

Dodd's Narrative: The State of the Northern Thai Church in 1887

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Introduction

The American Presbyterian "Laos Mission" established its first congregation in Siam's northern dependencies in 1868; three more congregations followed in 1880. Five years' later, in 1885, the mission felt that both it and the churches had grown sufficiently in membership and in numbers of missionary clergy that the time had come to establish the "Laos Presbytery." On Wednesday, 17 June 1885, four missionary clergymen and two northern Thai elders met at the home of the Rev. Jonathan Wilson in Chiang Mai "to organize themselves into a Presbytery to be known as the Presbytery of North Laos." The Rev. Daniel McGilvary preached the opening sermon, taking as his text Acts 2.33. The presbytery elected the Rev. S. C. Peoples as its first Moderator and the Rev. Chalmers Martin as its temporary Stated Clerk. By this act, the Laos Mission created the first formal regional church structure in northern Siam, what one might almost consider an embryonic northern Thai denomination; the Laos Presbytery, even so, was formally a part of the Synod of New York of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. The Payap University Archives holds a microfilm copy of the "Records of the Laos Presbytery, 1885-1920," which microfilm represents an invaluable addition to the records of the northern Thai church.

In February 1887, just two months shy of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Laos Mission and less than two years after the founding of the presbytery, the Rev. William Clifton Dodd, a recently appointed missionary to the Laos Mission took pen in hand to write the Laos Presbytery's "Narrative for the Year ending Oct 1886." Such narratives, frequently entitled, "Narrative on the State of Religion in the Presbytery," were considered by many presbyteries in the United States to be annual reports of the condition of their churches. This particular narrative provides us with a unique look at the state of the northern Thai church after twenty years of missionary evangelism and church work. What follows in this essay is an informal commentary on the narrative, using it as a starting point for reflecting on the early history of the northern Thai church.

According to the statistics that accompanied the minutes of the presbytery for 1886, the Laos Presbytery still had only the original four churches with which it began in 1885. Chiang Mai First Church, the oldest and largest of the four, had 325 communicant members, followed by the Mae Dok Daeng Church with 78, Bethlehem Church with 20, and the Lampang Church with 10 members. In the course of the year from October 1885 to October 1886, the presbytery had added 109 communicant members while recording a loss of 17 (4 members died, 10 were suspended, and 3 were excommunicated). The churches had a total of 12 northern Thai elders, 4 deacons, and 450 "scholars" attending its Sunday schools.

The Narrative

Dodd began his narrative by observing that the work of the Chiang Mai Church had been "enlarged" over the course of the year beginning in October 1885; it now had separate prayer meetings for both men and women on Sunday afternoons and a joint meeting on Friday afternoons. The church's worship services were better attended than ever before, and the congregation's chapel was becoming too small for the congregation. Dodd noted that roughly 400 people attended the communion service that was held during the presbytery meeting in October, most of them being Christians. Although he does not state as much, this was surely the largest gathering of northern Thai Christians to date.

His narrative then lingers over the fact the church added 72 new communicant members during the year. Dodd writes of these new members,

The character of the applicants is cause for gratitude because of the prestige it gives our work among the people. During the year there have been four Government officers received and a large number of men of good families and in good circumstances—men who are not presumably prompted by such low motives as hope of pecuniary help from the missionaries or of social advancement. The character of the converts has been such that a Government official was heard to say that the missionaries, being shrewd men, picked the best material out of which to make Christians.

This statement belies the impression contained in some other missionary records and in some of the more recent scholarship on northern Thai church history (including my own work), which argues that the early northern Thai church was composed largely of social marginals. If Dodd is right, quite the opposite was the case, at least in 1885-1886. The comment made by the unnamed government official, if reported correctly, suggests that the mission had been gaining converts of good character and social standing for some time.

Assuming Dodd's perception of the social standing of many of the converts was accurate, that perception raises a number of important questions. We know that converting to Christianity in the mid-1880s was not a particularly popular act. The Chiang Mai government was still actively persecuting converts as late as the previous decade, and that persecution had not come to an end even after the proclamation of the so-called "Edict of Toleration" by the Bangkok government's viceroy in Chiang Mai in 1878. As Dodd notes, better educated, reasonably well-off converts could not be accused of converting as a matter of financial or social self-interest. So, why did they convert? Dodd does not explain, and there is little indication from the larger missionary record that does, although a careful examination of those records with this question in mind may turn up evidence that has not been noticed to date. We may surmise, at the least, that the missionaries' religious message was in and of itself important. Something in that message caused a not inconsequential number of northern Thais to take the bold, unusual step of changing their religion—this in spite of the fact that the missionaries also demanded that they make a clean break with Buddhism, animism, and much of their former lives in northern Thai society.

Dodd next reports that between October 1885 and October 1886 the presbytery handled eight disciplinary cases that ended with the presbytery exercising "severe" discipline. He reported that four of the eight cases successfully accomplished "the reformation and restoration of the offenders." By "severe" discipline, Dodd evidently means that these eight were suspended from communion or, possibly, excommunicated, with the result that four of the eight repented of whatever wrong they had committed and were reinstated into the church. The most frequent causes for such discipline included taking part in Buddhist rituals or in spirit propitiation rites, often having to do with traditional medical care. They also included sexual improprieties and other moral infractions.

Although Dodd provides no details, the Presbyterian missionaries normally insisted on this type of discipline in order to protect the "purity" of the church as well as to serve as warnings to other members. Again, these acts of discipline were in keeping with a similar pattern in the United States. What is interesting in this case is that half of those who suffered the loss of face of having been suspended or excommunicated were willing publicly (as was usually the case) to confess their faults and humbly ask for readmittance into the church. While the numbers involved are not large, that willingness reinforces the sense that there was something significant in the Christian message and in belonging to the church. For some, at least, even public shame could not defeat their resolve to be Christians.

Dodd moves on to discuss the state of Chiang Mai Church's Sunday school. He admits that a lack of missionary personnel to oversee and staff the Sunday school had resulted in its classes meeting somewhat irregularly. He highlighted, in any event, one important feature of the Sunday school, namely the large women's class of 50 or 60 women taught by Sophia McGilvary with the assistance of Isabella Griffin and Elizabeth ("Lizzie") Westervelt. Dodd's narrative reflects thus the importance of the Laos Mission as an agent for social change in northern Siam, most particularly regarding the status of women. The mission

pioneered women's education and provided northern Siam's first salaried positions for women, hiring them as servants, teachers, and Bible women. The narrative also underscores the important role of Sophia McGilvary in women's education. She held literacy classes for young girls in the mid-1870s, which classes eventually led to the founding of the Chiang Mai Girls' School (Dara Academy, today) in 1879, and she started the first women's literacy class soon after the Laos Mission was founded in 1867. Sophia, unfortunately, left the chore of communicating with the Board of Foreign Missions to her husband and otherwise seems to have done as little as possible to call attention to herself. The consequence is a decided lack of historical information about her work, her person, and the earliest movements towards the missionary education of women.

Dodd's narrative reflects the fact that First Church's Sunday school was an important agent for social change during the first decades of the Laos Mission's history. The mission founded this Sunday school, the first in northern Siam, well before it started its first schools, and it became an important agency for providing adult literacy education as well as biblical knowledge and religious training. By the time of this narrative, dozens of northern Thai Christian women had learned to read in Sunday school, and they comprised the first body of literate women in, at least, recent northern Thai history. In this less formal educational context, the Laos Mission took an important step towards changing the status and role of women in northern Thai society.

Important as the Sunday school was, however, Dodd's primary educational concern had to do with theological education. He writes,

There is only one candidate for the Ministry under instruction nor is there any provision for such instruction or any looking in that direction. It is the great need of the Presbytery, and one which only the smallness of the mission force has prevented them from meeting. For many reasons a boy's school which shall provide theological instruction, as it seems warranted and demanded, is imperatively needed and it is hoped will soon be provided.

At this relatively early stage, the Laos Mission still intended to develop theologically trained leadership for its local churches. What is of particular interest here is that Dodd thought that the best way to establish theological education would be to start a boy's school. It is not clear exactly what he had in mind, but it does seem a curious way to proceed, as it would take some years for boy's school students to work their way up to theological studies. There was no guarantee that they would be interested in such studies or that they would want to become pastors. In any event, the mission did start a boys' school the following year, 1888, followed in 1889 by a training school for evangelists.

Dodd felt that there was a pressing need for theological training because of the growing success of the mission's evangelistic work, especially in what is now Chiang Rai Province, north of Chiang Mai. Nan Ta, the northern Thai church's leading elder and the person under theological instruction, had recently made a tour to that area and returned with an enthusiastic report. He was especially impressed by the fact that so many conversions had taken place in one village that the local temple had fallen into disuse. There had been at least two missionary trips to the north during 1886, and a delegation of Chiang Rai converts had also come down to Chiang Mai asking for missionary assistance. Dodd noted that, "As a result of these visits, there are now six or eight villages between Cheung Mai and Cheung San which include from one to a dozen or more members each."

The mission's evangelistic success, however, was clearly straining its ability to minister to and train the growing number of converts, which meant that the local converts had to take increased responsibility for themselves. On the one hand, as we have seen, the mission felt the need for a program of theological training that would provide leaders for the northern Thai churches. On the other hand, Dodd also explained that in a number of the mission's "outstations" the converts were holding something of a cross between a

prayer meeting and a Sunday school class. They studied the northern Thai catechism (based on the Westminster Shorter Catechism), the central Thai language Bible, and sang hymns and prayed together. The narrative takes an optimistic view of these developments, and of these groups, it adds, "In some cases there has been a daily prayer meeting. This fact and the love every where manifested toward the Shorter Catechism give hopeful evidence of piety among these scattered disciples." The only immediate cloud on the horizon was the scarcity of hymnbooks.

The enthusiasm for their faith that many recent converts were still showing in the 1880s is particularly notable. In latter days, we have seen this same kind of initial enthusiasm generated by the first generation of converts gained by the various evangelical missions in Thailand. There has been a strong tendency by those missions, in former years, to castigate the churches of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) for its failure to inspire such holy enthusiasm. To a degree, the criticism is well taken, but it should also be remembered that the old Laos Mission went through its own "golden age" when the faith was new and the converts felt a zeal that over the years dwindled to a more modest, less intense level. Mission records indicate that even in the mid-1890s new churches, such as the one in Nan, experienced that initial fire. When considered from the vantage point of well over one hundred years later, it is clear that "good news" sooner or later became "old news" among the Laos Mission's churches. By the 1920s and 1930s, the issues of church renewal and how to pass the faith on from generation to generation became burning questions and continue to be so down to the present. In February 1887, however, such questions remained hidden on the horizons of the future; optimism was the tone of the day.

When Dodd turned his attention to the state of the three other churches besides Chiang Mai Church, however, it appears that perhaps the future stood somewhat closer to his present than he and the Laos Mission realized. He was plainly concerned about the situation of the Bethlehem Church, located near Sarapee. Although the congregation had a Sunday school and enjoyed the capable leadership of a "faithful elder," the church had dwindled in numbers from 27 in 1880, when it was founded, to just 17 members by 1886. Dodd comments that, "Experience here has led to a policy of conservatism in organizing small independent churches." The contrast with the Mae Dok Daeng Church, situated some 20 kilometers east of Chiang Mai, may have reinforced the mission's reluctance to form small, one-village churches. The Mae Dok Daeng congregation extended across several villages and continued to be the "gem" of the Laos churches, as Daniel McGilvary had called it in 1884 (McGilvary to Irving, 19 January 1884, Records of the Board of Foreign Missions). Dodd states of Mae Dok Daeng, "Although the church has to depend almost wholly on its own members for leadership it has made steady growth."

Although Dodd did not draw the contrast between the Bethlehem Church and the Mae Dok Daeng Church, it seems likely that the Laos Mission learned from experience that larger congregations extending over several villages worked better than small churches limited to one community. Dodd's comment about the Bethlehem Church all but says as much. In any event, the gradual shift to establishing only "regional" churches that covered extensive swatches of territory has had a pronounced influence on the development of the northern Thai church. On the one hand, it drew the focus of congregational worship and life away from local communities and reoriented that focus to a central worship site, thus reinforcing the mission's centralization of authority and ministry in a hierarchy based on its own urban stations. "Church" was frequently located several hours walk away from home, and it involved considerable effort to attend worship regularly, especially in the rainy season. It is possible that this way of structuring local churches left the members in the "outer" villages with the impression that they were less responsible for congregational life and that the church had more to do with a formal structure and organization than it did with being a community of faith. On the other hand, the regional church configuration cemented relationships between local groups of Christians that have persisted down to the present. It is also possible that worshipping in larger congregations mitigated to one degree or another the feeling of being a tiny religious minority lost in a vast Buddhist sea. In later years, many of the new churches founded by the mission and the northern church comprised village groups that had originally belonged to another church.

Having dealt with the three churches in Chiang Mai State, Dodd turned to the sole congregation located beyond Chiang Mai, the Lampang Church. This church had been founded in 1880 (as had Mae Dok Daeng and Bethlehem) and subsequently suffered through a period of repression during which its chief elder had been imprisoned. The result was a feeble church, but Dodd saw hope for the congregation in the fact that Dr. S. C. and Mrs. Sarah Peoples had recently moved to Lampang. The Peoples were holding worship in their own home and that of an elder, and Sarah Peoples had started a Bible training class that met Sunday mornings. Dodd writes, "The character of the work has been largely preparatory. The people were at first distrustful of the motives of the Missionaries and their confidence had first to be won. This has been done so far as possible in the time." The primary way the Peoples had gone about gaining the trust of the people was through Dr. Peoples' medical work, which Dodd claims had been very successful.

The success of the medical side of the Peoples' efforts in Lampang highlights one of the most important themes in the history of the northern Thai church, the role of medicine as a tool for evangelism. The pioneer in the use of Western medicine for gaining the good will of the northern people as well as converts was Daniel McGilvary. As a lay physician, McGilvary showed considerable skill at doctoring. He particularly used quinine to good effect, and the cures resulting from even a quarter of a tablet seemed miraculous to the general populace. In 1869, he wrote a series of articles for the North Carolina Presbyterian promoting the general use of missionary medicine. In those articles, he drew parallels with Jesus' use of healing and also urged that successful medical helped to "tear down" the great edifice of northern Thai religious "superstition" by showing the people that disease was caused by natural forces rather than the spirits. While it is not clear that the northern Thai interpreted the healing given them by missionary medicine in quite this way, there is no question that medical care played a key role in missionary evangelism.

Comments & Conclusion

Dodd summed up his narrative description of the state of the northern Thai churches by observing that there had been "advance all along the line." He drove that conclusion home by pointing out that during the last year the Laos Presbytery's four congregations had shown a 38% increase in membership, compared with a mere 2.75% rate of growth for the Presbyterian Church USA as a whole. The year, he also noted, had seen missionary work extended into several new villages and more were "urgently waiting" for missionary visits. In light of this growth and these opportunities, he again stated that, "A native ministry is emphatically demanded and steps must be taken as soon as possible for their education and training." He concluded his narrative with the statement that, "Meanwhile we can not neglect the appeals of the starving multitude. God's blessing has given success in answer to prayer and to consecrated service; but that success means expanding fields and growing needs."

These closing words indicate that Dodd saw in the statistical growth of the Laos Presbytery's churches something of the true measure of their success during the year as well as a clear indication of the pressing needs created by that growth. From what we have already seen, however, it is also clear that he did not see statistical growth as the only source of optimism regarding the present state of the churches. He also put great store in the quality of many of the converts and their commitment to their new faith. Still, the fact that he closed with statistics indicates something of the importance he gave to numerical growth. His closing comment also shows his personal commitment (and that of the whole Laos Mission) to geographical expansion as another important measure of success. This enthusiasm for growth and expansion is hardly surprising, of course; indeed, that enthusiasm lay at the very heart of the reason for the Laos Mission in the first place. The McGilvarys, Wilsons, and their colleagues came to northern Siam because they firmly believed that the eternal fate and temporal happiness of the northern Thai people lay in their conversion to Christianity. They were committed to the salvation of the people as a nation, not just to individual northern Thais. They could, thus, not help but feel enthusiastic about the growth in the membership of their churches by nearly one-third in one year.

From our vantage point in 2002, it is also clear that numerical growth and geographical expansion posed a serious challenge to the Laos Mission. Dodd's concluding sentence, as well as his concern for developing a program of theological training, suggests that the missionaries were well aware of that challenge. Being aware of the challenge and meeting it, however, were two quite different things, and it can be argued that the mission did not respond as well as it might have to the challenges posed by its evangelistic successes in the 1880s. It made three extremely important decisions in the 1890s, in particular, that contributed to a slowdown in growth and a failure to nurture the Christian communities under its care. First, it made a hasty, poorly conceived attempt to develop a pastoral care system, which it then quickly abandoned as a failure when the inevitable problems arose because of its own poor planning. Second, it decided on ideological grounds that its churches had to be self-supporting without considering the impact of that decision on church life, which was that the rural churches could not afford pastoral leadership at that early stage of their lives without financial assistance from the mission. Third, and without any conscious decision or formal resolution being made, the mission increasingly invested its personnel and financial resources in urban schools and hospitals. The Laos Mission apparently felt that in order to support local church life in the hinterlands it had to develop a strong institutional base in each of its urban stations. The consequences of these decisions were that the Laos Mission eschewed the development of pastoral leadership, conducted its leadership development in an institutional setting, and generally arranged matters so that those institutions retained many of the leaders they trained rather than returning them to the local churches. This strategy, in sum, pulled the mission's attention and resources away from its churches and served to weaken them rather than build them up. The churches of northern Thailand did not begin to recover from the mission's decision to suspend the development of pastoral leadership until the 1980s, and twenty years later they are still struggling to put in place a church-wide system of pastoral care.

When Dodd wrote his narrative in February 1887, the Laos Mission's failure to address the question of pastoral care still lay in the future. His narrative helps us to look across the problems and issues that developed after 1890 to see that in the 1880s the Laos Mission had actually begun to build a strong base for potential growth and strong church life beyond that decade. In Chiang Mai First Church, it had a strong urban congregation, and in the Mae Dok Daeng Church, it had a model for strong rural congregations. His narrative also serves to remind us of another fundamentally important fact, one that requires more investigation and reflection. Something in the Christian message itself (beyond any thought of personal social or financial gain) as presented by the Laos Mission attracted the attention of an important, if still small number of northern Thais. Hundreds of northern Thais felt compelled to change their religion, and the small worshipping communities they established displayed enthusiasm for and commitment to their new faith.