope of Bangkok is the fastest growing church in Thai Protestant church history, beginning in 1981 with 17 people, and has grown to an estimated 40,000 members today. Not only is the Hope of Bangkok itself growing, but many other churches have benefited from former Hope of Bangkok members transferring their membership to mainline churches in Bangkok and the rest of Thailand.

The Hope of Bangkok has also experienced conflict with other churches because of its rapid growth and its policy of drawing members from other churches to join it. Its membership in the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand was suspended in 1987 and has not yet been reinstated.

The Hope of Bangkok is distinctive in that it began with a clear vision to plant to church in every Amphur district of Thailand. It expects a high level of commitment from its members who are expected to attend Sunday services, small group meetings, do follow up of new believers as well as show self discipline in memorizing Bible verses. A corporate structure is used to govern the church and the church services are a blend of Charismatic style worship mixed with expository sermons from the Bible. A clear system of follow up is used to contact people who attend services and meetings of the church.

The Hope of Bangkok Church has many lessons to teach the Thai church in general and its methods and policies need to be examined in the light of scripture to determine how the Christian church can improve its rate of growth and reach more Thai people for Christ.

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Introduction

The Hope of Bangkok is the fastest growing church in Thai Protestant church history, beginning in 1981 with 17 people, about half of them foreign missionaries. Today the church is estimated to number over 40,000 members and still seems to be growing at a rapid rate. Not only is the Hope of Bangkok itself growing, but many other churches have benefited from former Hope of Bangkok members transferring their membership to mainline churches in Bangkok and the rest of Thailand. It cannot be denied that the Hope of Bangkok has had a tremendous impact on the Christian church in Thailand. This report seeks to explore some of the reasons for the rapid growth of the Hope of Bangkok Church, and the lessons that we can learn from both its rapid growth and some of the problems that it has experienced during its 23 year history.

1 History

1.1 Dr Kriengsak Charoenwongsak- Personal Background and Conversion

Dr Kriengsak was the eldest of five children in a Chinese family in Bangkok. He had a father who worked very hard to establish the family business and was seldom at home. Dr Kriengsak himself grew up with an attitude to doing everything well and working very hard. His early life was also characterised by loneliness because his parents had to work very hard and he was sometimes not able to relate well to his school friends. He went to a prestigious secondary school but instead of involving himself in sports and other leisure activities he went regularly to an orphanage to play with the children and also to help the inmates in a blind institution. He would also organise teams to go to remote rural areas in the summer vacations to build schools. He grew up in a Buddhist home that also practiced Chinese ancestor worship. At the age of 16 in 1972 he was offered a scholarship to study for a year in an American high school in Wisconsin USA, and this was his first exposure to Western society.

In November 1973, Kriengsak arrived in Melbourne, Australia and studied economics and political science at Monash University. During this time he developed a friendship with a Singaporean student who was a Christian. He was impressed with

the intellect of his fellow student and through his witness eventually became a Christian. After his conversion he became very disciplined in Bible study, prayer life and witnessing to his friends. He became involved in a conservative evangelical church and also in the Asian Fellowship on the campus. Sometime later he had an experience of being baptised by the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Dissatisfied with the conservative Church he began to attend the charismatic Waverley Christian Fellowship in Melbourne. In this church, as well as in the Asian Fellowship, Kriengsak quickly became a leader who demanded 100% commitment from his followers. People were expected to memorise 21 verses of scripture per week, door-to-door witnessing on Sundays between services, attend cell groups, and be involved in follow-up of new believers.

In 1976 Kriengsak received a vision to plant a church in every one of the 685 districts throughout Thailand. He also met his wife Rojana who came to share his vision for the Thai Church. Even on their honeymoon on Phillip Island in Australia they spend the days handing out tracks and witnessing to other holidaymakers and residents. After he finished his university course with first-class honours he was then invited to study for his PhD in Australia for another three years, and during this time he was also able to complete studies in New Testament Greek while carrying out his other responsibilities in the church.

1.2 The Birth of “The Hope of Bangkok Church”

Kriengsak returned to Thailand in 1981 and took up a position lecturing in the Masters programme at Kasetsart University in northern Bangkok. He found himself disappointed with the teaching in the Thai Churches and within a few months began a new church service in the lecture room on the ninth floor of the Bangkok Christian hospital on Sunday, the sixth of September 1981, beginning with 17 people, many of whom were foreign missionaries with OMF international. Some of the OMF members who were present were Alex Smith, Henry Breidenthal, Alma Cunningham, Mary Cooke and Allan and MaeLyn Ellard¹. By the end of the year there were 120 people

¹ Allan and MaeLyn Ellard worked with the Hope of Bangkok Church for 10 years from 1981 to 1991. Allan is still working in Bangkok with ACET and gave an interview on 8 September, 2004.

attending the meeting. To begin with the music was very simple with only one guitarist leading the music and it gradually developed as more musicians became available. In the beginning what really attracted people to come to join the meeting was Kriengsak's preaching and his vision for growing churches. He was a young man who was well educated, very intelligent, had integrity as well as great vision, was highly committed, worked very hard and had obvious leadership skills.

There was great excitement in those early days as Kriengsak proved himself to be a capable leader full of integrity and passion to follow Christ. The missionaries working alongside him were also very impressed and excited at seeing a Thai Christian leader who was able to effectively grow a Thai Church. As well as being involved in the numerous church activities and evangelism, these early members also read one book every week. Some Thai members showed their commitment even to the point of selling their house and moving into rented premises in order to meet some of the expenses of the church.

Kriengsak himself set an example of someone who was intensely committed to follow-up and discipline. He was able to lead one of his school friends from Assumption College to know Christ (a member of the family that runs the central department stores in Bangkok). Every Wednesday morning at 6 a.m. he would travel from his home to meet in the missionary's house to disciple this young man before they both went off to work². Kriengsak was never late.

1.3 Expansion and Growth

In the second year of the church (1982) the growth in numbers slowed considerably and Kriengsak determined that this was due to a lack of unity in the leadership team and lack of commitment to the vision by some of the leaders. As a result, Kriengsak decided that he would only appoint leaders who had come up through the church and whom he had trained personally. After seven years of growth “the statistics would show that 93% of church members had been converted at Hope of Bangkok with the

² Interview with Alan Ellard.

remaining 7% being transplants from other churches”³. During this time a cell group program was implemented in a big way, which consisted of a clear follow-up program for new converts. The cells were organised all around the greater Bangkok area and a pastor was appointed to each one of the districts to oversee the cell groups and to train the leaders of each one of the cell groups. A program of leadership training was implemented through these cells. Everyone was expected to be involved in follow-up of new believers including Kriengsak himself. There are many stories of his total commitment to doing the work of the church over and above his commitment to his family and other priorities. One of them is the fact that he did not attend the birth of his first son despite the fact that his wife was having difficulties during the pregnancy because on that night he was counselling a drug addict and leading him to Christ. Another story is of Kriengsak making follow-up appointments at 5 a.m. in order to have time for all of his other commitments at work and church.

In 1983 a special evangelistic campaign was commenced with the aim of raising the membership to 200 by the end of the year. This target was met and raised the need for larger premises so in November 1983 the Hope of Bangkok church moved to the Sheraton hotel. When this began to be insufficient, the Hope of Bangkok church obtained the Oscar Theatre in Petchburi Road, and was able to commence a service there with about 400 people in November 1984. As the congregation grew the church was able to increase its range of activities and established interest groups in areas such as Bible study, playing a musical instrument, song leading, singing, typing, computer skills, and speaking English. New congregations were started as well as student cell groups on main university campuses.

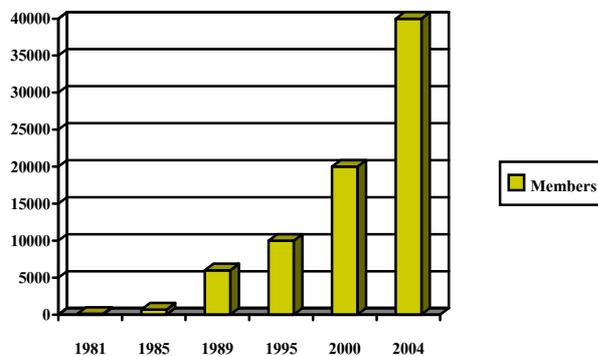
In May 1985 the Hope of Bangkok church had about 700 members and was able to pay off the money that Kriengsak owed for his bond in studying overseas. As a result he was released for full-time ministry and established the Thailand Bible Seminary, which offered short-term courses as well as a four-year bachelor degree in theology and various Masters Degree programs for university graduates. In the same year the Hope of Phayao church was established, although not without difficulties. In the next

³ Boyd C. “The Apostle of Hope- The Dr Kriengsak Story” Richard Clay Ltd, Suffolk, UK, 1991 P79

few years other churches were established in Chiang Mai, Suratthani, and Nakhon Sri Thammarat.

During this time of growth in the 1980s the structure and organisation of the Hope of Bangkok became increasingly autocratic. Bangkok was divided into four districts, each directed by one of the four men who work closely with Dr Kriengsak. These four districts would compete on the basis of growth figures, and awards would be handed out each Sunday for the best cell church leader in the district over the last week. Visitors to the church would be given different coloured nametags according to their classification. Visitors from other churches would receive a yellow nametag. People who were not yet Christians would receive a green nametag. A member of the church would have a red nametag. There would always be an altar call at the end of each service and there would be pressure on the non-Christian with a green nametag to go forward and make a commitment to Christ. With such coercive techniques many people who came for the first time never returned to the church⁴.

Figure 1- Growth of the Hope of Bangkok Church



In 1989, the present premises at Khlong Toey were obtained and by 1991 the Hope of Bangkok church was claiming around 6000 members. Marten Visser doing research on Thai churches estimates that today the Hope of Bangkok throughout Thailand has about 40,000 members.⁵ In 2003, their annual camp was held at Khon Kaen over two

⁴ Allan Ellard

⁵ Marten Visser, an OMF Missionary in Bangkok is currently doing research on the Thai church in co-operation with the Thailand Evangelisation Committee.

weeks with 15,000 people attending each week. The OMF short-term worker who attended the camp was given the impression that these people represented 75% of the total membership of the Hope of Bangkok Church. The Thailand Evangelisation Committee is currently trying to obtain accurate figures of the membership numbers, but these are very difficult to obtain.

1.4 Problems

The explosive growth combined with the aggressive techniques in follow-up and attracting new members to the church led to friction within the evangelical Fellowship of Thailand. These problems surfaced in many different ways. One was the extremely high level of commitment that was demanded of the Hope of Bangkok church. Members were expected to attend Sunday meetings for the whole day, cell church meetings throughout the week, follow-up of new believers and seekers as well as student meetings on campuses, interest groups and personal Bible study and scripture memory programs. This very high level of commitment to church activities caused friction with the other organisations and institutions that church members were involved with.

The most obvious of these was the immediate family of new church members who would become resentful of the amount of time that a new convert would spend in church activities. In October 2000 this led to some bad press in the Matichon newspaper because of a female university student who committed suicide by jumping out of a high story window. The allegation was that she had been involved in the Hope of Bangkok church and also Campus Crusaders for Christ which had contributed to her suicide. While this allegation was not substantiated it did lead to further allegations in the media of the Hope of Bangkok church drawing young people away from their families.

One Thai student, who is presently the wife of a pastor of an ACT church in Bangkok attended the Hope of Bangkok student meetings at Kasertsart University in the early 1990s. She said that there were enormous expectations to attend meetings and to be involved in all the evangelistic activities of the student group. This made her feel increasingly uncomfortable and eventually she had to cut off communication with the

group because of the aggressive approach that was used in bringing her to meetings. Her observation was that there was a very high emphasis on attending meetings and being involved in Christian activities to the point that the emphasis on a personal relationship with God suffered. She received the impression that Hope of Bangkok members were so busy attending meetings and that doing activities that very little time was left for personal Bible reading and prayer⁶.

There were also some allegations of church members not being able to contribute in the workplace as a result of their high level of commitment to church activities. In 1983, Alan Bennett⁷ was the director of the Far Eastern Broadcasting Company, which employed members from the Hope of Bangkok Church. When he needed to address the problem of his staff falling asleep during the day while they should have been working, their response was that they needed to sleep because of the constant demand to attend cell group meetings and church activities until late in the evening. If they did not attend the meetings then they would be fined a sum of between 20 and 50 Baht. Mr Bennett contacted Dr Kriengsak to try to address the issue of high expectations that were put on the Hope of Bangkok church members, but was met with the response that these people were doing the work of God and must attend all the church meetings. There was an apparent indifference to the obligations that church members had to their employers as well as to their church.

Over a period of time during the 1980s there were increasing complaints about the behaviour of Hope of Bangkok church members. Many of the complaints stemmed from a perception that Hope of Bangkok members were trying to coerce members from existing mainstream churches to join up with the Hope of Bangkok. These complaints came frequently and were not isolated. Due to the increasing number of complaints, the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand communicated to Dr Kriengsak a desire to talk about these issues. The behaviour of the Hope of Bangkok church members in attempting to recruit church members from other churches within the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand was outside of the policies and principles laid

⁶ Interview with ACT Pastor's wife (Anonymous), August 2004

⁷ Alan Bennett is currently the OMF Deputy Field Director working in Bangkok at the OMF Thailand field headquarters.

down by the Fellowship. A number of attempts were made to clear these matters up with the leadership of the Hope of Bangkok church. When Dr Kriengsak and other Hope of Bangkok church leaders refused to meet with the board of the evangelical Fellowship, the board eventually took the action of putting the Hope of Bangkok church under discipline. In January 1987, the Hope of Bangkok church was suspended from the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand. The EFT laid down a number of conditions for reinstatement in order to make the Hope Churches work better with other church groups, such as the approval of the existing churches for new church plants in a town or city, and approval of change of membership from an existing church into the Hope of Bangkok.

In October 1990 there was a dispute in the leadership team of the Hope of Bangkok church. Dr Kriengsak had been travelling in the United States and on his return he expelled one of his senior leaders from the church. The reason for his expulsion was never quite clear except that the leaders who were expelled were accused of rebellion and trying to take over control of the church. As a result four people were excommunicated and at the end of the next week another four leaders were also put out of the church because they questioned the decision. Church members were forbidden to have contact with the leaders who were expelled from the church and the homes of these leaders were put under surveillance to make sure that everyone obeyed. Over the next month there was a big emphasis on authority and obeying leaders, which became the main topic of sermons and seminars. It seems at this time that Dr Kriengsak had become untouchable and no one was able to call him to account. In December 1991, a delegation was sent from the Waverley Christian chapel in Melbourne to confront Dr Kriengsak on many of the unresolved issues that were affecting his reputation, including a charge of adultery. Dr Kriengsak was not open to being questioned and denied any wrongdoing.

In 2003 the evangelical Fellowship of Thailand reiterated its warning to all of its members not to have any formal relationship or engage in any programmed activities with any churches that had been suspended because of “disciplinary issues” which could only refer to the Hope of Bangkok Church.

2 A Personal Experience

I attended an 11.45am – 2.30pm service at the Hope Place in Khlong Toey. The service had over 1,000 People attending; the majority were fairly young with an average age of about 25-30 years. It is the largest church meeting that I have attended during my 10 years in Thailand. A band led the worship from the front stage singing modern tunes, but also some older songs. The main pastor is Phitsanunart Sritawong who is married to Dr Kriengsak's sister. Kriengkrai Suphiphatanamori preached the sermon in an expository style.

One Thai man about 40 years of age came and befriended me and introduced me to his friends. He has phoned me five times in three weeks inviting me to attend services and seminars at the church, even though he knows that I am a missionary with another organisation and that I have regular preaching appointments in other churches. He had obviously been trained to follow-up any show of interest among new people who turn up to church. There is quite a large bookshop selling a number of mainstream Christian titles from different distributors in both Thai and English. At the same time as the service was in progress, there were also a number of other different groups having meetings around the building and inside the building. There are also many other special events taking place through at the weekend on a regular basis such as: Bible teaching seminars, special midweek praise service, anniversary of children's ministry, a seminar on how to pass the entrance exam, and the 23rd anniversary celebration of the founding of the church⁸.

I talked to one man about the difficulty of obtaining statistics about membership numbers and growth, to which he replied that the leaders probably did not want to give statistics in order that there would not be an emphasis on numbers of people, but rather on the quality of their growth. He also added, "Some people do not understand us and might use the statistics in the wrong way."

⁸ Hope of Bangkok Church Bulletin, August 2004.

3 Distinctives of the Hope of Bangkok

3.1 Clear Vision

The Hope of Bangkok began with a very clear vision of planting a church in every one of the 685 amphurs in Thailand by the year 2000. This was the vision that kept the growth going for the first few years as the church sought to plant new churches outside Bangkok, beginning in Phayao, then Chiang Mai and other major provincial towns around Thailand. Hope churches were also established in other countries such as Malaysia, Sydney, Seattle and Singapore and connected through an international network of relationships. The current vision of the Hope of Bangkok is to be “A Healthy Church” according to the church bulletin and the slogan on the walls of the worship meeting advertising an upcoming seminar.

3.2 Corporate Organisation

A high level of organisation is apparent within the structure of the Hope of Bangkok church. There is a strong emphasis on structure and system within the church. There is a clear method of evangelism, follow-up, establishing new believers in cell groups, training leaders, and lines of authority. Many Thai churches seem to be based around a family model that is often suitable to a small town context. The Hope of Bangkok seems to take a different approach by adopting a more corporate model where organisation and obedience to the appointed leadership is very important. As a result it is possible for a small group of top line leaders to make decisions that affect the future direction of the whole church. This increases the efficiency of decision-making and the ability of the leaders to set the direction and the pace of change. Thai people are generally known to be quite passive towards leadership and so this model works quite well in the Thai context. The organisational model is suitable for a big city context where a multitude of activities are offered for people to be involved in, multiple services on each Sunday, choice of various cell groups to attend in a certain area, but at the same time maintaining a clear focus on a common vision.

On the other hand, this type of leadership structure has a possible weakness. While there is great accountability for members of the church to attend meetings and to be

involved in church activities, there is little accountability by the leaders towards the members they serve. It seems that the leaders demand obedience but that the same time this model lacks transparency of the leadership towards the membership in terms of financial accountability, personal lives of the leaders and involving the membership in major decisions that are made which affect the future direction of the church. Edwin Zhener refers to Dr Kriengsak's style as the "functional equivalent of the traditional Chinese patriarch atop the family business" and compares the bureaucracy of the church to that of "a large-scale Chinese organisation where financial matters are handled through a staff function where the details can be kept privately among a few individuals"⁹

As a result it is difficult for members to express frustration and disappointment within the church structure and this seems to lead to a fairly high turnover of membership. It is relatively easy to find people in mainstream churches who have at one time or another been members of the Hope of Bangkok church, but have become frustrated by the high expectations, the coercive tactics used to make people perform, and the lack of power among common members to influence decisions.

Performance and activity take a high priority within the structure of the Hope of Bangkok church. This is highlighted by such practices as imposing a fine of small amounts of money on people for not attending meetings, or arriving late for meetings such as cell groups or Sunday services. It is not known whether this practice still continues or not. Each year there is also a highly professional award ceremony where awards are given to various pastors around the country for their performance in different areas. The award ceremony is titled "The Best of the Best"¹⁰. This kind of practice would make most mainstream church members very uncomfortable but seems to be normal accepted practice for the Hope of Bangkok Church where pastors are given a high profile and are judged on their results in terms of numerical growth.

⁹ Zhener E. Church "Growth and Culturally Appropriate Leadership: three examples from the Thai church", School of World mission, Cornell University, 1987

¹⁰ "The Best of the Best" VCD, Hope of Bangkok, 2003

3.3 A Unique Way of Conducting Church Services

The Pentecostal style of running a service is attractive to young people because it is lively and upbeat with big bands, expressive worship, and emotional sermons. The emphasis on miracles and healing is also a magnet for many people who are impressed by such an emphasis, and also for those who are looking to be healed of their physical illnesses. As the Hope of Bangkok church was being established in the early eighties this was a time when Pentecostal-style churches were growing all over the world. The Hope of Bangkok led the way in providing exciting worship in a contemporary format and in adopting new songs from overseas as well as providing the church with new songs written by its own members. As well as having contemporary worship, Dr Kriengsak was also able to feed his congregation through expository preaching, which is not typical of most charismatic churches. In this way he was able to bring together the most appealing aspects of both charismatic style churches and the more conservative evangelical churches. He was able to disciple people not just by preaching the Bible, but also by enabling people to put into practice what they learn. Dr. Kriengsak knew very well that people learn best by putting into action the things that they hear, and he did this to an extent that many mainline churches would not consider.

Dr Kriengsak also suited the Pentecostal style of church in his leadership style where the pastor is normally given a lot of authority and scope for ministry. Being a man of the enormous capability and intellect he was able to command the respect of those who followed him. He was a very effective preacher and was able to move those who listened to him through his passion and his commitment. As a result the church became an expression of his personality and ministry where he became the key to making things work. Nobody within the congregation would think of refusing him anything that he asked for.

3.4 Follow up

Many churches lose people because they do not adequately follow-up those who attend services and express an interest in joining the church. By implementing an effective system for follow-up, Dr Kriengsak was able to address this major problem by expecting that a visitor to the church would receive a visit within 24 hours. All

members were held accountable for the way that they follow up any prospective church members that they meet. In this way Dr Kriengsak was able to effectively involve the majority of the membership in ministry and to see the church grow quickly. Because there would be pressure placed on people to bring new members to the church, many Hope of Bangkok members would aggressively try to pursue those who were in their circles of friendship. By having a clear system and expectation of how to do follow-up, Thai church members were able to break out of their traditional shyness and embarrassment.

This system of implementing follow-up was a major cause of friction with other churches in the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand. Hope of Bangkok members would sometimes attend other mainstream churches with the goal of attracting these church members to attend the Hope of Bangkok meeting. Using this method was an effective way of attracting members who already had a Christian foundation and could provide some stability and possibly even become leaders within the Hope of Bangkok church. Often cell groups would be set up in the homes of Christians who belonged to other churches. As the cell group met in a home of a member who belonged to another church, they would gradually be drawn into the circle of the Hope of Bangkok. These kinds of methods led to an increasing number of protests from leaders of mainline churches

3.5 High level of commitment

Few Thai Christian leaders have the status, the charisma and the influence that Dr Kriengsak had over his followers. Since he himself was the man who led by example of total commitment to the work of the church over and above other priorities, he was able to demand no less from those who followed him. As the church continued to grow and the momentum built up, so did the expectations that Dr Kriengsak was able to put on those who followed him. This stands in stark contrast to the general demands of the Buddhist religion and the demands of most mainstream churches in Bangkok which makes most activities purely voluntary and with no great pressure applied to be involved. As a result Dr Kriengsak was able to break through the deadlock that most churches find in not being able to mobilise their members to a high level of commitment to church activities and outreach. By mobilising his church

members to be involved in work he was able to multiply the ministry and the effectiveness in reaching outsiders to come into the Hope of Bangkok church. Although some people were turned off by the methods used, it has obviously brought results in terms of numerical growth and is continuing to do so.

This demand for a high level of commitment also had a downside. In the case where a church member was not able to keep up the commitment to meetings and activities, the church member would feel forced to leave the church. Leaving would be viewed as a failure and when the member attended another church they might be viewed with suspicion because of their background¹¹.

4 Dr Kriengsak Today

Dr Kriengsak has currently no known connection to the Hope of Bangkok church. At present his current responsibilities are:

- “Member of the National Economic and Social Advisory Council
 - Chairman of the Education, Religion, Arts and Culture Commission
 - Vice Chairman of the Economic, Commerce and Industry Commission
- Research Professor, Regent University, Virginia, USA
- Executive Director, Institute of Future Studies for Development, Bangkok.
- Chairman, Success Group of Companies”¹²

A search for his name on the Internet showed more than 100 hits on various web pages referring to his speeches at seminars on economic growth and development. Any references that once existed linking his name with Christian activities and the Hope of Bangkok Church have been erased.¹³ He is also taking initiatives to promote understanding of the Buddhist religion and history by sponsoring a program to send Thai young people to Sri Lanka.¹⁴ There are also a references to a few comments he has made regarding the present Prime Minister of Thailand raising the question of whether he has political ambitions.

¹¹ Allan Ellard

¹² <http://www.ifd.or.th> (His full Curriculum Vitae in both English and Thai is available at this address)

¹³ Over the course of writing this paper, a number of references to Dr Kriengsak’s conversion and involvement in the Hope of Bangkok Church have been erased, such as a testimony of his conversion given at an Urbana Missions Conference in the USA.

¹⁴ http://www.dhammathai.org/e/news/m06/bnews15_4.php

5 Lessons for the Thai Church

5.1 Strong National leadership

There is no doubt that the key to the initial and explosive growth of the Hope of Bangkok church was the result of Dr Kriengsak's leadership. He was a man who had had a powerful conversion experience and had the qualities necessary to become a powerful leader in the Christian church. People respected and listened to him and through his vision he was able to lead a large number of people in a common direction. He was very influential not only with Thai people but also with many foreigners who were impressed with his character and his leadership. Because of his charisma he was able to break through the complacency that many Thai Christians show towards their faith and lead them on to a very high level of commitment and activity. He was an exceptional individual who displayed qualities that are very rare in the Thai Christian church. Although his strong leadership style caused friction and conflicts with other churches he was able to grow his church very quickly, knowing that his membership respected and supported his leadership, at least in the early years of his ministry.

5.2 Accountability of church members

Kriengsak recognised that Christians in general need to have a system of accountability and this was one of the first things that he instituted in the new Christians life. A new convert would receive immediate follow-up within 24 hours as a rule, and each member of the Hope of Bangkok church was expected to attend activities and to be involved in the vision of the church. As a result he was able to change the prominent culture of many churches in which all activities are purely voluntary and members are not expected to contribute very much to church activities. In the Thai church in general, accountability of the believer's spiritual growth through Bible reading and prayer, and being involved in evangelism or doing follow-up of new believers can be a weakness. Kriengsak was able to change these perceptions and mobilise people for Christian ministry. The most effective structure to do this in was to work through small groups where accountability and leadership training can take place and where new believers can also be given a sense of belonging to a smaller group. Instituting a system of fines for not attending meetings and by coercing

people to be involved in activities could be said to be going too far. There is a fine line between holding people accountable and coercing and manipulating people.

5.3 Commitment among the membership

Commitment to Christ means a radical change in a person's life. By expecting and demanding a strong commitment to the church, Kriengsak was able to exercise a powerful influence over the lives of new converts. Many leaders who try to do this will simply cause their church members to turn away, but because Kriengsak had so many appealing qualities he was able to draw people into a strong sense of commitment. As a result the church was able to become united and work as a coherent and corporate body under him. Those who could not accept his strong style of leadership would simply move on to somewhere where they felt more comfortable. It would have been impossible for anyone to stay on and challenge his authority until serious questions regarding his reputation became apparent.

5.4 Accountability of leadership

It seemed that the Hope of Bangkok church lacked a procedure by which the top leaders could be held accountable when they overstepped their mark and began to manipulate its church members instead of serving them. As Dr Kriengsak grew in his influence he would not hold himself accountable to anybody including his former mentors from the Waverley Christian Fellowship. This shows the importance of church leaders to always hold themselves accountable to the people that they lead. Transparency and openness in decision making and also in lifestyle and spiritual walk is essential to maintain growth and morale in the church. It is also necessary in order to maintain a good reputation with those outside of the organisation.

6 Conclusion

The Hope of Bangkok Church has grown at a faster rate than any other church in Thailand and the growth has not slowed in spite of both internal and external conflicts. The methods and the structure of the Hope of Bangkok are worth considering by the mainline churches that want to see growth in both numbers and the quality of its membership. Church leaders may well want to consider the stronger corporate model of the Hope of Bangkok Church with clear lines of authority where cell group leaders and district leaders are given authority to lead and pastor the people under their care. Young leaders with potential need to be encouraged and developed. To do this they need to be given responsibility with clear structures of accountability so that they do not become proud, or discouraged. A clear system of follow up is needed for first time visitors so that opportunities are not wasted because people who visit a church do not feel welcome and included. Church members need to be trained and given clear instructions and expectations about what their role and function is in the life of the church. The Hope of Bangkok Church illustrates that these structures and expectations can have a very strong influence on the growth of a church, and can liberate people for God's service. If church members or leaders are motivated by fear of punishment or a desire for power, then it will ultimately have a negative influence on the church. The Hope of Bangkok Church has shown a model for church growth and church planting which mainline churches would do well to study closely and learn from in the light of what God's word teaches about their practices. The challenge is finding the delicate balance of living in the light of God's grace where Christ's love compels our members to be active in the church. Church leaders need to find a good balance so that God's kingdom will be established in Thailand.

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