

History of the CMA Work in Thailand

Establishing a Beach Head, 1929-1941

Protestant missions had just celebrated their first hundred years of ministry to Thailand when in 1929, after three years of prayer and deliberation, the French Indo-China executive committee sent the first C&MA missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Gunther, with their baby, to open C&MA work in northeast Thailand. Forty-nine Protestant missionaries had at that time laid down their lives in Thailand but little had been done to reach the northeast or east Siam, as it was called. The last leg of their journey was a seven-day trip from Phnom Penh to Ubon. The Gunthers were joined the following year by two other couples. By 1939 there were a total of six couples. These six were the missionary force until the land's closure in 1941 due to World War II.

Strategy

Typical of what was being done at this time is this quote from the field report in 1934:

In August the missionaries built a bamboo raft and with helpers floated down the river from Khon Khen to Oubon, traveling through a district never before visited by a white man. They held meetings in thirty-four villages and sold nearly three thousand scripture portions.

The strategy was to open provincial centers and engage in intense, extensive evangelism in the center and the surrounding villages. The dry season was called the "touring season" when roads were passable, and long strenuous trips were made into the countryside by bus, ox cart, horse and on foot sharing the good news. Work was thus opened in Ubon (1929), Khon Kaen (1930), Korat (1934), and Udorn and Roiet (1939).

With the first converts one of the priorities was to begin a Bible school. This was begun in Korat with six couples in 1935.

Paul Gunther refers to those years as “when a tiny group of six missionary couples was trying, with seeming hopelessness at times, to spread itself out into contact with over five million people.” (After Twenty Six Years by Paul Gunther in The Task, May 1955, p. 3)

Church Growth

The first church was not organized until 1934. There were pockets of response though. In 1936 hundreds were reported to have professed Christ. In 1941, when the missionaries left the country, or in a few cases were interned in Bangkok at Tammasat University, there was a baptized church of eighty-five.

Gathering the Harvest, 1946-1952

Strategy

Five couples returned after the war. In 1949, three other couples from China joined them. Over the next five years, until 1952, the staff rose to thirty missionaries. With the increasing work force work expanded into twelve centers throughout the northeast assisted by jeeps, a real improvement over the ox-carts of the 1920's. Most of the work continued to focus on rural villages where 90% of the people lived.

With a shattered economy due to the war, the mission heavily supported the church financially paying pastors, evangelists and offering free tuition to the Bible school. Later on, this proved difficult to overcome when a policy of self-support was implemented in 1952.

In terms of strategy, the work of the C&MA in those early years and for many years to come had the unmistakable marks of the influence of R.A. Jaffray, field leader of the C&MA work in China and of Indo-China in its inception. Itinerant evangelism over a wide area, the strong use of literature, and the opening of Bible schools were all characteristics of the work of the C&MA in China and the influence of Jaffray.

Church Growth

In 1946, when the missionaries returned, only 42 of the 85 pre-war members could be found. But the response after the war was very encouraging. Within that first year, 189 were baptized and meeting places doubled to 20. In 1952, one thousand decisions were recorded. At the end of that year there was a church of 600 members.

Indigenization and Expanding Ministry, 1953-1961

Strategy

The big push in the early '50's was the indigenization of the growing church. This was understood as a matter of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation. The mission took steps to move in that direction.

In 1951, the Gospel Church of Thailand was officially organized under a constitution drawn up by the mission. In 1953, a decision was made to end all pastoral support and in 1955, to end all mission-paid evangelists. By 1956, all mission support of workers had ended.

The mission force continued to grow and by 1955 there were 57 missionaries on the field.

Evangelistic outreach or "touring" continued as a strong focus enhanced now by better roads and trains. By 1960, seventeen centers were opened in seventeen provinces of the NE. The strategy included the opening of street chapels where regular services were held. These were used also as reading rooms during the week where the gospel was shared to those interested.

Returning missionaries found the 50,000 lepers of the NE very responsive to the gospel and in 1951 began a work among them.

Annual youth camps were begun in 1958 and were a real success. Yearly, 300 to 400 youth gathered to hear the gospel and were challenged to commit their lives to Christ. Many found Christ and also found their way to the Central Bible School to prepare themselves for full-time Christian ministry.

The Bible school moved to Khon Kaen where property was purchased in 1948 with a gift from the Toledo Gospel Tabernacle in Ohio. It was "still the main Thai-language Bible School in all of Thailand" (Training Tentmaker-Theologians in Thailand by Wm. D. Carlsen in *The Task*, May 1955, p. 10). The first graduating class since the war was in 1952. In 1953, four short-term (two month) training sessions were added to the program.

Dick and Beulah Johnson began work among the Kui in 1955 in an area near the Cambodian border. For twenty-two years they labored to translate the Scriptures into the Kui language. In 1979, the Kui NT was dedicated.

In 1951, in cooperation with the Far Eastern Broadcasting Company, the C&MA began Thai radio programs, the first in Thailand. Paul and Priscilla Johnson, the first to head up that ministry, were killed by bandits in Udorn after less than one year in that ministry.

Work among the 600,000 Cambodians living along the Thai border began during this period. John Ellison's father, missionary in Cambodia, had surveyed that area in 1929 with Paul Gunther. John and Jean continued that work for 28 years. The C&MA was there when the refugees came over in 1975.

The C&MA believed strongly in communicating the truth not only by the spoken word but by the printed page. Sometime around the early '50's the C&MA began the Alliance Literature Department. It soon became the chief producer of Christian literature in the country. In 1952, 23 million pages were printed and by 1972, it had grown to 40 million pages.

The indigenization policy of the mission was not well received by the church and in 1953, as one missionary put it, "all hell broke loose." The work was difficult especially for the national pastors as the following quote from 1955 regarding an area in Udorn indicates.

"There is a pastor living in the area who oversees two of the groups. He holds services at these churches every other week or so when he can make the rounds, but most of the time he is trying to make a living. Borrowing money, he bought a field and put up a small house near the railroad. The people have no money, but they do give him rice at harvest time. To visit his parish, he rides a horse purchased with funds given by Christians abroad; and we help him with the cost of feeding it. The Enemy is trying to get this man dissatisfied and discouraged. He did try to resign but I pled with him to remain and pastor these two places" (After a Year Where are the Established Churches?" by John and Ruth Perkins in *The Task*, May 1955, p. 14).

Church Growth

Despite the difficulties of indigenization, growth of the church during this period continued at a pace equal to that immediately following World War II.

Growth was especially good among the leprous people. Within a month of beginning the work in 1951, some 196 were enrolled in a weekly clinic program. Two hundred decisions were recorded that year. Very quickly the work expanded to ten provinces and was ministering to over 5,000 people. In 1953, five hundred made decisions for Christ. That same year, a four-year Bible school for lepers (Maranatha Bible School), the first in the world, was opened. It was located on 24 acres of land outside of Khon Kaen purchased with funds from believers in the US. In 1955, two-thirds of the Bible school students in the GCT were leprous. This ministry continued until the early 70's when government programs assisted this group and the mission closed its clinic and later the school. The leprous church on at least two occasions sent missionaries from their group to Laos where they planted a church among fellow leprous people. During this period, the church grew from 600 to 1,475 by 1961 and had 53 established churches. Much of this growth was among the lepers.

Literature continued to prove an effective tool. In 1960, 10,000 people had enrolled in the correspondence Bible school. By 1961, it had grown to 14,000.

Paul Gunther, who returned in 1955 as the conference speaker, noted progress of the work during this period. (The Gunthers served in Thailand until 1942.)

"Most inspiring of all to one who has returned after the lapse of years is the development of the Gospel Church. From less than 100 believers at the end of the war, the "Body of Christ" has grown to over 800 members (baptized members). The Church has been organized into an autonomous body with presiding officers and a governing committee. Local groups and churches are calling their pastors on a basis of trusting God together for support...It is a far cry from the ox-cart in the roadless country of 26 years ago to the jeep in modern Thailand. Two Thai Gospel radio broadcast daily, increased production of Gospel literature, use of Gospel phonograph records, along with the time-tested methods of the past are working together to speed the Gospel far and wide." (After Twenty Six Years by Paul W. Gunther in The Task, May 1955, p. 4)

A Time of Sifting, 1962-1974

Strategy

In the 60's and 70's, the church and the mission encountered a period of real struggle. It was a period characterized by much strife and division between the church and the mission, the national committee and local churches, the well and the leprous church, as well as attack from without through a pentecostal "Jesus Only" movement. Special efforts were made to bring revival and growth but nothing seemed to bring a real turn around. Missionaries became increasingly involved in the oversight of district churches and less involved in outreach.

Many of the earlier ministries of bible school, radio, literature and evangelism continued. There was a growing focus to reach the urban centers of the NE and gradually even Bangkok. Churches were built in the cities of Khon Kaen, Ubon, Udorn, Roi Et, Srisaket and Chaiyapoom. In Bangkok, the Mahapawn church was started and a daughter church opened in Bangsue, which was later closed.

The pioneering spirit and hard work of both nationals and missionaries continued. John and Jean Ellison typified this spirit:

"Through those years, we have traveled untold miles over deep-rutted ox-cart trails, penetrating into remote villages where Christ's name had never been heard. We have seen rays of light begin to pierce the deep heathen night when new believers dared to take a stand against pagan customs. We have rejoiced to see three church buildings bravely go up to exalt Christ's name. We have often wished for added strength and more hours to carry the Good News to the many villages that still wait."

(For Such A Time as This by John and Jean Ellison in 50 Years in Thailand, 1979, p. 16)

Church Growth

As might be expected the numerical growth during this period leveled off and began a slight decline. The 1,475 members in 1961 stood at only 1,600 fourteen years later in 1975. There were actually fewer churches in 1977 than in 1963.

New Advance, 1975-2000

Strategy

As the Protestant missionary effort was now nearing its 150th anniversary (1979), one of the major focuses of the C&MA in Thailand in the late '70's was the work among refugees headed by CAMA Services. In 1979, there were 148,000 Indochina refugees in Thailand with 77,000 having already gone to third countries. Missionaries who spoke Lao, Hmong, Cambodian and Vietnamese ministered to the spiritual and physical needs of these people. The refugees were responsive. A number of the churches in the camps were larger than any among the Thai.

Another ministry that developed during this period that C&MA personnel had a large role in was work with the blind. Mr. Prayat began the ministry in 1975 and now has three of four schools helping hundreds of blind children around the country.

The strong Alliance Literature Department (ALD) work was turned over to Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) in 1979.

Bangkok

Throughout these years in Thailand, like much of the world, a great migration was taking place to the city. Bangkok grew from a small town of a few hundred thousand to a cosmopolitan center of ten million people. It had become the economic, political, educational, financial center of the country. The mission has basically used the city as a jumping off point to ministry in the NE.

C&MA work in Bangkok in the early '70's included the Guest Home, which also housed the literature work and a Thai church. In 1966, Bill Carlsen had begun the Evangelical Church of Bangkok which still continues today with a congregation of 500. In 1971, along with the OMF, the C&MA had a large role in beginning the Bangkok Bible College and Seminary. Two of the first five male students were GCT young people. The school presently has about 220 students enrolled about half of which are in the graduate program. In recent years, as much as 25% of the student body were GCT/C&MA related.

In the late '70's, the C&MA USA developed a focus on reaching major urban centers around the world in its Key Cities Project. Bangkok was one of the cities chosen as part of this focus. In 1979, the mission went on record to begin in earnest to develop the work in the city. In 1985, the mission was directed by headquarters in the US to move the mission office from Korat to Bangkok. By 1987, Bangkok had

become the mission's priority in terms of church planting. It was a difficult transition after 60 years in the NE.

The North

In 1991 the Siam Mission began work in the north among the Hmong.

The Northeast

The mission's main involvement today in the NE is the Bible school in Khon Kaen, Northeast Bible College. It was closed for three years and reopened in early 1991. A Thai director was appointed in 2000 when the school had 50 students.

Missionary Force

Throughout the seventies there was a decline in the number of missionaries. By 1981, thirteen of the seventeen provinces of the NE were without a resident C&MA missionary. The '80's was, in many ways, a period of the "changing of the guard" as many of the new missionaries arriving in the 70's did not return and those who came in after World War II began to retire. Despite the fact that many of the younger recruits did not remain, the total missionary force reached 60 people by the year 2000.

One of the most exciting and unique developments regarding the C&MA mission team in the latter years has been its international make up. The team of 60, including those on home assignment, came from 9 different countries or churches as follows: USA – 19; Canada – 9; China – 6; Holland – 2; Philippines – 9; Hmong – 7; Japan – 5; Korea – 2; Malaysia – 1.

Strategic Planning

In 1999, the mission again began to address its strategic plan. Using the Materplanning tool it has developed the following purpose statement and objectives and is in the process of working out short, mid and long-range priorities.

Purpose

The purpose is to realize a church planting movement that will impact this country for Christ.

Ministry Objectives

Ministry objectives include evangelism, discipleship, leadership training, church planting, social ministries, spiritual freedom, and administration.

Church Growth

During these years, the growth of the GCT has continued steadily. Things turned around between 1974 and 1979 when 400 new members were added, triple what had been realized in the fourteen years previous.

Regarding responsiveness of this period, a Thai Christian leader in the C&MA family wrote in 1979:

“The resistance toward Christianity has softened as the result of improved communications, increased knowledge, and the good influence of Christian medical and educational institutions. A general willingness to listen and a seeking to know about Jesus Christ is the current trend.” (What God has Done by Dr. Somdee Pooawtsee in 50 years in Thailand, p. 29)

Northeast

There are about 3,000 members in the 70 GCT churches of the NE.

North

Work among the Hmong has proved to be especially fruitful as, in a period of 9 years, 17 churches have been planted with a total constituency of 2,000 people. One of the biggest challenges facing that ministry is the training of leadership.

Bangkok

Work in Bangkok has also proven to be fruitful. Today there are nine GCT/CMA related churches in Bangkok and three others in the beginning stages. The total Christian community in the Thai churches is 600 and, including ECB, total about 1,100. Some exciting recent developments in terms of relating the Bangkok churches to the NE has been the planting of a daughter church in the Northeast by the Sukhumwit church, and the official formation of the Bangkok churches as the fourth district of the national church.

The total GCT/C&MA constituency in Thailand is 6,000 people.

Future Prospects for the GCT/C&MA in Thailand

There is solid ground for holding that the prospects for the future are bright and exciting:

Freedom we have to share the gospel in this land

Tremendous resources we have at our disposal both inside and outside the C&MA

Personnel – strong church leadership and multinational missionary team

The support of the larger C&MA body of the Alliance World Fellowship (AWF) region

Modern technology in communication and travel. A far cry from the ox carts of those first missionaries.

Evangelistic tools and mass media outreach of groups like the Campus Crusade for Christ

(CCC) – the past couple of Christmas' they have blanketed the country with TV outreach, thousands have responded. They have cassette tapes, videos and CD's that thousands are watching in the privacy of their homes.

Discipleship tools galore. One exciting tool we are working on is the SEAN curriculum for nonformal training of lay leaders

Strategic planning tools like Masterplanning

Resources of our growing city churches

Growing responsiveness of the Thai people. Economic crisis has opened many hearts. Hardly a day goes by and certainly not a week when people are professing Christ in our churches.

A good relationship between the church and the mission.

A growing vision for missions in the church and young adults are responding

No doubt there are many more positive factors that could be listed.

The one real concern which is at the heart of the C&MA is bringing it all together in a spirit of unity and cooperation under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

It is very important to have a sense of history. It gives a context in which to work today. So much has gone into laying the foundation upon which we build. As one reviews the past 70 years of C&MA involvement, one stands in reverent awe and humility of what God has done through his committed servants. We have come a long way from "when a tiny group of six missionary couples was trying, with seeming hopelessness at times, to spread itself out into contact with over five million people." Our God has not forgotten that nor the present labor of love that has been extended over this land. The GCT and the C&MA have invested much in this land. Today we have a church of 6,000 scattered over the NE, the North and Bangkok amidst some 62 million people who still need Christ. We have a strong team of Thai leaders and missionaries that are committed to our Lord and His commission. We have a wealth of resources. The needs and the opportunities that lie before us are overwhelming, but exciting. Our God wants to move across this land in a great ingathering and He wants the GCT and the C&MA to play a major role. May God help us to sense that moving of His Spirit and with one heart and mind respond to His leading and take this land for Christ.

Norm Ford

July 2001

