

HeRD #339 - Uttaradit Split

Last semester Ach. [NP], an M.Div. student at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, wrote a research paper on the withdrawal of a large group of members from the Thai Tawarntam Church, Mae Chuey, of Uttaradit Province. This congregation is a member of the Fourth District, CCT. A significant portion of the church left in April 1993 to join a congregation belonging to the Rom Klao "faction" of the Thai Pentecostal movement. Among those who left were most of the elders and other key leaders in the church. Ach. [N], with the aid of a friend, conducted a number of interviews with those who left. He reported the reasons they gave for their departure in his paper. They are quite revealing of some of the issues facing local CCT churches in northern Thailand today, issues that I would argue are firmly rooted in the past.

Nang (Mrs.) [BI] gave six reasons why she left the Thai Tawarntam Church. First, she liked the atmosphere and the sense of love she found in the Rom Klao congregation. Second, she liked its forms, esp. the sense of excitement in worship. She felt that its worship helped her know God better and to feel happier. Third, at first she was simply curious, which is why she started going. Fourth, she received financial blessings from God that made her life better. She was able to buy a car, buy land, and build a house. She contrasts this with the house she had started to build and never finished while she was a member of the Thai Tawarntam Church. Fifth, her family life was more loving and the whole family went to church together regularly. Sixth, she went to the Rom Klao Church because the pastor of the Thai Tawarntam Church (Ach. [N] himself) refused to accept Pentecostal-style worship. Nang [B] claimed that she and the others who left thought that when so many members quit together the pastor would have to leave too. Then they could come back. But he didn't leave and so they stayed on permanently at the Rom Klao Church.

Two thoughts. The first is that Nang [B] wanted her own church to change in ways that she felt would make it a more faithful and viable church. She clearly found spiritual nourishment in the Pentecostal movement that she didn't find in the CCT, but she preferred to bring that nourishment into her home church. Second, however, she wasn't willing to work patiently towards that end. When her new and inexperienced pastor proved stubborn, within a matter of months she left. Way back in HeRD #79 we looked at another church split in Uttaradit, and what we found there was this same pattern. A desire for a better way, and an impatience with obstacles to achieving that better way within the life of a "traditional" church. In that pattern, I think we see something of both the strengths and the weaknesses of Thai Pentecostalism.

HeRD #340 - Uttaradit Split: Another Voice

In HeRD #339 we looked at the loss to the Rom Klao Church of a significant number of members of the CCT's Thai Tawarntam Church in Uttaradit Province. Elder [CS], another one of the members who left, offered the following explanation .

He first went to the Rom Klao Church because he was curious about their forms of worship and their method of healing by the laying on of hands and prayer. He noted that his "original" church, the Thai Tawarntam Church, didn't practice faith healing. When he went, he himself had an experience with the laying on of hands that caused him to fall to the ground. He believed that he had experienced the Holy Spirit and received the power of God. From that time on he's gone to the Rom Klao Church faithfully. He stated, further, that the Rom Klao Church has both morning and afternoon Bible study groups, and these help the members better understand about God. Again, his "original" church didn't have such groups.

In spite of what many claim in the CCT, it usually isn't ignorance that impels its members to leave for "greener pastures." The Office of History's study of several such situations dating from World War II onwards indicates that CCT members have generally left out of a sense of hunger for something deeper. It's frequently stronger, more committed members who leave. It's not unusual for them to make some attempts to bring alternative forms into their local churches before they feel "forced" to leave. It also seems not unusual that both those leaving and those happy to see them go treat each other with considerably less than Christian love and patience. The "reformers" are as stubborn in their insistence on change as the "old guard" are in their defense of the faith of their ancestors. Our research also suggests that the result of such splits is usually two (or more!) churches, both (all) of which are weaker than the original

congregation. We have found that it also becomes more difficult to preach about Christian love in the larger communities where these splits take place.