

The FJCCA Church Planting Movement

BY **STEPHEN BAILEY** WITH **DWIGHT MARTIN**

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Dwight Martin was raised in Thailand and moved back after a 30-year career in the software industry. Because of his knowledge of Thailand, Thai church leaders asked him to serve as research coordinator for the Thai church. As a result, he started the eSTAR Foundation to provide this research. <http://estar.ws>

Thirty years ago, a young Thai man came to faith. With no other churches nearby he planted what is now Chon Daen Church in Phetcabun Province. Between 1987 and 2016 this man, Pastor Somsak, helped plant 13 more churches in Central and Northeast Thailand. Then in late 2016 the number of churches more than doubled in one month, and Pastor Somsak received a vision to train 1,000 church planters, start 1,000 churches and baptize 10,000 new believers by 2020.

While there are many movements among Hindus and Muslims, movements among Buddhists are rare, especially in Thailand where less than one percent of Thai are believers after 400 years of missionary effort. Yet the *Free in Jesus Christ Church Association* (FJCCA) had grown in three and a half years to 16,258 Christians by the end of 2019, which is very significant. “Of these 39% have been baptized and 53% attend a house or mother church on a regular basis. 656 house churches have been started and eight new mother churches have been built to support the network of house churches.”¹ The story of this movement was remarkable enough to become the cover story for the April 2019 issue *Christianity Today*.²

Pastor Somsak’s common sense business background and his sensitivity to and knowledge of Thai social preferences has led him (through trial and error) to an effective and appropriate means of sharing the gospel with Thai Buddhists. He has mobilized dozens of local lay volunteer Christians who effectively contextualize their evangelistic strategy and gospel communication. There are no Bible school graduates or foreign missionaries involved in this effort.

Cognitive Contextualization³

The FJCCA has contextualized the gospel in terms of at least three Thai cognitive categories. First, the use of the term *Prachao* (lord or god) by Thai Christians is confusing to Buddhists because it can refer to any number of Hindu deities, local spirits, angels or even a king. To avoid this confusion FJCCA only speaks of *PhraYesu* or Jesus. This is no trivial change of nomenclature, since it clarifies the story of the gospel for Thai who now understand that the message is about a God named Jesus who was incarnated and died to take away our bad karma. Jesus, they are told, is ready to help us with our problems and guide us today.

Second, while the FJCCA acknowledges the Father, the Son and the Spirit as they read of them in Scripture, it does not teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Pastor Somsak explains, “It’s not my history.” By this he means that the doctrine is not articulated in the Scriptures and the philosophical debates that gave rise to the doctrine are not relevant to Thai people. In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity often leads Thai to understand that Christians worship three gods. As new believers grow in their faith and study the Scriptures, they learn of the roles of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit, but this is not analyzed or articulated in philosophical categories.

Third, the FJCCA does not pray that new believers be filled with the Holy Spirit since this language suggests to the Thai that one is being possessed by a spirit in the way a spirit medium or the priest of a guardian spirit is possessed. Consequently, the role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life is taught later in the discipleship process.

³ I understand cultural contextualization to refer to mental ideals of what is true, good and beautiful. Social issues relate more directly to how people actually relate; it is what people do. The social realities of love, hate, wealth, poverty, power, weakness, health and illness / death often are more important factors in human behavior than our cognitive ideals.

¹ Dwight Martin. Email eStar Newsletter dated January 12, 2020.

² TinyURL.com/ThaiCPM

Social Contextualization

FJCCA's strategy is contextualized to its social environment. There are 40 evangelism teams from 17 mother churches that strategically go to unreached villages sharing a simple gospel message on a daily basis. Each team is made up of five volunteers. They begin by finding a person of peace; a non-Christian who is sympathetic to the message of the gospel. This person introduces them to relatives and friends who might also be interested in hearing the gospel. They then ask permission from the village head man in the area to hold a meeting to share the good news about Jesus. In this way the teams are "sponsored" into new communities by individuals from the community making their presence acceptable. Evangelism meetings are held under someone's outdoor sitting area that has a roof (*sala*) or even in a Buddhist temple compound making the event public. The event can be as small as 10 or 12 or more than 150 people.

Team members speak with energy and confidence as they share life experiences as to why they believe in Jesus, and simple, short teachings. Each person speaks for no longer than five minutes; there is no hard-sell and the message is simple and peppered with life experiences of new believers. The atmosphere is one of informal hospitality and everyone gets a small bowl of noodle soup served up by the team. The meetings are highly participatory and interesting which means the events qualify as something Thai call *sanuk* (enjoyable). The team members act with *suphab* (polite humility) and they *khaolob* (show deference and respect) to local authorities.

The last speaker asks if anyone would like to receive new life in Jesus. Everyone speaks and gives thanks in Jesus' name. Prayers for those who want to receive Jesus are recited not only by the new believer but by the whole audience. The reciting of prayers out loud is traditional in Thai Buddhism and new believers are encouraged to pray and develop their own relationship with Jesus. They are taught to pray by a paper they are given that has five short prayers printed in a large font. There are morning, noon and evening prayers as well as prayers of confession and for times of need. The large font is important in villages that have so many elderly people with bad eyesight and poor lighting in their homes. The children have their own meeting and are led through a simple short explanation of the gospel as well.

From these village evangelism events typically 10 or more adults show a desire to follow Jesus. From this core of new believers, a house church is formed. The result is that churches are planted in clusters as the gospel moves from village to village through neighbors and friends (see the map at <http://thaichurches.org>). Every week one or more of the church planters returns to this village to teach the new believers. Church planters return until a leader is "raised up" from within that house church.

When 20 to 30 villages in an area have house churches, the FJCCA builds a one-room mother church large enough to hold between 100 and 500 people, depending upon the size of the local house church network. A kitchen area is constructed behind the building to accommodate the fellowship meals of the community. The mother church serves as a central worship center and training center to strengthen the surrounding house churches. They follow a typical contemporary Protestant order of service with the exception that before the message they open up the service for attenders to share what they have learned through Scripture or life experience that week.

FJCCA sees the first few months of Christian faith for a new believer to be a crucial period in their spiritual lives. Typical Christian church services are very different from temple community and ritual practice and are not easy for new believers to adapt and fit in to. The experience can be overwhelming to a new person. Consequently, new believers are encouraged to attend only the house church until they have grown in their faith. Once they are comfortable in their faith they may attend the mother church if they choose.

New believers also decide when they want to be baptized. This could happen right after they identify themselves as a Christian or much later. Being baptized indicates that a new Christian has decided to abandon their former objects of worship and spiritual allegiances; now they are ready to only worship Jesus.

The FJCCA does not forbid new believers from going to the temple or from fulfilling their family obligations to help their family members make merit and care for their ancestors. Instead, the decision to stop these Buddhist practices is left to the new believer to make in their way and time. This allows new Christians to assure their loved ones of their love and respect for family and to decide when and how they might stop participating in

merit rituals. In one church I met the lay Buddhist leader from the temple immediately across the street from the church. He explained that he was a new believer in Jesus but he is still leading the Buddhist congregation through the temple rituals with the monks until he is able to find someone to replace him. This kind of easy accommodation to the needs of both communities is rarely found in Thai Protestant churches and seemed refreshingly practical and kind.

Discipling Buddhists to Christian Faith

FJCCA pays careful attention to the discipleship process in two important ways. First, they follow up new believers within 48 hours to teach them how to pray to Jesus and to have them begin a personal relationship with Jesus. This is made easier by the fact that the teams carefully record the new believer's name, address, the date they came to faith, age, gender, etc., along with the person's photograph, and enter it into a database that tracks new believers and the location of all their churches. This means that the growth of this movement is being tracked in real time. Who has been disciplined and to what level is digitally tracked for every person in the movement.

Second, new believers are disciplined in an easy to understand, step by step process. Initially, a new believer is given a small booklet called, *Jesus' Plan for Us* (printed in a large font) that helps the person understand the gospel better. Each lesson is reviewed and taught again in their community meetings and new believers are encouraged to practice teaching the lesson to others. This eventually results in a firm grasp of the gospel and believers who are able to articulate the basics of their new faith. Later, new believers enter a second level of discipleship from the Gospel of John through a book called, *The Water of Life*. A third book, *Abundant Life*, covers basic doctrine. The third level of discipleship guides new believers in reading and studying the Bible within their house groups.

SE Asian mission efforts have seen many Buddhist converts fail to continue in their walk of faith. One reason for this has been that most churches have required Buddhists converts to quickly renounce everything associated with Buddhism, effectively making it impossible for new believers to honor their families. FJCCA deals with this by allowing new believers to decide how and when to address Buddhist ritual duties connected to family. This helps explain the delay between praying a prayer of

initial belief in Jesus and being baptized (as mentioned above 39% of the new believers have been baptized). Conversion is dealt with as a process that includes:

- praying that Jesus will take away their bad karma and come into the new believer's life
- being disciplined
- becoming a member of a house church
- learning to only follow and pray to Jesus
- turning over household temple duties to family members
- and, when ready, public baptism.

Another issue related to this pattern has been the failure of churches and missionaries to follow up and guide new believers into mature Christian discipleship. Such discipleship is labor intensive and time-consuming. It requires careful tracking of new believers and a large number of volunteers capable of teaching others to take the next step in their life with Jesus. FJCCA's data system and army of willing, enthusiastic volunteers meet these demands.

Pastor Somsak and the FJCCA clearly bring entrepreneurial experience, practicality and flexibility to their ministry. They are always assessing and adjusting what they do along the way. Whatever helps people understand easily, whatever helps people feel at home in the church and whatever helps facilitate the rapid and easy spread of the gospel is retained. Whatever is a hindrance is discarded.

In one village that we went to the presentation of the gospel was delayed because it was raining so hard that no one could hear even when using a small PA system. Because the rain did not let up for a considerable amount of time some of the audience left. Later when they tried to hold the evangelistic event the audience was inattentive. Afterwards the team discussed what to do next time something like that happened. They decided to plan an activity for the group to do while they waited for the rain to stop in hopes of keeping their interest until they could share the gospel and be heard.

This easy flexibility is a key part of their strategy. It is also directly related to the fact that they are not connected to any western missionary or church organization. Without these outside theological and historical constraints, they are free to read the Bible in their context to arrive at theological and methodological decisions that are faithful to scriptures and effective. 