

Globalization and Ministry with the Karen

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In my understanding, globalization means making the whole world over into one place. It means unifying the world. The reason I say this is because of the present condition of the world as reflected in the news, which is a world suffering under the oppression of one global system. Just as globalization has had a tremendous impact on our world today, so too have we Karen, as a local people, experienced that impact a great deal. Still, we can agree that globalization has both a positive and a negative effect on our lives. I would like to invite you to look at both the positive and negative consequences of globalization on the Karen and how we carry out ministry with the Karen.

What Globalization Means for Me

On the one hand, there are many advantages to globalization. We Karen live mostly in the mountains and hill regions of Burma and Thailand as an isolated and poor people. Because of globalization, we have the opportunity to communicate with other people and to improve our lives, thinking, and understanding. Trips, for example, that used to take us three or five days walking now take only three to five hours driving. So, it is much easier for us to visit each other and keep up our relationships with each other and encourage each other. Our churches can communicate with each other more easily since we no longer have to walk everywhere as we had to do before.

Because globalization makes transportation easier, we local people have opportunities to go out, and at the same time people from the outside can always come to meet us. In the same way, as transportation has improved we also have more conveniences, especially electricity. This means that in many ways life in the mountains and hills has become easier. With electricity, moreover, comes television, videos, and the telephone. Through television, mountain people have a chance to know more about what is happening in the world, the world's situation. We can learn many new things, have new ideas, and improve some parts of our lives.

On the other hand, we can see that there are many negative consequences of globalization as well. When we have so many conveniences, some of us—including our young people—become lazy. Everything is too easy, too convenient for them. They do not use their strongest qualities, their strength, energy, and intelligence. They no longer think about doing things for themselves. Most Karen young people today do not know how to use Karen materials and tools that are still commonly used by our older people. More than this, we have seen that most Karen people in northern Thailand today cannot read and write their own language very well. Because of globalization, the Karen people have more relationships with others and more education. They have to deal with many other cultures. This leads them to imitate others and to forget who they are as Karen. Some even look down on their own culture and traditions.

Especially in our Karen churches in Thailand today, we have to face these problems, and we urgently need to find ways to revive and awaken the consciousness of our church members. If we look at how the Karen are living in other countries, especially in Burma, we see how much they are struggling to maintain our culture and traditions. They try in every way possible and have committed themselves to both maintaining Karen culture and improving it.

So, when I look at the situation we Karen face here in Thailand, I feel very sad and deeply concerned. I don't mean that when we commit ourselves to maintaining and improving our own culture we have to look

down on or hate the cultures of others. We should show respect for other people's cultures and traditions and even be willing to use them. But, at the same time, we must know ourselves and give value to our own culture and traditions too. We must not look down on what is ours. But, because of globalization we do look down on what is Karen. The wrong principles and the wrong values are sweeping over our Karen people today.

In fact, the Karen people have their own theology, their own understanding of God. But in this time of globalization, they have thrown that theology away and taken the theology of others as their own. When the Karen try to make the theology of other's their own, however, they lose touch with themselves and who they are. What saddens me even more deeply is that even those who come among us calling themselves Christian missionaries use our culture and people for material gain. In my home area of Musikee, personal business and money-making is in the background of a large Christian development project. It hurts me deeply to see such individuals use the poor "in the name of Jesus" to increase their own wealth and power.

Not the least of our problems as Karen Christians in today's global environment is the way Thai and global culture washes over our people and the church. The educated church leaders and members of the Karen churches in Thailand, especially, have to be careful about the influence of Thai and global culture. Because they struggle in every way for the growth and development of their churches, they sometimes will follow the blueprints for church growth of other peoples and nations until they forget themselves and lose their identity as Karen. They are very happy and proud with their success, but the result of their borrowing too much from others is that the Karen-ness of the churches is gradually lost. Thai-ness is replacing it. Such people still wear Karen dress when they go to church, but most of the church's program is in the Thai language and uses Thai forms.

Most of the Karen in Thailand today speak a mixture of Karen and Thai. They do not know or understand "pure" Karen. They think our language is so poor that we do not have suitable words for what they want to say, but that is not true. Karen is a very rich language and has many beautiful and valuable words and idioms.

Since globalization has arrived, most of the Karen try to modernize and "Thai-ize" their way of living, for example, in the styles of their homes and furnishings, the food they eat, the way they dress, and even the games they play. Speaking as a Karen, I find these things unpleasant. They do not replace the things we are losing. Originally, for example, the Karen were a people known for their hospitality, but now in the age of globalization Karen hospitality has grown dim. It is not as clearly seen as before.

When we look back on the history of the Karen, we can see clearly that originally the Karen as a tribe were an honest, righteous, faithful, and honorable people. They loved peace, silence, and the simple life, and they had no love of fighting. Why, today, do the Karen have to fight? Why are our lives a struggle? The reason it is now essential for the Karen to fight is because they are oppressed so much that they are now forced to do things they do not want to do. When I visit my Karen brothers and sisters in the refugee camps in Mae La District on the Burma border and see and hear about their actual situation, it is so painful for me that I cannot stop my tears from flowing. It is painful for me and for all Karens.

I would like to share with you a poem written by a Karen refugee brother, the Rev. Dr. Simon, that reflects the real conditions of the refugees. This is his living testimony:

*They call us a displaced people,
But praise God; we are not misplaced.
They say they see no hope for our future,
But praise God; our future is as bright as the promise of God.
They see they say the life of our people is misery,
But praise God; our life is a mystery.*

*For what they say is what they see,
And what they see is temporal.
But ours is the eternal,
All because we put ourselves,
In the hands of God we trust.*

My Ministry in the Age of Globalization

As I am a poor Karen woman—poor in education, in strength, in wealth, in quality—how can I help my people, who experience globalization as if it were a mountainous wave? Other than pray to God to rescue them, sometimes it seems that I can do nothing. But, I can try to do even a little, and the things I'm doing include the following:

Firstly, I have been doing research in the history of the Karen churches in northern Thailand. In our history, we rediscover who we are, and I can tell you that the Karen churches of Thailand are hungry to know their past. But, I don't do this research just by myself. I am trying to encourage church leaders and members to do their own research so that they may come to know their past for themselves—so they can keep the good and valuable things, see their own needs and weaknesses and correct them, and so they can find out for themselves ways to free themselves from the oppression they face today.

Secondly, I have worked with a local committee in my own church to arrange five-day "church & culture" camps held during the October holidays. The purpose of these camps, attended by children and young people, is to awaken the consciousness of Karen youths and children and to give attention to the revival of our culture. During these camps, we train them how to use traditional culture for their life now. We encourage them to wear traditional dress. We prohibit the use of any language except Karen. We teach them how to cook Karen food. We teach them Karen music, songs, and anthems and how to play traditional musical instruments. They learn herb lore, traditional games, and crafts such as cloth weaving and basket making. During the camp, everyone studies Karen literacy and Karen history, and it brings me real joy to see how willing and excited our children and young people are to take part in all of these activities. Last year over one hundred participated, not counting the many adults involved, and this coming October we plan to hold an even larger camp for other Karen churches from our area.

Thirdly, I have been involved in discovering a Karen Christian theology and have led two consultations with pastors and local church leaders on Karen theology. Our hope is to preserve the many beautiful traditional beliefs of the Karen and hand them on to the next generation. During these consultations, we studied Karen folklore, poetry, stories, proverbs, riddles, and oral religious traditions to see how they can contribute to our expression of the Christian faith. We have, as they say, been learning to "read the Bible with Karen eyes." The participants have shown real interest, and they have asked us to do more consultations with a larger audience. This coming November I hope to visit Karen communities in Burma that still practice the traditional Karen religion, called *moluebala*, without influence from either Buddhism or Christianity. I want to learn more from them about how we Karen have worshipped God for many, many centuries. In rediscovering Karen theology, I see that we will be able to regain our culture and theology in the churches so that a faith that is truly Christian, truly Karen may come back to life again.

These are a few of the small things I am doing for our Karen people in northern Thailand today. We are facing a "mountainous wave of globalization," and I hope and pray that these activities can help in a small way to save the Karen from the impact of globalization. I'm not sure how much they will gain from this work, but I believe it is better to do a few small things than to give up and do nothing. Thank you.