

HeRD #3 - Overview Of Northern Thai Church History

A comment from one of you reminds me that most of you don't have an orientation in northern Thai church history. It's hard to put these little vignettes into perspective. So, here's a quick overview.

The story began in April 1867 when the Rev. Daniel McGilvary and Sophia Bradley McGilvary arrived in Chiang Mai. C'Mai was the distant chief city of Siam's northern dependencies. The Wilson family joined them a year later, and by Sept. 1869 the "North Laos Mission" had 7 converts. In that month, C'Mai's ruling prince ordered the execution of several of the converts and two were executed. This event set church life back seriously for a decade or so. In 1885 the mission founded its second station in Lampang. The late 1880s and early 1890s were a period of expansion and hope. By 1897 the mission had five stations and one sub-station spread across northern Thailand. Its institutional base also grew to include boarding schools and hospitals in all of the stations as well as a mission press in C'Mai. Converts were scattered across the region. In 1920 there were 37 churches and 6,649 communicant members. The North Laos Mission was eventually renamed the North Siam Mission, and in 1921 it united with its sister mission in south and central Siam to become the American Presbyterian Mission (APM).

Within its own context, the story of the northern Thai church is significant in a number of ways. From a Christian perspective, it is the story of expanding the church into a whole new cultural region, and not a small one at that. From a Thai perspective, both the missionaries and the converts played an important role in social change and modernization. From a personal perspective, this story is an endlessly fascinating one.