



# Protestant Christians in Thailand 2009

Marten Visser

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## Chapter 1 Protestant Christians in Thailand

How many Protestant Christians are living in Thailand? The answer is not as easy as you might think.

In 1978 Alex Smith, an OMF missionary, counted about 55,000 adult members of Protestant Thai churches. For a long time after that, no count was made. Government numbers range between 400,000 in the National Census 2000 to more than 1 million by the National Statistical Office for the same year. The most reliable count probably was done by the Ministry of Education. They found a total of 800,000 Christians. However, this total includes Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians.

In 2002 a new research project started counting Protestant Christians again. Now, Thai Christian Resource Center (ThaiCRC) has the responsibility to continuously provide TEC and denominations with reliable statistics of Thai Protestant Christians. The numbers presented here are numbers of people who really are church members. They do not include people who claim to be Christian, but are not members in any church. The most recent numbers available are as follows:

**Table 1. Thai and tribal Protestants**

	<b>Population</b>	<b>Churches</b>	<b>Protestants</b>	<b>Percentage of population</b>
Thai	61,638,401	2,640	185,741	0.30%
Tribal	1,400,000	1,376	137,907	10.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>63,038,401</b>	<b>4,016</b>	<b>323,648</b>	<b>0.51%</b>

This table shows that there are well over 300,000 Protestant Christians in Thailand. Over 40% of them are tribal. So far, the Gospel has had a dramatically larger impact among the tribal population than among the Thai.

# คริสเตียนในประเทศไทย

## สถิติของประเทศ

ประชากร	คริสเตียน	คริสตจักร
63,038,401	323,648	4,016



## Vision 2010

อำเภอ	อำเภอที่ไม่มีคริสตจักร
926	215

0 35 70 140 210 280

กิโลเมตร



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Population Data: DOPA  
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## เปอร์เซ็นต์ของประชากรที่เป็นคริสเตียน

0%	0.1 - 1%
< 0.1%	> 1%

# อำเภอในประเทศไทย

สถิติของประเทศ

ประชากรที่ไม่มีคริสตจักรในอำเภอ

8,186,472



คริสตจักร  
ในอำเภอ

ไม่มี

มี



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0 70 140 280 420 560

กิโลเมตร

**Table 2. Protestants per region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Inhabitants</b>	<b>Protestants</b>	<b>Percentage Protestant</b>
Bangkok	11,546,837	54,141	0.47%
Central	10,546,692	32,233	0.31%
North	6,215,099	179,193	2.88%
Northeast	21,385,815	33,216	0.16%
South	9,149,419	15,929	0.17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>63,038,401</b>	<b>323,648</b>	<b>0.51%</b>

This table shows that the only region in Thailand where Protestants form a significant part of the population, is the North. This is mainly because of the number of tribal Christians, but also because among the Northern Thai there are more Christians than among the Thai in the rest of the country.

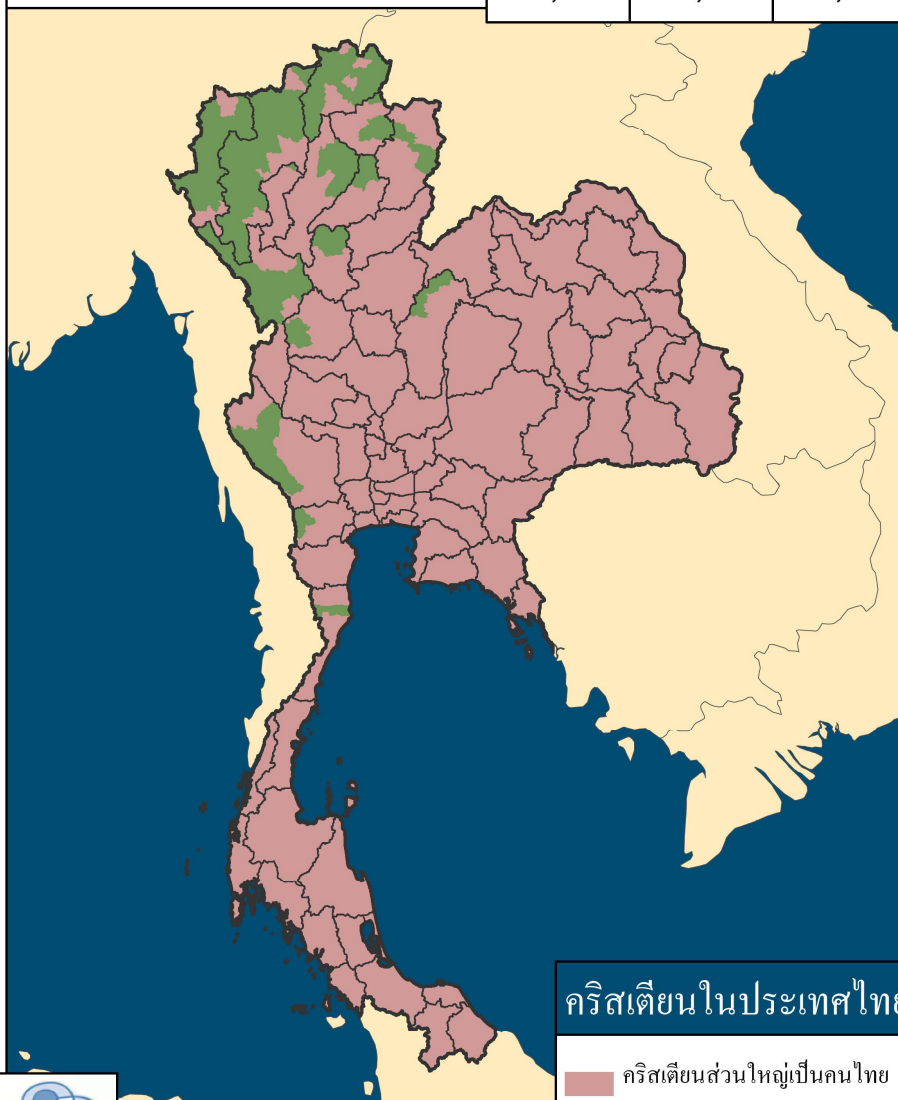
The tribal church is growing twice as fast as the Thai church, and if this growth continues, within 5 years there will be more tribal Christians than ethnic Thai Christians in Thailand. It is clear that the large challenge facing the church in Thailand is reaching the ethnic Thai. Therefore the rest of this booklet will present research data about the ethnic Thai church, which is not applicable to the tribal church.

Another interesting way to look at the number of Thai Christians, is the urban – rural divide. In Bangkok 0.5% of the population is Christian, in provincial capitals it is 0.9%, and in rural districts it is 0.2%. So the provincial capitals are the best reached parts of Thailand, while the number of rural Christians is still very low.

# ประเทศไทย

## สถิติของคริสเตียน

คริสเตียน	คนไทย	ชนเผ่า
323,648	185,741	137,907



## คริสเตียนในประเทศไทย

- คริสเตียนส่วนใหญ่เป็นคนไทย
- คริสเตียนส่วนใหญ่เป็นชนเผ่า



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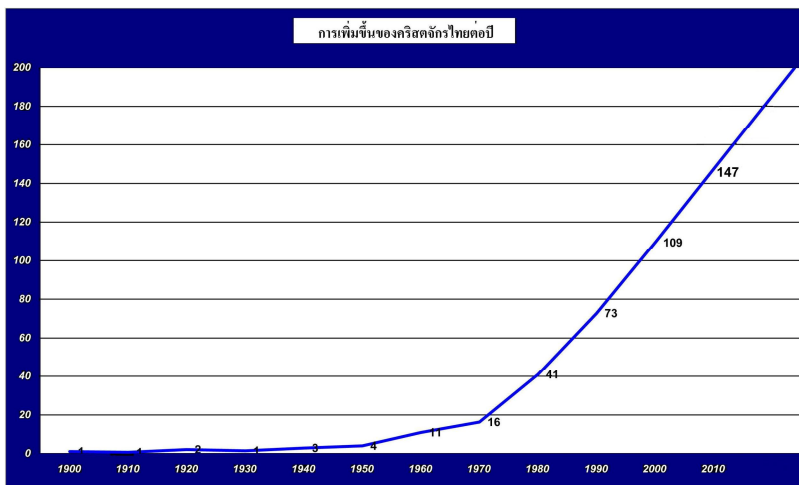
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กิโลเมตร

## Chapter 2 Growth of Protestant Christianity

The last 30 years, the Thai church has grown 4.2% per year. (The tribal church grew 8% per year). About 1% growth is biological growth. Almost all girls born in Christian families become church attenders themselves, but only about 70% of the boys. The Thai church has a problem keeping Christian boys in the church.

The rest of the church growth is through conversion. 65% of all Thai Christians were born in non-Christian families. Because of the faster conversion growth of the church today, a larger proportion of the Thai church is first generation believer than 30 years ago. This is very encouraging and bodes well for the future of the Thai church.

While the growth now is not much faster than the decades before that, there is one important difference. In the past the population as a whole grew very fast as well. But over the last 30 years the population only grew 1.2% per year on average. So the church is growing 3% faster than the population! If the church continues to grow at this rate, in less than 200 years all of Thailand will be Christian. But if the Thai church will start to grow as fast as the tribal church, Thailand would turn Christian in less than 90 years!





## Chapter 3 Who become Christians?

Over 3000 Christians in 94 churches from all denominations and from all over Thailand filled in a questionnaire. That makes it possible to get a clear picture of what kind of people become Christians, how they become Christians, and what kind of churches grow. The outcome of this research is presented here.

### ***The two big factors:***

1. People who have relatives who already are Christian, are quite likely to become Christians. About a quarter of all people with Christian relatives, become Christians themselves. But people who do not have Christian relatives, are very unlikely to become Christians. Actually, the chance of someone with a Christian relative to come to the Lord is probably around 700 times higher than the chance for someone who does not have a Christian relative. This shows the utmost importance of relationships for conversion, and especially family relationships.
2. People in a village or district without a church, are very unlikely to become Christians. There are church members in districts and villages without a church. However, the chance of someone becoming Christian in an district of village that does have a church, may be up to 100 times as big as for someone living in a district or village without a church. So if we want every Thai to have the opportunity to respond to the Gospel, we need churches in every amphur and every village.

### ***Three additional factors:***

1. Women are becoming Christians more frequently than men. Among first generation worshipers in the church, there are almost twice as many women as men. Yet the data show that in the end probably close to 90% of husbands of Christian wives become Christians as well (even though quite a few convert more than 10 years after their wife). This shows that there must be quite a few men who consider themselves Christians, but are not going to church. The Thai church faces a challenge in letting the church be a man-friendly place. This is even more important when you realize that believing husbands are even more likely to influence their wives to become Christians than the other way around.
2. Migrants are more likely to become Christians than people who have always lived in the same place. There seems to be an especially greater openness to the Gospel the first 5 years after moving. Yet a remarkably high number of people who ever migrated convert before moving or a long time after moving to another province. So the greater openness of migrants to convert has as much to do with their personality (openness to new ideas), than with the disruption of their social network.

3. Older people are slightly more open for the Gospel than young people. E.g. people who are older than 60 are twice as likely to become Christians as teenagers between 15 and 19. This is a surprise, because so often it is claimed that the young generation is much more open. The growth of Christianity in Thailand is clearly not fueled by modernization, as in some other countries in the region.

***Three factors that are not relevant:***

1. In Isaan, South-Thailand, and Central-Thailand the church is smaller than in the North and in Bangkok. Yet the churches have the same growth rate as in the rest of the country. This shows that the population is not more resistant, but that they have never yet had the opportunity to respond to the Gospel. There simply are no Christians and no churches near to them!
2. In the past, people with Chinese ancestry were more open to the Gospel than ethnic Thai. That is no longer true.
3. People living in cities and people who have a university education, are more likely to become Christians than rural people and lower educated people. However, they are not more open to the Gospel, they just are where the churches and the Christians already are. To reach the countryside and the lower educated people, the church will need to start planting more churches in areas that do not have any!

## **Chapter 4 Effective evangelism**

**To understand the process of evangelism in Thailand, we do well to understand the importance of the following points:**

### **1. Family members.**

40% of all new Christians say that a relative was the most important influence in coming to the Lord, and in a large majority of the cases this was a member in the family. First within the family and second within the wider circle of relatives is the main way that the Gospel spreads in Thailand. Less surprising, but still worthy to note, is that for all Christians born in Christian families, 71% state their parents as the most important influence for their faith. This emphasizes the great opportunity and responsibility Christian parents have to lead their children in God's way.

### **2. People older than 30.**

Christians of all ages are an influence for good in the lives of other people. Yet there is a clear divide at age 30. Christians over 30 are almost twice effective as evangelists as people under 30. Effectiveness as evangelists tops between ages 40 and 50. The respect for age that Thai people have, results in being more convincing in evangelism later in life.

### **3. Lay church members.**

Pastors are personally much more effective evangelists than their church members. In average 1 in 40 members will win a new Christian through personal evangelism in a year, while the same is true for 2 in 3 pastors. But because there are so many more church members than pastors, the large majority of new believers is still influenced by church members rather than pastors. Among new believers, 70% say a church member was the main influence in their coming to faith. 24% mention a Thai pastor, and 6% a missionary. So if the Thai church wants to grow faster in the future, the key is to make the members more effective in evangelism. This will have a much bigger impact than better evangelism by pastors and missionaries.

### **4. Printed media.**

Though a lot of attention is given to TV and radio ministry, only 10% of the new believers mention these media as the major media influence in their conversion. 30% claim that media did not play any role at all. The remainder, 60%, mentioned printed media. This contradicts what is often said that 'Thai people do not read'. Actually, they do. Recent research showed that two thirds of all Thai people read, not counting for study and work, an average of 39 minutes a day. Printed media like the Bible, bible correspondence courses, and Christian books have a major impact. Even tracts are mentioned by 17% of the new believers as the major media influence in their conversion. The reason why printed media are so often

mentioned is probably that printed media go from hand-to-hand, and are therefore mostly used in the context of a social network. Other media are literally broadcast, and this research again shows that that is less likely to influence people on the deep level that is needed to commit their lives to God.

### **5. Personal testimony and Bible study.**

Asked what experience helped them to come to faith in God, 26% of new believers mentioned a personal testimony, 20% mentioned Bible study, 16% the life example of Christians, and 11% a sermon. This shows that situations where people are in close proximity and relate on a personal level, are better suited to convince them to become Christians than more impersonal settings. The numbers for people born in Christian families were quite different. Bible study, with 41%, trumped all others by a wide margin. This shows the importance of having a Christian family life centered around the Bible.

All these points point toward conversion as a process that takes place over a period of time. People need time to study and understand the Gospel and to see faith lived out by Christians they know. Though being born again certainly happens in a point in time, it is not always possible to exactly know when exactly it occurred in the conversion process. Emphasis on a conversion point in time by leading people in a prayer of repentance, might be counterproductive in the process of real conversion leading to eternal life.

## **Chapter 5 Churches that grow**

Besides knowing what kind of people are likely to become Christians, and what kind of evangelistic approach is likely to bear fruit, it is also important to understand what kind of churches grow. The research gave a clear answer to that. If you know two things about a church, you know for 80% how much it will grow.

### **1. Young churches grow.**

The single most important factor that determines the growth potential of a church, is its age. A young church grows much faster than an old church. This is true in all denominations, which shows it is not a theological point, but a sociological development. In older, established churches it is much more difficult for outsiders to feel at home. Therefore they stay away. This finding is another reason to let the planting of new churches be the main evangelistic strategy for the Thai church in the future.

### **2. Churches without extra-biblical rules grow.**

The second most important factor that helps us understand whether a church is likely to grow, is whether or not it is traditional. Churches that have many traditions, are growing much slower. With traditions I mean man-made rules that are not contrary to what the Bible teaches, but neither are they mandated in the Bible. Examples of these are: Rules about who is allowed to preach; rules about what kind of education you need to have before you can become a pastor; rules about what songs can be sung in the church; rules about what is considered a church; and a church constitution that has many rules. While none of these things are condemned by the Bible, the research clearly showed that churches that allow the Holy Spirit, rather than standard rules, to guide in these matters, are growing much faster. This finding should make us rethink whether we have man-made rules in place that hinder the growth of God's Kingdom.

## **Things that make no difference the growth of your church**

### **1. Having a pastor.**

Churches with a full-time pastor are not growing faster than churches without a pastor. The research showed that pastors do a lot. But once there is a pastor, the members start doing a lot less. So a pastor who wants to contribute to the growth of the church will have to find ways to get as many members involved in ministry as possible.

Pastors are doing better when they have a colleague- be it a missionary or another pastor. Being pastor all on your own is hard, and ways should be found to let every pastor have a colleague to encourage him in his work.

## **2. Having a leadership development programme.**

This was another surprising outcome of the research. The reason why leadership development programmes do not have an impact on church growth, probably is that it is often focused on book learning, and not on practical ministry. This is a call to churches to evaluate their training programme. Is it only teaching book content to people? Or is it really helping people to go out, meet non-Christians, and proclaim the Gospel?

## **3. Planting daughter churches.**

It is often said 'we don't plant daughter churches yet, because our own church is not yet strong enough'. The truth is, it does not matter. Planting a daughter church does not have any influence on the number of new Christians that the mother church is attracting. The only loss a mother church has, may be the members it lets go to a daughter church. But there is no reason to choose between growing your own church through evangelism and planting a daughter church. You can do both at the same time. That is the most effective way to extend God's Kingdom.

### **The text of this booklet is based on:**

Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*, Zoetermeer, 2008.