

A Church Health Survey of the CCT's District Four

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Introduction

From March through May 2004, the Office of History and District Four (Phrae-Uttaradit) of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) conducted an extensive church life survey of the health of the district's 16 churches and 7 muad (organized worshipping communities). The Office's research team included four members of the staff and six undergraduate theological students from the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University. On Saturday, 15 May 2004, this research team presented a final report to forty-plus representatives from District Four's churches and muad, which summarized the key findings of the survey. So far as I know, nothing even remotely like this church health survey has ever been attempted in the CCT previously, and for that reason alone the data collected is of interest. More importantly, there is very little data available on the actual condition of CCT churches, apart from the perspectives of denominational leaders, which perspectives do not always reflect those conditions as they exist. One of the purposes of this survey was to go beyond opinions based personal observations to discover the actual health of local churches and worshipping communities.

The Questionnaire

Two versions of a questionnaire were distributed to the churches, one for churches and muad with pastors and one for those without. The Office of History staff prepared an initial draft set of questions based on the results of the 2002 survey on what it means to be a good (or healthy) church. That is, we self-consciously sought to apply local standards of church health to the churches. In general, the number of questions on a given topic and the content of most of the questions reflects those results (for a summary of the results of the 2002 survey, see the News Item "Preliminary Findings from Phrae" in HeRB 2). Thus, for example, the present study emphasizes worship because of the significance the members of the churches themselves place on it. After considerable "in-house" work on the original draft of the questionnaire, it was submitted to District Four's Executive Committee, which proposed a number of changes in wording and some in the questions. On the basis of their suggestions, the Office of History prepared a second draft, which was again submitted to the Executive Committee. The third draft was then tested with members of two different churches, and the final draft in two versions was completed. It should be said that the Office of History staff did not accept all of the changes in the drafts proposed by the District leaders, primarily for technical reasons having to do with preserving the clarity of questions and because a few of the questions proposed were irrelevant to the research topic.

Final Draft: [html version](#)

The Project

The project research teams visited every church and muad in the district for a period of from a few hours to three days, depending largely on the size of the individual congregation. In addition to distributing and collecting the questionnaires, the teams conducted small group and individual interviews to test their understanding of the questions on the questionnaire and gather additional information on the current state of local congregations. A good deal of this additional information was not used by the project staff to prepare its final report to the District, but all of it was turned over to the District officers for their use.

The research teams reported in once every week, and as much as possible the staff used the data they had collected to begin preparing reports for each of the 23 churches and muad involved in the study. Although under considerable time pressure, the project staff was able to produce individual reports for each congregation as well as an overall report for the District. It was able to collect questionnaires from roughly one-third of the total communicant membership of the district so that it can be argued that its reports and this paper provide a good indication of the thinking of the local members concerning their own congregations. While, as will be seen below, the responses tend to paint a very positive picture of the state of those congregations, the responses obtained from the members of churches and muad facing particular difficulties generally clearly reflect those weaknesses.

The Findings

From the Church of Christ in Thailand's earliest days down to the present, both missionary and the denominational national church leadership has generally believed that the CCT's local churches are weak, poorly led, and incapable of carrying out local ministries effectively. This attitude continues to guide the development of CCT programs and the work of its agencies even today. The local church members of District Four, however, disagree. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, they collectively affirm the strength of their own congregations and insist that their churches are carrying out the various ministries of the church competently.

Table 1 shows that, in general, District Four's local members believe that their churches and muad are relatively strong. The frequency distribution for the whole district and for each of the categories in Table 1 show, that is, that roughly half of the respondents in each category state that their congregation is either "not very strong" or "somewhat strong." Very few report that their church is "not strong at all" or "not strong," and less than one in ten in each category claim that their church or muad is "very strong." The respondents tend thus to give a somewhat cautious answer that does not overstate either the weakness or the strength of their churches. The data in Table 1 also shows churches and muad without pastors and those in Uttaradit Province are less inclined to express a positive attitude towards the strength of their congregations. From the personal observations of the students (and the author), churches without pastors and those in Uttaradit Province are generally weaker in their congregational life and ministries, and the members themselves have some collective sense that such is the case.

Table 1
Question 1
Strength of Congregations

Responses	Total	Congregations with Pastors	Congregations w/out Pastors	Phrae	Uttaradit
<i>Not strong at all</i>	0.7%	0.5%	0.9%	0.7%	0.5%
<i>Not strong</i>	2.8%	2.1%	3.9%	2.1%	4.4%
<i>Not very strong</i>	22.8%	21.1%	25.7%	21.1%	26.8%
<i>Somewhat strong</i>	28.8%	29.4%	27.8%	27.8%	31.1%
<i>Strong</i>	36.4%	39.8%	30.9%	40.1%	27.9%
<i>Very Strong</i>	7.1%	5.6%	9.6%	6.9%	7.7%
<i>Unsure</i>	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%	1.2%	1.6%
<i>Valid No.</i>	604	374	230	421	183

N = 678

Table 2 confirms that the district's membership, again in general, believes that their congregations are performing their various duties and ministries well. They especially believe that the churches are doing well in worship, and they acknowledge that they are weakest in carrying out evangelism. As we will see, the respondents are by and large consistent in their evaluation of both worship and evangelism.

Table 2
Question 3
How well the churches carry out the following tasks?

Answer	Cooperation	Help Others	Community	Giving	Bible Study	Evangelism	Worship
<i>Poorly</i>	14.4%	12.4%	6.9%	11.5%	17.5%	29.0%	3.5%
<i>Well</i>	84.5%	83.1%	91.4%	87.3%	81.0%	67.0%	95.7%
<i>Not sure</i>	0.9%	4.4%	1.7%	1.2%	1.5%	4.0%	0.8%
<i>Valid No.</i>	659	655	650	652	651	649	654
N = 678							

The responses from individual congregations vary considerably, and for the most part tend to fall into line with the personal observations of the research team members who visited them. Some 78.4 % of one congregation's members, for example, affirmed that their church is strong, while only 5.4% said it is not strong. In another congregation, by way of contrast, 68.8% responded that their church is not strong, while only 31.3% claimed that it is strong. Still, in these cases and all others, the respondents show a strong tendency to give generally moderate answers, not claiming either too little or too much for their churches and muad.

The data contained in Tables 1 and 2, in sum, indicates that local church members in District Four feel relatively confident about the life of their churches. They do not, for the most part, have strongly negative attitudes about that life, but at the same time they tend to take a fairly balanced perspective. Their appraisals, in light of other data collected by the research team, seem to be usually reasonable and sensible. No one claims that there are no problems and everything is just fine, but there is also a widespread sense among the respondents that their situation is not nearly so bleak as it is often believed to be by others, particularly the CCT's national church leadership. At the same time, we must keep in mind that these summary figures reflect the fact that, as a rule, the larger churches, especially those located in Phrae Province, tend to be stronger than the smaller churches and muad. If, that is, we counted the individual responses from the 23 churches and muad in District Four, we would find a fairly large number that do not reflect the general sense of being relatively strong the general figures suggest. We can look at the matter in at least two ways. Negatively, Tables 1 and 2 do not reflect the fact that quite a few churches and muad are fairly weak according to their members' own responses. Positively, it can be argued that a strong majority of the district's members belong to relatively strong congregations.

In the absence of longitudinal data, Questions 4 and 5 seek to establish some sense of the general direction of the churches and muad in terms of increase or decline. The responses to these two questions reinforces the impression already established from the data in Tables 1 and 2 that, collectively, the church members in District Four feel positive about their churches. Some 63.8% agreed that their church or muad is stronger today than it was five years ago, and 77.4% agreed that their congregation will be stronger five years from now than it is today. The answers to Question 5 concerning future developments are particularly important

because only 7.3% disagreed with the statement that their church or muad will be stronger five years from now than it is today. The respondents feel not only generally positive about the current state of their congregations but also optimistic about their future over the next five years.

It should be noted, however, that individual interviews conducted in every church and muad suggest a very different picture for the long-term. In all but two congregations, church leaders expressed considerable pessimism about the more distant future of their congregations. They note that young people and children are less and less involved in congregational life. Even those young people who are involved in church life eventually leave their churches to do further study or vocational training and seldom return home once they enter the work force. Church leaders foresee a time when their churches will be populated entirely by the elderly and wonder how long into the more distant future they can last. Questions about the role of youth and the involvement of children in church life, unfortunately, did not figure in the questionnaire and is thus one important subject that calls for further study.

Table 3
Questions 4 and 5
Strength of Congregations Five Years Ago and Five Years from Now

Responses	5 years ago weaker	In 5 years stronger
<i>Disagree entirely</i>	3.2%	0.2%
<i>Disagree</i>	13.1%	3.4%
<i>Disagree Somewhat</i>	7.5%	3.8%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	21.4%	10.5%
<i>Agree</i>	35.7%	46.3%
<i>Agree entirely</i>	6.8%	20.6%
<i>Not sure</i>	12.3%	15.3%
<i>Valid No.</i>	650	655
N = 678		

In the initial 2002 survey of the churches' understanding of what constitutes a "good" or "strong" church (church health), the members of the Phrae churches placed primary emphasis on worship. A church that worships well is a strong church. This emphasis reflects the central importance of ritual in northern Thai culture, and however much those in other contexts might wish to disagree with this central concern for worship, in the District Four's cultural and religious context it makes a good deal of sense to use the strength or weakness of worship as one measure of church health. As can be seen in Table 4, the respondents consistently assigned worship very high marks. They affirmed that the worship in their congregation does bring them closer to God (94.2%), helps them better understand the Bible (94.7%), and helps them better understand the way to live as a Christian (95.2%). They expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their worship experiences (95.6%). Although not contained in Table 4, they also agree to Question 12 (quality of preaching) and Question 13 (lively singing) in the same range of 90%-plus positive responses. The respondents seem, in sum, to be very pleased with the quality of worship that they are experiencing.

Table 4
Questions 7 through 10
Evaluation of Worship Experience

Responses	Q. 7 Brings Closer to God	Q. 8 Understand the Bible	Q. 9 Understand Christian Life	Q. 10 Feel Satisfied w/ Worship
<i>Disagree</i>	3.8%	3.9%	2.6%	3.0%
<i>Agree</i>	94.2%	94.7%	95.2%	95.6%
<i>Not sure</i>	2.0%	1.4%	2.3%	1.2%
<i>Valid No.</i>	653	666	662	666
N = 678				

The responses described in Table 5, however, shed some doubt as to exactly what the respondents meant by their answers to Questions 7 through 10, 12, and 13. Questions 15 through 18 ask the respondents if their churches need to improve in the areas of preaching, music, the order of worship, and in the leading of worship. Substantial majorities agreed in each case that the quality of worship needs to be improved. In Question 11, furthermore, 55.4% of the respondents agreed that worship in their church "lacks liveliness."

Table 5
Questions 15 through 18
Evaluation of Worship Experience

Responses	Q. 15 Need to improve preaching	Q. 16 Need to improve music in worship	Q. 17 Need to improve order of worship	Q. 18 Need to improve worship leaders
<i>Disagree</i>	12.1%	17.6%	24.5%	21.8%
<i>Agree</i>	82.9%	77.1%	68.4%	70.8%
<i>Not sure</i>	5.0%	5.3%	7.1%	7.4%
<i>Valid No.</i>	659	660	664	665
N = 678				

The respondents seem to be sending a mixed message with these two sets of responses. On the one hand, they affirm the value of worship as they experience it today, while on the other hand they also agree that their worship needs to be improved. Observations by the research team suggest that the actual quality of worship in most of the churches in District Four is not particularly high and that there is considerable need for improvement, especially in preaching. On that score, the respondents seem to agree, but their sense that worship could be better does not appear to reduce their appreciation for worship as they now experience it.

They apparently feel that they receive a number of benefits from worship and that, as it stands, it is an important part of their lives. What emerges, in sum, is what appears to be a balanced, sensible appreciation for the importance of worship to the religious life in a northern Thai cultural context and a realization that the actual conduct of worship could be better than it is.

In the 2002 survey, the CCT members in Phrae Province felt that another important measure of church health is the members' knowledge and use of the Bible. Table 6 displays the responses to the 2004 questionnaire for Questions 19 and 20, which ask the respondents to specify how frequently they read the Bible personally and in their families. According to their responses, 58.7% of the respondents read their Bible at least once a week, including 18.3% who stated they read the Bible daily. As expected, family rates

are lower, although 39.9% said they read the Bible in their families at least once per week, including 10.0% who read the Bible with their families daily. These figures indicate that the respondents highly value the Bible and devote some time to reading it. This level of commitment to reading the Bible is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that, according to the responses to Question 39 on educational levels, 58.9% of the respondents have only a grade school education or less.

Table 6
Questions 19 and 20
Frequency of Reading the Bible Personally and in the Family

Responses	Q. 19	Q. 20
	Personal Bible Reading	Family Bible Reading
<i>Less than once/mo.</i>	15.4%	30.9%
<i>1-2 times/mo.</i>	25.3%	28.8%
<i>1-3 times/wk</i>	25.6%	19.0%
<i>4-6 times/wk</i>	14.8%	10.9%
<i>Daily</i>	18.3%	10.0%
<i>Valid No.</i>	644	612
N = 678		

The data contained in Table 7 suggests that the members of the Fourth District feel generally confident in their ability to understand the Bible and apply its teachings to their daily lives (Questions 21 & 22). They are nearly as confident in the general biblical knowledge of their congregation's members (Question 23). Again, this data stands in almost stark contrast to the attitudes widely expressed by denominational leaders and educators concerning local church knowledge of the Bible. It is not infrequently stated that "the problem" with local church people is that they don't know the Bible. I might add, as a personal aside, that in an interfaith meeting between members of a CCT church and a temple in their same community concerning their religious understanding, it was clear that even the average members of the church were better able to express their religious understanding than were their Buddhist neighbors. Given that specific observation and the data from District Four, it may be argued that local church Christian education is, or at least has been, stronger than is generally recognized.

Table 7
Questions 21 and 23
Knowledge & Use of the Bible

Responses	Q. 21	Q. 22	Q. 23
	Bible Knowledge	Using Bible in Life	Church Knowledge of Bible
<i>Negative</i>	10.8%	4.5%	10.0%
<i>Positive</i>	87.9%	94.4%	86.8%
<i>Valid No.</i>	667	665	661

N = 678

The 2002 survey of the churches in Phrae Province also identified pastoral care as another important element in church health. One of the decisions made by the research team for the 2004 survey, however, was that this survey would not ask church members concerning the strengths and weaknesses of pastoral care in District Four in any detailed way. The study, that is, would focus on congregations and not on individuals, including most especially pastors. Thus, the questionnaire for churches with pastors contains only one question (Question 26) concerning pastoral strengths. The questionnaire for churches without pastors contains an additional two questions (Questions 24 and 25) concerning the members' desire for pastoral leadership and whether or not they think their church or muad will be stronger if it has a pastor.

Some 90.7% of the members of churches and muad without pastors agree that they want pastors (Question 24), and 89.8% believe that their congregation will be stronger if they have a pastor (Question 25). In response to Question 26, the members indicated that they would want their pastor—if they had one—to emphasize Bible study, preaching, and church administration in that order. In those churches with pastors, the members ranked their pastors as strongest in preaching and weakest in music. While the members of congregations with pastors ranked their pastors strongest in preaching, how capable those pastors actually are as preachers remains an open question. On the one hand, as we saw in Question 12 above, church members do feel blessed by the preaching they hear. On the other hand, as was also described above, they also want to see that preaching greatly improved. The question of the actual quality of preaching in District Four is one that needs further study.

As is widely seen as representative of CCT churches generally, the 2002 survey of the Phrae churches and muad found that the members did not place particular emphasis on evangelism. This survey, thus, contains only two questions having to do with evangelism (Questions 27 and 28). The data obtained from these two questions, again, calls into question the generally accepted wisdom held among Protestant leaders both inside and outside of the CCT that CCT churches are failures when it comes to evangelism. In Table 8, we find that about one-fifth (21.2%) indicated that their church or muad was not intentional in conducting evangelism, although the great majority of these responses fell into the highest negative category of "not much." Most of the members felt that their churches are, in fact, intentional to a degree in evangelism.

Table 8
Question 27
Intentionality of Churches Regarding Evangelism

	Not at all	Not	Not Much	Somewhat	Intentional	Very much	Unsure
<i>Response</i>	21	22	96	239	181	74	22
<i>Per cent</i>	3.2%	3.4%	14.6%	36.4%	27.6%	11.3%	3.4%
N = 678							

This data is consistent with the answers the respondents provided for Question 28, which asked about how frequently they themselves share their faith with their neighbors of other faiths. Fully one-fourth (25.4%) of the respondents stated that they share their faith "regularly," and another 44.3% agreed that they share their faith more than once a year. Only 49 respondents of the 618 who answered this question (7.9%), agreed that they have never shared their faith with a person of another faith.

This data, as much as any collected in the course of the 2004 District Four church health survey, contradicts the general, widely held image of that CCT churches are weak and unable to carry out local ministries. We

can account for this data either by assuming that the local people gave misleading answers to Questions 27 and 28, either purposely or out of ignorance, or the commonly held attitudes about those churches are incorrect. At the very least, the truth of the matter can only be discovered by further research into the actual situation in the churches and muad themselves.

In the 2002 survey of the Phrae churches concerning what they believed constitutes a healthy church, some importance was placed on the relationship of the churches to their districts; and in 2004 the church health survey of District Four found the churches generally happy with that relationship. Some 81.7% of the respondents agreed that the district contributes to the development of their churches while only 11.2% disagreed. Interviews in the churches suggest that a recent change in the district officers contributed, in part, to this positive response as the new set of officers have shown themselves more responsive to local church needs.

One of the more surprising findings of the church health survey is the number of respondents who had received some form of lay training through the district or through national CCT offices. Nearly half (48.3%) of the respondents said they had received such training, and of that half, half again (49.7%) had attended more than one training session of one type or another. As important as the numbers receiving training, is the positive evaluation of the training events by the respondents who participated in them. As can be seen in Table 9, a very large majority (97.8%) stated that they felt that the district sponsored training sessions they attended were useful to their churches. That percentage included 47.2% of the total number of respondents who believed that those sessions were "very useful" to their churches.

Table 9
Question 33
Usefulness of District Sponsored Training Session

	Not at all	Not	Not Much	Some	Useful	Very	Uncertain
<i>Number</i>	1	1	6	48	87	126	2
<i>Percent</i>	0.4%	0.4%	2.2%	18.0%	32.6%	47.2%	0.7%
N = 267							

Questions 34 and 35 were added by the research team and are designed to test the relationship of the churches and muad to their Buddhist neighbors. Individual interviews revealed that there was a small amount overt local tension between Buddhists and Christians in just a few communities, but the data collected by the questionnaire, as shown in both Tables 10 and 11, suggests that District Four congregations generally have good relations with their Buddhist neighbors. Table 10 indicates that local church members are normally willing to participate in the traditional celebrations of their neighbors. (It should be noted that the survey teams, as a rule, explained this question to mean Buddhist celebrations such as Loy Kratong and Songkran). That is to say, the Christian community does not refuse to be present, at least, for such celebrations as it once did in the past.

Table 10
Question 34
Participation in Traditional Celebrations With People of Other Faith

	Entirely Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Agree Entirely	Uncertain
<i>Number</i>	37	49	46	227	220	36	27
<i>Percent</i>	5.8%	7.6%	7.2%	35.4%	34.3%	5.6%	4.2%

N = 642

Table 11, by the same token, shows that the respondents very much agreed that their Buddhist neighbors are willing to accept them as Christians.

Table 11
Question 35
Willingness to Accept Christians by People of Other Faiths

	Not at all	Not Willing	Not Much	Somewhat Willing	Willing	Very Willing	Uncertain
<i>Number</i>	4	9	57	183	294	82	10
<i>Percent</i>	0.6%	1.4%	8.9%	28.6%	45.9%	12.8%	1.6%
N = 640							

Conclusion

Although stated at various points, above, it bears repeating that one of the main conclusions from this survey of church health in District Four of the CCT is that the churches and muad of the district believe themselves to be in generally good health. Smaller congregations and those without pastors are less confident in the state of their church's health, but since the majority of members belong to larger churches with pastors it is evident that most members of the district belong to relatively healthy congregations. It must be emphasized, also again, that the national CCT leadership has long operated under the assumption that most congregations are in a state of poor health, which means that the results of this survey are "counter-intuitive" so far as they are concerned. Indeed, some district-level leaders of District Four themselves initially rejected the findings of this survey as being "impossible." When they were led through an analysis of the data, they began to see that they themselves had been looking at the worst cases in the district as being typical of the whole district, which is clearly not the case.

It should also be noted that the members of the churches and muad cooperated very well with both this survey and the one conducted in 2002; and they proved entirely able to fill out a questionnaire and participate in small group discussions. Admittedly, there were more problems with the 2002 survey, as many local members had never filled out a questionnaire before and found the whole experience problematic at best. The students who conducted this year's study, in contrast, found most church members quite comfortable with the idea of filling out the survey form. They reported that some of the small group discussion sessions were very lively and informative. Which is to say that, with proper preparation, sociological instruments can be used effectively with local churches of the CCT.

Specific findings include the following:

1. There is a serious need to improve the content and the feel of worship and preaching, in spite of the members' general appreciation of what they participate in and receive today;
2. In general, the short-term health of the District's churches and muad is relatively good; however, their long-term future is worrisome. The membership is aging, and young people are either failing to join in church life entirely or, after graduation from high school, moving away from home and the church. One can foresee the time, in twenty to thirty years or so, when several churches and muad will cease to exist entirely if present trends continue.

3. It is clear from the survey, that larger churches with pastors generally experience a higher degree of church health. One of the pressing issues facing the district is to find ways to assist smaller congregations and those without pastors to attain those same levels.
4. Local church members believe themselves to be living relatively good Christian lives. They give time to the Bible and are confident in their ability to use it for daily living. They find meaning in worship. Many of them share their faith with others on a regular basis.

As has been noted at several points in this summary of the findings of the 2004 survey of church health in District Four, those findings provide a significantly different picture of the health of the district's congregations from that generally held by district leaders and by that held by CCT national leaders. The issue of local leadership, to reiterate one key example, is not nearly as worrisome so far as church members are concerned as national leaders and agencies believe it to be; and far more has been done to train local church people than is generally realized. On the other hand, the most pressing issue facing nearly all of the churches and muad of the Fourth District (and one they are deeply concerned about), the disappearance of their young people from the church, has received very little attention at the national levels of the CCT. One cannot help but conclude that there is, first, a serious need for further church health studies in the CCT and, second, at the very least those who are working at the district and national levels of the church need to test their own assumptions concerning the actual state of the churches to which they are responsible.

The data presented here cannot be taken to be conclusive. The 2004 church health survey in Phrae and Uttaradit Provinces, as extensive as it was, still amounts to little more than a pilot project for the study of church health in Thailand. The questionnaire the survey team used requires considerable rethinking and retesting. Still, the data collected from all of the congregations in District Four is generally consistent, and the student survey teams felt that other data and impressions they gathered tend to confirm that data rather than contradict it. That is to say, the experience of the Fourth District clearly suggests that church health surveys are potentially useful in the CCT and could well become an important tool for program development and evaluation if sufficient time and thought are invested in them.