

## HeRD #350 - Bangkok Conference

One of our HeRD recipients some time ago forwarded to me an item that appears to have bounced around Internet a bit. It's entitled "Signs, Wonders and Church Growth - Bangkok 14-17 November [1996]." It's interesting enough from a historian's perspective that I thought I'd pass excerpts of it on to the rest of you. It's a remarkable study in how things never change.

The item is a report of a training conference cum revival meeting held in Bangkok. It was led by Wesley Campbell and Jim Goll and was held at Christ Church and at the YMCA. The first paragraph of the Internet report on the conference reads, in part, " 'And we rejoice, for the river is here!' The lyrics of the song the 'River is Here' were translated into Thai and this became the theme song of the Bangkok conference, as the participants always added extra emphasis to the line, the River is HERE!. Here, in Bangkok; a city of ten million right in the heart of the 10-40 window, with less than one half of one percent Christian; and certainly a city somewhere in the "top ten" of spiritual oppression & historical resistance to the light of Jesus Christ. Other David Ruis songs such as 'We will Dance on the Streets that are Golden' and 'We will Break Dividing Walls' were also translated into Thai, and introduced a new dimension of worship to the meetings." The report goes on to express the deep spiritual experience many of those attending experienced. They received new insight, according to the report, into the meaning of holiness and prayer. One person commented, "I believe there was a breakthrough in the spiritual realm over Thailand and people saw something completely new to Thai churches." Others felt they were introduced for the first time to "prophetic ministry." They were impressed and wanted to learn more. Miraculous answers to prayer were also reported. Three people came forward the last evening to receive Christ, and the report states that the meeting ended with a sense of "holy awe." People felt touched by God, and there was a fervent desire born in some for a revival in Thailand. Several people had intense experiences with the Holy Spirit, including visions. Throughout the report is a pervasive sense of something new happening, a sense of a spiritual turning point having been reached.

I'll have some reflections on this report to share in HeRD #351.

## HeRD #351 - Reinventing the Wheel

The report of the conference in Bangkok reported in HeRD #350 is intriguing for a number of reasons. What particularly impresses me, from a historical perspective, is not the supposed newness of this event, but the way in which it replicates and captures *typical* themes from Thai church history. First, note the negative attitude concerning the Thai context. It recalls the old-time missionaries' attacks on the "godless heathenism" of the Thai people. Second, observe how the hymns sung are translated and the whole dynamic of the event is foreign in origin and leadership. The "good news" shared at this conference is a foreign good news. Third, and most important here, is the dependence on revivalistic fervency for the renewal of Thai churches and the propagation of the faith in Thailand. Nothing new here at all. Thailand's Presbyterian and Baptist churches went through several phases of fairly intense revivalism between 1924 and 1939, and they experienced much the same feelings as expressed in the above report. The CCT went through another long period of revivalistic emphasis after the War. One of the central lessons of 20th century Thai church history is that this form of revivalism is ineffective in the Thai context. The momentary enthusiasm generated doesn't lead to effective change, and one could make a case that revivalism is actually detrimental to the church. It gives the appearance of "something happening" without anything actually happening.

The Lesson We Should Be but Aren't Learning From the Past: Over the last 70 years we've continued to do the same old things over and over. We've expressed the same negative attitudes about the Thai context, setting it up as "the enemy." We've engaged in constant "revival". We continue to import foreign influences, in ever new guises. The results are minimal at very best.