

Mission Journey of the Church of Christ in Thailand

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Christianity in Thailand has had a long history. The first Protestant missionaries came to Thailand over 150 years ago. These missionaries made many sacrifices, were energetic and industrious, and were dedicated to their Christian ministry. Still today, we can see many evidences and achievements of their sacrificial and dedicated hard work.

The challenges that faced the early Protestant missionaries were especially hard because of the strong Buddhist cultural and religious traditions found in Thailand. For over a thousand years the great majority of the Thai people have been Buddhists.

In spite of this prevailing Buddhist influence, the early missionaries, through God's grace and power, were able to plant the seeds of Christian faith in the hearts and minds of some Thai people. As a result of the patience and perseverance of these missionaries, these seeds have now grown and matured into a firmly established indigenous Christian community that has enabled many Thais to have the opportunity to know and serve Christ.

The American Presbyterian Mission

The foundations for the Church of Christ in Thailand were laid by missionaries from the American Presbyterian Mission. The Board of Foreign Missions of the American Presbyterian Mission assigned Rev. William P. Buell and Mrs. Seignoria Buell as the first missionaries to Thailand, which was then called Siam. They arrived in Bangkok on August 16, 1840.

The second group of missionaries consisted of Rev. Stevenson Mattoon, Mrs. Mary L. Mattoon, and Samuel Reynolds House, M.D. They arrived in Bangkok in March 1847. The third group consisted of Rev. Stephen Bush's family, arriving on April 2, 1849.

About four months after their arrival, on August 31, 1849, the First Presbyterian Church of Bangkok (Sumrae Church) was established in the district of Sumrae on the banks of the Chao Praya River. The first members consisted of Rev. Mattoon's family, Dr. House's family, and the Reverend Stephen Bush's family. Later, a Chinese woman named Ke-eng Qua-Sean became the first non-missionary member of this church. She was baptized on September 3, 1849. The first Thai member was named Nai Chuan. He was baptized in February 1860.

During the period after 1851 the ministries of the American Presbyterian Mission continued to expand. In 1852, the Mission built a new office near Wat Arunratwararam. In September 1852, a boys' school was established at the same location. Ke-eng Qua-Sean, the first Chinese convert, was their teacher.

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Four years later, the Presbyterian Mission bought additional property at Sumrae. They then moved the Mission Office and the boys' school to this new location. In 1888, Rev. John A. Eggins started a new boys' school in Thonburi. The earlier boys' school that had been near Wat Arunratwararam was now united with this new boys' school. This new combined school would later become the Bangkok Christian College. During this initial period the main purposes of the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam (Thailand) were: Evangelism (sharing the gospel with the Thai people); Education (teaching Thai young people basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills as well as English language and about the Christian faith); and Medical Care (healing and ministering to the sick among the Thai people).

The Presbytery of the Siam Mission

On 20 June 1858, Rev. Dr. Daniel McGilvary, Rev. Jonathan Wilson, and Mrs. Mary Wilkin Wilson arrived in Bangkok. Shortly afterwards, the Presbytery of the Siam Mission was founded in Bangkok. During the following years, the Presbytery of the Siam Mission had more missionaries and resources, and was able to expand its ministries into other parts of Thailand.

Although the responsibility of the Presbytery of Siam Mission was to start ministries in the central and southern regions of Thailand, most of their achievements occurred in central Thailand, especially in and around Bangkok. For example, in the field of education the Presbytery opened many well known schools for boys and girls in Bangkok. In 1874 they opened Wattana Wittayalai School for girls. Three years later the Jane Hay's Memorial School for girls was also opened. In 1890 the Bangkok Christian High School for boys was begun.

Several churches were also established. These were the Suabsampanthawong Church, established in 1904, the Wattana Church next to the Wattana Wittayalai School in 1922, and a Chinese Church (Yellow Bridge Church) at Ratchawong Road in 1932.

Outside Bangkok, the Presbytery opened a Mission Station in Phetchaburi in 1861. A few years later they established Sripimontum Church and Arunpradit School in Phetchaburi. In 1872 Christian work was begun in Ayuthtaya in the central area. In 1899 this work was expanded to Pitsanulok. In 1900 work was begun in Nakorn-Sritummarat in the south, and in 1910 this work was expanded to Trang.

In 1867, at the General Meeting of the Presbytery of Siam, Nai Klai was appointed to be the first Thai Christian lay preacher.

The Presbytery of Lao Mission

At that time, the people living in northeastern and northern Thailand were called the "Lao". There were some important differences between those living in the central region (Siam) and those living in the north (Lao). These differences included cultural and political history, everyday customs, and languages. Chiang Mai and many other cities in the North of Thailand had been independent states before being taken over by Siam.

In December 1860 the Rev. Dr. Daniel McGilvary met the then governor of Chiang Mai, Chao Kawirorot, and his family in Bangkok. They were interested in the missionaries' activities and in the new western technologies that they were introducing into the country. McGilvary immediately saw an opportunity to evangelize and spread the gospel among the Lao people.

In 1867 Rev. Dr. Daniel McGilvary started the first Christian mission in northern Thailand in the city of Chiang Mai. The new Christian work in the north of Thailand was called the "Lao Mission". After only a short time, the first northern Thai converted and became a Christian. His name was Nai Nan Inta, and he was baptized on January 3, 1869. Later on in April 1875, he was elected as an Elder in the Chiang Mai church.

Almost everywhere in the world where the gospel has been preached, Christians have been the object of persecution. Thailand is no exception. In Northern Thailand, Noi Sunya (Suriya) and Nan Chai, two early converts to the Christian faith, lost their lives as a direct consequence of their conversion to Christianity. On Tuesday morning, September 14, 1869 the two martyrs were executed by order of the ruler of Chiang Mai.

The reason given by the ruler for the execution was the refusal of the two new Christians, who were in his employ, to work on the Sabbath. They were charged with disobedience and sentenced to be beaten to death because of their refusal to do the ruler's work. Actually, the ruler of Chiang-Mai was under increasing political and social pressures, and he blamed the Christians' presence for his difficulties in ruling. So, he had decided to punish these two Christians as a way to discourage others. Later, challenged publicly by Rev. Dr. McGilvary, Prince Kawilrot openly acknowledged that the only reason the two men had been killed was because they were Christians.

In July 1880 a new church was established in the district of Sarapee by Dr. McGilvary. The new church was named the Bethlehem Church. On Christmas Day, December 25, 1880, another new church was started in the Doisaket District. This new church was called the Mae Dok Deang Church. In 1889 a Theological Training Center was opened in Chiang Mai. This center would eventually evolve into what is today the McGilvary College of Divinity at Payap University.

In 1875 Mrs. Sophie McGilvary, the wife of Daniel McGilvary, started to teach Thai girls in her home in Chiang Mai. Later, Miss Mary Campbell and Miss Edna Cole jointly founded a girls' school in the city. They developed the curriculum for the school and supervised its operation. This school later became known as Dara Academy. A few years later, in 1888, a school for boys was opened under the direction of Rev. David G. Collins. This school would later be known as the Prince Royal's College.

In 1885, the Presbytery of Laos Mission expanded its ministries to Lampang. In 1891 the Mission started two girls' schools, which were later to be known as Kennett McKeane School and Witchanaree School. In 1896 a mission hospital, later to be known as Vansanwood Hospital, was opened by the Mission. In 1891, the Mission expanded to Lamphun. There they were able to establish three churches. These three churches were the Bethel Church, the Wang moon Church, and the Lamphun Church.

In 1893 the Mission expanded its ministries to Phrae. In 1914 the Ban Papeung Church in Phrae was begun, and later churches were established at both Ban Dan and Ban Houay Rai. By 1897 the Mission had expanded its work to Chiang Rai. In 1910 Dr. William A. Bricks, M.D., began to give medical care to the people of Chiang Rai. He soon opened a mission hospital that would later be called Overbrook Hospital.

In 1887 Dr. A. M. Cary, M.D., started a temporary hospital to care for those afflicted with leprosy at Ban Pakouy Village near the city of Chiang Mai. A few years later in 1890 Dr. James W. McKean took over the management of this hospital. McKean then opened a permanent hospital as a part of the Mission Station. This facility was later named the McKean Hospital. The medical care given by this hospital was one of the most important ministries that attracted people to convert to Christianity.

In 1892 while Reverend Daniel McGilvary was on an elephant ride with his daughter Cornelia, he met a group of Lahu tribal people who lived near Wiang Papao. (Travel by elephant was the most convenient way to travel in northern Thailand at that time.) The Lahu were interested in knowing about the Christian faith, and McGilvary taught them the word of God. They converted to Christianity. The Lahu Christians then built a chapel in one of their villages, and they continued to come together to worship there on Sundays.

Reflection and Recommendation

On the basis of this case study, I would now like to offer the following recommendations and reflection.

Over the years the Thai Church has encountered a lot of problems. Until today the Thai church sometimes needs help from abroad and is not always ready to take complete responsibility for all its ministries. Nonetheless, today, Thai Christians are responsible for their own churches' ministries without having to depend on resources or financial support from foreign countries.

In the past it was always taken for granted that after Thai churches were established, the Thai members of the new congregations would be responsible for their church's ministries. The missionaries who had established the new church always stayed at the Mission Station. So, churches were not often visited by missionaries. As a result, the administration of many congregations was less than ideal.

Also, the schools, hospitals, and other ministerial organizations established by the missionaries continued to require much attention and many resources in order to operate properly at a high level of efficiency. Once the Thai church was established as an independent entity, the leadership and responsibility for these institutions and their work passed from the missionaries to the local Thai Christians. Often they were initially unable to meet the challenge of continuing the often excellent work done by the missionaries. As a result, the administration of many of the Christian institutions was also less than ideal.

Starting in 1895 the Board of Foreign Missions of the American Presbyterian Mission tried to develop the idea that the Thai Christians should support their own church ministries by

themselves. The Board issued methods and guidelines for missionary and local churches to practice. However, due to lack of training, often the churches could not follow these methods and guidelines.

Early missionary reports indicated that Thai pastors, elders, deacons and church members often could not perform their ministries by themselves. They did not understand how to administer church affairs or even how to lead the meetings. They needed training to be effective as evangelists, pastors, preachers, and church leaders.

In 1893 the American Presbyterian Mission Board expanded on the "Nevius Plan" into the Thai Church. But later in 1895 there were reports of ineffectiveness in local churches. This was a result of local churches not understanding the role of a pastor sent to the church. Also, they did not understand why they had to pay his salary. Some church members refused to meet their financial obligations and did not contribute to paying the salary of their pastors. So the plan did not really work.

Some missionaries believed that in Thai culture, the Elder system was appropriate. They believed that the idea that local churches should have their own pastors came from the missionaries themselves rather than from the desires and needs of the Thai church members. Therefore, the missionaries tended to leave the responsibility for the local churches in the hands of the local lay members, and those churches that had no pastors continued to use the laity to preach and to perform the various ministries of the church.

Most missionaries believed that Thai culture was a dark culture, depending on the idolatrous religion and that Thai people needed to be converted to Christianity. Therefore, missionaries should be sensitive to religions and cultural plurality in Thailand.

The main purposes of the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam (Thailand) were: Evangelism (sharing the gospel with the Thai people); Education (teaching Thai young people basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills as well as English language and about the Christian faith); Medical Care (healing and ministering to the sick among the Thai people). Jesus' mission was a holistic mission. Missionaries should attend to the total needs of the people rather than only for evangelism (spiritual salvation), education and medical care.

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