

The Poor Lost Sheep at Phrae Revisited

Introduction

In 1984, I published a preliminary history of the northern Thai church from 1867 to 1920 entitled *Khrischak Muang Nua*, which publication quickly gained a local notoriety in Chiang Mai for its criticism of the way in which the Presbyterian Church's Laos Mission founded and dominated the northern Thai church. Nineteen years later, I remain convinced, on the one hand, that the historical record supports no other conclusion than the fact that the ethnocentric policies and strategies employed by the American Presbyterian missionaries up to 1920 substantially and even systematically weakened the northern churches. On the other hand, missionary ethnocentrism was but one factor in the formation of the northern Thai church, and future histories of the northern Thai church will need to pay more attention to other factors as well. They, that is, will necessarily place the missionary role in larger, more textured contexts, which seek to account more fully for the strengths as well as weaknesses of both the Laos Mission and the northern Thai churches.

The contents of the Callender letter books comprise one important source for the rewriting of northern Thai church history. They provide, as one example, valuable additional information regarding one of the key episodes in the history of missionary and church relations in early twentieth-century northern Thai church history. That episode was the experiment in northern Thai ecclesiastical self-rule conducted by the Rev. Robert Irwin in Phrae beginning in 1903, including subsequent developments after Irwin left Phrae in 1905. In *Khrischak Muang Nua*, I argued that this episode proved that the missionaries impeded the growth of the northern Thai church. In this third historiographical essay, I would like to rethink that argument on the basis of Callender's correspondence in the letter books.

The Original Argument

The "Phrae Case," as described in *Khrischak Muang Nua* (pages 109-113), began when the Laos Mission transferred the Rev. Robert Irwin to the Phrae Station in 1903. Irwin was a missionary with a reputation in the mission for harebrained schemes. Over the years, he repeatedly engaged in experiments that encouraged northern Thai churches to take full leadership responsibility for themselves. None of those experiments proved satisfactory in the long run largely because of the mission's habit of constantly moving its inadequate force around to cover for those going back to the States on furlough or to recover their health. Irwin was a prime victim of this habit and, thus, ended up working in nearly every station in the mission. The mission never allowed him to stay anywhere long enough to bring any of his various attempts at local church rule to fruition, and his successors always immediately scuttled his experiments as unworkable, whether they actually had been or not.

Phrae was Irwin's last stop before resigning from the Laos Mission, and he went there with the intention of preparing the Phrae Church to become a self-governing congregation. The mission no longer had the forces required to keep the Phrae Station open, which fact provided Irwin with one more opportunity to prove his contention that northern Thai Christians did not need missionary supervision. From 1903 through 1905, Irwin labored to prepare the Phrae Church to no longer depend on missionary patronage but to lead itself, support itself, and grow by its own ability. He turned actual authority for the administration of the congregation over to its session (church council) and assumed the role of advisor. When the session came to him and asked that he resume the usual missionary administrative, supervisory role over the church, he refused. He did work with the session to help it carry out its duties, but at points he left the city to conduct country evangelism, leaving important decisions to the session entirely. It should be noted that these efforts were marred by Irwin's poor health, which forced him to return to the United States for some six months

during this period. He was, thus, able to devote only a portion of his time to preparing the Phrae Church for self-rule, and even during that time he was not well physically.

Irwin left Phrae permanently in 1905. The mission did not appoint a replacement and put Phrae under the official authority of the distant Lampang Station while empowering the elders of the Phrae Church to run the church's life. It even gave them authority to conduct the sacraments, a highly unusual action for a Presbyterian mission. The records of the Laos Mission for the next few years betray a distinct uneasiness, however, concerning the state of the Phrae Church. Those records contain repeated references by the missionaries to the "poor people in Phrae" who they were like "sheep without a shepherd." The missionaries felt that the work and church in Phrae were in danger of dying out entirely. *Khrischak Muang Nua*, drawing on comments by the missionaries themselves, argues that such was not the case and that the self-rule experiment in Phrae was successful in spite of obvious, foreseeable problems and obstacles. Missionary ideology blinded the missionaries to that success and, ultimately, poisoned it when the Laos Mission reopened the Phrae Station in 1912 and terminated without cause the Phrae Church's responsibility for its own life.

The Argument Revisited

The Callender letter books provide a unique opportunity to review the case I made nearly twenty years' ago concerning the meaning and importance of Irwin's experiment in northern Thai ecclesiastical self-rule in Phrae. Although he was not in northern Siam when Irwin initiated that experiment in 1903, Callender developed a close relationship with the Phrae Church, beginning in late 1909, four years after Irwin had returned to the United States. Callender lived in Phrae temporarily from the end of 1909 through April 1910, and after a few years in the Lampang Station, he returned to live in Phrae again 1913. While located in Lampang, he kept a more or less close eye on developments in Phrae, and his correspondence between 1909 and 1913 provides an excellent source for the study of the Phrae Church in that period and, thus, the results of the Irwin experiment in northern Thai church self-rule.

Three of Callender's letters from Phrae written in January 1910 indicate that Callender shared the general opinion of his missionary colleagues concerning the self-governing church in Phrae. On January 4th, he wrote to Dr. Charles Crooks that, "The Christians are tired of promises from the Mission to resuscitate the work or reman the station. Their condition is pitiable." Three days later, on the 7th, he added in a letter to the Rev. Roderick Gillies that, "Our hearts ache for these people. They seem like sheep without a shepherd, truly. They seem to doubt our word, almost, when we tell them that the policy of the Mission is to reman the station as soon as possible." Finally, on the 12th of January he wrote to the Rev. Howell Vincent that, "The Pre field makes ones heart sick, so many have gone back for lack of missionary oversight." Callender does not provide much in the way of specifics, but he appears to have focused on two aspects of the situation, which indicated to him the pitiable state of the Phrae Christians. First, he pitied them because the Laos Mission had failed to fulfill their desire for the return of the missionaries. Second, he felt sorry for them because so many former Christians had left the church.

Yet, as we read on in Callender's correspondence of January 1910, we note another theme emerging. In a letter written on the 14th, he informs his old friend, the Rev. William C. Dodd, that many of the Christians who had been disappointed by the failure of the missionaries to return had given up and "gone back" to Buddhism. He observes, furthermore, that the Phrae Church would have been in much better condition had the station not been closed. Then, he goes on to write to Dodd that, "But the wonder is that the church has stood as well as it has. The people are responsive and the work is bound to build up with proper workers." In an undated letter to a former missionary in Phrae, the Rev. J. S. Thomas, also written in January 1910, Callender states again that, "It is a wonder that the Christians have kept together so well as they have without missionary oversight for the past number of years." Callender's correspondence, that is, shares in the almost strange tension and self-contradiction found in other Laos Mission records concerning the

church in Phrae. It was poor and pitiable, yet it had also done surprisingly well at maintaining itself. It had survived in better condition than Callender expected it would have.

A letter Callender wrote on 26 February 1910 to the editor of the Pacific Presbyterian for publication sheds important light on his perspective on the situation in Phrae. He notes that the mission's experiment of using the Lampang Station to carry out work in Phrae had proven unsatisfactory, and he writes,

Many went back into heathen practices owing to a lack of proper missionary oversight. The lack of a physician is especially detrimental to the progress of the work, as the Christians are sorely tempted to resort to non-Christian doctors who always connect doctoring and disease with spirits. Without a missionary doctor, it is no wonder that some have resorted to that which the country affords—spirit doctors. The temptation here to return to non-Christian practices is beyond all human conception. It takes first of all a Personal Savior to keep them/then a personality thru which the Holy Spirit works and reveals the Savior.

In analyzing the contents of this missive, it should be noted, first, that Callender transformed Irwin's experiment from being a test of whether or not the Phrae Church could run its own life into a test as to whether or not the missionaries could use Lampang as a base for working in Phrae. The goal of northern Thai ecclesiastical self-rule has been dropped entirely. Second, Callender considers even this more limited and mission-centered experiment as a failure because the Phrae Christians lacked someone who could function as a medium for the Holy Spirit. The implication of the final sentence in the above quotation is that God required the immediate presence of missionaries in Phrae as that spiritual channel. Third, Callender helpfully identifies one of the central problems facing the Phrae Church, namely the absence of a missionary physician who could provide medical services to the Christian community and thereby prevent their return to "non-Christian practices."

Callender's observations call our attention, once again, to the importance of missionary ideology in the formation of the Thai church. Irwin's idea that the Phrae Church could actually take responsibility for its own life independent of the mission simply does not exist in Callender's thinking, and his thinking was far more representative of the mission than was Irwin's. Callender was working in the distant Kengtung State when Irwin was in Phrae. He probably did understand what was going on in Phrae, and it is likely that he more or less "filled in the blanks" by interpreting the closing of the Phrae Station as a tactical redistribution of missionary forces rather than a strategic move to encourage the northern Thai church to take greater responsibility for its own life. It is not that he opposed the idea of greater independence so much as that it simply was not in his thinking. Hence, when he voiced the need for a human, immediate spiritual agent in Phrae, he clearly assumed that the missionaries had to fulfill that role. It never entered his mind that a northern Thai Christian could be the "personality thru which the Holy Spirit works and reveals the Savior." Such is the power of ideology; it blinds us to the basic assumptions by which we live, thus preventing us from testing the viability and appropriateness of those assumptions.

Missionary ideology had a profound impact on the very issue of medical care itself. So far as Callender and virtually all of his colleagues in the Laos Mission were concerned, northern Thai Christians could not avail themselves of indigenous medical care because that care involved animistic practices. They believed that any Christians who did seek "native" treatment had, in effect, "gone back" to Buddhism and animism. Given this assumption, Callender correctly states that, "The temptation here to return to non-Christian practices is beyond all human conception." Missionary ideology interpreted the situation in Phrae in dualistic, white or black terms. The use of Western medicine was Christian. The use of indigenous medicine was heathen, anti-Christian. In these terms, then, the Christians in Phrae faced the difficult situation that when they became ill they did not have anyone who could treat them in the "Christian" way, and they had no effective recourse but to "go back" to indigenous medical practitioners. In Callender's eyes this meant they had stopped being Christians.

In previous issues of *HeRB*, I've discussed the question of the relationship of Western dualism to the Thai church(es). The issue is a burning one, even today, because the peoples of Thailand do not generally divide the world and human action into such rigid categories of right and wrong. They are generally much more adept at thinking in terms of degrees of grayishness than are most Westerners, who want things to be black or white, yes or no, right or wrong (see, for example, the short note below on "Compliance: All or Nothing"). [HeRB 2](#) contains a short note worth recalling here concerning a Karen tribal Christian who raises work elephants. The process of weaning a young elephant from its mother is crucial to the training of a work elephant, and that process invariably must be done by specialists who use certain ostensibly animistic rites as a part of the process. Christian Karen who are such specialists feel compelled to use these rites because, otherwise, the young elephant cannot be successfully weaned from its mother and is ruined as a work elephant. The economic loss of a ruined young elephant is substantial. In the conversation I had with this elephant owner and a group of other Christian Karen, two perspectives emerged. A theologically trained pastor told the elephant owner he was wrong to engage in animistic practices. He should stop. The owner and some other participants in the conversation, while not challenging the pastor directly, clearly felt that they could remain good Christians and still use certain traditional, animistic practices. They did not feel completely comfortable about the situation of the elephant owner, but they felt it was tolerable. Northern Thai Christians, in similar situations, will frequently assert that the essential point is what a person feels in her heart. If she is sincere, that is what really matters.

Callender and his colleagues in the Laos Mission did not accept this less dualistic, more Asian attitude, hence the rigid, uncompromising distinction between Western and northern Thai medical practices. That is to say that the missionaries' perception of the supposedly pitiable state of the Phrae Church was a consequence of their Western dualistic worldview. A somewhat more tolerant, Thai-like attitude would have resulted in a quite different interpretation of the situation of the convert community in Phrae. At least some of those who left the church did not do so because they wanted to but because when forced to choose between remaining in the church and their health, they chose their health.

A letter Callender wrote to the Rev. Howard Campbell, located in Chiang Mai, dated 24 February 1910, further raises the question of the missionary role in Phrae. He writes, "The people are so much in need of constant oversight on the part of the missionary. The people are responsive." He goes on to state, "The field is an intensely needy one, interesting and promising of splendid results if proper attention be given it." Later in the letter, Callender concludes, "The Christians are longing—almost to despair—for missionaries to come permanently, especially a physician." Four facts stand out: first, the Phrae Church needed leadership; second, given that leadership, it had great potential; third, the Christians longed for the return of the missionaries; but, finally, what they really wanted was a missionary doctor located in Phrae. Callender, again, unconsciously assumed that the church's need for leadership meant missionary supervision, and a solution not involving missionaries simply did not enter his thinking. He also, again, unconsciously assumed that only a missionary doctor could solve the medical dilemma facing the Christians in Phrae.

This last letter, however, also suggests that it was not just Callender who shut the door on any solution to the ecclesiastical and medical needs of the Phrae Church that did not involve missionaries. If he is correct, the Christian community itself did not see any way to resolve these problems apart from a return of the missionaries. In another communication, written on 9 April 1910 to Dr. E. C. Cort, Callender reports that one of the elders in Phrae, Elder Nan Chai, claimed that, "if the missionaries would only stay here there would be a great harvest." As if to confirm that observation, Callender went on to note that on a recent trip out into the country he had baptized six adult converts and nine children. He enthused and lamented that, "The field is ripe for the harvest, the reapers are certainly few." In a correspondence with the Rev. William C. Dodd, dated 14 May 1910, Callender brought a number of points together when he wrote about the Christians in Phrae that,

While a number have gone back, the wonder is that so many have remained

faithful and so many have taken a stand for Christ. The condition is most unsatisfactory to the natives Christians, no missionary being located there to whom they can refer their many

He states here, again, that the "native Christians" themselves felt uncomfortable with their situation. They wanted somebody to help them solve their problems, which desire recalls the hesitancy on the part of the Phrae Church that Irwin experienced when he initiated his experiment in church self-rule. The elders themselves went to Irwin and asked him to resume his role as head of the church. Irwin refused to comply with their request—a refusal that made him virtually unique in the history of the Laos Mission. Callender, in contrast, never considered any other possibility but that the missionaries must return and take over. The local Christians seem not to have considered any other possibility either, in spite of the fact that they had been running their own church for most of the last seven years. In a letter to the Rev. Hugh Taylor written on 6 July 1910, Callender writes that the Phrae Christians "seemed so discouraged on account of having been left so long without the oversight of missionaries."

Callender moved from Phrae to Lampang in May 1910, and several of his letters indicate how unhappy his was about leaving Phrae and how much he worried about the "poor lost sheep" there. On 30 June 1910, however, he wrote to Thomas that,

I never saw soil better prepared than Pre. The Holy Spirit is certainly at work there now. We were loth to leave the Christians without a missionary to see to their needs. *But it is wonderful what is being done there without the constant oversight of a missionary.* Some have gone back, to be sure, but the wonder is that so many have remained faithful. The majority of those who have come in are children of Christian parents, but several new families have taken a stand. [Emphasis added]

In a letter dated 7 January 1911, written to the Rev. C. W. Mason, Callender notes with some pride that the Phrae Church had decided that it needed to add a boarding department to its school, and he states, "The Christians there certainly have some push." In March 1911, he wrote to missionaries in the Nan Station, which borders Phrae, that the boarding department of the Phrae school was doing well.

Letters Callender wrote to Roderick Gillies on 21 June 1911 and on 16 December 1911, indicate that things continued to go generally well in Phrae during 1911 in spite of the failure of the Laos Mission to reopen the station there. Lampang sent one of its clergymen, Kru (Teacher) Wong, to work in Phrae, and he made substantial progress in rural evangelism. Callender also noted that a Christian doctor, who had quit the Phrae Church, was again doing "a good deal of helpful work in medicine," and the Lampang Station was paying him a modest monthly salary to encourage him in that work. He was also planning to rejoin the church. There was only one problem. The city Christians in Phrae gave Kru Wong a cool reception, and when he tried to call a meeting of the session, they refused to hold that meeting until they had word from Lampang that the missionaries approved. In his letter of 21 June 1911, Callender speculated that the Phrae Christians were peeved with the Laos Mission for not reopening the Phrae Station and, thus, were in no mode to accept a northern Thai stand in.

Still, as 1911 closed, the actual situation in Phrae according to Callender's own correspondence had improved in spite of his repeated lamentations concerning how the Phrae Christians were "lost sheep" without missionary oversight. The church itself had done well over the years, although there had been problems, and the Lampang Station had successfully supplemented the church's efforts by sending a capable northern Thai clergyman and by employing a northern Thai doctor to work in Phrae. That is to say, the Callender letter books present the same picture concerning developments in Phrae as is found in those sources I used twenty years ago. While the missionaries felt that the situation in Phrae was unstable and uncertain, their own correspondence suggests otherwise. The Phrae Church had successfully taken charge

of its own life, and the Lampang Station had taken specific actions to further strengthen the Christian community, which actions did not require the presence of a missionary.

Conclusion

The situation of the Phrae Church at the end of 1911 was not perfect, to be sure, but it was viable. In *Khrischak Muang Nua*, I noted that the actual situation of the church in 1911 was better than it proved to be in later years after the Laos Mission reopened the Phrae Station in 1912. What seems to have happened after the missionaries returned was that their leadership replaced northern Thai leadership in the Phrae Church but then focused most of its attention on activities unrelated to the life of the church. In a pattern found repeatedly in the history of the Laos Mission, the missionaries held onto the reins of power in the churches but devoted precious little of their time to the care of those churches. The Phrae Church, eventually, became known as one of the weakest, most poorly led churches in the North—a situation that developed only after the missionaries returned to Phrae in 1912.

The Callender letter books, however, make it clear that the argument presented in *Khrischak Muang Nua* requires some modification. It fails to give due weight to the evident role the Phrae Church itself played in terminating Irwin's experiment in self-government. The congregation did not welcome the experiment and, if Callender's correspondence is any measure, never did reconcile itself to running its own life. Rather than entering into the experiment with a sense of commitment, that is, the church contributed to the missionaries' impression that they were "poor lost sheep" by their frequently voiced desire for missionary oversight. Forced to run their own church, they proved able to do so; but they never wanted to have to do so.

We can only wonder at the possible results of Irwin's experiment if the Phrae Church had engaged in it faithfully, willingly, and wholeheartedly. We can only speculate as to what might have happened if it had communicated to the Laos Mission a firm resolve to take responsibility for its own life and made it clear that it did not need or want missionary oversight. It is possible that the missionaries would not have been able to divest themselves of their ideological blinders in any event and would have ignored the congregation's wishes to run its own life. Yet, Callender so frequently returned to the fact that the Phrae Christians were upset, discouraged, and felt abandoned by the mission that it is clear that their feelings were a key source of data for his own impression that they required missionary oversight. It is just as possible, then, that the Laos Mission might have continued Irwin's experiment indefinitely if the Phrae Church had shown a clear desire to do so.

Callender never discusses why the Phrae Church so eagerly desired the return of the missionaries, other than his comments about their desire for a mission doctor. It is, perhaps, too simple to write the matter off as a northern Thai desire for missionary patronage, a reflection that is of the fundamental patron-client structure of northern Thai society. Why did the church prefer missionary patronage, that is, instead of relying on its own local sources of patronage? At an economic level, city Christians in all of the northern Thai urban centers depended on the missionaries for incomes. A typical missionary station would employ tens of Christians in all manner of positions from nanny to nursing assistants to house parents in the boarding schools; the departure of the missionaries must have meant some economic hardship for the Phrae Christian community. At an institutional level, when the missionaries departed the church lost a key model for conducting every aspect of its life. The "church" as created by the missionaries was an idea, which grew out of the American historical experience of the church as a voluntary association independent of the state. There was nothing comparable in northern Thai society, and the only way in which northern Thais could learn how to run the church "properly" was from the missionary example. The Phrae Church had no written constitution it could refer to when questions came up. It only had the "living constitution" of the missionaries. And at the practical level, the fact is that lay people are busy people and only have so much time and energy to devote to the church. Most churches prefer to have trained, professional leadership. In

the case of the Phrae Church, missionary leadership would have been made even more preferable by the fact that it was free so far as the church was concerned.

In any event, the problem with *Khrischak Muang Nua* is not that it is wrong in its interpretation of what happened in Phrae so much as it is only partly right. It focuses too much on the missionary role and fails to give sufficient attention to the Phrae Church's complicity in terminating Irwin's experiment in church self-rule in Phrae, an experiment that had achieved some success by December 1911. In that sense, the Callender letter books also serve to remind us of a central problem facing the study of northern Thai church history during the years of the Laos Mission (1867-1921), namely that there are almost no northern Thai records from that era and the living memory of the church today effectively extends back to the 1930s, if even that far. We have to depend on the missionary record for our interpretation of what happened in Phrae, which necessarily warps our perspective. Even when we try to discover the church's own views in those records, we are, at best, seeing through a glass darkly. Still, the point stands that future research into the history of Protestantism in northern Thailand will need, as best it can, to give more weight to the role of the churches themselves in the construction of the northern Thai church.