

HeRD #250 - Chiang Saen Church

One of the most interesting figures in northern Thai church history is Nan Suwan, one of the key figures in the founding of the Mae Dok Daeng Church. He left the monkhood when his father converted in the mid 1870s, and quickly showed great promise to become an important leader in the northern Thai church. He was, however, descended from inhabitants of the city of Chiang Saen. Located on modern Thailand's northern border, Chiang Saen in the 1870s had been abandoned for many decades, and the central Thai government feared it would lose control of the old city's region if it left Chiang Saen in that condition. In 1878 it ordered the descendants of the city to return to it. At first, Nan Suwan planned to buy himself and his family off, but the missionaries persuaded him that this was a fine opportunity to spread Christianity into an entirely new region of the North. He agreed in spite of the dangers of disease that killed off many of those resettling in Chiang Saen.

The missionaries sent him off with some quinine, which was a highly effective medicine in those days, and Nan Suwan soon acquired a reputation as a doctor. His medical efforts plus his own personality soon brought in a number of converts. Holt Hallett, in his book, *A THOUSAND MILES ON AN ELEPHANT IN THE SHAN STATES* (1890), gives us the following description of Nan Suwan: "Broad-minded, hospitable, kindly, and thoroughly upright, there could have been no better selection. He became the real father of the Chieng Sen church. His family was a light in the city. His youngest daughter, Kui Keo, one of Mrs. McGilvary's first pupils, taught most of the early Christians there to read the Scriptures in Siamese. The elder himself became a great favourite with the governor, who used to say that the fact of his being governor, and, therefore, under authority, alone prevented him from uniting with the church." (p. 223). The Chiang Saen Church later moved over into what is today Burma, and it long enjoyed unusually competent leadership. It remains a relatively large and active church today and is, I believe, the only CCT church located in Burma.

Sources: McGilvary, *Half Century*, 202-203; and Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, 223.