

HeRD #93 - Karen Evangelists

Dr. Mike Leming has been doing research among Karen Christians. In a draft of a paper he is preparing, he provides us with a glimpse into Karen evangelism in northern Thailand in the 1930s. We should note that this evangelism was carried out without any input from Western missionaries.

"When Baw Ney, Kaw Peh, and Thra Pho Too first came to the Musikee area they had to carry all of their supplies on foot and since Thra Pho Too was getting older, this first trip took eight days to complete. The men knew that when they arrived in the Musikee area the Karen people would feed them and provide accommodations for them as this is the Karen custom to give food to guests even when the family does not enough food for themselves. This first trip did not produce any converts but it prepared the people to become more open to the gospel in subsequent missionary visits.

"When Baw Ney and Kaw Peh returned to Musikee without Thra Pho Too, they worked with the people in the fields and helped them carry water and cut firewood. As a consequence the people were happy to have them come and offered them a place to stay. At the same time they earned the people's friendship, respect, hospitality, and the people listened to what they had to say about Jesus being a better way than the spirit si kho miu xa--the object of traditional Karen animism.

"When coming to a new village Kaw Peh and Baw Ney would gather the children and sing for them. After they had the children's attention they would teach them to sing songs and to read Karen. Soon the adults of the village would gather to see what was happening. It was at this time that Baw Ney recited Karen poems and stories. One of the stories he told was about Y'wa [God] leaving earth and giving the three brothers books of wisdom and how the white missionaries had come to Burma and given the Karen the Bible that told about Jesus Christ coming and dying as a sacrifice for the sins of every person, and that once they believed in Jesus, Y'wa no longer required the Karen to sacrifice. For the Karen who suffered under the burden of making costly sacrifices of chickens and pigs to si kho miu xa, this was good news. While the people in the villages did not come to faith on the first hearing of the gospel message, during the first year there were four families who came to faith in Christ--the families of Su Na Hae, Da Mer Ler, Bu Kar, and 'Hu Hae."