

HeRD #46 - MM1 - Marburger Background

In 1993-94 I did preliminary research into the history of the Marburger Mission (MM) in Thailand. The MM began work here in the early 1950s. In this HeRD, we'll look at the roots of the MM. Tomorrow, we'll reflect on how those roots influenced their work in Thailand.

The MM has its roots in the German pietist movement which arose in the 17th century. That movement sought to counter-act the rationalism and liberalism in the church. In the early 19th century there was another awakening, one that emphasized salvation through personal decision. By the late 19th century, Pietism had evolved the principle of wanting to be a core of true believers within the organized church. The MM began indirectly in 1899 with the Rev. Carl Ferdinand Blazejewski. His powerful, pietistic preaching inspired eight young women in his church to become deaconesses, and he founded a deaconess mother-house for them. Eventually the mother-house moved to the city of Marburg where another mother-house was established and a seminary for missionary work was founded. The movement was called the *Deutscher Gemeinschafts-Diakonieverband* (DGD, in English "German Fellowship Deaconry"). The MM itself began in 1909 when the DGD started sending deaconesses as missionaries to China, where the women fed the hungry, cared for the sick, and housed orphans. In 1929 the MM began sending out men, called "Tabor-brothers," as well. They were sent only to China, and by the end of World War II there were 13 couples and 15 deaconesses serving in China. Between 1949 and 1951 they all had to leave China. Some went to Japan, some to Taiwan, and in 1953 the Pretels moved to Thailand. The MM in Thailand focused on evangelism and local church nurture. Several of their missionaries lived in country villages. They were instrumental in founding a Bible school department for the McGilvary Theological Seminary. Since the mid-1950s the MM has had a major impact on the life of many CCT churches in northern Thailand.

HeRD #47 - MM2 - Germany or Thailand?

Historians of the Thai church need a strong grounding in American and European church history. The MM's experience shows why this is so. Interviews and discussions with four MM missionaries, one of whom came in the late 1950s, reveals that the pietistic Marburger experience in Germany strongly influenced their understanding of the CCT. The MM missionaries saw dangerous parallels between the CCT and the "established" churches in Germany. In Germany those churches were, according to MM thinking, dying spiritually because of liberalism. They lacked a strong evangelical spirituality. MM missionaries saw the same thing happening in Thailand. The CCT was the Thai equivalent of the liberal, official church. As one Marburger said, "We have seen the terrible results of such theology in the German church." Pastors, he said, don't give the people "the Bread of Life." This doesn't sustain a Christian life. In Germany, we saw in HeRD #46, the MM movement adopted a strategy of remaining within the established church. It did not form a separate denomination of its own. It sought, rather, to reform the church from within. In Thailand, the MM quickly adopted the same strategy. It stayed in the CCT.

It is striking that the MM interpreted the Thai situation as being quite like that of Germany. It found familiar conditions here - and familiar problems! This is not a characteristic limited to the MM. In my research, I'm beginning to appreciate more and more the difficulties missionaries have had in coping with long-term cultural disorientation. One of the ways they have coped is by transforming the unfamiliar into the familiar.

HeRD #48 - MM3 - A Mistake

The MM has not been as successful in evangelizing the northern Thai as it expected to be. Why? Answering that question would encompass another book. MM missionaries themselves believe that the MM's missionary strategy has been part of the problem. It began 40 years ago with a strong evangelistic emphasis that failed to emphasize nurturing local church life. The emphasis was on personal piety. Through their work a cluster of churches soon appeared in the Phayao District of C'Rai Province. The MM eventually realized that this individualistic emphasis results in weak Christians in Germany & in Thailand. It then began to emphasize local church life more. At first, the MM pursued a paternalistic approach that seemed fitting to northern Thailand's hierarchical society. Missionaries lived with the churches and pastored them. Mission funds, medicine, materials, and equipment were dominant. The churches grew

fairly rapidly. Then, however, one faction in the MM decided that missionary dominance did not lead to strong churches. This group, composed of younger missionaries, eventually "came to power" and instituted an abrupt change in policy. The missionaries moved out of the churches and replaced themselves with northern Thai pastors. The MM emphasized self-support. The churches stopped growing and have not grown since. MM missionaries now believe that the MM spent TOO much time on policy matters. It over-managed its work. And it changed its policy too rapidly.

Observations: 1. The importance of missionary administration, policy, and behavior as the context out of which the Thai church has grown can hardly be over-emphasized. 2. Self-support again! I am increasingly believing that the quest for self-support has had a major impact on church life here - and not a happy one.

HeRD #49 - MM4 - Why Missionaries Quit

In his research into MM history in Thailand, the Rev. Emil Scharrer, an MM missionary in C'Mai, found that MM missionaries assigned to Thailand stay, on the average, about 15 years, which means 12 years actually on the field. Missionaries themselves, 9 times out of 10, claim that they left because their children could not get adequate German-language schooling in Thailand. Health was a cause in some cases. But Scharrer feels that the actual cause was the problem of being a missionary in Thailand itself. The rate of MM missionary "drop-outs" is much higher in SE Asia than anywhere else in the world. Scharrer believes that one cause is disappointment with lack of evangelistic success. The missionaries come with unrealistic expectations, which are soon shattered. Another cause, perhaps even more important, is that SE Asian cultures are especially alien. Other cultures may be different too, but feelings are still expressed openly in them while here they are not. It is harder for the missionaries to understand the people and their feelings. One consequence of this pattern is that the MM in Thailand, after 40 years, has failed to create a group of senior missionaries.