

"My Hope Thailand" Evangelistic Project

Karl Dahlfred



In December 2009, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), together with major Thai church denominations, sponsored and promoted the "My Hope Thailand" evangelistic project. They produced an evangelistic TV program that aired several times on Thai national TV just before Christmas. The program featured testimonies and music videos from Thai pop stars who became Christians, as well as preaching from Billy Graham and Franklin Graham, dubbed in Thai.

As a result of the program and associated church based events,

nearly 12,000 people made "decisions for Christ". Many in the Christian community (both in Thailand and abroad) were overjoyed by the number of "new Christians" produced by My Hope (such as [here](#) and [here](#)) but I have a more mixed review of the project. But before I get to the negatives, I want to say up front that there were some really **good aspects** about the My Hope project:

- 1) *Church unity on a national level (43% of all Thai churches participated).*
- 2) *Thai Christians were encouraged to pray for people that they wanted to know Christ, then invite them to their homes to hear the Gospel*
- 3) *Many local churches trained their members to be able to share their testimonies and to share the Gospel.*

Despite these very good and commendable aspects of the My Hope Thailand mentioned above, the reported results of the project (11,956 people became Christians) are questionable for two reasons:

1) **An over-simplification of the Gospel:**

In the brochure ([PDF](#)) that I received for the My Hope project, there were instructions on how to share the Gospel with people really simply. While a concise, clear, and simple presentation of the Gospel is a good thing, this was too simple. Simple to the point of distortion. Translated, the brochure said:

Simple Method of Telling the Gospel:

1. *God loves you*
2. *Man has a problem*

3. *Jesus is the way to solve that problem*

4. *We need to welcome Jesus Christ (lead them in a prayer to receive Jesus Christ)*

One might hope that the preaching portion of the My Hope television program would go into much greater depth but it didn't. There were a couple versions of the program and I watched one that featured Franklin Graham (Billy's son) preaching, interspersed with video clips of an interview with a Thai pop star who became a Christian.

The gist of Franklin Graham's message was this: 'You are trying to do all these things in life (money, sex, success, etc.) in order to be happy and satisfied but it is not working. Jesus came to give you life and you can be satisfied (peace, joy, etc.). You need to ask Jesus to forgive your sins in order to fix this problem. We've all sinned (lying, stealing, impure thoughts, etc.), so repent and ask Jesus to forgive your sins and you will have eternal life. Let's pray.' Of course, his sermon was longer than this but not much more substantial.

Nothing that he said was technically wrong or unbiblical but the spin that he put on it was that Jesus is the solution for your lack of satisfaction in life, so pray the sinner's prayer and Jesus will come into your life and fix that problem. However, man's primary problem is not unhappiness but rather God's wrath against us because of our sinful rebellion against Him. We need God's forgiveness not so that God will fix our unhappiness problem but so that we can be reconciled with our loving heavenly Father who has graciously sent his Son to pay the penalty for the wrath due to us. Joy and peace are, of course, a result of our reconciliation with God but Graham was extolling the gifts without extolling the Giver. The sermon was all about what God can do to fix your problems, and not about how wonderful God is, that we would want to know Him.

Graham talked about sin only enough to solicit a "Well, I guess nobody's perfect" type of reaction, not a grief at offending a holy God or a concern that God is going to judge them. Neither God's holiness nor his anger against sin made an appearance in the sermon. Graham mentioned repentance only in passing and said nothing about the cost of discipleship. In a Buddhist nation such as Thailand, the cost of discipleship can be high as people can face mocking disapproval from family, friends, and co-workers when they stop worshipping idols and don't participate in animist spirit ceremonies. But of course, even if Graham had talked about the cost of discipleship in his sermon, he wouldn't have mentioned anything to do with idols or spirit ceremonies because the message was recorded before a Western English speaking audience and subsequently dubbed into Thai. If the actual cost of following Jesus was presented in his sermon, I wonder how many thousand fewer people would have prayed to receive Christ as a result of the My Hope project.

Given that any serious talk about sin, repentance, holiness, wrath, the greatness of God, and the cost of discipleship was absent from Franklin Graham's dubbed message on Thai TV, I can see how many thousands of people gladly prayed to receive Jesus in hopes of having a more satisfied and problem-free life.

2) Use of the sinner's prayer to indicate conversion:

Historically, the sinner's prayer has been a very poor indicator as to whether God has caused someone to be born again. People pray the sinner's prayer for [lots of reasons](#) and the less explanation of the Gospel there is, then the easier it is for people to fill in the sinner's prayer with their own understanding and meaning. As Sri Lankan pastor Tissa Weerasingha points out ([PDF](#)), "In ministry to Buddhists, we have observed that it is not possible to get them to make instant "decisions." Such "decisions" often mean nothing to them because at the initial stages they have no comprehension of the real implications of the gospel."

While the majority of the 11,956 reported "salvations" as a result of My Hope likely don't represent actual conversions, they do represent people who have heard the Gospel in some shape or form, and probably have a relationship with a Christian who is praying for them. Hopefully those relationships have continued in the six months since the end of the My Hope project and the people who prayed to "receive Christ" have been further exposed to the Gospel since that time, whether it be through hearing Gospel preaching during a Sunday worship service, or shared in a small group, or personal conversation. Then again, lots of the people who prayed receive Christ during the My Hope project have probably figured out by now that Jesus didn't fix the personal problems that they hoped he would, and they are back at the local spirit shrine offering incense. Before praying to receive Christ, they may not have known much about Jesus and now they don't know much more except that Jesus doesn't work.

Summary

Speaking charitably, My Hope represents widespread commitment among Thai Christians to see their family and neighbors come to know Christ, and for that we can praise God. Unity among the Thai churches is also a great thing, and I imagine that the vast majority of Thai Christians, missionaries, and folks from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association who poured their time and energy into this project did so with the best of motives. And perhaps some people did actually come to know Christ, partly as a result of My Hope. However, an oversimplified presentation of the Gospel and a flawed methodology for counting conversions seriously diminishes the believability of the claimed number of people who became Christians.