

# The Wiang Pa Pao Consultation on Evangelism in the Northern Thai Context

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## About This Article

This paper summarizes discussions held over two days at the Dong Phra Phorn Camp, Amphur Wiang Pa Pao, Chiang Rai Province. The consultation was held as a part of a research project funded by the Luce Foundation on "Northern Thai Christianity in its Buddhist Context," headed up by Dr. Don Swearer of the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University. A very different version of this paper is slated to appear as a chapter in a book based on the research done for that project.

## Introduction

The issues involved in the relationship of northern Thai Protestant Christians to their Buddhist context is, first and last, a question of the religious, ideological, and behavioral boundaries that divide the faith communities from each other. The old-time Presbyterian missionaries laid down for their churches a clear, rigid boundary against Buddhism that could not be compromised, let alone erased. They used a number of strategies to create, preserve, and expand that boundary, the most important of which was the evangelistic communication in word and deed of the Christian message. Evangelism dominated their thinking, and it suffused their strategies to the point that no other motivation carried so much importance for most of them. Daniel McGilvary's autobiography provides a classic description of that importance; he remembered that when his family first arrived in Chiang Mai in 1867 people frequently asked them why they had come. He and Sophia explained that, "We were come with messages of mercy and with offer of eternal life from the great God and Saviour. We were come with a revelation of our Heavenly Father to His wandering and lost children." [1] Dr. Charles Crooks spoke for nearly all of his colleagues over the years when he stated that if the missionary purpose was to be accomplished, "it is essential that the primary aim of all missionary enterprises be evangelistic." [2]

The missionaries knew that they would eventually have to entrust all of their work to the "native" church, and they fully intended that the northern Thai church would continue to place its primary emphasis on evangelism. The Rev. William Harris wrote in 1898 that one of the pressing needs of the Laos Mission was to develop a program that would enable the "native church" to become "a great evangelizing force in this country." His colleague, the Rev. W. F. Shields, writing that same year summarized the feelings of the vast majority of his colleagues in the mission that, "To me the evangelistic work is so necessary to the life of the church that a failure to do it is the death of the church." [3] The missionaries, that is, expected that the northern Thai church would continue to use evangelism as one of its chief means for defending and expanding the boundaries that they had created for it. The ministry, or mission, of evangelism thus comprises an important indicator of how Christians have related to their Buddhist neighbors over time. If northern Thai Protestants have largely preserved the missionary emphasis on evangelism intact, their relationships with their Buddhist neighbors and their experience of their Buddhist context will be of a nature very different from it will be if they no longer hold to that evangelistic emphasis.

The purpose of this article is to report on a consultation held on Friday and Saturday, 21-22 February 2003, with a group of northern Thai evangelists, which consultation focused on the question of evangelism in the northern Thai Buddhist context. The consultation was held at the CCT's Dong Phra Phorn Camp, Amphur Wiang Pa Pao, Chiang Rai Province, and it had no speakers, no addresses, and no formal program. The sole purpose of the consultation was to provide a venue in which northern Thai Christian evangelists could share experiences and insights regarding evangelism in the Buddhist context.

The 31 registered participants for the Wiang Pa Pao discussions included 27 men and 4 women. They came from the following CCT districts:

District	Location	Participants
One	Chiang Mai-Lamphun	10
Two	Chiang Rai	7
Four	Phrae-Uttaradit	3
Five	Nan	5
Seven	Chinese Presbyterian	3
Fourteen	former Leper churches	2

One participant is working for an evangelism program of another denomination. Their number included eight pastors. Virtually all of the participants had some background in carrying out evangelism, and most of them are experienced evangelists. Because of the remote location of the camp (89 kms north of Chiang Mai), most of the participants took part in all of the sessions; only two participated in just one or two sessions. The general tenor of the meetings was serious, intense, and from the beginning to end, it never lacked for participation. The participants evidently cared deeply about the subjects discussed.

It should be noted that nearly all of the participants are members of churches that have their origins in the work of the Presbyterian Laos Mission; these churches today all belong to the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT). The Wiang Pa Pao discussions provide insights thus into the ways in which northern Thai Protestants have preserved and modified their evangelistic missionary heritage three generations later. They, first, provide a rough measure as to whether or not contemporary Presbyterian proselytization of Buddhists is as aggressive as it was in the missionary era. They, second, offer insights into how both northern Thai Buddhists and Christians experience the boundary that lies between their two faiths. They, finally, give us some sense of how those who are most likely to be alienated from the Buddhist context and most critical of it actually feel about that context today.

## The Discussions

### *Session I: What is Evangelism?*

The first session began at roughly 1:30 pm, Friday afternoon, February 21st. It was devoted to a plenary discussion of the question, "What is evangelism?" As the participations presented various definitions, it became clear that one issue much on their minds is the relationship of verbal communication of the Christian faith to non-verbal forms of that communication in a Buddhist context. Some participants insisted that evangelism does not necessarily and invariably entail a verbal presentation of Christianity, while others were equally insistent that, eventually, evangelism included verbal witnessing. The difference in the two emphases was largely one of tactics rather than strategy, and all of the participants clearly agreed that evangelism is a communication process with a goal. It presents a message aimed at convincing people who are not Christians to become Christians.

As the discussion progressed, it became apparent that most of those present felt that evangelism necessarily includes both telling people about the Christian faith and demonstrating Christian love in visible ways. In one particularly enlightening exchange, one individual agreed that Christians must be good examples, but he still averred that they must at times speak the Christian message. A second speaker concurred with these comments and went on to note that the best way to combine speaking and effective loving is by doing

evangelism on a personal, one-to-one basis. A third participant, while not at all disagreeing with these comments, stated that a sense of love, both in actions and words, was key to presenting the Christian faith in a northern Thai context. He noted that Western missionaries in the past engaged in aggressive evangelism that included criticizing Thai culture and religion; the missionaries used Jesus, he argued, to try to gain a religious "victory" over the Thai people. He went on to state that (roughly translated), "A better way to show Jesus to Thais is through loving actions. There has to be both a verbal presentation and loving actions." Still another person reinforced the thought that evangelism will not be effective in northern Thailand if it is only a matter of words—if it lacks actions as well. She urged that evangelism has to be seen as a process rather than a discrete act.

During the course of this entire first session, the participants virtually ignored mass evangelism, publicity campaigns, revival meetings, and the like. Private conversations around the dinner table suggested that these evangelists felt that mass evangelistic strategies do not work with northern Thais, and discussion later in the consultation provided examples where Christian mass communication approaches had actually proven disastrously offensive to northern Thai Buddhists. One veteran evangelist said later on in the meetings that he himself had gone through a "conversion" of sorts, from depending on printed literature and evangelistic crusades to doing personal evangelism. A young pastor from a rural church near Chiang Mai stated, " 'direct sales' doesn't work; people don't like it and will flee from it." He used the term "direct sales" in English, meaning aggressive public relations-style salesmanship. Looking in another direction, all of the participants agreed that Christian evangelism should wrap itself in northern Thai cultural forms to one degree or another, but few felt that cultural forms held the key to successful evangelism. Time and again, speaker after participant asserted that the only fruitful way to conduct evangelism in northern Thailand is through loving personal relations.

Much of the discussion in this first session actually anticipated the topic of the second session, which had to do with evangelistic methods. In the meantime, a number of participants continued to "chew" on the definition of evangelism, playing with various individual words and sometimes contradicting each other in their preference for one word or another. One or two individuals found this exercise trying, and one person, in particular, stated with some obvious impatience that whatever words are used for "evangelism," the important thing is the Gospel. Another participant laid much of the matter to rest by observing that all of the several words bandied about as terms for evangelism were helpful, each in their own way. Each adds something to our understanding of evangelism as a communication process involving both loving and telling. To which statement, yet another participant responded by concluding, "Yes, that is right. In the end, however, Jesus is the key. Jesus is the heart of the matter."

The sense of the consultation after this first session, then, was that evangelism is generally, but not invariably, a process of verbal communication mixed with loving actions. It is not aggressive, abusive, or given to gimmickry. It is, at its most effective, loving and other oriented. It is personal. Absent from the discussion (and, by and large, from the consultation) and in contrast to the older missionary approach was any anti-Buddhist rhetoric.

### *Session II: What is the most effective way to do evangelism in a Buddhist Context?*

Session II began at roughly 7:00 pm, Friday, February 21st, after the evening meal. After a brief summary of the afternoon's discussions, the consultation proceeded to consider the question, "What is the most effective way to do evangelism?" The participants were divided into three smaller discussion groups by the simple method of counting off by threes and went to their respective corners for an extended consideration of the question. As usual, the discussions were lively with every individual contributing at least once and, for most, several times. At the end of the allotted period, each group was asked to post the results of its discussion, recorded on large sheets of paper, and all of the participants were invited to peruse each of the summaries. There were no formal presentations of the discussions of each group, such summary

presentations (in the experience of the author) being frequently long-winded and often representing only the personal opinions of the reporter. We closed with a brief further discussion in which the participants offered their reactions to their own group discussions and the summaries of the other two groups.

The three individual groups, as might be expected, did not differ a great deal in their conclusions as to what constitutes the best way to conduct evangelism. Group One emphasized personal evangelism based on creating good relationships with individuals, families, and larger communities. The group insisted that the evangelist herself must live a good Christian life, one that sets a good example for others. The group felt that from this base of interpersonal relationships the evangelist can then use a variety of communication strategies to reach people with the Christian message. Group Two described three aspects necessary for the conduct of successful evangelism: first, build personal relationships; two, take part in community life; and, three, feel a personal sense of commitment to evangelism. Group Three created a three-tiered set of activities. The highest level, again, emphasized building strong, positive personal and communal relationships. Such activities included establishing cell groups that included potential converts ("inquirers" in the old missionary language) and teaching English. The second level involved community and social action, and the third and lowest level of evangelistic endeavor called for the use of northern Thai cultural forms in communicating the Christian message.

To this point, the question of the use of culture in evangelistic communication had not received a great deal of attention, and Group Three put it on the table in a somewhat hesitant, retiring manner that suggested it was not a major issue. In fact, it did become a major issue, one that was anticipated by comments made during the small group discussions by participants in one of the groups. One of those participants argued that when Christians attend Buddhist ceremonies, such as funerals or temple festivals, it is crucial that they not wai (bring the palms of their hands together in the raised position of respect) during formal Buddhist ritual. In this way, Christians show their faith in a silent, non-participatory form of evangelism. It should be noted here that in the eyes of many Thais failing to wai during Buddhist ritual is considered extremely bad manners and disrespectful of religion and of those taking part in the ritual. The received tradition of Protestant Christians, however, has been that to wai during Buddhist ceremonies is tantamount to worshipping a false god.

Other members of the group did not notice this point then, but the larger issue of Christianity and culture was now lurking in the background. The small group discussions also began to consider how northern Thai Buddhists looked upon their Christian neighbors. One participant argued that Christians are now more accepted in village life than they used to be as can be seen by the fact that Christians are now more often selected to be local leaders—perhaps, he speculated, because Christian leaders are more honest and capable than are other leaders in the villages. Another participant, however, was skeptical and claimed that the general image others have of Christians is that "we are the people who distribute pamphlets." These comments were made as part of the more general discussions on how to evangelize northern Thais and the insight that personal relationships are the key. The unresolved question behind these two observations, in fact, concerns the attitudes the general northern Thai populace take towards Christians.

One of the district leaders from Nan summarized the collective sense of the small groups as described on their sheets in three points. Effective evangelism, as she summed up the discussions, depends upon: building personal relations with individuals, their families, and their community as the starting point; showing love and carrying out acts of social help are also very important as is using local culture as the means of communication. The rest of the consultation readily accepted her first two points, regarding building relationships and showing love, but the third point jolted the large group into an intense discussion of the problems of using local culture in the church. Inevitably, the question came back to one of the central issues facing virtually all northern Thai Christians and their churches, namely the intimate relationship between northern Thai culture and Buddhism. As stated by one participant, the question is one of propriety.

What can Christians do and what are they forbidden from doing? Questions related to performing the wai in Buddhist ritual contexts, as mentioned above, are simply a subset of this larger issue.

It happened that a visitor, who works for the CCT's Pastoral Care & Theological Education Unit, attended this session, and he offered the following four point test for Christian use of cultural forms in the life of the church, including for evangelism: Does the action under consideration honor God? Does it violate our personal conscience? Does it create obstacles for evangelism? Does it cause other church members to stumble? While such guidelines sound simple and practical, they still require judgments that many northern Thai Christians may feel inadequate to make for themselves. The potential for conflict and misunderstanding is not reduced, nor are the inner conflicts of individual Christians who have to weigh religious strictures in light of and even against social expectations.

### *Session III "How Can the Churches conduct Effective Evangelism?"*

After a short break on Friday evening, February 21st, the consultation reconvened for its third session, a general session on the subject of the best way for local churches to carry out evangelistic ministries. How, that is, do the churches relate to their Buddhist contexts in light of Christ's commandment in Matthew 28 to make disciples of the world? It should be remembered that this consultation was composed almost exclusively of members of ethnic northern Thai churches belonging to the Church of Christ in Thailand, the oldest Protestant denomination in the country. Other, invariably more conservative Christian groups view the CCT as being weak in evangelism, and this consultation of CCT evangelists fully agreed with that assessment. They feel disappointed with their denomination and its churches, and most of what followed in this session was an attempt to understand why CCT churches do not engage in evangelism more actively.

The discussion began with the statement by one participant that the churches have to know the Gospel. He emphasized the importance of Christian education. If the churches do not conduct strong programs of Christian education, they will not be able to conduct evangelism effectively because the members do not know their faith. Another participant immediately followed these comments with the question, "Why is it the churches do not do evangelism?" He proceeded to answer his own question by asserting that the problem with the churches is that they do not know the Bible. Church leaders do not explain the Bible according to what is actually written. This being the case, he asked rhetorically, how then can they conduct evangelism.

The discussion then turned to trying to find the causes of the CCT's failure in evangelism, one speaker arguing that a key problem lay in theological education. The churches do not select theological students and, by implication, a strong personal faith and a commitment to evangelism is not one of the criteria for their selection. Another participant added that pastors are another serious problem because they do not show a commitment to evangelism, and he urged the consultation to focus on them as a key source of the problem of evangelism. A third member of the consultation tried to shift the discussion back to the original question of how the churches can best carry out their own evangelism by urging that church members must focus on their life in Christ. They have to be willing to volunteer, that is to give themselves in carrying out the work of the church. In the course of things, he went on to say, they must also know how their religious faith differs from that of other religions. He then concluded by returning to the Christian message, the Good News. Jesus is life, he stated, and the issue of evangelism actually has to do with the nature of life in Christ. These comments, however, led another participant to return the consultation's attention to the pastors by arguing that members will live out their evangelistic commitment only when pastors show them how to do so by example. The problem is that pastors show no interest in evangelism; they seem to think that their only job is "to keep members from leaving the church." Pastors should teach their members that evangelism is a duty, and they should teach members how to plan for and carry out evangelism. Standing outside of this discussion for a moment, the course of these conversations suggested that for the large majority of members of CCT churches evangelism does not play a part in their relationship to their larger society.

Members do not see themselves as evangelists. They do not see their relationships with people of other faiths as opportunities to witness for their own faith.

An elder from Wiang Pa Pao stated that one way to begin to do evangelism is to lay the groundwork for evangelism by becoming involved in local government and local activities. Christians should start with social involvement in order to show people that they have new lives. They should teach people to do what is good. One of the participants from Nan observed, however, that many churches are involved in local community life, including local government, and people often trust church members to be community leaders. In fact, in some communities church members behave too much like the rest of the community, for example in their drinking habits. Even with all of this involvement, however, the churches do not carry out evangelism. Involvement in local community life, she concluded, does not in and of itself hold the key to evangelistic success.

The discussion then ranged back and forth across the question of why the churches fail to carry out evangelism and what they should do to correct the failure. Some participants strongly emphasized the nature of evangelism as a duty, arguing that the churches failed to understand its evangelistic duty and failed to teach that duty to its members. At the same time, one participant noted, the churches also fail to demonstrate their Christian love of others; they fail to involvement themselves in a loving way in the lives of their local communities. One individual offered the use of prayer as a concrete example of what churches can do. He stated that church members should go and pray for non-Christian neighbors who are ill. Such prayers, he noted, sometimes result in miraculous healings, which in turn communicates God's compassion to those who are not Christians.

Still, the main course of this discussion on local church strategies for evangelism returned persistently to the fact that local church leaders, particularly pastors, do not have a commitment to evangelism. Some participants urged the need for training programs in evangelism, and one elder from District Four, Phrae-Uttaradit, called for training of local members in personal communication skills in their own churches. He pointed to the necessity of church members being able to share their faith in a personal way with their neighbors—a non-threatening way that did not make those neighbors feel negative about the Christian faith.

It will be noted that throughout much of this discussion relatively few concrete and positive suggestions concerning the ways churches could carry out successful evangelism were made. The tone of much of the conversation was negative and discouraged, and even the call for training of local members did not ground itself in a clear sense of what members should be trained to do specifically. Some participants felt that the focus of such training should be on motivation, that is, on creating a deeper awareness of the importance of evangelism. Others warned that it is useless to send out untrained people to do evangelism because they do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to do it well. In spite of the fact that most of the participants in this consultation were experienced evangelists, their discussion of local church involvement in evangelism was surprisingly theoretical. A participant from District One, Chiang Mai, for example argued that Bible study is an important key to fostering evangelism. If church members will only read their Bibles, they will "wake up" as Christians and the churches will began to make progress in evangelism. How such an approach actually works was not made clear.

Only one young pastor, from District Four, offered a concrete example of what can be done. He described how he had been working in his congregation for some eighteen months trying to build an evangelistic team. Working with the church council, he had set goals for evangelism and then involved a number of members in a team ministry. He indicated that the members did not actually need special training for evangelism. They already had the communication skills they needed, the problem being that the church had never made use of their skills. It was at this point that the pastor from District One observed, as we saw above, that the "direct sales" approach does not work; people do not like it and will flee from it. He stated

that those engaged in sharing their faith with people of other faiths should use the model of Christ, which was shown in Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. Evangelists, that is, should only gradually introduce religious topics into their conversions with other people.

Exchanges of this type, in which the participants debated the pros and the cons, the possibilities and the obstacles of evangelism in a Buddhist context indicated the seriousness with which the consultation took these discussions. It treated evangelism as a serious form of interfaith communication and recognized that it cannot be gimmicky—that it involves some sense of being concerned for and oriented to the other. Although, obviously, the more personal approach can still be superficial and a form of headhunting proselytization, the participants in the consultation seemed largely concerned to move beyond simply getting people to change their religious affiliation. They shared a sense that evangelists have to live on the boundaries of their faith and know how to speaking personally and meaningfully across those boundaries.

The evening closed with the question, "Do you know of churches that provide models for how to conduct successful evangelistic programs locally?" An elder from the Pa Gniew Church, Wiang Pa Pao, shared his church's approach, which is to use the Christian organization, Compassion, to help connect with their community. Compassion provides scholarships for children to go to school with the expectation that the children will become involved in a program of Christian education. Among other activities, the church sponsors a major Christmas celebration for the children and their families, and the elder stated that for some time now there have been a growing number of parents and families of these scholarship children who are converting to Christianity. The church's evangelism team, which formerly spent most of its time traveling to distant villages, now spends all of its time locally. The associate pastor of First Church, Chiang Mai, stated that their congregation has received roughly four hundred new converts in three years, part of the reason being the hard economic times in Thailand. The congregation is especially active in reaching out to young people with the aid of a cell group program. The church also trains its young people to carry out evangelism, especially in the two large Christian parochial schools, Dara Academy and Prince Royal's Academy.

The pastor of the Lamphun Thai-Korean Church, also from District One, shared his congregation's approach to evangelism. It is a new church, and when it first started, it had to engage in a great deal of local advertising including distributing tracts. As a few people began to come, the church leadership then had to actively follow up on each person. From nearly the beginning, it depended on cell groups for both its outreach and nurture work, and the church grew only gradually. Down to the present, the congregation places prospective new members into cell groups, where they receive training in the Christian faith even before they begin to attend worship on Sunday mornings. Prayer, this pastor stated, is an important part of the cell group experience; he firmly believes that miracles take place with prayer and it is these miracles that attract new members to the church.

Finally, the head of a church-planting project based in Chiang Mai shared the experience of her center in evangelism. Her work, she noted, is not church based but rather based on a center that emphasizes the use of northern Thai music and culture. Most of their work is with young people, and they are now working with three to four groups of young people who initially came to them to learn music and are now actively interested in becoming Christians. She stated that such work requires patience but has its own rewards.

After these brief presentations, the consultation came to a close for the evening with a series of statements from several participants that highlighted the importance of growth for local churches; the importance of churches having a vision in order to grow; and the thought that people who do evangelism gain rich personal blessings for their efforts. The final word from the last participant was "God is still God. The issue is not one of more or better resources."

*Session IV: "Why do people convert?"*

The very question of the Christian experience in Buddhist contexts assumes that there is a boundary between the Christian and Buddhist communities of northern Thailand. In our first session on Saturday morning, February 22nd, the consultation considered the motivation converts have for crossing over that boundary to become Christians. What is it, in other words, that motivates people who are not Christians to change their religious affiliations? We again divided into three discussion groups, and with their usual liveliness and intensity of purpose each group worked up a list of reasons of why people convert. Each group, as before, produced a large sheet of those reasons that were posted at the end of the discussion period, and all of the participants were invited to peruse the sheets. Each list was quite long and generally similar, containing such reasons for conversion as: studying the Bible through correspondence courses; experiencing or observing miraculous healings; the example of Christian friends and relatives; belief in Christian teachings, especially ethical teachings; and boredom with their former religion or feelings of being oppressed by the demands of traditional Thai religiosity. Some of the groups also listed what they considered less than happy reasons for conversions, such as a desire for attention or expected financial benefits.

One person, after reading over all of the sheets from the three groups, summarized their contents by concluding that people convert to Christianity because they are experiencing a life crisis, which they cannot resolve with the religious and other resources they have at hand. Such crises open the door to conversion. A second participant offered a helpful four-point summary of all three sheets. First, people convert to Christianity out of a concern for issues of life after death, issues that are very important to most northern Thai. Second, converts are often tired of their former religion and, most especially, they are disappointed in the highly publicized immoral behavior of some monks. Young people are especially put off by the emphasis on older people and on money that seems to pervade contemporary northern Thai religious life. Third, converts are impressed with Christian lives and experience love from Christians. Finally, They see that Christ is God and is powerful. A third person summarized the small group discussions of the reasons why people convert to Christianity with five very short points. Converts have heard the Gospel. They want to escape evil spirits. They want eternal life. Christian prayer healed them. They are seeking blessings in this life. Seeking a central thread in all of these reasons for conversion, another participant argued that the key to conversion is that all potential converts are people who are looking for something. They are seekers who find what they are in quest of in the Christian faith.

One pastor, himself a convert to Christianity, closed the session with something of a personal witness. He said that as a young man he was profoundly impressed by Christian ideal of servanthood exemplified in the lives of Drs. Tom Dooley and Albert Schweitzer. He believes that God was at work in that impression, calling him personally to Christian faith; conversion, that is, is the recognition of God's call in our own lives. God's call, he claimed, is mediated to us in personal life experiences by which converts meet and find God.

This session, Session IV, and its consideration of the issue of why people convert brought to a close the consultation's discussions concerning evangelism, which we will remember began with the question of how to define evangelism in Session I, went on to reflections on evangelistic methods in Session II, and then discussed the role of local churches in the conduct of evangelism in Session III. It was clear throughout these discussions that the participants largely shared the older missionary understanding of the importance of evangelism. They expected pastors to assign evangelism a central place in their ministries. They made such statements as, "The church that does not grow in numbers will die." They, as we saw above, deeply lamented the fact that so few CCT churches seem to be committed to evangelistic outreach. The participants were also aware of and sensitive to the particular situation they faced in their northern Thai religious and cultural contexts. They did not, however, as a group reflect the old-time missionaries' aggressive disdain for Buddhism—with one or two notable exceptions. The consultation, collectively, did not articulate an anti-Buddhist position, and the criticisms expressed by individual participants generally



were in line with concerns that many faithful Buddhists themselves express concerning certain aspects of contemporary Thai Buddhism.

The question raised in Session IV concerning why people convert, however, set the stage for the consultation's final session, a plenary discussion that addressed directly the question of the relationship of Christians to their Buddhist contexts in northern Thailand. The final session did not represent then a break with the other session even though the topic was apparently quite different. It brought the discussions, rather, to a culmination.

*Session V: How do you feel about living in a Buddhist society?*

As the consultation approached this final session, the participants were increasingly aware that the clock was ticking its way towards Saturday noon, February 22nd. The original "contract" governing the consultation was that it would end faithfully at noon, and while no one suggested otherwise several participants voiced the opinion that the time allotted for the consultation was too short and the issues too many, too complex to resolve in a mere 24 hour period. The final session certainly reflected the sense that there was more to say than time allowed as the participants collectively worked on their apparent feelings of ambivalence regarding northern Thai Buddhist society.

The discussion, in fact, opened in a decidedly negative manner. One of the participants from Nan stated that Buddhists generally do not display a sense of respect for things that should be respected, especially in religion. They do not even show respect for their own monks. He claimed that Christian young people have a better sense of how to show respect and that Christians find it very difficult to accept the lack of religious sensibilities on the part of their non-Christian neighbors. A second participant from Nan agreed, saying that in this environment of disrespect Christians face the particular problem that Buddhists generally do not accept Christians and, in particular, are not willing to listen to them or allow them a social role. She related her experience of living in a Buddhist village where there are no other Christian families. She said that not too many years ago she decided to organize a kindergarten in the village, but some of the leaders tried to stop her because they thought she was engaging in evangelism—the school, that is, was a gimmick to convert their children. She related that she went ahead anyway and now the kindergarten is going well, and she made the point that Christians can overcome their neighbors' prejudices and resistance through sincerity.

A third participant from Nan observed that Christians often feel tense and nervous in their relationships with their Buddhist neighbors because they are not sure how to behave in interreligious situations. He stated that he has numerous Buddhist friends who are community leaders, and these friends complain to him that Christians do not respect them as Buddhists. When they, as Buddhists, attend Christian worship services and celebrations they do everything the Christians do. They sing. They pray. They participate fully. But when Christians go to the temple, they fail to show proper religious respect. Most particularly, they fail to wai, a failure that is very offensive to the temple faithful. Buddhists, he went on to say, do not understand that participation in their rites and ceremonies puts us in danger of breaking certain biblical commandments. To them the Christian failure to conduct themselves "properly" is nothing less than a matter of disrespect for the Buddhist religion. This participant said that for him, as a community leader himself, one of the most difficult issues he has to face has to do with cremation ceremonies. As a part of the Buddhist ritual before a cremation, honored guests are asked to offer robes to the monks irrespective of whether they are Buddhists or Christians. It is simply not acceptable in the context of dealing with death for Christians to refuse to do what seems to them to be an act of religious worship. This participant has had to take part on many occasions; he does not feel happy about the fact; and now he generally does not go to cremations just so he can avoid having to take part.

As the discussion moved on, it became readily apparent that the question of whether or not Christians should wai during Buddhist rituals was both a major point of friction between the two communities and a somewhat divisive issue among the participants themselves. Just, however, as the difference of opinion concerning when and when not to wai was emerging one of the elders from Wiang Pa Pao virtually cut off the discussion by stating at fervent length that Christians absolutely cannot raise their hands in the Thai gesture of respect, the wai in any Buddhist context under any circumstances or for any reason. Absolutely. Christians, he argued, must be brave and stand up to the social pressure put on them when they refuse to wai. In his experience, if a Christian is brave enough to resist participation once, then people will know the Christian position and not call on that person again—for example, in giving cloths to monks at a funeral. Christians, he went on to state, can wai monks as people, but otherwise they must take the public stand that as Christians they cannot wai in any situation involving a showing of respect to what Buddhists hold to be sacred. Christian, he avowed, must be strong on this point.

Although no one responded directly to the absolutist position taken by this elder, it was clear that he did not speak for the majority of participants in forbidding the wai in virtually all situations where Christians are in a Buddhist context. Indeed, the comments of the next participant, a pastor from Phrae, could be seen as an indirect rebuff of a hard-line position on interfaith relations. That pastor stated that he had once lived for a brief time in southern Thailand and he would much, much rather live in a Buddhist context than a Muslim one. In a Buddhist context, members of minority religions are allowed to practice their own faith freely in a society that values peace and tolerance. Still, another participant noted, however, that the Buddhist notion that "every religion teaches people to be good" makes it harder to evangelize Buddhists because they do not see the point to conversion. All religions are headed in the same direction. And, this participant went on to say, if Christians become overly aggressive Buddhists will fight for their own religion. Although he did not state it in this manner, this elder felt that Buddhist attitudes of live and let live in terms of interreligious relations is a two-edged sword. It is fine as long as Christians are quiet. It is less good if Christians are committed to converting Buddhists to the Christian faith. Another elder agreed, saying that Buddhists expected Christians to take the same tolerant attitude towards other faiths that they have, and they do not like it at all if Christians fail to do so.

This last exchange on Buddhist tolerance opened the floodgates to a variety of observations on the opportunities and obstacles facing Christian evangelists in Buddhist contexts. One person stated that the concept of merit making made it difficult to convert people because they did not want to give up their store of merit. A second person claimed that, on the other hand, Buddhism is incomplete and felt to be so by some of its adherents; this makes it possible for Christianity to provide that which is lacking. Following up on the idea of incompleteness, a third person stated that in his opinion Buddhism is growing weaker because of the misbehavior of certain monks, which makes it easier to do indirect evangelism.

An elder summarized these various feelings by saying that he personally feels sabai chai (content) about being a Christian in a Buddhist society, while also feeling sorry for Buddhists. He said that he personally knows a missionary working in Pakistan who told him that the missionaries there have no freedom to do evangelism. In Thailand, Christians do have that freedom, and this elder concluded that Christian evangelists should see Buddhist society as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. In spite of some problems, it is easier to carry out evangelism in a Buddhist society. This observation brought an immediate rebuttal from another participant, who stated that the problems of doing evangelism in a Buddhist context should not be minimized. Christians still have to struggle, still have to take a stand for their faith. To which statements, yet another person said that, in the first place, if Christian evangelists want an easy environment they are not serious about preaching Christ; and, secondly, the fact is that evangelists do not face actually serious problems in Thailand in any event.

In a somewhat extended statement, the associate pastor of First Church, Chiang Mai, stated that Christians can feel at ease about their social and religious context; it poses them no serious problems. His closest

neighbors, he said, are Buddhists who are very good to his family and look out for them. His wife is a teacher in a government school, and they have fine relations with her colleagues. He agreed that Christians need to feel secure in their faith and that there are certain things that Christians cannot do, but at the same time, he expressed his personal sense of shame at the ways some Christians behave towards people of other faiths. He cited the widely known example of a Christian group that erected large, ugly yellow signs advertising Jesus on major highways throughout Thailand as an example of how Christians behave improperly in their Buddhist context. The local and provincial governments always call First Church, he said, whenever there is a problem with Christians, and it is difficult to explain to them that First Church and the CCT are not responsible. He recalled, as one particularly hurtful case, when the local Seventh Day Adventists held public services in the heart of Chiang Mai on the subject, "Is there really a Nippan [Nirvana]?" An irate Government official called First Church and berated Christians with strong, harsh language for creating ill feelings between religions. The pastor called on Christians to behave in a more sensitive way and affirmed the importance of doing things to work with the community, which helps Buddhists to see Christians in a positive light. A second pastor from the First District, Chiang Mai, agreed that there are no real obstacles in being a Christian in a Buddhist context and told the story of how he was invited to attend a program at a local school that also involved several monks with whom he sat as if he was one of them.

Other participants reacted to these comments by reaffirming the less open, more cautious attitude expressed earlier in the sessions. Christians must make a clear, brave stand. Christians have to demonstrate their faith. They cannot have any God but God. Christian should not participate in cultural events with religious overtones, such as taking part in the string tying ceremonies at weddings, which are the way, northern Thais give blessings to the newly married couple. One elder affirmed that he too has many good Buddhist friends but Christians still have to take stands for their faith. He also observed that if Christians generally treat their neighbors well, those neighbors will not fault them for failure to wai or take part in certain situations.

Still another participant caught something of the inherent tension involved in the views being expressed in the consultation when he stated that Christians have to be accepted by Buddhists before they can effectively witness to their own faith to Buddhists. Although he did not state the matter directly, he seemed to be saying that if Christians are too bold, too fixed in avoiding participation in Buddhist ceremonial life they risk destroying their acceptability as witnesses to the Christian faith. Other comments and observations came fast and furious as time wound down to the close of the consultation that by-and-large reflected the sense that Christians have to both act in loving ways and yet have to maintain their own identity and their evangelistic witness. One person emphasized the importance of loving relationships. Another person emphasized the importance of being constantly alert to opportunities for witnessing. And then it was time to close, which we did with worship and lunch.

## Observations & Conclusions

As has been already noted in the introductory remarks of this article, these northern Thai evangelists do not live simply in a Buddhist context. They also have their own historical Christian context, which influences their attitudes towards Buddhism and Buddhists. In general, with perhaps only one or two exceptions, they seem to have largely rejected the older missionary ideology with its blanket condemnation of Buddhism as heathenism, and they understand that living in a Buddhist context is far from onerous. Their contemporary attitudes reflect those that developed among Presbyterian missionaries in the 1920s and 1930s and can be described as comprising an ambivalent and not always consistent set of disparate attitudes. Buddhists can be good people, but they still are not saved. Buddhism has its good points, but that goodness pales before the Throne of Grace. Recent research into the attitudes of a like sized group of theologically trained CCT church and denominational leaders found a similar pattern of a majority of respondents advocating more positive towards the Buddhist context than was generally true in this consultation. [4] That is to say, the

participants in the Dong Phra Phorn consultation represent a somewhat moderately conservative to conservative understanding of Christianity in a Buddhist context. They have drifted away from a hard-core anti-Buddhist mentality, but their concern for evangelism has limited the extent of that drift to the point that they still largely share the old-time missionary understanding of the centrality of evangelism. The church, nearly all of them agree, must put evangelism first on its agenda, and individual Christians should always seek opportunities to witness to their faith before non-Christians. Viewed historically, then, it seems that, excluding a hardcore reactionary element, the CCT has moved perceptibly away from a bald rejection of everything Buddhist to a more complex, ambivalent, and thoughtful position that mixes acceptance and rejection in varying degrees.

It was clear from the last session, however, that the northern Thai church's missionary heritage still shapes its relationship to its Buddhist contexts in several ways, most notably in the attitudes Buddhists have towards Christians. The consultation reflected a painful awareness of the image many northern Thai Buddhists continue to have of Christians, which is that Christians are closed-minded religionists who are only interested in stealing the temple faithful. The participants viewed this negative image of Christianity as being one of the obstacles to successful evangelism, and it seemed clear that they saw a need to transform Christian relationships with their neighbors of other faiths from ones based on judgmental condemnation to relationships of mutual love and respect. Most of those present seemed to agree that Christians have to be sensitive to the religious sensibilities of their neighbors, and they regretted instances of insensitivity—not withstanding their basic feeling that Christians cannot wai in many situations where Buddhists expect them to do so. The pastor from Nan who does not want to attend Buddhist cremations because he is expected to participate in the ceremonies exemplifies the general attitude of the participants. They do not want to offend their neighbors, but they feel that biblical injunctions against idolatry limit their options for participation without offense in the religious life of their neighbors.

This dual context of changing Christian attitudes and the need to overcome an "image problem" shapes the way the participants understand evangelism itself. They share a perception that evangelism is a communication process that must solve the question of how to share the Christian faith with people of other faiths. By-and-large they agree that evangelism can include a number of non-verbal forms of communication but, at the end of the day, Christians must necessarily communicate their faith verbally. The collective wisdom of the participants preferred building loving personal relationships to mass meetings, revivalistic campaigns, and other glitzy multi-media approaches.

One is struck, at the last, at the ways in which the participants in this modest two-day consultation share certain religious concerns with their Buddhist neighbors and relatives. Jackson describes, briefly, how Thai Theravada Buddhism has long emphasized the right-practice of religion (orthopraxis) over right-believing (orthodoxy), a pattern that he notes reverses the Christian emphasis on doctrine over practice. Buddhist salvation, he notes, "ultimately depends upon religious practice rather than belief." [5] Without insisting that Buddhism in Thailand has influenced Christians to place a similar emphasis on right practice, it is well worth noting that the participants in this consultation devoted considerable time to issues of right-behavior vis-à-vis Buddhism and seemed content with only passing doctrinal affirmations. One might just as well attribute their attention to issues of Christian orthopraxy in a Buddhist context to Old Testament injunctions against idolatry as to the Buddhist context itself; perhaps both are involved, as might be any number of other causes. The point is that, whatever the cause, these 31 northern Thai Christians, all committed to evangelism, perceptibly share a Thai religious "habit of mind." In their particular case as Christians, that habit of mind concerns itself with how to behave properly in the presence of people of another faith and their rituals.

It would seem, then, that in some ways at least northern Thai Christians replicate "the Buddhist context" within themselves. While they may find certain elements within that context alien to them and even threatening, the results of this consultation suggest that northern Thai Protestant Christians may not stand

apart from the Buddhist context nearly so much as their heritage would suggest. Clearly, the participants find important meaning in their Christian faith. They believe, as do Christians around the world, in a personal, loving God known to humanity through Jesus Christ, and they agree with their missionary mentors that it is a Christian's duty to share this saving knowledge with others. Yet, unlike their Protestant forbearers, they concern themselves centrally not with what they must believe to be saved, but rather with what they must do and not do to rightly live out their allegiance to God. Perhaps we need a new category to encompass their particular approach to the Christian faith, something like "Theravada Protestantism."

In the end, however, the theme that stuck out perhaps most clearly in this consultation was the participant's search for a balance between verbal and non-verbal forms of evangelistic witnessing. The majority of those present seemed to favor verbal witnessing as the primary means for bringing non-Christians into the faith while realizing that loving actions have to accompany the words; a minority seemed to prefer relying centrally on loving actions while agreeing that eventually there have to be words, too. These evangelists, collectively, do not want to trick or fool people into conversion. They do not want a phony or spur of the moment mere switching of religious labels. They realize that, finally, they have to approach northern Thais of other faiths as northern Thais themselves with a loving, verbal message that makes contextual sense. They are still wrestling with how best to make sense within northern Thai culture, but they as they wrestle they are evidently and quietly moving towards some degree of reconciliation with their Buddhist context.

### End Notes

- [1] Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao* (New York: Revell, 1912), 78-79.
- [2] Charles H. Crooks, "Institutional Evangelistic Work," *Assembly Herald* 22, 5 (May 1916): 248.
- [3] Shields to Brown, 30 August 1898, v. 15, BFM; and, Harris to Brown, 8 June 1898, v. 15, BFM.
- [4] Patricia McLean, "Thai Protestant Christianity: a Study of Cultural and Theological Interactions between Western Missionaries (the American Presbyterian Mission and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) and Indigenous Thai Churches (the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Associated Churches of Thailand—Central)" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2002), 235.
- [5] Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), 21.