

A History of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Thailand

by

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In 1511 two Dominican priests were sent to accompany a Portuguese diplomatic mission to Thailand. This is the first recorded Christian presence in the country. Catholicism grew slowly, establishing only 6 churches in its first 300 years.¹ Protestant Christianity did not fair much better. In 1828 the London Missionary Society sent Karl Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin as the first Protestant emissaries to Thailand. Although they experienced a small measure of success among the minority Chinese population, it would be 21 years before the first ethnic Thai within Thailand accepted Christ.²

¹ Kenneth B. Wells, History of Protestant Work in Thailand. Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand, 1958, p. 5.

² Alex G. Smith, Siamese Gold. Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1981, p. 22. Smith records that Ann Hasseltine Judson worked with Siamese prisoners of war in Rangoon between 1813-1826, and led one Thai man to Christ. Using this convert as a resource she managed to translate some Gospel portions into Thai as well. There is no indication she was ever in Thailand itself (Smith, p. 12-13).

Five different Protestant organizations arrived in Thailand between 1828 and 1850. By 1850 only the American Presbyterian Mission remained and it stayed the dominant organization in the country until World War II. Although a time of significant growth took place between 1884-1914 in Northern Thailand, in general the Protestant Church experienced little growth.³

Prior to 1934, much of the Church's work remained in the hands of missionaries. However, an attempt at indigenization took place in 1934 when believers connected to the Presbyterian and American Baptist works formed a national church organization called the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT).

Using statistics derived from several different sources Jaakko Mäkelä charts membership of Protestant churches in Thailand from 1870-1940 as follows:⁴

Table 1. Membership of Protestant Churches in Thailand from 1870 to 1940.

<u>1870</u>	<u>1880</u>	<u>1892</u>	<u>1902</u>	<u>1914</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1940</u>
95	735	1678	3452	8155	8730	9784	10599

In its infancy the newly established CCT organization was rather weak with membership actually falling from 9,421 in 1935 to 8,408 in 1937.⁵

Earliest Known Demonstrations of Charismata in Thailand

In an attempt to stem membership losses in CCT churches Boonmak Kittisarn, then General Secretary of the CCT, invited Chinese evangelist John Sung to hold meetings in Thailand. The Chinese Maitrichit Church in Bangkok hosted Sung's meetings in March and April 1938. Further meetings were held in Chiang Mai and Lampang in the North and Trang in the South in 1939.

³ Ibid, p. 93.

⁴ Jaakko Mäkelä, Khrishak Issara: The Independent Churches in Thailand, Their Historical Background, Contextual Setting, and Theological Thinking. Pargas, Finland: Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2000, p. 32.

⁵ Smith, pp. 183, 196-198.

Some CCT leaders did not want Sung to come to Thailand. Perhaps they feared his ministry would cause church splits as had happened in some other countries. Others suggest that some reluctance was due to reports of demonstrations of *charismata* occurring in his meetings, particularly prayer for the sick.⁶ There is some disagreement as to the impact that Sung's ministry had on the unchurched; yet there is agreement that his ministry significantly impacted the spiritual fervor of CCT church members who, previously, were at best nominal Christians. In 1939, Sook Pongsnoi, the Pastor of the Trang CCT church, reported,

I invited Dr. Sung to come to Trang and through him God has poured out a mighty blessing upon the people of this city. The Trang church is now on fire for God and has been packed with people every Sunday since Dr. Sung went away... We are feeding on the Word of God as never before, and last Sunday sixteen women and five men were baptized and twenty baptized children confessed their faith in Jesus Christ and all united with the church. Two backsliders also came and confessed their sins.⁷

Sung's meetings likely helped strengthen God's people for the persecution to come during World War II. It is documented that many renounced their faith during those tumultuous times.⁸ Yet several Church leaders, including Kittisarn and Pongsnoi who were touched by God in those meetings, boldly encouraged believers to hold firm to their faith and not turn away.⁹ Some see this hunger for spiritual revival as laying the groundwork for the soon arrival of the Pentecostal Movement.¹⁰

⁶ Prasit Pongudom. *Prawatsaasat Saphakrischak nai Prathet Thai* (The History of the Church of Christ in Thailand). Bangkok: The Church of Christ in Thailand, 1984, p. 83-88.

⁷ Sook Pongsnoi, "New Life in the Church in Siam", *Missionary Review of the World* 62 (July 1939): pp. 341-342.

⁸ Alex Smith (pp. 204, 212-213) writes that at the start of World War II Thailand's Christian population was approximately 10,700 consisting of: 9,399 CCT church members; 450 British Churches of Christ members; 100 Brethren Church members; 75 Christian and Missionary Alliance members; 500 Karen Church members; and 50 Anglican Church members. By the end of the war, CCT membership had fallen to between 6,000-7,000 members.

⁹ Dr. Nithi Eowsriwongs. "Yonroi adeet: 175 pee mitchannari Protestant nai Prathet Thai" in *175 pee: Phanthakit Kristasatsana Protestant nai Prathet Thai (K.S. 1828-2003)*" edited by Dr. Nantachai Mejudhon ("Tracing the Past: 175 Years of Protestant Missionaries in Thailand" in *175 Years: Protestant Missions Endeavor in Thailand*), 2004, p. 47.

¹⁰ Robert Nishimoto. *Prawat Pentecost lae Kharismatic nai Prathet Thai 1946-1996*. (History of Pentecostals and Charismatics in Thailand), 1996, pp. 43-46.

Prior to the first Pentecostal missionaries arriving in Thailand, there is record of a Thai Christian being baptized in the Holy Spirit in the traditional Pentecostal sense without any prior teaching about this experience. In April 1940, Jaran Chairat, a school teacher and CCT church member was attending a conference in Petchaburi. Following lunch on Sunday, everyone went to the beach except Chairat who went to rest in his room. He reports that

Suddenly, something began to happen to me which I did not understand... My mouth began to feel like I wanted to cry out. I put two handkerchiefs into my mouth to cover these sounds. But the more I tried to stop it, the more these sounds came out from my mouth.

Chairat says God used him to speak prophetically to Paul Eakin, a Presbyterian missionary attending the conference. Apparently his experience was not understood by others, nor acknowledged as coming from God, but rather taken as an indication that he was working too hard.¹¹

A world war and another 6 years ensued before clear teaching about the meaning of Chairat's experience made it to Thailand.

Thailand's Early Years of Pentecost

After World War II a new surge of missionary activity took place including the arrival of Thailand's first Pentecostal missionaries, Verner and Hanna Raassina, sent by the Finnish Free Foreign Missions (now FIDA International) in 1946. They initially planned to minister in Burma, but when denied visas they were rerouted to Bangkok arriving on 17 November 1946.¹²

While on their voyage they spent most of their cash treating Verner who fell ill with typhoid. Upon arrival in Thailand they were informed that their home church could no longer support them as Finland's newly formed Communist government

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 46-48.

¹² Hannu Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong* (Golden Fields), Bangkok: Finnish Free Foreign Mission and Full Gospel Churches in Thailand, 1996, pp. 21-22.

forbade finances being sent to support missions work.¹³ When Boonmak Kittisarn heard about their plight, he invited them to stay at a school owned by his family. This marked the beginning of a blossoming friendship between him and early Pentecostal missionaries to Thailand.

Eventually, funding received from other sources enabled them to rent a house in Thonburi west of Bangkok. Attending language school to learn Thai, was not an option for them due to their restricted finances. Instead, at the leading of the Lord, a pastor's wife came from Songkhla to help them. Receiving no salary, for a full year this woman of God cooked for them and taught them Thai.¹⁴

In 1948 Eukka and Maria Rokkas joined the Raassinas in Bangkok, living with them for the first few months and working alongside them to develop a preaching center in Thonburi. In 1949, the Rokkas helped about 30 displaced missionaries being forced to leave China to obtain Thai visas. In 1952 the Rokkas went on to serve in Japan.¹⁵

The Raassinas now moved to Lomsak in Petchabun Province to open a preaching center; a decision, Mäkelä suggests, that was at least partially influenced by their friendship with Kittisarn, who had prior contacts in both Petchabun and Chiang Rai, both of which later became locations for the strongest FFFM works.¹⁶

The Raassinas faced numerous personal tragedies. Before coming to Lomsak they lost a son in childbirth. While in Petchabun a 2 year old child died of cerebral malaria. Later, a 15 month old son died of tropical dysentery. Hanna Raassina died in Lomsak on 14 October 1956 from complications following childbirth.¹⁷

¹³ Ervin E. Shaffer. *Missions – Thailand: Under the Shade of the Coconut Palms*. Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, ND, p. 12.

¹⁴ Kettunen, p. 24.

¹⁵ Kettunen, pp. 25-33 and Nishimoto (1996), pp. 54-55.

¹⁶ Mäkelä, pp. 70, 152.

¹⁷ Kettunen, pp. 49, 51, 54 and Shaffer, p. 37.

Thailand's first Pentecostal church was probably in Petchabun. One day a man arrived at the Lomsak Preaching Center and told the Raassinas about an old man in the remote village of Huay Sawang with similar beliefs as they did. The man was derogatively nicknamed "Old Father Nothing" because he refused to serve the old gods. In July 1949, the Raassinas set out to see if this story was true.

As they neared the village, the old man met them saying, "Teacher, you have finally come!" He explained how 30 years before, a Thai Christian had given him a Scripture portion. The village had only one person who could read, and that rather poorly, so little of what was read could be understood. The man explained that he had been asking God to send them someone to explain the book's meaning. Verner explained the Gospel's meaning to an attentive audience. After three days 22 men decided to follow Christ. In a second visit another 20 people accepted Christ. Later, in 1956, Huay Sawang became the setting for the first major outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Thai people.¹⁸

Around the same time that the Raassinas moved to Petchabun, due to the increasingly liberal leanings of the CCT, Kittisarn resigned from that organization and started an independent church in the capitol called Bangkok Church.¹⁹ During its early years it is unclear how Pentecostal the Bangkok Church was in practice and beliefs. However, between 1956-1958 the church took on a distinctive Pentecostal flavor.

Meanwhile, new missionary personnel from FFFM continued to come to Thailand until eventually Thailand became the country with the largest number of FFFM missionaries. In these early years, most of their efforts were focused in Thonburi, and in Petchabun and Phitsanalok Provinces in Lower-North Thailand.

¹⁸ Shaffer, pp. 18-20; Herbert R. Swanson, "HeRD #364 – Thailand's First Pentecostal Church", *herbSwanson.com*, 3 April 1997.

¹⁹ Mäkelä, p. 58.

Starting in 1951, Pentecostal missionaries from other countries began arriving, particularly from Scandinavia. Adolph and Karen Nilsen transferred from China to Thailand becoming the first missionaries from the Swedish Free Mission. Later that year Esther Bastrup from the Norwegian Free Foreign Mission also transferred from China to Thailand. Later the Danish Pentecostal Mission and Orebro Mission from Sweden also sent missionaries to Thailand. Because of similar backgrounds and beliefs, in 1973 these groups merged their works organizationally under the name Scandinavian Pentecostal Mission, and formed churches called the Foundation of the Full Gospel Churches in Thailand (FCT).²⁰ Most Scandinavian and FCT ministry takes place in South Thailand. Statistics published in 2008 show that FCT has 31 churches and outreach centres, with all but 5 located in the South.²¹ International Broadcast Association (IBRA) associated with FCT broadcasts a radio and television program called “The Way of Life”. In the mid 1960’s a Bible school was started by the Scandinavian Pentecostals in Surat Thani in the South. That school closed in 1990. A new school under the direction of FCT was started afterwards in Prachuab Kirikhan.

T. L. Osborn Crusades and Far-reaching Impact

The event that probably most impacted the development and growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Thailand was the open-air crusades held by the American healing evangelist T. L. Osborn in March 1956 in Bangkok and Trang. Initially permission had been received to use the Bangkok Royal Stadium for the crusade but just before the meetings were scheduled to begin the government rescinded that permission. An alternative venue was provided by Boonmak Kittisarn,

²⁰ Nishimoto, pp. 149-150. Mäkelä, pp. 70, 152.

²¹ 2008 Thailand Christian Directory, Bangkok, pp. 297-298.

inviting them to hold the crusade on the grounds of Kittikhun Wittaya, a Christian school owned by Boonmak's wife, Muan Kittisarn.

Thousands of people attended these 15 days of meetings, with several hundred coming to faith in Christ and many healed. One of those healed was Saman Wannakiet, a 31 year old Presbyterian pastor who had suffered with heart disease for 13 years. Chaiyong Wattanachan, a friend of Wannakiet's, was healed of a cancerous tumor. Both men were subsequently filled with the Holy Spirit. Afterwards they formed an evangelistic team to take the message of salvation in the power of the Holy Spirit to the whole of the country.²²

Following the crusade, Don Price, a member of the Crusade team accompanying Osborn to Thailand, was asked to dedicate a church building in Huay Sawang. During the service Price preached about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and people began to speak in tongues, dance in the Spirit, and roll on the floor. This is viewed by many as the first truly Pentecostal revival in Thailand.²³

The month after the Osborn crusade, Wannakiet and Wattanachan traveled to Chiang Rai to visit Presbyterian Churches with which Wannakiet had contacts. Desiring that these congregations experience a move of God similar to what occurred at the Osborn crusade, they began to preach about the baptism in the Holy Spirit. As a result, numerous church members were filled with the Holy Spirit. Facing opposition from their own church members, some of these broke away and formed separate congregations in five locations within Chiang Rai Province.

Concerned that these newly formed churches receive proper teaching, Kittisan and some Finnish missionaries began regularly visiting these congregations. Eventually these churches, along with subsequent new church plants started by these

²² Nishimoto, pp. 174-175; Kettunen, pp. 52-53.

²³ Kettunen, pp. 65-66.

recently Spirit-filled believers, became linked with the network of churches associated with the FFFM. Around 1958 the Aleksi Tynkkyne family became the first of many FFFM missionaries to move to North Thailand to work directly with these churches.²⁴

In 1957 Wannakiat and Wattanachan held evangelistic meetings at Bamrung College in Nakorn Pathom. One of those who responded to the Gospel was a 15-year-old student named Wirachai Kowae. During school breaks Kowae often traveled with Wannakiat and Wattanachan in their evangelistic outreaches. Kowae would play a significant role in the future growth of Pentecostal churches in Thailand, especially once he established the Thailand Assemblies of God.²⁵

In 1959 Kittisarn was invited to Finland as a representative of the Pentecostal church in Thailand. He spoke to the National Summer Conference of the Pentecostal Movement in Kouvola. Afterwards he traveled to the United States where he stayed with Don Price. While there Kittisarn got in touch with the United Pentecostal Church (UPC). Upon returning to Thailand several months later, he began to proclaim the UPC teaching that the only valid baptism was that given in the name of Jesus only.²⁶ He attempted to lead churches under his influence to follow his move to join the UPC. Although strongly opposed by FFFM missionaries, Kittisarn successfully persuaded some members of Pentecostal congregations to follow him including Chaiyong Wattanachan who later became General Superintendent of the UPC work in Thailand.

Initially the UPC increased fairly quickly, mostly due to church transfers. Alex Smith notes that in just one year the UPC baptized (or rebaptized) around 800

²⁴ Kettunen, p. 88; and Robert Nishimoto, "Pentecost in Thailand," *10th Anniversary of Rom Yen Missions*, 1993, p. 15.

²⁵ Based on an interview with Wirachai Kowae in 1997.

²⁶ Mäkelä, pp. 72-73.

people.²⁷ Kittisarn's actions greatly weakened any further influence he had among the general Christian population. Jaakko Mäkelä writes that due to his association with the UPC and subsequent actions Kittisarn "had become a *persona non grata* even among the groups he had helped to establish."²⁸

In September 1960 the first of several Bible training institutions were established by Pentecostals in Thailand. Because of negative experiences by Finnish Pentecostals regarding how students were educated in State operated seminaries in Finland, there was a tendency to look with suspicion at seminary-trained ministers. But with the growing numbers of Pentecostal churches and increased numbers of Thais responding to God's call, the need for some type of formal ministerial training became evident. In response, the FFFM started The Full Gospel Bible College at Muban Setiket in Thonburi.²⁹

Initially, classes met only 3 months a year between planting and harvesting season making it convenient for students from rural communities to attend. Approximately 50 men came to study that first term.³⁰ Several of them went on to make a profound impact on the spiritual state of the country including the evangelist Wannakiet, plus Kowae and Nirut Chantakor who later established new churches throughout Thailand, including Bangkok's two largest Pentecostal churches.³¹

Statistics released in 2008 show Full Gospel Churches (associated with FFFM) had 117 churches and outreach centres with 70% of them located in North Thailand.³²

²⁷ Smith, pp. 252-253.

²⁸ Mäkelä, pp. 72-73.

²⁹ Anonymous, "History of The Full Gospel Bible College", *40th Anniversary of The Full Gospel Bible College* (Thai), 2000, p. 10.

³⁰ Raul Laine in an interview of Yoko Heinikainen in "*Prawat Khong Soon Prakittikhun Somboon*" ("History of The Full Gospel Centre") in *Soon Prakittikhun Somboon 25 Pi* (The Full Gospel Center, 25 Years), 1985, p. 8-9.

³¹ Kettunen, p. 255.

³² Thailand Christian Directory, pp. 300-305.

The 1960's: A Decade of Massive Influx of Pentecostal Ministries

The trickle of Pentecostal ministries in Thailand in the 1940's that began with the arrival of the Raassinas and reinforced by other Finnish and Scandinavian missionaries turned into a flood by the end of the 1960's. Dr. Eowsriwongs writes,

By 1960 we see that the Pentecostal group was still quite small (Nishimoto estimates about 600 believers³³). But after 1960 an increasing number of new Pentecostal organizations entered (Thailand) to join the task and expand the work to various provinces...³⁴

William and Ellen Butcher were the first Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) missionaries to Thailand arriving in 1961. Churches associated with them are called Full Gospel Assemblies of Thailand (FGAT). FGAT church growth was quite slow until 1972 when, under the leadership of Nirut Chantakorn, Jaisaman Church was started in Bangkok. Jaisaman became the denomination's flagship church and is one of Bangkok's largest. In 2009 FGAT reported 60 registered churches in Thailand and two branch churches overseas.³⁵ A school for training ministers, Thailand Pentecostal Seminary was opened in 1973 and is the only Pentecostal school in the country offering an MA degree.

During the Vietnam War era many American troops were stationed throughout Thailand. Several new organizations arose directly or indirectly as a result of this American presence in the country.

One of those was the Church of God World Missions (COGWM). Plukjit Nonsung, the first church associated with COGWM, began in 1967 through the efforts of Charles Austin, an American officer stationed near Udorn Thani with connections to the Church of God, Cleveland. In 1978 the first COGWM missionary

³³ Robert Nishimoto. Survey of Pentecostal Missions in Thailand, 1993, p. 7.

³⁴ Eowsriwongs, p. 64.

³⁵ <http://fgat.christian.in.th/home/index.php>, viewed 27 October, 2009.

to Thailand, Rod Richie, began a church in Bangkok.³⁶ This church met in an apartment complex on Plukjit Street in the Klong Toey area of Bangkok. Thus the name Plukjit (meaning *an awakened heart*), was adopted to refer to that church and the denomination. In 2006 there were 10 Plukjit Churches with a membership of 746.³⁷

The Thailand Assemblies of God (TAG) also started during the Vietnam War era. In 1968 Ervin Shaffer, an American Assemblies of God (AOG) missionary, established a ministry centre for American military in Bangkok. Meanwhile, Wirachai Kowae, while attending the Bible Institute of Malaysia, learned about indigenous church principles followed by the AOG. Kowae found he agreed with this methodology rather than that followed by FFFM with whom he had been working. Through his influence, AOG missionaries began working alongside Kowae and other Thai ministers and in 1969 the TAG was established. 2008 Statistics list 94 churches directly associated with TAG.³⁸ Another 65 churches have an indirect relationship with TAG as daughter churches of certain TAG churches.³⁹

The Thailand Church of God of Prophecy also traces its beginnings through the efforts of American serviceman, Thomas Filtman, who started a church in Korat in 1969. Gary Holcombe was the first missionary to work with this national organization in 1977. Most of their efforts were focused on Northeast Thailand.⁴⁰ In 2008 they had an estimated membership of no more than 300 people.⁴¹

³⁶ Nishimoto, 1993, p. 10.

³⁷ Martin Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*. Zoetemeer, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2008, p. 99.

³⁸ Thailand Christian Directory, pp. 318-322.

³⁹ These are churches with connections to either Romyen or Udomsuk Church. The figures are found in Prakong Posrithong, "A Dream that Became a Reality" in 25th Anniversary: Bangkok Evangelistic Centre, Bangkok: Romyen Church, 2008, p. 32; and Thailand Christian Directory, pp. 325.

⁴⁰ Nishimoto, 1993, p. 10.

⁴¹ Visser, p. 99.

The 1960's saw an influx of not only new Pentecostal organizations entering the country, but other Protestant, mostly evangelical, organizations as well. Due to this proliferation of new Christian groups, a need was felt for a covering organization to represent these diverse groups, similar to the CCT which represented the more liberal mainline denominations. Sinchai Chaocharoenrat writes

It was felt that the various Protestant Christian groups that were not a part of the Church of Christ in Thailand needed a means to come together for fellowship, to work together, and to respond to the government's wish that these various groups be unified under one umbrella to smooth the communication process between the government and these groups. This resulted in the establishment of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), which received recognition by the government as one of the organizations representing Protestant Christianity.⁴²

The EFT became a legal entity on 9 September 1969. Excluding the Southern Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists, who created separate legal entities with the Thai government, eventually most Pentecostal and other Evangelical organizations would come under the umbrella of the EFT.

The Arrival of Charismatics

A number of Charismatic organizations began arriving in the country in the 1970's. Several indigenous Charismatic Movements were also birthed during this time.

In 1975, Duane Klepel, an independent Charismatic missionary, began a training program in Chonburi called Christ for Thailand Institute. Most of the students were tribal Christians from various ethnic groups who were not qualified to attend traditional Bible schools. The school eventually moved to Pakchong in Nakorn Ratchasima Province. Thasanapong Suwaratana, the Institute's current director,

⁴² Rev. Sinchai Chaocharoenrat. "*Phanthakit Kankortang Kristajak: Prasobkan jaakadeet lae Naewkhit su anakhot*" in *175 pee: Phanthakit Kristasatsana Protestant nai Prathet Thai (K.S. 1828-2003)*" edited by Dr. Nantachai Mejudhon ("Ministry of Pioneering Churches: Experiences from the Past and Thoughts for the Future" in *175 Years: Protestant Missions Endeavor in Thailand*), 2004, p. 232.

reports that over 290 students have been trained through the years, with 86% of the graduates involved in full-time ministry.⁴³

Around that same time, two Filipino missionaries, Sonny Largado and Pedro Belardo began an organization called Christ to Thailand Mission. Their initial thrust was a short-term training centre in Khon Kaen at which people from a broad spectrum of Christian backgrounds received training. Additionally, the 2008 Christian Directory listed 12 churches directly a part of Christ to Thailand Mission, most of them in Northeast Thailand.⁴⁴

In the 1980's Victory Bible College International opened in Chonburi; Living Word Ministries International was begun in Chiang Mai; and Rhema Bible College started a training center in Bangkok in 1999. Numerous other church-based training centers of a Charismatic nature have also been developed in Thailand.

Since the Osborn meetings, open-air crusades were a popular means of evangelism. Most Pentecostal organizations held their own open-air meetings with the most popular being those held by Wayne Croke. In 1979 Croke visited Thailand to hold an outdoor healing and evangelistic crusade in Hua Hin, following which he regularly returned to hold outdoor crusades throughout the country.⁴⁵ In 1983 Croke and his wife moved to Thailand where he reportedly held over 100 crusades in which he prayed for over a million people.⁴⁶ By the end of that decade his crusade ministry slowed considerably due to increasing government resistance to his outdoor meetings.

As the influence of the Charismatic Movement began to be felt in Thailand, several Independent Charismatic type churches were planted and, in some cases, new organizations grew out of these churches.

⁴³ <http://www.christforthailand.org>, viewed 6 November, 2009.

⁴⁴ Thailand Christian Directory, pp. 294.

⁴⁵ Nishimoto, 1993, p. 11.

⁴⁶ www.ncchampton.org/missions/primary.html, viewed 6 December 2009.

Bangkok Fellowship Church, started in 1969 by Robert Nishimoto, an Independent Pentecostal missionary, was one such church. It is one of the larger Charismatic churches in Bangkok and now has a network of 19 daughter churches.⁴⁷

Another independent Charismatic church which has expanded into an indigenous denomination is Romklao Church founded in 1979 by Wan Phetchsongkram. Phetchsongkram came to faith in Christ in a Baptist context and once was the principal of the Thailand Baptist Theological Seminary. However, due to disagreement over organizational strategy and his experience with the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he started Romklao Church as an independent work using a strategy of establishing a strong central church divided into smaller cell groups.⁴⁸ Visser reports that Romklao had a network of 23 churches and 3,736 members in 2006.⁴⁹

Some other indigenous independent Charismatic churches begun by individuals originally part of non-Pentecostal organizations include Sahaphan Church Khon Kaen (C&MA) and Fa Muang Thai Church (Baptist).

Thailand's most well-known Charismatic church is Hope of Bangkok begun by Kriengsak Charoenwongsak. Churches in that network are called Hope Churches. Charoenwongsak became a Christian and was baptized in the Holy Spirit while studying in Melbourne, Australia. He claims to have received a vision in 1976 to plant a church in each of Thailand's 685 districts, a work which he began upon returning to Thailand in 1981. Cell groups, aggressive evangelism (including proselytizing members of other churches), authoritarian leadership, and requiring a high level of commitment by church members enabled Hope of Bangkok to go from 17 in attendance at its first meeting to a current estimated membership of over 10,000 people meeting in various locations throughout Bangkok, with an additional 15,000

⁴⁷ www.bangkokfellowship.com/webpage/show.php, viewed 26 October 2009.

⁴⁸ Mäkelä, pp. 120-122.

⁴⁹ Visser, p. 100.

members in 430 locations outside of Bangkok. They also claim that there are 120 Hope churches in various locations throughout the world. Hope Church's use of aggressive tactics and questionable ethics led the EFT to suspend their membership in 1987. Only in 2009 was Hope Church allowed to rejoin the EFT.⁵⁰

Both Romklao and Hope Church can be seen as largely indigenous Charismatic Movements. Another Charismatic organization birthed from within Thailand are Ruam Nimit Churches. These were started by Nirut Chantakorn in 1990 after Chantakorn resigned as Senior Pastor of Jaisaman Church amid accusations of unethical behavior. Visser records 22 churches and 1,278 members associated with Ruam Nimit as of 2006. About half of them were church transfers and the other half new church plants.⁵¹

Other Pentecostal or Charismatic organizations entering Thailand since the decade of the 1970's include Foursquare Churches reporting 40 churches with a membership of 1,316,⁵² and Vineyard with 3 churches as of 2007.⁵³ In addition there are numerous other independent Charismatic-style churches not connected to a larger network that have been started in the past 40 years.

With the influx of so many Pentecostal and Charismatic organizations within the country, maintaining a sense of unity has been difficult. Starting in 1985 a degree of co-operation took place between Pentecostal and Charismatic groups when annual evangelistic services called "*Ritdaet*" or "Power" meetings were held. Well-known preachers from within Thailand and overseas took part in these services, but by the close of the 1990's interest for continuing these meetings had petered out. In recent

⁵⁰ This information on the Hope Churches comes from the following sources: Mäkelä, pp. 124-130; Visser, p. 100-101; www.thaicrc.com/gsd/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D4888.pdf, viewed 12 September 2009; and www.byhim.org, viewed 30 November 2009 .

⁵¹ Visser, p. 101.

⁵² <http://fmi.foursquare.org/countries/countries.sd?iid=112>, viewed 2 December 2009.

⁵³ vineyardmissions.org/Thailand.asp, viewed 2 December 2009.

years a new attempt to build co-operation among the various Christian groups, including Pentecostal-Charismatic groups, has been made called “Bless Thailand”. Its goal is to unite all Christians in Thailand to pray for transformation and revival.

Because God’s Spirit is moving in Thailand in ways unmindful of manmade borders, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain what churches are Pentecostal or Charismatic in nature and which are not. Mäkelä expresses the problem well when he says

It is difficult to make classifications based on... backgrounds. One distinction could be the division into Pentecostal or Charismatic churches and others, but even this classification is problematic (as) practices like praying for the sick and exorcisms are practiced widely.⁵⁴

Because most church planting in the country today is being done through Pentecostal or Charismatic expressions of Christianity, the statistics presented in this chapter will likely soon be out of date as these churches continue to expand and influence the nature of Christianity in Thailand.

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⁵⁴ Mäkelä, p. 88.