

# **Remaking the Sapha: Demographic Change and the Church of Christ in Thailand 1982-2001**

**Herb Swanson**

## **Introduction**

The future of the "mainline" churches in the West looks problematic, perhaps even grim. Philip Hughes' article in Herb 2 and the review of Andrew Walls' article on global Christian demographic change in HeRB 1 are but a small taste of the growing body of data all pointing in the same direction. The Church in the West is facing a serious time of testing; Christianity is declining in its most recent homeland.

Statistics kept by the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) over the last two decades, including two special projects aimed at collecting accurate and reliable data (in 1997 and 2001), paint a startlingly different picture compared to what is happening in the West. Between 1982 and 2001, the CCT grew from a small body of 33,390 total members to a much larger denomination encompassing 128,793 baptized members (communicant and non-communicant). That is a growth rate of 285.7% in just twenty years. Cynics will immediately point out that in that period the CCT incorporated two large Baptist tribal bodies, the Lahu Baptist Convention (LBC) in 1992 and the Karen Baptist Convention (KBC) in 1995, totaling nearly 40,000 members between them at the time of admission. Still, between 1997 and 2001, after those two bodies had joined, the CCT increased its membership by some 20.1% in just four years; District 19 (the former KBC) grew somewhat faster than that rate, at 25.5%, while District 18 (the old LBC) grew at a rate of 18.7% or slightly less than the overall CCT rate. Which is to say, the addition of these two groups of churches increased the overall size of the CCT perceptibly, but has not added much, if anything, to its rate of growth. See Table One, below.

A closer look at the CCT's growth in membership since 1982 offers some important insights into the near past, present, and near future of the CCT. More than anything else, those figures reveal that the CCT is going through an important period of internal cultural change unlike anything that it has experienced since it was founded in 1934. Originally a church dominated numerically by ethnic northern Thais whose churches had been founded under the aegis of American Presbyterian missionary work dating from the 1840s, by 2001 ethnic tribal churches and churches of a multi-national Baptist heritage had established themselves as the largest groups within the CCT.

Beneath all of these cheerful statistics of growth, however, there lurks one other quiet statistic. Between 1997 and 2001, the CCT increased its numbers of members in every age category except one, the exception being children ages 1 to 15. Although in absolute numbers that age bracket did increase, as a percentage of the whole it fell by nearly 4%. The CCT represents "mainline" Protestantism in Thailand, and perhaps a mainline fate awaits it down the line.

Table One  
CCT Membership Statistics 1982-2001

District	1982	1992	1997	2001	% Change	% Change	% Change
					1982-2001	1992-2001	1997-2001
1	6,931	8,062	10,003	10,288	48.43%	27.61%	2.85%
2	8,715	10,725	14,735	17,765	103.84%	65.64%	20.56%
3	1,798	2,185	2,095	2,209	22.86%	1.10%	5.44%
4	2,032	2,326	2,202	2,690	32.38%	15.65%	22.16%
5	1,750	1,938	2,903	2,845	62.57%	46.80%	-2.00%
6	2,019	3,180	3,098	3,328	64.83%	4.65%	7.42%
7	2,775	4,825	7,803	8,058	190.38%	67.01%	3.27%
8	504	550	690	747	48.21%	35.82%	8.26%
9	530	600	826	916	72.83%	52.67%	10.90%
10	1,728	2,319	4,553	5,067	193.23%	118.50%	11.29%
11	534	910	798	853	59.74%	-6.26%	6.89%
12	1,524	3,829	7,006	11,562	658.66%	201.69%	65.03%
13	1,065	1,160	1,732	2,165	103.29%	86.64%	25.00%
14	1,485	1,579	1,325	1,385	-6.73%	-12.29%	4.53%
15		1,950	2,349	2,593		32.97%	10.39%
16		641	2,149	3,433		435.57%	59.75%
17		891	1,187	1,398		56.90%	17.78%
18			13,631	16,185			18.74%
19			28,133	35,306			25.50%
Total	33,390	47,670	107,218	128,793	285.72%	170.18%	20.12%

### An Overview of the Data

While the numerical growth of the CCT's nineteen districts obviously varies widely, it is striking that since 1982 only one district has dropped in its numbers, that being District 14 (-6.73%). District 14, comprising former leper churches, split off from District 1 in the 1970s. All but two of the fourteen districts in 1982 experienced at least 40% growth by 2001. It should also be noted that the "champion of CCT church growth statistics," District 12 (Chinese Baptist) is one of the CCT's "old" districts, yet another indication that CCT growth has not come simply through the incorporation of the KBC and LBC in the mid-1990s. In general, it is striking how few negative percentages appear in Table One. District 14, as noted, is the only district to show a general decline over the past twenty years; District 5 (Nan) has seen a recent drop in its total membership but shows substantial growth over the longer run. Still, it cannot be denied that by-and-large it is the high numbered districts, the ones most recently added to the CCT, that are enjoying the largest percentages of growth.

The significance of the CCT's demographic growth can be partly measured by comparing its figures to those of the general population. Thai Government census data (from the National Statistical Office's website at [www.nso.go.th](http://www.nso.go.th)) shows that in the last twenty years the nation's population grew from 44,824,540 in 1980 to 60,606,947 in 2000 (35%) while the CCT grew between 1982 and 2001 by 285.72%, as stated earlier. Looking at the situation before the LBC and KBC joined in the mid-1990s, it is notable that between 1980 and 1990 the general population of Thailand grew by some 21.7% while the CCT increased in size by 42.8% between 1982 and 1992. The "old CCT," that is, was already growing twice as rapidly as

the general population even before it incorporated the LBC and KBC. By way of more recent comparison, between 1990 and 2000 Thailand's population increased at an annual rate of 1.05%, while the CCT's membership grew by a total of 20.1% between 1997 and 2002. My sense is that we can't simply divide 20.1% by four to arrive at annual growth rate of about 5% per year for the CCT, but clearly the CCT today continues to grow in size at a much higher rate than the total population. That rate of increase, in fact, looks to be much higher even than the CCT's growth rate before the 1990s.

While we can speculate as to why the CCT has been growing at such impressive rates, relative to the general population, the fact is that we don't really know why. Some of the CCT's districts, as well as individual churches, are engaging in relatively aggressive evangelism. Tribal birth rates are surely higher than the general population so that CCT growth figures benefit from its high percentage of tribal church members. Yet, a review of the districts' rate of growth between 1992 and 2001 and between 1997 and 2001 (Table One) reveals that only District 14 is clearly failing to keep up with national population increases. Districts 3 and 11 are apparently just barely keeping pace. Since 1997, Districts 1 and 5 seem to have lost growth momentum as well, but then for the same period, the figures for District 14 have picked up slightly. Otherwise, the CCT's statistics indicate generally church-wide growth at levels that vary from slightly above to impressively greater than the growth of Thailand's population of just over 1% annually.

At a CCT meeting held in January 2002, I had a chance to ask representatives from several of the high growth districts about their statistical increases in membership between 1997 and 2001. The Moderator of District 16 (Sangklaburi, Karen Baptist) affirmed that the district was rapidly growing in numbers, but he could not really explain why. It seemed almost commonplace to him that churches grow statistically. The District Coordinator for District 4 (Phrae), on the other hand, initially denied that the district's churches had grown by over 20% since 1997. He felt that there was a mistake in the numbers. A companion from that district, however, reminded him off the top of his head of two District 4 churches that have been growing in recent years. Brief discussions with representatives from District 2 (Chiang Rai) and District 10 (Karen Baptist) elicited no more information as to why the churches of those districts are growing at healthy rates.

Even where the CCT is not engaging in aggressive evangelism and where its birth rates are probably no higher than those of the general population, it is growing. Why? Church historians attribute the growth of the early church to a variety of factors, but two seem to stand out. The first was the person of Jesus. The second was the quality of Christian community life. Is it possible that these two factors are still at work in Thailand? Perhaps, but for whatever reason the CCT's districts are growing in membership at impressive rates, especially in comparison to national population figures. Those rates are still more impressive, as the heir of "mainline" Protestant missions, when considered in the light of the mainline churches of Europe, North America, and Australia-New Zealand with their constant reductions in membership. (The Presbyterian Church USA website, for example, shows that PCUSA has dropped from a membership of 2,895,706 in 1989 to 2,560,201 in 1999, a loss of nearly 16%). This growth, furthermore, has had an impact on the composition of the CCT's membership, an impact that will increase in the years to come.

## **A Denominational Shift**

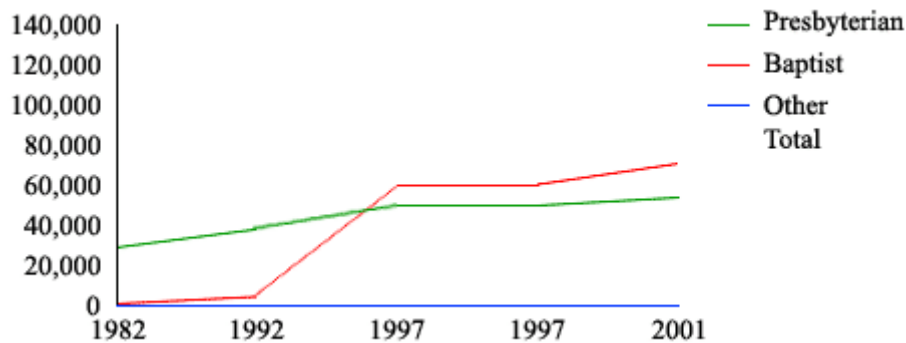
In the first place, the demographic weight of the CCT's denominational heritage is shifting away from American Presbyterianism towards a more pluralistic configuration increasingly leaning towards a more international Baptist heritage (still heavily influenced by American missionaries). Table Two (below) tells the story.

Table Two  
CCT Membership Statistics 1982-2001: By Denominational Background

Heritage	1982	%	1992	%	1997	%	2001	%
Presbyterian	28,539	85.47%	36,861	77.33%	46,867	43.71%	51,629	40.09%
Baptist	3,252	9.74%	6,789	14.24%	55,472	51.74%	71,553	55.56%
Other	1,599	4.79%	4,020	8.43%	4,879	4.55%	5,611	4.36%
Total	33,390		47,670		107,218		128,793	

When rendered graphically, in Graph One (below), the shift from a predominantly Presbyterian heritage to a more pluralistic one with a few large Baptist districts contributing to a Baptist majority is seen even more clearly.

Chart One  
CCT Membership Statistics 1982-2001: By Denominational Background



Presbyterian means here Districts 1-9, 14, and 17. The Baptist Districts are 10, 12, 16, 18, and 19. The three "Other" districts are District 11 (formerly Churches of Christ/Disciples of Christ), District 13 (formerly C&MA), and District 15 (largely Marburger Mission with some Presbyterian).

This division is far from precise. District 7 (Chinese Presbyterian), for example, includes a large number of Hmong churches founded, originally, by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). District 16 grew out of a joint Baptist-Disciples of Christ venture. Even so, the general trend over the last twenty years is clear. The "old Presbyterian" districts are growing more slowly than are the "new Baptist" districts.

The most important and apparent immediate implication of this shift is more political than theological. Up until the mid-1990s, the "old" districts clearly dominated the political structures of the CCT; the only shift apparent over time was that Chiang Mai and the northern churches had gained increased voice in the highest councils of the church while the Bangkok churches lost influence. The incorporation of the LBC (District 18) and KBC (District 19) did pose a potential challenge to the powers in place, particularly as these two "mega-districts" commanded large numbers of delegates in General Assembly. The powers in place have met this threat by an artful change in the way numbers of delegates are calculated, a change that puts a ceiling on how many delegates the large districts can send to the assembly. For the time being, at least, the former Presbyterian churches continue to dominate the CCT politically.

On the face of it, the shift in denominational heritage has probably not made much difference in other ways either. In terms of worship, for example, the almost massive influence of the Pentecostal churches on Protestant worship generally has been a great leveler, encouraging a general drift in many CCT churches

towards less formal, more demonstrative worship. This drift can be seen more clearly in the cities than the countryside; yet, one finds sets of drum and guitars being used and hand-clapping choruses being sung in the rural churches as well urban ones, old CCT churches as well as new ones.

Differences between the Baptists and Presbyterians in terms of pastoral care, as another important example, are more apparent than real. Historically (until the 1980s), the churches of a Presbyterian heritage relied more on elders than on trained pastors to care for their churches. The Baptist churches normally had pastors, but they were seldom trained theologically and gave only a few hours a week to their pastoral duties. The two systems, in effect, were much the same. Now, both the old Presbyterian churches and the newer Baptist ones are seeking to put into place a system of professional pastoral care. Increasing numbers of "Baptist" tribal students, meanwhile, are finding their way into the CCT's Thai-language seminaries where a further melding and leveling process is taking place.

In sum, the demographic shift away from the old Presbyterian core and towards a growing Baptist presence has not yet had much impact. The CCT had already worked out a "live and let live" policy that allows Disciples and Baptist districts to retain their distinctive polities within the overall framework of the CCT. The "new" Baptists in the CCT are tribal, and they have shown a general willingness to adapt to the ways and means of the CCT. This fact coupled with the ability of the old core to still manipulate the church politically is a perfect formula for preserving the status quo into the near future.

## **An Ethnic Shift**

Since 1995, when the KBC joined the CCT, one fact stands out more clearly than all others: taken together, the CCT's ethnic minorities now constitute a majority of the CCT's membership. If it were to proceed on a simple one person, one vote basis, the CCT would do well to change its name to the Tribal Church of Christ in Thailand. The general statics contained in Table One only begin to tell this story. In 1982, the CCT had only one ethnic tribal district, District 10 (Karen), which had just 1,728 members (5.2% of the CCT's total membership). After 1995, the CCT had only four tribal districts, three largely Karen (Districts 10, 16, 19) and one Lahu (District 18); in 1997 45.2% of the CCT's total membership belonged to churches of these four districts. In 2001, that figure had increased slightly to 46.6% of the CCT's total membership. Tribal membership, by these figures, has not yet reached 50% of the CCT's membership.

In fact, tribal churches account for more than 47% of the CCT total membership. District 2 has one large khaed (sub-district) that is Chinese Haw and Akkha in ethnic background. That sub-district has quietly pursued membership in the CCT as a separate district, so far without any success. District 7, as mentioned above, includes a large number of Hmong churches. Part of District 12's nearly phenomenal rate of growth is due to an aggressive program of evangelism among tribal peoples in northern Thailand. When all of these tribal churches and some others that belong to non-tribal districts are factored into the equation, tribal membership in the CCT is in excess of 50% of the total local church membership. Given these figures, it is not too much to conclude that with the addition of the LBC to its constituency ten years ago, the CCT entered into an era of profound cultural change.

It is not clear precisely what this cultural shift in the CCT portends. A great deal depends on the complex cultural forces at work in the tribal churches themselves. The Karen of northern Thailand are an especially important case because of their large numbers and their longer connection with the CCT. It is fair to say that there remains a keen sense of Karen identity among Karen churches in the North, a sense that the Office of History is finding is more widely shared even among young people than one might have thought. When the Office of History and the Ban Nong Ched Nuey Church of District 19 sponsored a weeklong "church & culture camp" for young people in 2001, the response by Karen youth and children was nearly overwhelming. Where 30-40 was initially expected to attend, the actual number was over 80. Other Karen churches have since taken up the idea of church & culture camps. I am not sure whether this same interest

in tribal culture is found among the other tribal groups in the CCT, but it is possible and even likely that the CCT is going to become an even more culturally diverse body in the future. Whether or not cultural diversity is a strength or weakness remains to be seen.

It is not clear, however, how this diversity affects the life of the CCT. Certainly, national meetings are more colorful and multi-lingual. But, the new tribal members of the CCT have shown a strong preference for remaining quietly in the shadows; tribal voices are not heard in proportion to their numbers. The pressures of "Thai-ization" weigh heavily on all tribal peoples in Thailand, and it seems apparent that tribal Christians are more susceptible to that process than are their non-Christian neighbors. Western missionaries taught the tribal churches to look down on their own cultures and indigenous religious heritage as being both satanic and inferior. The younger generation of tribals, especially Christian tribals, are educated in Thai-language schools and speak Thai nearly as well or even as well as their tribal language. That trend will surely continue into the foreseeable future.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

A great deal, in fact, is not clear. We do not know, on the basis of the statistics available to us today, whether to be optimistic or pessimistic concerning the near-term and long-term future of the CCT. That the CCT is growing statistically is a fact. Why? We do not know. In what specific situations? We do not know. Does this growth reflect the strength of the CCT's local churches? Again, we have no idea. What are the reasons why people are becoming Christian? There are a range of reasons that can be given, but we do not know which ones are predominant.

Our ignorance of what these statistics mean, apart from a few general conclusions, is appalling. We are not sure that the bare fact of demographic growth is indicative of anything other than the bare fact that the churches are currently growing demographically. By way of comparison, Dr. Peter Brierly of the Christian Research Association in Britain has produced an insightful study of the 1998 English Church Attendance Survey [The Tide is Running Out (London: Christian Research, 2000)], which reveals a great deal about the actual state of church life in England today. If, there was such a survey among the churches of the CCT, what would it show? Church rolls may be growing, but is church attendance? No one knows.

Still, the CCT can take a certain amount of comfort in its demographic growth. Although we are ignorant of the dynamics of this growth, still it is better to be ignorant about demographic growth than it is about demographic decline. That growth, furthermore, raises some interesting questions about the strength of the CCT's local churches. The common wisdom in the CCT is that the local churches, especially in rural areas, are very weak. They are poorly led and have few resources for ministry. But, they are also growing in numbers. The tribal churches are among the poorest churches in the CCT, poor in terms of trained leadership and resources for ministry. But, they are the fastest growing segment of the CCT. Is it possible that the CCT's local churches are not as weak and leaderless as is widely believed?

The implications of the CCT's demographic growth for its own life are somewhat clearer. In and of itself, that growth is not an engine for change. The CCT has so long ceased to be "Presbyterian" that it is meaningless to argue that the increase in Baptist membership makes it "less Presbyterian." At the same time, it does not seem that the increase in tribal membership is making the CCT any less "Thai" than it was before. The major institutional changes in the life of the CCT over the last twenty years, including the reduction of missionary influence and the concomitant rise in influence of the church's educational and medical institutions, has had nothing to do with demographic change. We are left, in sum, with an inconclusive conclusion. The need for further study is clear. Whether such study will take place and who will do it is, unfortunately, unclear.