

The Kingdom of Thailand, formerly Siam, is known for its tourist industry, Buddhist temples and long-reigning monarch. The country has suffered recently from unrest in the south, and the tsunami of 2004 and flooding in 2011.

**Population:** 63 million; Density: 133 per sq. km.

The population is unevenly distributed, with the greatest concentration of people in the central region.

Ethnic Thai people make up between 75-80 percent of the population. The remaining 20 percent are Chinese, Malay and from minority ethnic groups, particularly in the north. In South Thailand there is a significant Malay population.

**Religions:** Buddhist 94.6%; Muslim 4.6%; Christian 0.7%; Other 0.1%

There are over 30,000 Buddhist temples and around 300,000 monks in Thailand. Nearly all Buddhist men enter a monastery for at least a few days or months.

Nearly all Muslims live in South Thailand or metropolitan Bangkok. Islam is the majority religion in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala and Satun provinces.

### **Language**

Thai, a member of the Tai language family, is the chief language. Four regional dialects are in use. Lao, Chinese, Malay (in the south) and Mon-Khmer languages are also spoken, including many distinct languages among the hill tribes of the North. English is taught in all schools and colleges and is sometimes used in commerce and government. However, most Thai people are unable to communicate in English.

### **Geography**

Thailand measures 319,380 square miles and contains many topographical contrasts. The north and west are mountainous, the northeast is dryer than other parts of the country, the central plain is fertile and exceedingly densely populated and in the south there are narrow coastal plains and high mountains. A high percentage of the country is rural.

### **Climate**

Thailand has a moist, tropical climate influenced by monsoon winds. The hot season (February to May) sees temperatures reach 40°C (104°F). During the wet season (June to November) temperatures reach 26-37°C (79-99°F) with cooler temperatures of 13-33°C (55-92°F) from December to February. Inland areas are the hottest.

### **History**

Thailand is unique in Southeast Asia in that it has never been a dependent of another nation (Thailand means "land of the free"). Thai women are active in

business affairs, professions and the arts. No single outside culture has ever dominated the entire area, though India has had a deep influence on Thailand, especially as it relates Buddhism.

Thailand emerged as a kingdom in the 13th century and over the next four centuries enlarged its borders through conquest. During the 1800s European influence (including Portuguese, Dutch, French and British) grew with trade, the country began to modernize, and Thailand kept its independence by ceding land to the colonial powers (Cambodia and Laos to the French; part of Malaysia to the British).

During World War II, other than granting passage to the Japanese, Thailand turned to the Allies in July 1944 and joined the United Nations in 1946.

The present King Bhumibol Adulyadej, or Rama IX, ascended the throne in 1946. Rule by benign military dictatorship was stable until 1973, when efforts to develop democracy ushered in two decades of mainly peaceful military coups, political and social unrest and uneasy coalitions until a non-military government was achieved. Through it all, the king has remained a stabilizing influence, being well respected and loved by the people. He is the world's longest-serving head of state.

Although Thailand's material prosperity continues to increase, other factors make future stability uncertain. In 2006, a military coup overthrew a popular prime minister and set off a new round of political struggles and popular protests that have revealed deep dissension among the Thai people.

Natural disasters have also brought much suffering to Thailand in recent years. In December 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean and subsequent tsunami killed over 6,000 people and destroyed countless homes and businesses along the west coast of Southern Thailand. In 2011, Thailand saw the worst flooding in 50 years, sending one-third of the country under water. Many people lost all their possessions and livelihood, being stranded in makeshift relief centers for weeks or months.

## **Christianity**

The first missionaries came to Bangkok in 1828, but it was 12 years before the first sustained missionary presence was established. After 19 more years, they baptized their first convert. Official antagonism, persecution, and the short lifespan of missionaries hampered the growth of the church. The churches in the north of the country – where most of the growth occurred pre-World War II - remain the strongest in Thailand, with 57 percent of the country's Christians being from this area.

OMF International came to Thailand in 1951, relocating from China to other parts of East Asia. They chose several different fields of work.

In the north, OMF International missionaries (including the writer Isobel Kuhn) worked among the hill tribes: the Mien (Yao), Hmong (Meo), Akha and Lisu. In 1956 a Bible training center was opened at Phayao for the training of Thai and tribal

Christians for the pastoral ministry. OMF International also began outreach to the Pwo Karen and Shan. In North Thailand, OMF International works to enable Christians from hill tribes to travel across geographical borders with the gospel, as well as church planting in the cities.

In Central Thailand, there was no viable Christian witness until OMF International arrived in 1952. The first priority was to share the gospel. Mission stations were opened in provincial towns, literature and Scripture portions were distributed, films were shown and during the dry season evangelistic projects were possible. Medical clinics were first opened in 1954. Today, OMF International remains committed to pioneer evangelism, working in partnership with the Thai church so that it becomes self-propagating. Other priorities are leadership training and discipleship. Some Thai have responded readily; others remain totally closed to the gospel.

In Bangkok, OMF International set up its national headquarters, a publishing house and other centralized ministries. In 1966 OMF International began a student ministry, leading to the founding of the Thai Christian Students (similar to UCCF). Student work continues today.

In 1971 OMF International helped start the Bangkok Bible College and Theological Seminary. Since the 1970s church work has been a priority.

In the south, there was no sustained Christian work before OMF International sent medical personnel in 1952. Saiburi clinic opened in 1956 and village leprosy clinics in 1966. Some Thai and Chinese people embraced the gospel, but the response among the Malay population has been quieter.

The Thai church is slowly growing, but it is still very small. Though Thailand is more open to Christian activity than neighboring countries, it also has the fewest believers. However, the small but steady church growth – five percent annually since 1975 – is beginning to have an effort. The Thai church is now beginning to send some missionaries and short-term teams as well as receiving them.

### **OMF International's strategic priorities**

- Training and motivating Thai Christians in evangelism and leadership
- Urban/rural evangelism and church planting
- Media work

### **Opportunities**

- Church planting, church nurturing and support
- Disciplers, Mentors, and Leadership Development
- Student Workers
- Theological Education
- Teachers and dorm parents
- Guest house hosts

- Administrators
- Medical personnel
- Bible translators
- English teachers
- Literature production

### **How to pray**

- Thailand's religious culture is a complex web of spirit appeasement, occult practices and Buddhism, which is closely interwoven with social culture. Pray that Christians may be able to express their faith without losing their cultural identity.
- Thailand is a Buddhist country that allows freedom to belong to other religions. However, there is much social pressure against converting from Buddhism.
- Evangelism remains a priority, but as the churches grow there is increased need for discipleship that addresses both head and heart.
- Legalism and a lack of personal holiness are common problems in Thai churches. Pray that Thai Christians understand both the depth of their own sin and the riches of God's grace, in a way that transforms their lives and relationships with others.
- The vast majority of Thai can read, but prefer to learn orally. Pray for the implementation of oral strategies such as Bible story telling in order to more effectively evangelize and disciple Thai people.
- The burgeoning economy is changing society. People are drifting to the cities and materialism is rampant.
- The growth of the church has been steady, but slow. Much of the growth has been among the Thai-speaking Chinese in the cities and the marginalized tribal peoples.
- Leadership training and theological education, at all levels, both formal and informal. There are many fine evangelical leaders in Thailand. More are needed who are adequately trained and spiritually mature to disciple, mentor, and train others.
- Of the 77 provinces, 33 have fewer than 1,000 Christians. Sixty-three percent of the population lives in an area without a church.
- Students (one million) have largely not heard the gospel. Pray for OMF's work among students. Pray for Christian students who are a tiny minority among their peers.
- Most of the 3 million Muslims live in South Thailand and Bangkok. Pray that those ministering among these peoples would have perseverance, wisdom, and love as they work among them. Pray that the Thai church would gain a burden to reach their Muslim neighbors.
- Bible translation is ongoing in minority languages. Some people do not have the complete Bible in their mother tongue.

- Christian literature in Thai is limited, especially in the areas of theology and pastoral training. Pray for the translation of appropriate resources and for more Thai Christian writers.
- Christians among the hill tribes in the north have a vision and calling to reach their people groups in the countries surrounding Thailand. Pray for them as they take the gospel into these areas.
- Pray for rebuilding work after the tsunami of 2004 and floods of 2011, and for those personally affected.