

HeRD #439 - Evangelism in a Bangkok Context I

Last month I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Wirachai Kowae, pastor of the Rom Yen Church in Bangkok, and the leading figure in the founding of the Thailand Assemblies of God. TAG is a Pentecostal denomination that has experienced fairly strong church growth over the last 20 years or so, especially in comparison to other groups founded by post-World War II missions. Dr. Wirachai explained that in starting and building up the Rom Yen Church he had very little financial resources and so had to keep things simple. He described his approach as a "friends and relatives" approach. It depends on family relationships or friendly relationships built up over a period of time. Dr. Wirachai emphasized that Thai people like good relations. He also noted that it is rare to find someone who converts after first hearing about Christianity. The foundation for conversions has to be built up over time.

Dr. Wirachai observed that as a rule major evangelistic stadium campaigns are a poor way to found churches. First, they're expensive and time-consuming. Second, the conversions that come of those campaigns aren't based on personal relationships but on a momentary experience. Third, the converts themselves come from scattered locations. The Thai churches simply aren't large enough or wealthy enough to follow up in any effective way. Dr. Wirachai believes that stadium campaigns have other uses, but they're not the best way to establish local congregations in Thailand.

HeRD #440 - Evangelism in a Bangkok Context II

Dr. Wirachai Kowae [see HeRD #439], founder of the Thailand Assemblies of God, claims to be a successful evangelist, with all of his success coming from non-Christians. He admitted, however, that his record in keeping converts in his church has, until recently, been a very poor one. Through constant evangelism his church grew, but a large percentage of converts eventually left. Dr. Wirachai also came to realize that he couldn't depend upon the members of his church to assist him in expanding its work. He was a leader who could create followers, though he lost many in the process, but not a pastor who could create other leaders. He came to the point where he had to decide if he was fit to continue to be a pastor, and as he tells it out of this crisis in his pastoral ministry he started in a new direction. Although still deeply committed to evangelism, he started to emphasize pastoral nurture and leadership training. By his own admission it took him over 25 years to learn this lesson.

These sentiments, while based on one evangelist's personal experience, reflect once again one of the definitive trends in Thai Protestantism over the last two decades. The post-World War II Protestant experience has taught virtually all segments of the church a hard lesson about the realities of evangelism in Thailand. Numerical results, even among the Pentecostals, are slow in coming. Christian losses are a large fraction of Christian gains. It requires a huge effort to sustain growing churches in Thailand. A major reason for this, historically, is that the constant emphasis on getting converts has left little time for nurturing those converts. The commitment to evangelism, it now appears, hasn't diminished, but it's being re-routed into a growing concern for the quality of local church life.