

# Transformation in context - combining church and local development.

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**The work of the Center for Church Planting and Church Growth (CCPCG) and the Issaan Development Foundation (IDF) in North East Thailand.**

This case study looks at how both christian life and social action can be set in the context of the local culture. It shows how they can work together to make the gospel relevant to specific communities. It illustrates how one organisation has attempted live in a relevant way, to see Christ in the local culture and to have "dialogue with encounter".

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## Background

Thailand has done much to improve its economy over the last 30 years. Like many of the Asian tigers it has tremendous pockets of poverty. The NE Thailand remains a predominantly agricultural society with a minority and to a certain extent marginalised people. Approximately 40% of all Thai families live in the north east and 65% of these are below the poverty line. In 1977 the Center for Church Planting and Church Growth (CCPCG) was started. Its original purpose was to plant "**contextualised dynamic equivalent**" churches in NE Thailand. Since that time it has grown to give birth to over 32 "mother" churches and 165 "daughter" churches by 1990, and started the Issaan Development Foundation (IDF). IDF was created to address the social, economic and physical needs of the people.

## The Challenge

## ***Holistic ministry***

The challenge for CCPCG and IDF has been to create a framework where the Gospel is integrated into all aspects of ministry. Jim Gustafson would suggest that "traditionally speaking, the World Mission of the Church has been a rather narrowly defined 'mission'. For the most part, it has focused the 'spiritual' needs of man as opposed to the 'social' needs. It has dealt with the salvation of the soul with minimal concern for the salvation of the body. When it has addressed the physical, social, or economic needs of humanity, it has done so in what is basically a segregated way, setting up organizations to deal with these needs separately. The 'missions' do the 'real' missionary work (Spiritual) and the relief and development organizations do the socio-economic work (Secular). The church today does seem to be increasingly interested in the socio-economic needs of man. Relief and development organisations are many and growing. The issue of the relationship of evangelism to socio-economic ministries is the basis of many church discussions."

**The challenge for Jim and his co-workers has been to try to bring together all the elements of a holistic ministry and present a unified work based on and within the church.** For the past 20 years the team have struggled with the implications of bringing theology and practice closer together.

### ***Ministry in the context of the local culture.***

In addition to the segregation of 'spiritual' and 'socio-economic' needs, Jim suggests that World Mission also faces another great challenge. After years of missionary work the gospel remains culturally isolated (or segregated) from Thai society. To become aligned with Christ is to leave behind the many social contacts of Thai culture. Jim and his team are not alone in these observations.

In 'Poles Apart' (John Davies, OMF 1993), John Davies suggests that we still 'colonise' the Third World churches by sending books and hymns, written from a Western theology. John argues that this perpetuation of a Western view is often irrelevant to other cultures. For instance, much Westernised Christian evangelistic literature is focused on proving that a God exists, that there is a supernatural. Rural Thai's already know this. Yet very few books deal with questions that Thai's do ask - about reincarnation, ancestor veneration, spirit possession.

"Even the lovely ceremony of Thai wedding has not been Christianised into the church. There are other Thai customs that are very dear to Thai people, e.g. Loi Krathong (floating banana leaf boats), Songkran (New Year sprinkling of water), Sukhwan (summoning the spirit essence). There is no evidence of any missionaries attempt to seek their meanings in their depth so as to adopt them for indigenizing Christianity. The forms of worship, music, liturgy, were almost wholly Western" So wrote a mission evaluation in 1971.

**So a further challenge for the CCPCG and IDF has been to create a framework where the Gospel is integrated into Thai culture.** This involves two elements, the presentation of the gospel to the unbeliever in an intelligible way, and the celebration of new life in Christ in ways that fit the local culture.

### ***Dynamic Ministry***

Finally, the church in Thailand also faces the challenge of a changing society. The social and economic needs of the people have to be met by new and innovative ways. This is particularly true for the minority tribes who remain marginalised at the edge of society. CCPCG and IDF had to create a framework where the Gospel remained ever relevant as Thailand changed. In the 20 years of the ministry, Thailand has changed from a developing country to a newly industrialised one. The external influences on young people and on the villages have dramatically changed. **The church needs to be dynamic to change with the times involving both a changing spiritual and socio-economic ministry.**

## **Features of the Programme**

Center for Church Planting and Church Growth (CCPCG) is focused on the areas directly related to the churches faith and practice including church planting, faith (theology) and culture (music, local instruments, songs and dance). The Issaan Development Foundation (IDF) is concerned with enabling the local church in the social, economic and physical areas.

The Integrated Holistic Development ministry started with the establishment, in 1977, of the Center for Church Planting and Church Growth in N.E.Thailand. It's original purpose was to plant 'contextualized dynamic equivalent' churches (we will explore this phrase throughout the case study) in N.E.Thailand, the poverty belt of Thailand. Since that time, it has given birth to over 100 churches and has started the Issaan Development Foundation (IDF) to deal with the socio-economic needs of the people of N.E.Thailand. Today the Center and the Foundation are pioneering in the areas of the contextualization of the Gospel (theology, music, dance, & drama), the integration of social and spiritual ministry, the development of local eco-systems or integrated farming systems, among other things. The basic goal of the Center and Foundation is to establish groups of people in the process of "being transformed" (churches who are integrated with their society, culture, and nature and are actively pursuing the task of holistic development in their own communities).

Both the Center and the Foundation are operated by the same staff. The Center focuses on the more directly church related ministries, such as Church Planting, Church Enablement, Music, Song, and Dance. The Foundation is concerned with the social and economic ministries to the church, such as pig banks, rice banks, ecosystem co-ops, community health, and welfare. The Foundation exists to give

an official organization recognized by the Thai government, which is capable of owning land and legally representing those with legal problems. It should be noted that there are 2 organizations set up out of legal necessity. It is not possible to incorporate the spiritual work into the Foundation and be accepted by the government. In fact both the Center and the Foundation are integrated in the sense that the same goals, policies, and people govern both organizations. Functionally they are two arms of the same body.

An important part of the Foundation is the Udon Patina-Farm. It was a 30 acre integrated farm system which integrates rice mill, fish, pigs, ducks, chickens, trees, and vegetables. Recently, 1997, it has moved to become a 100 acre holding further from the town. The farm exists for a number of very crucial reasons. It is the economic support base for all expenses of the Center & Foundation. It is the basic resource center for support, materials, and technology for all socio-economic development projects. It is the basic model for all eco-system cooperative projects done at the village level. It is an agricultural implementation center. Nothing is introduced at the village level before being tested at the Farm first.

The Center and Foundation (including the farm) work together in an integrated way to establish new communities of "being transformed" people in N.E.Thai society, and to help them grow in a new relationship with God, man, and nature, as well as to develop a dynamic new lifestyle in response to God's Grace.

## **Key strategy**

Integrated Holistic Development - Development in that it seeks to transform people from what they are to what they are meant to be in Christ. Holistic in the sense that it deals with the whole person and all areas of life. Integrated in that all aspects of the ministry are tied together and could not exist or function independently.

## **Method of working**

The basic working method of the programme is grounded in three basic premises.

1) Only "being transformed" people can do comprehensive and consistent Integrated Holistic Development. 2) The best "being transformed" people to do Integrated Holistic Development in society, are local people. (The best innovators are those within a community.) 3) "Being transformed" people are only being transformed as they experience the process of Integrated Holistic Development first themselves.

These premises translate into a number of definable steps that need to be worked through. There is never a sense in which any one of the steps is completed. Each of the steps is part of a vibrant and vital mix. These are not theoretical points, but

rather practical points which are the essential ingredients of the organizational lifestyle in Udon. They include:-

### ***Know the message of the Gospel.***

Transformation is based on a belief in the renewal of the world from an outside force i.e. God in Jesus Christ. The work of transformation is God's work from start to finish. It is necessary to reject the concept of a superficial doctrine of progress through human achievement. That concept is bankrupt from the start (e.g. the idea that man is basically good and if we teach and fund him, he will progress). The gospel contains the concept that man is basically weak and incapable of working for the good of others and of natural creation. His values contrast with those of God. His lifestyle which springs from those self-centric values, denies the greatness of God and the importance of others and the natural creation. Only the act of God in Jesus Christ can change man and turn him right side up. God has done in Jesus Christ what man can't do for himself. In Jesus, God has fulfilled the demands of the law for man. In Jesus, God has paid the debt man has accrued through sin (death). In Jesus, God has provided power for new life (power for value system change).

Transformation is concerned with the confrontation of man's value system with the 'new' value system of God. It is concerned with the transformation which occurs in the mindset of man due to a power encounter with the value system of God. It is concerned with the new lifestyle which results from a transformation of the mindset of man. It is concerned with the results of this process of transformation for the larger community of mankind and the natural creation of the world.

The problem faced by the World Mission of the Church today is that the above message is the hardest of all concepts to believe and act on. There is a basic "false assumption" today that all Christians understand and teach the essence of the Gospel of Grace in Jesus Christ. Over the past 14 years in Thailand I have been experiencing the fact that this just is not true! There is a definite tendency to 'fudge' away from the essence of God's Grace in Jesus Christ. Again and again I have been told that the concept of God doing everything for man by His Grace is too easy or that it opens Christians up to freedom to sin. I have been told that the concept of God's Grace does not make people 'responsible'. Law and man's efforts to be good and acceptable to God are a powerful force in the value system of the Church of Jesus Christ. I have had national evangelical leaders from throughout countries in Asia tell me that Law, not Grace, was the basis of their church's belief and value system! The overriding concern of Thai Christian subculture is morality, and the message is LAW. If God's Grace is mentioned, it is fleetingly, as the focus of this non-Biblical Christian subculture is the Law, and the total efforts are aimed at making people be good. There is no way man can be saved by obedience to the law (Romans 3:20). The basic role of the law is to drive man to despair and total dependence on the Grace of God which is God's power for salvation and transformation. It is not enough to be Christian. Religion is powerless to help man,

as its basic appeal is to man's self-efforts at being morally acceptable to God, which is categorically impossible. The Gospel message is that there is no one good but God (Luke 18:19). This goodness (righteousness) of God is free as a gift to all who believe and accept it (Eph. 2:8-9). This goodness of God is the power of God (Rom. 1:16-17) which will utterly transform man and enable him to become what God originally planned him to be. This is the ultimate goal of transformation or Integrated Holistic Development and the only way to realizing it is through the Gospel of Grace in Jesus Christ. Jim Gustafson 1985

### ***Know the people and the local culture***

It is now commonly accepted that before any transformation or development intervention occurs the external agency should invest time in getting to know the situation. There is much discussion among those involved in development about the tools for this. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a generic term for many of these tools. However, it is not enough just to know what a person says about their situation. CCPCG and IDF believe that knowing what a person means by what he says, is just as or even more crucial than documenting the mere words that he says. It is very possible to understand the Thai language and yet not understand the mindset of a Thai or the values of a Thai.

It is essential to know the mindset and values of people in order to begin where they are! It is important to know the people and local values and mindsets in order to know what must be confronted and transformed by the power of God. It is important to know the people and local culture and mindsets in order to evaluate the progress of transformation in the minds and attitudes of the people.

Jim gives an example from a gospel context:-

Well meaning Christians may wish to help Thai admit they are sinners. They sometimes forget that the Thai are part of a shame culture. It is true that the Thai is on the one hand locked into a legalistic religious system of gaining merit by not sinning. But at the same time he or she knows that any admittance of sin would bring loss of face and eyes in society. The question is how to get the Thai to sense their bankruptcy and need of the help that only God can give. Our answer, after much study both of the Word and of the Thai value system, is to redefine sin. Instead of accepting (as do the above traditional Christians) that sin is doing bad things (which in itself is a very inadequate definition of sin), we have determined that sin is egocentrism and the selfish nature of man. Since a basic value of Thai culture is "I am the source of dependence for I myself" and two corollaries are, "to each his own" and "I can't see anyone but myself as good", this definition of sin hits home. We have found people respond quite positively. Most Thai will admit to "hen kae tua" (look out only for self). When they have been helped to think through the implications of that value system, their question is generally "What can I do?".

The answer is the Gospel - only God can do anything to help you and He has in Jesus Christ.

At a socio-economic level, similar understanding is required. Micro credit has been promoted throughout the world. To some, the 'Grameen Bank' method has become a gospel to spread throughout the poor communities. The 'Grameen' system works on the co-operation of people and their co-sense of responsibility. Finance is lent to individuals although accountability is on a group basis. But in the N.E.Thai culture, as we have said above, "hen kae tua" (look out only for self). How then can co-operative action work? The answer lies in encountering the values of N.E.Thai society with alternative values.

### ***Put the message of the gospel in context***

Putting the gospel into the forms and expressions of the local culture has one basic purpose. To communicate in ways that can be understood. We have said before that communication is what is "heard", not what is "said".

The result of this immersion in local culture means that the CCPCG and IDF program uses the Lao language (heart language of the N.E.), hymns are N.E.Thai tunes with Scripture, ceremonies are N.E.Thai ceremonies impregnated with the Gospel, and liturgy is drawn from the N.E.Thai social context; all used to express glory to God. People dance in worship services to express glory to God. There is no preaching, but rather a discussion centered on the Word and led by elders asking questions on the passage. There are no church buildings, as people meet in houses. They have adopted many of the N.E.traditions into the lifestyle of the Church, such as tying strings in love and blessing. **This idea of "contextualisation" (putting things in context of the local culture) is discussed in more detail below in the Discussion section.**

### ***Encounter the value system of the local culture with that of the gospel***

To do this one must know the values of the Gospel, and one must understand the values of the local culture. Some insights can be gained by reading books, looking at the works of foreign researchers (anthropologists and sociologists), considering studies by nationals and by personal observation and discussion with local people. However for these insights to be an encounter for the local people, they themselves must identify the points of conflict and discuss and act upon the contrasts. To this end, the churches limit preaching to a minimum since they have found it has little value in confrontation between values. "Interactive" teaching (based on question and discussion) is used instead. Through this medium they have identified some of the following conflicts.:-

<u>N.E.Thai Values</u>	<u>Biblical Values</u>
Basic focus is self. (Hen kae tua yak pen yai.) Concern is to help self alone: to look out for one's own good is supported by society and religion.	Basic focus is God and others. Concern is to help others.
Personal ease and convenience. (Kwam saduak suan tua.) If not easy or convenient then not do it.	Service oriented Concern: how can I help others?
To each his own(Tua krai tua man.) I do my thing and you do yours	Community oriented Cooperation within the group is a key value.
Don't like to see others as good. (Kee echa - hen ko eun mai dai.) Jealousy predominates.	Love others as love self.
Dishonesty in relations. (Nah wai lung bk; Nam koon wai nail Nam sai wai nok). Poor communication (don't say what they think.)	Honesty in all relation ships. Let yes be yes and no be no.
Power for self is ultimate goal (Kaw hai pen chaew pen nai.) Status and position: other serve you.	Weakness for self is goal of Christian - creates dependence on God. In our weakness, God's strength.
Self is source of dependence. (Tua eng pen tee peung kong tua eng).	God is only true source of dependence Man is weak and can't be depended upon
Don't take responsibility easily (Mai aew ching aow chund.) Like fun, not work	Faithful in responsibility. Goal is faithfulness, not personal ease
Do good, get good; do bad, get bad.	No one can do good enough to get good.
Love face and name in society.	Give God glory in society.
To each according to merit (Works oriented)	To each according to need (Grace oriented)

***Establish 'dynamic equivalent' churches in the local culture***

A 'dynamic equivalence' church is one which remains an integral part of its local culture and community taking part in the local community life, uses local language

and cultural forms and expressions, integrated with the community. The church is experiencing transformation of its old value system and lives out the lifestyle of the new values. The program uses the phrase ‘dynamic equivalence’ because they are equivalent in belief and practice to all churches which are based on the Gods will but are formally different from churches in other cultures.

### ***Establish socio-economic projects in dynamic equivalence churches***

This focus on church stems from two factors. One is a belief that the church alone is the focal point of all of CCPCG and IDF socio-economic development work. There are several reasons for this. CCPCG and IDF believe it is impossible to do successful socio-economic work with non-Christians. N.E.Thai value systems make it ultimately impossible to work with them to a successful end. However, working with the local church as a resource center for Integrated Holistic Development in the local community will mean that positive action in the local community will occur at a more rapid pace and in a more comprehensive way.

The second factor is a practical reason. CCPCG and IDF do not have the materials, facilities or management capability to work with anyone else but the church. Churches are growing so rapidly that it is hard to keep up with the socio-economic development needs of church groups.

The socio-economic projects have an important role in the life of the church. Examples of this role are:-

- The socio-economic development projects enable the local church members to raise their standard of living. This, however, is not an end in itself, but rather a means to the end of good stewardship. One of the most difficult things for the Christian church to do in N.E.Thailand, traditionally, was to get churches to tithe. In Integrated Holistic Development, however, a person receives (by God's Grace) and then is encouraged to give in a response of gratitude to God.
- In all the socio-economic projects, the church has one share (equal to one family) of all profits. The tithe and gifts of the members are over and above this share. For example, in the pig bank project, each member has 2 pigs. The church also has 2 pigs. These funds are used by the members to support the expenses of the local church (helping sick and poor, travel to meetings and seminars, or supporting elders/pastors in the future if they choose to do so).
- The socio-economic development projects are also ‘labs’ for spiritual development. They provide the context in which the members of the local church members can grow spiritually. All of the development projects are cooperatives (communally oriented). They each require people to work

together and share the work and the profits. For N.E.Thai who very rarely cooperate, this is a very difficult system.

- The socio-economic projects become resource centers for the spontaneous expansion of the church into society. The church itself can reach out and touch its community in the Spirit of Jesus. The development projects provide the local church with a tangible way to show the agape love of Jesus Christ, which is the lifestyle of the "being transformed" church (based on the new value system of the Gospel). To tell someone that God loves him, and to be unable to meet his felt needs, appears to be a bit ridiculous in the eyes of those who are scraping the bottom and have nothing.

The socio-economic development projects strive to help the members understand the natural creation (which they have raped all of their lives) and their relationship to it and

responsibility for it. CCPCG and IDF use an eco-system approach to doing integrated farming. It provides an efficient and productive integrated farming system.

Example - The 'Rice Bank' project. Basic resource the rice mill. The rice mill operates as a business. Paddy is bought in and milled for a profit. The profits from the rice mill fund the rice bank program. The rice bank program provides milled rice for loan to needy farmers. Loans (of rice) are given out to those meeting program conditions over a period from around May to December each year. This is a crucial period for farmers who have paid back exorbitant loans (400-500% interest) to local loan sharks in January (following harvest) and run out of rice to eat around May each year.

The rice bank supplies the farmers basic rice needs over total period of need. Rice mill "loans" the farmers milled rice at the rate of 15 kilos an adult and 10 kilos a child per month. The farmers are required to pay back these loans in "paddy" in January (during harvest). 150 kilos paddy per 100 kilos of milled borrowed. (Paddy mills out to about 65% milled rice.) A second function of the rice bank is to sell milled rice to needy farmers at wholesale prices (usually 30% or more below market prices) on a one month credit basis. This aspect of the rice bank program caters to the "hired labor" villager who has no land.

IDF also works with pig banks, fish banks and eco-system co-operatives, developing new ideas as appropriate.

***Enable the church to do integrated holistic development in its own community***

At this point the church has the potential of moving out into its community to do Integrated Holistic Development at the local level. It has become what CCPCG and

IDF call a 'resource center' for Integrated Holistic Development. The end result of Integrated Holistic Development is the spontaneous movement of the church out into its community to do transformation by the Grace of God.

## **Hindrances to the program**

Criticism by other churches - the CCPCG has been accused of compromising the gospel, of syncretism (mixing Christianity with the local religion), and even by some people of heresy. "The response on the part of the traditional Thai church has been everything from dismay to disbelief. We have been accused of being demonic by some fellow Christians and our salvation has been questioned by others. We are rocking the cultural 'boat' of traditional Christianity in Thailand. Those who listen long enough to understand that what we are doing is "Contextualisation", voice support. When questioned, however, about why they are not doing similar things, they shake their heads and say that although their organizations give lip service to contextualisation, they would never dare actually do it."

Lack of male managers - it has been surprising but CCPCG have found it difficult to find men who are willing and competent to manager the various project components of the IDF work. Women have taken a strong role in management which has proven to be acceptable to the wider society and given women an increasing status in society.

The time to profitability - the idea of a base farm that supports extension and ministry beyond itself, and at the same time experiments and proves new agricultural practices, is common to many church development projects. However, the time it takes to get such a farm to make a profit should not be underestimated. In the case of the IDF farm, the practices introduced required heavy investment in the early days. It took nearly 12 years before the farm made an actual profit when those investment costs are factored in.

## **What helped it succeed**

### **Strong core values**

Other case studies in this series have discussed the importance of core values to the success of an organisation. The values are the heart of the organisation and form the foundation for strategy and action. In the case of CCPCG, the core values have been documented and are clear. Seven main principles are presented as the core values:-

- Authority - "A firm belief in the authority of the Word of God. Stemming from this is a belief in and a commitment to the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, which is the heart of the Gospel."

- Integration - "Every aspect of the ministry is tied together by the Grace of God."
- Flexibility - "A willingness change anything and everything about the organisation to clearly communicate the Grace of God which alone can transform man."
- Contextualisation - Effective communication must be receptor oriented because communication is what is "heard", not necessarily what is sent. The ministry must enable Christ Jesus and His Gospel of Grace to be born into N.E Thai culture. The worship and life of the church (the songs, the language, the ceremonies) as well as the structure and management system and development programs are the result of enabling the gospel of God's grace to impregnate and be born in and live out of NE Thai culture.
- Power Encounter - Transformation is at the level value and mindsets. The power encounter is between the value system of the gospel and that of the local culture.
- Local Church focus - The local church is the focus of the holistic development ministry.
- Process/Broker Approach - CCPCG/IDF sees itself in a process/broker relationship with the local church. Process starts with the people themselves. It involves the poor in dialogue, it is participatory, it is flexible adaptable. IDF brokers by accessing external resources, markets, knowledge for the local organisations to be effective in their own functioning.

## **Bringing good news to the poor - Impact indicators.**

Many people have made a public commitment to Christ, and meet together to explore His Grace. They are filled with a joy and the local cultural values have been challenged by the values of the Gospel. The impact of this work has been more qualitative rather than quantity. The growth of people in their faith, their understanding, their social and economic life has been evident in all members of the 165 new congregations.

Jim tells of the day he was in church sitting on the ground next to an elderly lady. Throughout the singing and discussion she would slowly get to her feet, she would then make a simple movement of her body as though she had an ant in her underwear, and she sit down again. About five minutes would pass and she would rise slowly again, do her jiggling and sit down.

After several times of this, Jim turned to her and politely asked her to sit still as she was disturbing his concentration. There was a short silence and she rounded on him with a vehemence. "How dare you tell me to sit still and not dance to my living Lord. I am so full of joy that I cannot sit still. I want to sing and dance to my God my Saviour, but I cannot dance for long, my bones are too old. If I sit still the stones themselves will disturb you concentration."

Co-operation between people has led to the building of "contextualised dynamic equivalence" churches and an increasing economic standard that lifts people up from poverty.

## Discussion

In the text above we have often referred to how CCPCG have attempted to put the gospel in context. This has two main elements. First we said that communication is what is 'heard', not what is 'said'. Second we said that theology and Christian growth can be informed and encouraged by using local culture in church. In this section we explore these concepts a little further.

### ***The Gospel in context***

Communication is what is 'heard', not what is 'said'. We often do not realise how much our interpretation of the Gospel and our subsequent behaviour is influenced by our culture. Our worldview is formed by our culture. When this worldview only contains certain concepts then what is 'heard' is in the light of these concepts, and not perhaps interpreted in the way the communicator meant.

Consider this illustration from John Davies. "Anyone who has spent time in Thailand attempting to communicate the "Good News" must come up against the exasperating fact, that no matter how brilliant a linguist one may be, how sincere in presenting the Gospel, how totally saturated in the local culture, one's message seems to fall on deaf ears. All sorts of reasons have been propounded for this unmistakable lack of communication. The goal is to *preserve the essential nature of the Gospel* and at the same time take seriously the implications of the incarnation as it relates to Thai culture.

When a western educated person verbally presents the gospel there is often the dual problem of vocabulary, and transference of concepts between the two belief systems, trying to mix "Aristotelian pepper and Buddhist salt". The Reverend Wan Petsongkham stresses that to communicate effectively to Thai people, "we must use terms that people already understand, not just the language of the Christian faith".

"Imagine a young enthusiastic missionary, frustrated by the tedious task of language learning, anxious to communicate "the *gospel* in a *nutshell* ", attempting to take a short cut to effectively communicating his message. He is convinced that Scripture itself should convey the true meaning of the Gospel - is it not after all "as powerful as a two edged sword"? Does not the Holy Spirit illuminate the Word, so that it will pierce the listener's heart?

"He spends considerable time memorizing John 3:16 accurately, in perfect Thai - even getting all the tones right! Having checked and rechecked with his language

teacher, he begins with enthusiasm to share John 3:16 with his neighbors. They smile benignly and he thinks he has delivered the message with clarity -after all he has "sown the seed faithfully"- so he imagines.

What in fact is he actually saying in terms of the *receptors categories*?

With all due respect to the missionary's enthusiasm, he is in fact communicating unintelligible gobbledygook. Words scrambled together that convey both confusing and contradictory concepts. The hearer nods his head knowingly (to please the communicator), but he in fact is no wiser than before he had heard John 3:16 pronounced so accurately in his own language. What then is the problem? If we break down John 3:16 into components and consider each part separately we shall begin to perceive the problem from a Buddhist's point of view:

*"For God so loved the world".* This word "God" (*prajao*) in Buddhist cosmology can mean any number of things - the sun, moon, stars, members of the Royal Family, members of the Buddhist priesthood (all monks are called *prajao*), Hindu mythological gods, special sacred places or images of Buddha. All use the same designation.

A Buddhist *never* thinks of the possibility of using this word *prajao* for the "God" the Christian is so enthusiastically trying to convey. *He has no such concept.* There is no God in the Christian sense in Buddhist cosmology. This is compounded by the fact that, whoever this God is, he is apparently supposed to "love". But all desire, good or bad, in Buddhism is by definition bad - it presupposes relationships and attachments. Then if we infer that the Christian God is *personal*, we fall deeper into a morass of misunderstanding. Some Buddhist priests, upon being told that the Christians' God is a personal God came, as far as they were concerned, to the logical conclusion that this was of course feasible, but such a "person" must then be compared with Buddha *BEFORE* his Enlightenment. Anyone who has achieved Enlightenment would no longer have the capacity to love, or 'desire' to have any such attachments to people or to the world. How could this Christian God, 'love people' and the world? Also, for this God, *'to give His only Son'*, is on its own a totally meaningless statement.

The other segments of the verse will further confuse the recipient regarding the nature of this "good news". The idea of "believing" or "trusting" is also totally contrary to the Buddhist concept of salvation. Salvation in Theravada Buddhism, is not dependent upon anything or anybody. The best known Buddhist epithet, embedded in the memory of every Thai person is *Hai ton pen ti peng khong ton* which means "You cannot depend upon anyone else, you must depend upon yourself alone".

The last part of the verse, the result of the Good News, "that *you may have everlasting life*" is the ultimate obstacle to understanding. *"Everlasting life"* may be

good news to the Christian, but it is certainly not for the Buddhist - it is the last thing he wants. For the Buddhist, "everlasting life" is understood in terms of a law-governed process the cyclic rise and fall of one meaningless, aimless world after another. The course this individual sentient being is meandering through a series of 'moments of present pseudo reality', strung along the line of force, determined by karmic law. A Buddhist 'aspires' (although that in itself is a contradiction) to Nirvana, not to a perpetuation of reincarnations which in his own terms is "eternal life".

If our enthusiastic missionary communicator had realised what had been going in the Buddhist mind when he was quoting his verse, perhaps he would have sat down and reasoned *that effective communication can only be determined by how Receptor perceives and understands the message, not how accurately the Communicator thinks he has delivered it*. This presupposes a comprehensive understanding of the Receptor's world view and perceptions.

This is where the method of CCPCG comes in. Knowing the Gospel, knowing the local culture and encounter work together as steps on a path so that the Gospel can be understood and lived in a culturally relevant way.

### ***Living in a culturally relevant way***

Many Christians would not have a problem with the above. They very much want to communicate the Gospel in a clear way that can be understood by the hearer. In the main text above, the Method of the Program described how the gospel message was made more understandable by Thai's, by emphasising sin as self centredness rather than wrong doing. This seemingly semantic difference is probably acceptable to most Christians. So why then have some traditional churches taken exception to the work of CCPCG?

The difficulties stem not from these simple word changes in the presentation of the Gospel but in the life of the church. Recently it has become the "in" thing to acknowledge that all cultures are equal in the sight of God as are all peoples. It is said that God is reflected in Man and so He must be reflected in Man's culture. This means there are social institutions within a culture that can be a vehicle for the Gospel message without distorting it. Therefore there is way for local people to express the Gospel in local ways. In Thailand many Christians had to put aside their culture to become Christians. It became that you had to reject 'Thai-ness' to accept Christ. It is this that CCPCG addresses in their church structures.

We said above that CCPCG have incorporated the local culture by using the Lao language (heart language of the N.E.), hymns with N.E.Thai tunes with Scripture, ceremonies which are N.E.Thai ceremonies impregnated with the Gospel, and liturgy drawn from the N.E.Thai social context. It was said that people dance in worship services to express glory to God. That there is no preaching, but rather a

discussion centered on the Word and led by elders asking questions on the passage. There are no church buildings, as people meet in houses. That they have adopted many of the N.E. traditions into the lifestyle of the Church, such as tying strings in love and blessing.

Some Christians reject this 'contextualisation' because they see it as syncretism. Syncretism is when the Gospel gets mixed with the old religion. Certainly casual contextualisation can lead to syncretism. In one case a Buddhist monk was invited to speak to a Christian audience about Christianity and Buddhism. The paper was published with a cross on top of a bo leaf. This to conservatives compromised the uniqueness of the gospel. But this failure by some groups to strike the correct balance does not mean we can only use a Westernised Gospel. The hope contained in the work of CCPCG is an effective Gospel in context, that points people clearly to the Lord Jesus Christ.

To address the question of whether this approach corrupts the Gospel let us consider the alternatives. Jim Gustafson speaks of two common approaches "dialogue and presence" (Liberals) where the culture is embraced but rarely challenged, and "encounter" (Conservatives) where nearly all of the culture is challenged because of its religious roots. He would see his work and the work of CCPCG as a middle way, that is "dialogue with encounter".

The concerns about using local cultural rituals in church life often focus on their past meaning. We must understand that we are already influenced by culture. Western Christianity has an adoption of culture built in. Consider Easter sunrise services. Ralph Winter says "I grew up without realising that Easter sunrise services could easily revert to their original paganism if Christians attending them do not see and sense a Christian meaning in them. The very word Easter comes from a teutonic spring goddess of fertility called Eostra. The same is true of Christmas. We have all fought to maintain Christ in Christmas, since Christmas is also originally pagan holiday that was TAKEN OVER by the early church. Romans gave gifts to each other on 25th December long before Jesus was born ....." Using, or redeeming the pagan service of spring rise to illustrate the rising of Christ is not the same as syncretising (mixing) Christ with the pagan religion. Few if any of us now get them mixed up.

All societies have extensive ritual systems, which cannot be disregarded without destabilising the culture. If no substitutes are found then the lack of a previously held ritual can be a cultural void, and this itself can often lead to syncretism. To leave a hole is to invite trouble, perhaps seven times as much trouble as the original!

In the New Testament, we see that they discontinued some of the rites and rituals, e.g. blood sacrifice, but continued with others, e.g. going to the temple. Circumcision and not eating pork continued in the Hebrew church, but ceased in

the Gentile church. Within the Bible there are transferable customs and non transferable. Most Christians see washing each others feet as optional. It was good in the context of dusty roads, but difficult if you normally wear shoes and socks/stockings. However some customs have inward meaning as well as outward sign. Those are transferable, such as the bread and the wine. Yet we eat leavened bread, when it was originally unleavened. We look therefore for a culturally appropriate expression of the inward truth. The early church worked in a dynamic way in each new culture. If we seek to copy the outward form of the New Testament church we end up with a static and culturally irrelevant model. Hence the use of the terms dynamic and equivalence for the CCPCG churches.

Rituals can be put into three categories - those that if neglected society would regard as a sin, those that society holds as tradition, and those that society can choose to celebrate as and when it feels appropriate. In the case of Thai rituals many contain Buddhist practices. Buddhism is the spider web, interwoven in everything. But that should not stop Christians using the same or similar rituals and reinvesting them with new meaning.

Consider funerals. In Thai they are both religious and cultural. But that was the same for Western Christians when they first adopted Christianity. Western Christians continued to wear black, originally to escape the animist demons, even though it had pagan background. However this use of black has not prevented Christians talking at funerals about the resurrection of Christ and His defeat of death and demons in the Cross. Customs are rarely static, and meanings often dim to the point where no one knows the original meaning.

Bridesmaids at Western weddings are another pagan handover. They dress the same as the bride in order to confuse demons who might target the bride. Most bridesmaids would be shocked today to discover the meaning, especially conservative Christian bridesmaids! In Thailand, a young girl often refers to herself as a rat. This too is to confuse the evil spirits, who then will not want to attack such an obnoxious vermin. Today few Thai's realise the original meaning. Would it therefore be appropriate or inappropriate for Christian Thai bridesmaids to refer to themselves as rats?

One of the key elements to choosing which bits of a culture can be used in Christianity to illustrate truth, and which bits would confuse people is how the choosing is done. It must be from within the culture not from the outside. This is a key role for the 'contextualised equivalent dynamic' churches of CCPCG. They meet to discuss the scriptures. The pastor does not preach from his western theological training, but together the congregation embark on a journey of discovery and encounter. They recognise the three non negotiables of idolatry, immorality and injustice.

Some responses have been relatively simple. The CCPCG churches use songs written by Thais to traditional Thai tunes. This compares with the order of service in the Church of Christ Thailand which follows exactly its parent worship book of the Presbyterian Church USA. Out of 247 hymns only 11 have been written by Thai's, and then only 7 of these have tunes written by Thai's (after 150 years of Christianity!). In 40 churches in Chiang Mai only one Thai traditional instrument is used. So on the surface the Thai church looks Western. The rejection of Thai culture was linked to rejection of the old religion. But are traditional instruments only to be used by Buddhists? Who first used the guitar?

Some other responses are more to do with faith and theology. One of the strongest influences in Western Christianity is the "enlightenment". This philosophy has gradually eroded our supernatural world view and replaced God with fixed laws of nature. We have taken on board this world view and adapted the gospel to it (not always helpfully). One of the biggest results is that we separate religion from the rest. Science and religion are not taught together in schools, even Christian ones. No other religion in the world does this. In so doing Western Christianity has left huge gaps which do not cover all the possibilities of experience. Hence we have Christian health workers who only deal with Western medicines, and we leave the prayer for healing to the few with "special" faith or the local traditional doctors. CCPCG have attempted to address this integration. The holistic development combines the Christian worldview with physical activity in order to challenge N.E.Thai values.

### ***Christ in the local culture***

As well as making the Gospel culturally relevant in word and ritual there is also sometimes a special 'entry point'. If God has 'not left himself without a witness' in the various cultures, then the primary task of the missionary should be to find that 'entry point'. The entry point for John the Baptist was the proclamation of Jesus as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' For Nicodemus, Jesus used the idea of fulfilling a concept that he already had - the brass serpent on the pole. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

The question is are these 'redemptive analogies' unique to the Jewish culture. For example:- The Damal people who anticipated a long awaited golden age within their mythology called Hai. When Christ's second advent was preached, the Damal took this as fulfillment and responded in large numbers. The nearby Dani believed that one day man would be immortal. Upon hearing of the resurrection of Christ they turned en masse to Him as fulfillment to their hopes. There are a great number of examples where missionaries have found that it is not unique and Thai culture is another example.

Example: Apparently about 600 BC there had been a devastating plague in the city of

Athens. The people offered sacrifices to their 30,000 gods but the plague raged on. Epimenedes was asked to solve the problem and he felt there must be another God who would be great enough to help. He called a flock of sheep and let them loose on Mars hill. He commanded men to follow the sheep and asked the God to make them lay down where he wanted men to sacrifice to him. The Athenians built an altar and inscribed it to the unknown God. The plague lifted and the city was delivered. 600 years later, rather than proclaim a "foreign God" Paul uses this story and altar to say that you need not be ignorant of Him. This was the eye opener to turn his listeners from the darkness of idolatry to the light of God's truth.

Buddhist scripture speaks clearly of a coming Messiah. Although there are said to have been 27 messiahs before Gotama, the one Messiah who is foremost in Buddhist aspirations and prayers is Mettaya. This Messiah ranks highest of Bodhisattvas and is the most popular figure in Buddhist art. The Buddha said "I am not the first Buddha who came upon earth, nor shall I be the last. In due time another Buddha will arise in this world, a holy one, a supremely enlightened one, endowed with wisdom in conduct, auspicious, knowing the universe, an incomparable leader of men, a master of angels and mortals. He will proclaim a religious life, wholly perfect and pure; such as I now proclaim...He will be known as Metteya, which means "he whose name is kindness".

In an unpublished document which a Thai pastor received from his father was a copy of Buddhist Scriptures placed at Pra-sing Temple at Chiangmai. In one section of this document which is part of Buddha's prophecy, a certain old Brahman asked the Buddha about how to be saved from sin. The Buddha answered that regardless of how many laws you have kept, or even if you pray five times a day, you shall not be saved. Buddha continues saying that sin is too great to be washed away; even though I become hermit, for more than eight 'A-song-kai' or am reborn for another ten times, I shall not be saved. The Brahman asked what Mettaya's character is. The Buddha answered that in his hands and feet are wounds, his side has a wound which was pierced and his forehead is full of scars from wounds. He is the gold ship to carry you to heaven where you will find the 'Tri-pra' (the Crystal Triune god). Thus, give up following the old way. A Spirit from heaven will come and dwell in your heart by which you will overcome your enemies from both four and eight directions".

This prophecy is known in at least three countries; China, Thailand and Cambodia. In those crisis days just before the fall of Phnom Penh, many thousands of Cambodians showed a great interest in the Gospel through the ministry of Stanley Mooneyham, then Director of World Vision International. Mooneyham centered in on Christ as the fulfillment of these prophecies concerning the Mettaya. A Cambodian pastor reported that his 84 year-old mother had come to Christ as a result of a dream in which she saw Christ with wounds in his hands and side. She related that immediately to her knowledge of *Metteyya*, which she had received from her forebears.

## ***Dialogue with encounter***

We have discussed how CCPCG seek to know the Gospel, to know the local culture and to bring together Gospel presentation and the celebration of the life of the church to include both. This dialogue is so that both the Christian and the Thai are speaking in such a way that each can relate to the other. This dialogue then leads to Thai people encountering the values of the Gospel.

However while we have discussed the need for people to encounter the values of the Gospel, we must not neglect to note the authority and power of God that sometimes brings people to a power encounter. Where people have a cosmology of "principalities and powers" then the power encounter presentation as part of the Gospel breaks through. He reaffirms that power encounters (healings, exorcisms, and miracles, or dreams and visions) linked to the proclamation of the Gospel happen today and are a source of entry, a "contextualised medium for communication", where folk religions are dominant. For example:- Twenty five years ago John Davies was hosted by a Yao headman in N.E.Thailand. He explained the Gospel, including in response to questions, that Christ can heal today. He was taken to a house where he saw a coffin. The headman's father was sick and the local shaman had said there was no hope of recovery, so his sons had prepared the coffin. Challenged to prove Christ's healing power, a young John prayed with 'very little faith'. The following morning the man was walking around! Twenty five years later John visited the village again, and found most in the village Christian. The wife of the sick man gave him a very uncultural hug, affirmed her husband's full recovery and explained that the coffin had been disassembled and made into a small bridge over a stream. The bridge is regarded by the community as a statement ('sign') that Jesus is alive and does heal the sick.

A final word on power encounter. Where there are strong beliefs that there is no God, or that he cannot heal today a major challenge to these values is God sovereignly healing someone. His intervention challenges these values and forces the person to reassess their understanding of life. To be challenged about ones behavioural values by revelation as described in the section titled "Encounter the value system of the local culture with that of the gospel" is also a "power encounter" Both are encountering the gospel and being challenged by it.

### ***To conclude this discussion;-***

This case study has looked at how both christian life and social action can be set in the context of the local culture. It has shown how they can work together to make the gospel relevant to specific communities. It has illustrated how one organisation has attempted live in a relevant way, to see Christ in the local culture and to have "dialogue with encounter".

Know the Gospel, Know the local culture, Dialogue and Encounter. The integrated work of CCPCG and IDF has built on these foundations. They continually consider the Gospel, the local culture and how the two interact. It is from this holistic view that the life of the organisation (church) and the socio-economic actions of the IDF naturally flow. The world is seen as a whole, action and reflection go hand in hand. Not many organisations take the time to think through their values and build a consistent model. While the reader may not agree with everything said or done by CCPCG and IDF, the strength that comes from an integrated holistic response must be commended. Even in secular development we can learn from the principles applied by CCPCG and IDF. It is important to know what we think, know the local culture, dialogue and encounter.

This case study has looked at how both christian life and social action can be set in the context of the local culture. It has shown how they can work together to make the gospel relevant to specific communities. It has illustrated how one organisation has attempted live in a relevant way, to see Christ in the local culture and to have "dialogue with encounter".