

Theological Education in Thailand: An Interview with Daniel Kim



Many times it is assumed that theological education around the globe can be done basically the same way everywhere, namely the way it is done in the West. But in many cases, a cut-and-paste approach to theological education and pastoral training isn't nearly as effective as some would like to think that it is.

To get some more insight into the nature and challenges of theological education in Asia (and Thailand in particular), I recently interviewed Daniel Kim, director of Chiang Mai Theological Seminary and a missionary church planter in Thailand with OMF International.

KD: Could you share briefly about your background, and how you came to be involved in theological education in Thailand?

DK: Korea is my physical birth place. U.S.A. is my spiritual birth place. And Thailand is my missional place. My life has been an exciting journey like the life of Daniel in the OT. I am a trilingual and multicultural person.

I was born and grew up in a Buddhist family, and as a teenager, our family immigrated to the U.S.A. When I heard and experienced the Gospel, God's divine salvation plan began in my life. I was the first Christian in our family. After eighteen years of long enduring prayers, all the members of our family in the U.S.A. came to know Christ.

After college, while working as a chemist in a company, I studied at Talbot School of Theology, wanting to study theology and preparing to return to Asia as a missionary to share the Good News with my fellow Asians. Then my family came to Thailand in 1998.

During our first term at Thailand, while mainly doing church planting, I taught a couple of classes at a small Bible college in Bangkok. I was open to teach at a theological institution someday in the future.

During our Home Assignment, Chiang Mai Theological Seminary invited us to join the teaching staff. With our theological training and pastoral experience in the U.S.A, we sensed that this invitation might be the right time for us to engage in equipping church leaders of Thailand in the theological setting.

KD: What is the vision and mission of Chiang Mai Theological Seminary (CTS) and what is your role in that?

DK: CTS' Mission is to Glorify God by equipping leaders through biblically centered education to effectively demonstrate authentic Christian living and to engage in God's work both locally and globally.

My primary role is to serve as the director of the seminary, both teaching and leading.

KD: In 2005, CTS started Mobile Seminary. What was the impetus for starting this, and how does it work?

DK: My heart has always been with local churches, envisioning to equip many lay pastors and to assist local pastors to train their own lay leaders without sending them to seminary. In reality, the majority of lay leaders cannot move to Chiang Mai to study at our seminary. Like the Great Commission, our seminary cannot just sit and wait for local churches to send their people to us. Our seminary should go to equip them where they are. This dream motivated us to launch "Mobile Seminary" which is different from typical TEE. The concept of Mobile Seminary came from Acts 19. The church in Ephesus had a training center in the church, Paul teaching church members at Tyrannus Hall for two years. So, Mobile Seminary is an idea to encourage each local church to open a Bible Training Center in her church, rather than sending them to theological institutions. Mobile Seminary is an informal training suitable for the local church to meet the need of raising up local leaders in the church.

KD: How would you compare theological education in Thailand with that in the U.S.? How is teaching in the Thai context different from teaching in the U.S.?

DK: Theological education in the U.S. is like learning through libraries, while that of Thailand is like learning on the streets. Theological education is flooded with books in the libraries. The library is the well of knowledge. Students of theological education in the U.S. gain second hand experience through people who wrote books. On the other hand, theological education in Thailand does not happen in or through libraries of books due to a couple of crucial facts. First of all, there is a severe poverty of theological books in the Thai language. Secondly, Thai do not consider the library as the source of learning. The general learning happens on the streets, meaning gaining first-hand experiences through teachers and in the arenas of real life.

Generally speaking, theological education in the U.S. tends to emphasize the academic aspect with deep and broad theologies. U.S. theological education tends to focus on the head of knowledge more than the heart of character and the hand of skills. However, theological education in Thailand focuses on the heart and the hand more than the head. Our teaching in Thailand happens outside of classes as much as in the classes, taking students outside of the seminary classrooms.

Most of the theological education [in Thailand] follows the pattern of the westernized theological education more than developing its own localized theological education.

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KD: It has been said that Thai people don't like to read. In your experience with Thai students, have you found this to be true? If yes, how do you adjust teaching methods and learning assignments to address this reality?

It is true that Thais are oral and visual more than literate. The modern education system has changed, in some degrees, Thai people to read books more than previous generations, but still reading is not their culture. Compared to students in a bachelor's degree program in Bible colleges, students in our graduate-level program are reading books more. The higher education, the higher degree of reading books.

In each class, I try to offer assignments beyond writing assignments. Group projects, group presentation, and using creative visual methods are examples of their assignments, other than just written assignments.

KD: Orality and Bible storying are big topics in missions today. What is the role of a traditional seminary education in a society where most people are preferred oral learners?

DK: I think, in the mission arena, orality and bible storytelling themselves are not the most crucial issue as is being promoted by some advocates, but the real issue is how effectively missionaries and teachers use orality and bible storytelling. They appear to be another methodology that mission practioners promote. Although one can tell a Bible story very accurately to local people, the listeners might have no understanding about the culture of the Bible. Then it's ineffective. People can misunderstand or cannot understand the story at all.

Having said that, I recognize that most Thai people love to listen stories. CTS is offering seminars to train students to know how to tell Bible stories in their cultural context.

KD: What has been your greatest challenge in teaching students at CTS?

DK: Jesus prepared thirty years of his private life for three years of public life. CTS can only have two to three years of students' lives to effectively equip them and then we unrealistically hope that they can serve the church effectively for next thirty years. This is the greatest dilemma we are facing. We tend to hurry in equipping God's workers, by teaching so much so fast within three years. They cannot even digest the materials fully.

KD: What advice would you give to a prospective missionary who is interested in theological education in Thailand?

DK: Since the seminary is the place of equipping local church pastors, any prospective missionary should have the following preparation:

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1. Abundant local church ministry experience.
2. Cultural experiences as much as possible- learning to be de-westernized (Americanized) to become more Biblicalized for the purpose of being Thainized.
3. Special quality of character – patience, flexibility and discernment to understand Thai people, Thai ways and Thai language.

KD: What advice would you give to a pastor or seminary professor from the West who comes to Thailand to teach a short-term Bible course?

DK: I personally don't favor at all teaching through translators. Having said that, if a westerner has an opportunity to teach in Thailand, please consider the following. The character of the person who teaches a Bible course is more important than the content of the course. Thai people learn from people, not necessarily from the content. Building the trust-bond relationship with students is most important in class and outside of class. Any Westerners who desire to teach in Thailand for a short course should be intentionally willing to open their life and experiences to students in correlation with the content of their teaching. People are touched by the life of people, not the content of their teaching.

When they teach, they should try to balance between the depth of the academic and the simplicity of application. Use questions in the cultural context to assist students to think and understand the content. Make each sentence short so it would be easy to translate. Avoid using American jargon. Be sensitive to the host culture.

KD: Thank you so much for your time, and may the Lord bless you as your minister in Thailand at Chiang Mai Theological Seminary.

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