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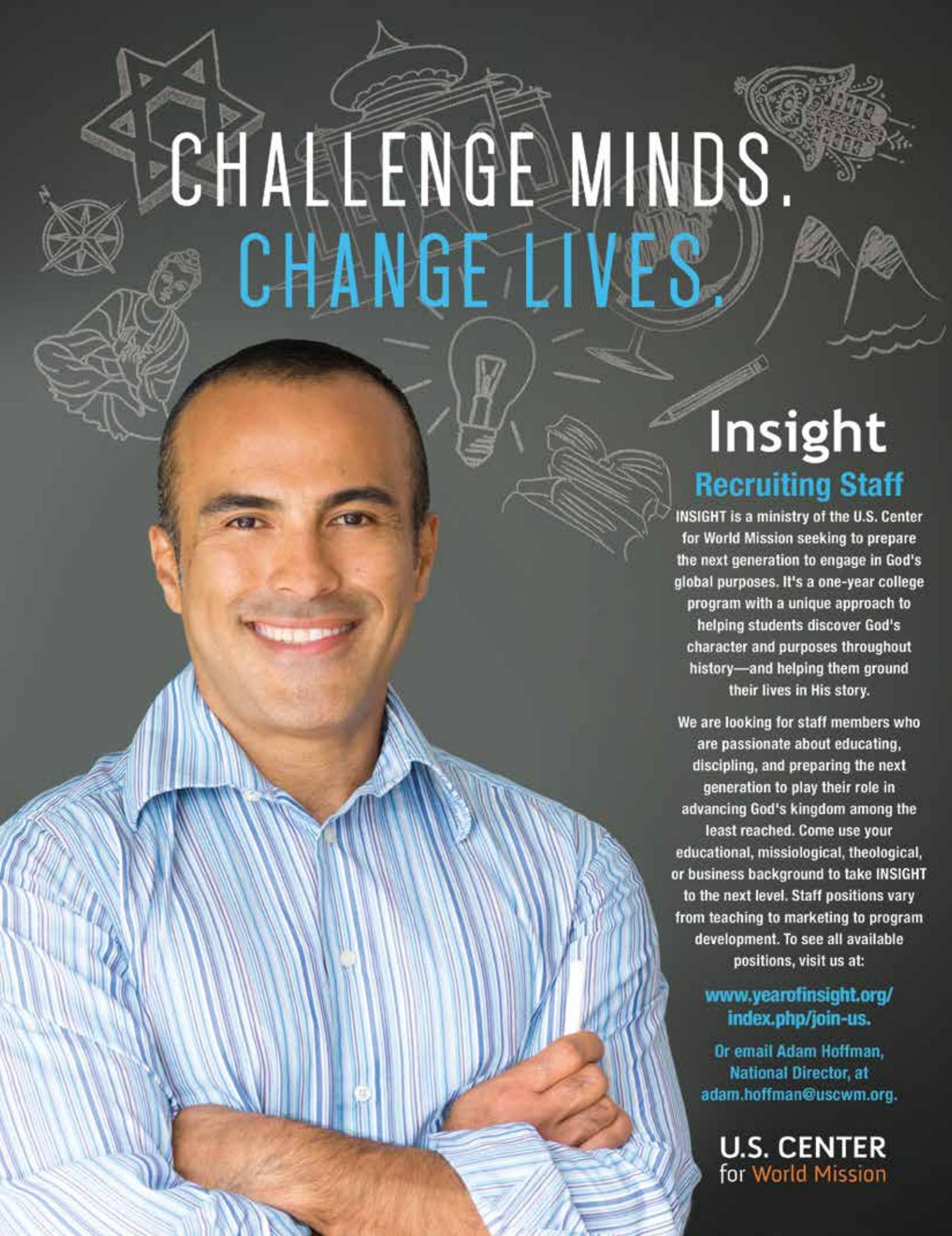
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*The Fingerprints  
of God in Buddhism*

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# DECONSTRUCT AND RECALIBRATE

MARIE BAUER

Marie spent over a decade among Buddhist peoples in southeast Asia, wrestling with the barriers that keep people from Christ and seeking to answer the question: What is it going to take to see a movement to Christ? Living among Shan people in villages on the Thai-Burma border changed her perspective forever. Currently her role at the USCWM focuses on research and coaching for Buddhist and Hindu peoples.

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When I first began my missionary journey in Asia, I was taught Thai Christian vocabulary and was told it would enable me to do ministry in Thailand. I went to church every Sunday as part of my language learning, and built relationships with many wonderful Thai Christians. Some Sundays, older women would get up and dance in traditional Thai style in the aisles during worship. Despite the intense heat and struggle to stay awake for a three-hour service that I did not understand, these dancing ladies gave me a burst of joy.

As the years went on and I continued to live in the Christian bubble, I realized how little I understood of the Buddhist worldview. By this time I was living in an ethnically Shan village on the Thai-Burma border. My interactions with Shan Buddhists seemed to be either very shallow “have you eaten yet?” or debating some aspect of religion, feeling that somehow I needed to prove I was right and they were wrong. I wanted to participate in festivals so that I could learn more about Shan culture and worldview, but the Shan Christians told me I should not go, that it was all about evil spirits. Not wanting to jeopardize my relationship with them, I did not go. I began to realize that most of my training was based on the apologetic approach, i.e. that we need to debate and convince Buddhists of the “truth.” Insight and hope came from two notable exceptions: “Poles Apart,” by John Davis<sup>1</sup> and *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, by Wan Petchsongkram.<sup>2</sup> These authors’ humble, learning approach resonated with me.

I watched newer Shan Christians struggle; when they became desperate due to family illness or mishap, they often turned to spirit doctors and superstition for help. When a Buddhist family member died, they did not participate in important aspects of the funeral, or if they did, they were made to feel ashamed by the church members. They were forced to make a choice between their family and traditions, and the

church. I felt this was unreasonable and that there must be another way, where family and village could feel honored and reinforced, so that the lifestyle and love of the believer would be an open invitation to follow Christ. I did not have an answer.

I finally realized that these common issues were based on missionaries’ fundamentally faulty assumptions, which needed to be deconstructed. I needed to take a step back and ask the Lord, “How do you want to reach these people whom you created?”

I hope you find a similar challenge here, the first Buddhist-focused issue *Mission Frontiers* has ever published. My hope is that it will spark reflection and fundamental changes in the way we as believers approach Buddhists and how we think of their religion and worldview. Much of what we do is based on assumptions of which we are not even aware, including that we are right and “they” must be wrong, our job then being to correct the wrong. Many missionaries suffer from a hero complex, and I believe this is due to the way we train our missionaries.<sup>3</sup> We must remember that God created these people and their culture and that no one culture is “right.” All cultures have aspects that need redemption and aspects that are beautiful preparations and illustrations of who God is. We need to approach others with humility, realizing that we are on a journey together, that we all have a contribution to make. We need each other to help make that contribution as we seek to understand who God is. No one person or group has been given all the light.<sup>4</sup>

There are many types of Buddhist beliefs and practices. This issue focuses on people we identify as Theravada folk Buddhists, even though the people would identify themselves simply as Buddhists. Though Buddha himself taught that there was no supernatural, today’s Theravada folk Buddhists see no conflict between their Buddhist belief and practice, and animism, the belief in spirits. The supernatural

is understood as a reality that affects every aspect of life. I hope that last sentence is true also of us Christians, as it is biblical and helps us bring the gospel to Buddhists.<sup>5</sup>

This issue is not a comprehensive instruction on how to reach

Buddhists to Himself. Then Jay Judson reports on a movement taking place in Myanmar, describing how movement leaders share the good news and do church. Next we have a wonderful infographic from Global Mapping International, giving an overview of the Buddhist

Christian to a movement leader. She describes the movement and how God is reaching Thai Buddhists. This article was also originally written in Thai.

Then we have a wonderful depiction of how to communicate the gospel through traditional Thai art. Sawai Chinnawong is a gifted illustrator and has taken the gospel out of its typical Western presentation and made it Thai.

I hope this issue will challenge you, bless you, and spur you on toward further seeking and action. Many names have been concealed or changed in order to protect those involved in these movements.

Also please check out our online edition for further footnotes and an additional article about patron-client relationships and their impact on how we lead, teach, and work with southeast Asians. 

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## GOD IS DOING AMAZING THINGS IN THE BUDDHIST WORLD, AND WE NEED TO PAY ATTENTION.

Buddhists, but rather a launching pad for further exploration. There are writers representing three different movements in the Buddhist world, four of them from Theravada Buddhist nations. They are average people who asked themselves the question, “What is it going to take to see large numbers of Buddhists turn to Christ?” They describe how the Lord answered this seeking in their lives. God is doing amazing things in the Buddhist world, and we need to pay attention.

What I love is that God often uses seemingly insignificant, unknown people to start these movements. In these movements, we conclude that it is not more missionaries we need, but rather a few humble people who are open and seeking God passionately for His approach, His way to reach people. One person can start a movement. But it needs to be the person God has called and gifted for the task, and the person who is willing to pay the price to do so. These are the types of missionaries we need today. A few who are ready to give up their own culture, step into another worldview, and radically and fully enter into the lives of others, on a search for where God is already at work.

In the lead article, Chris Bauer takes us on a journey through basic Buddhist concepts and how we can see God at work in them, pointing

world. This is the beginning of a series of infographics that will help clarify and simplify important ideas in future issues.

Message contextualization is next, with an intriguing exploration of how important it is to use terminology that Buddhists understand when communicating the good news. Then in *Old Wineskins?* I tell about my time as a church planter, focusing on the relationship between new believers and the established church. The principles described in this article can also be applied more broadly, to reaching Asian Buddhists here in the Western world, as we consider what it will take for those who come to Christ here to start movements in their home countries. How will this impact how we lead them to Christ and disciple them?

David Stuart then gives some essential practical guidelines for interacting with Theravada Buddhists. Next we hear from another movement leader who articulates some of the theology behind the movement, addressing identity issues. This article was originally written in Thai and has been greatly condensed to fit our format. If you are interested in seeing the full version, write to me.

Jiraphon Serithai’s article gives me goosebumps; she takes us on her journey from being a typical Thai

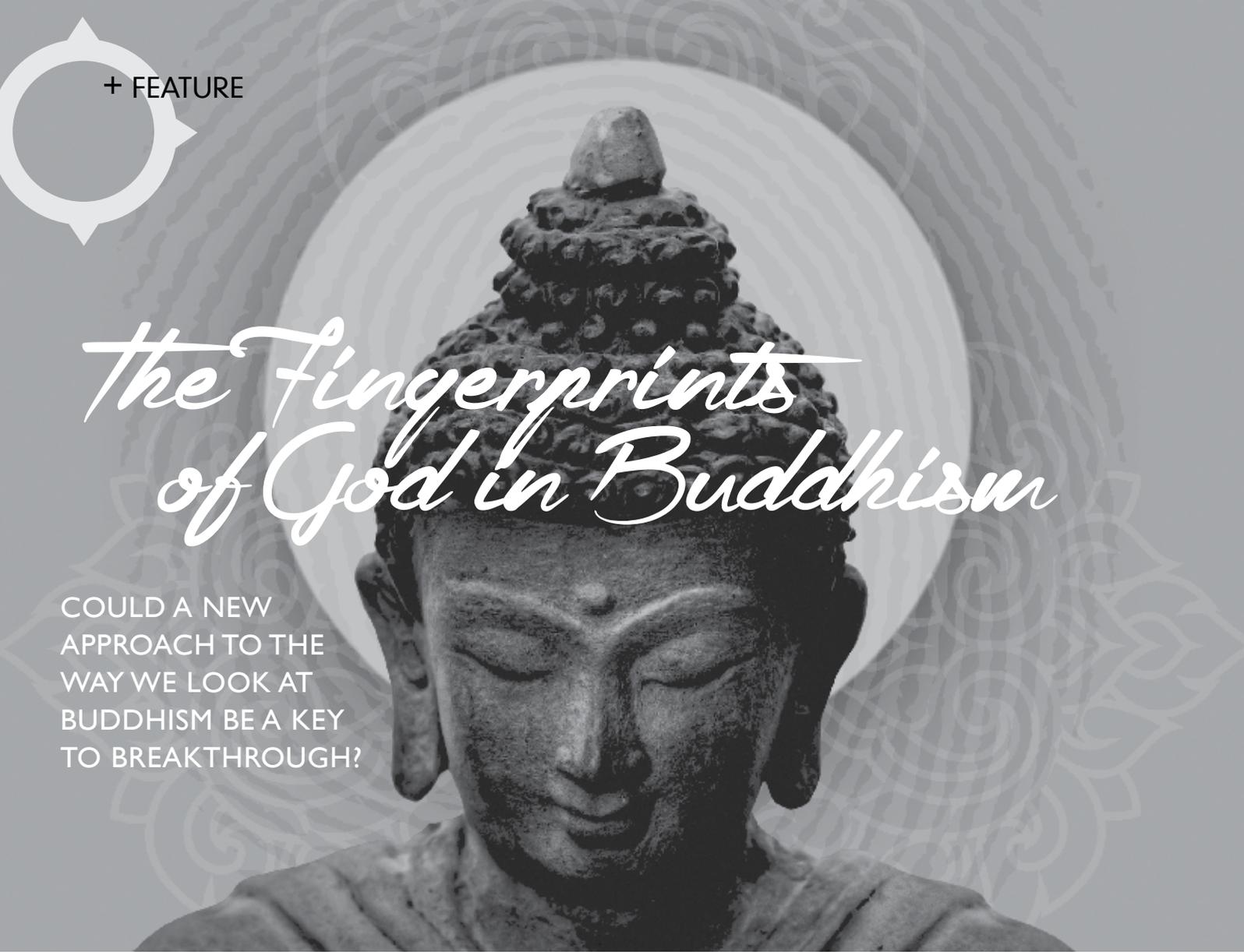
<sup>1</sup> [www.thaicrc.com/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D5672.dir/5672.pdf](http://www.thaicrc.com/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D5672.dir/5672.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [www.herbswanson.com/post/\\_docs/Bo\\_Tree.pdf](http://www.herbswanson.com/post/_docs/Bo_Tree.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For a good book on this subject, read *We Are Not the Hero* by Jean Johnson.

<sup>4</sup> [www.icc.ac.uk/files/uploads/RMacKenzie-Karl\\_Ludwig\\_Reichelt.pdf](http://www.icc.ac.uk/files/uploads/RMacKenzie-Karl_Ludwig_Reichelt.pdf) An example of an historic missionary who used this approach was Karl Reichelt. “What I have experienced through these many years in the sacred hours of conversation with these people has given me the profound conviction that Christ has been working everywhere through all the ages. We should, therefore, gratefully and joyfully use the material which He Himself has prepared for the coming of His Kingdom. That the result is genuinely right is also clear. For Christ Himself has given us the criterion ‘Ye shall know them by their fruits’ (Matt.7:16): a circle of people who through faith in the Lord have been set free from sin, fear and bondage and are now enthusiastically giving up their lives in service for Him.”

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the different schools of thought in Buddhism and where they are practiced, see [buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/schools1.htm](http://buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/schools1.htm)



# The Fingerprints of God in Buddhism

COULD A NEW  
APPROACH TO THE  
WAY WE LOOK AT  
BUDDHISM BE A KEY  
TO BREAKTHROUGH?

## CHRIS BAUER

Chris lived and worked in Asian countries as a strategy coordinator and church planter for ten years. As he experienced difficulties due to different worldviews, it raised the question “How can Asians truly understand the good news without becoming a Western Christian?” Chris has spent the last several years exploring what it would look like to follow Christ in a Buddhist context.

Chris now works at the US Center for World Mission.

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Typically Christians attempt to understand Buddhism<sup>1</sup> by trying to compare it with biblical doctrine. We quickly come to the conclusion that Buddhism is quite different from Christian beliefs. We believe in God, Buddhists do not. We believe in a savior, they have to rely on self-effort. This line of reasoning can develop until we are solidly convinced that there could not be any two belief systems further apart from each other than Buddhism is from biblical Christianity. And because we know we are in the light, they therefore must be in the darkness, from which we have to rescue them by proclaiming the gospel. And by gospel I mean our understanding of the gospel, because to a Buddhist our good news does not sound like good news. The biblical doctrine seems so far removed from their concepts that rarely does any understanding occur, even after 200 years of Protestant mission efforts. The only way for a Buddhist to believe what we believe is to reject everything “Buddhist”<sup>2</sup> and jump camp.

But could it be that how we are interpreting Buddhism puts us off target altogether? Could it be that we have never really understood Buddhism and what it is all about?

Do we actually believe what Paul wrote that God’s “eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen” (Rom 1:20, NIV)? How does this apply to Buddhism? Can we find eternal and divine fingerprints in Buddhism? Instead of dismissing everything

Buddhist as untruth, let us try the opposite, finding some truth within Buddhism. Such a new approach might actually hold the key to breakthroughs among Buddhists.

First, a few words of what we can not expect. We can not expect that Buddhists have a fully and completely developed concept of “God.” Neither can we expect that a savior concept exists in the sense of a savior who overcame death to make a deathless life possible for all of creation. Even the Jews who had all the revelations of God in their Scriptures weren’t able to identify Jesus as the Savior of the world. Both concepts-- of God and of a savior--are part of the good news.

## Let us believe that God gave some profound wisdom and understanding of godly truth to Buddhists, then build on that foundation laid by God himself and see what will happen!

Let us believe that God gave some profound wisdom and understanding of godly truth to Buddhists, then build on that foundation laid by God himself and see what will happen!

For a Christian to dive into anything Buddhist leads to much confusion early on. An easy way to declutter our understanding is to study how Buddha saw reality.

The Buddhist world is basically divided into two spheres with unique and opposite attributes.

There is *kamma* (Pali; *karma* in Sanskrit) on one hand and *nibbana* (Pali; *nirvana* in Sanskrit) on the other. While *nibbana* is deathless and includes no suffering, in *kamma* there is death and suffering.<sup>3</sup> Humans are in the *kamma* realm, we are conditioned by death and suffering, we are under the condition of change. We want to attain *nibbana*, which is unconditioned.<sup>4</sup> While living this kind of life within the *kamma* realm we desire what we do not have, while within the *nibbana* realm this kind of desire is absent. God, however, is not conditioned by death and suffering, he is not under the condition of change, he is unconditioned.

In short, all that is absent in *nibbana* is present in *kamma*, and it makes our lives miserable.

Life in the Buddhist understanding is strictly defined as life under *kamma*. It is a life that is under death. Buddhists do not have a concept for life without death. It is like a fish without water, while the fish is living for a short while on the dry table (after hopping out of the glass), his life is full of suffering and will surely lead to death quickly. If he would be in water, he would actually live. This is one

reason why Buddhists are not very appreciative of being told about “eternal life” as for them it means this miserable life on earth, experiencing suffering and death again and again without any escape eternally. That is bad news, the worst imaginable. What we want to find words for is the biblical concept of “life without death.”

The concept of *kamma* always includes the ideas of reincarnation or rebirth.<sup>5</sup> The reasons are that humans have to experience some kind of result for what they do. They cause something to happen and this has to have an effect, which in a certain way is simply how we experience life. We see people doing good and good comes back to

them or people doing evil and bad things come to them. We also experience, however, that bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people. While there seems

to be some kind of “justice” going on, it clearly does not all happen in this life. Therefore if we do not experience all the good effects in this life and there are some effects “left over,” the only way to experience them is in another life. Unless of course we get out of *kamma* into *nibbana*. Justice from God is absent simply because God is absent in their worldview. *Kamma* is a concept which includes the absence of God while it preserves some kind of justice concept, although Buddhists would not use that term because justice implies the idea of another being administering this justice.

Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. Here are some possibilities of understanding them from the perspective of a shared foundation:

1. “All is suffering.” This refers to the *kamma* realm. Nothing in the *kamma* realm excludes suffering. Suffering is an all-pervasive concept and goes way beyond what Christians understand suffering means. In biblical concepts the first Noble Truth would best be translated as, “Everything is under the curse.”
2. “The cause of suffering is desire.” Just like suffering, the word desire or craving (*tanha* in Pali) does not mean the same as the English word. *Tanha* can best be understood by the desire Adam and Eve had when they desired to be like God--knowing good and evil. Adam and Eve did not trust God; they desired something that was not meant for them. Acted out in an unwholesome act (*akusala* in Pali), this desire led to the fall, to death and suffering. *Tanha* and *akusala* pair up in something that the Bible calls sin



(although, of course, it lacks the component of having a connection to “God”).

3. “The cessation of suffering is possible.” The good news: There can be an end to this suffering, and an end of death. The cessation of suffering (and death) means attaining *nibbana*. This cessation happens by extinguishing *tanha* (desire).<sup>6</sup> When “not trusting God” is *tanha*, then “trusting God” practically has extinguished *tanha*. In biblical terms “trusting God” is the same as “believing in God.”<sup>7</sup> Not believing is the same as “not coming from faith” (which is sin<sup>8</sup>). The implications of this are far-reaching, and need to be explored further.

## All concepts in Buddhism are not fleshed out with God in mind, but they can be.

4. “The Noble Eightfold Path leads to the end of suffering.” Interpreting this path correctly can be a bit tricky; however, without getting lost in details, all eight steps<sup>9</sup> have the element of “not-self” in it. “Not-self” (*anatta*<sup>10</sup> in Pali) is probably the most difficult Buddhist concept to comprehend. Understood from a biblical perspective, there is no such thing as a permanent unchanging self. Permanent and unchanging is in the realm of God. We cannot make ourselves into a permanent and unchanging entity, and thereby become a “self” (i.e. *atta*). And here is the intersection of us being in Christ: “he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor 5:17, NIV) We can not “better” our *atta*; we have to come to the understanding that there is no ultimate transcending self beyond Christ. And Christ

is the way to God, the way to deathlessness, the way to *nibbana*. This Noble Eightfold Path is personified in Jesus Christ. This path, which is Christ himself, leads to the end of suffering, to the end of death.

Much more can be said about this. Some readers may feel uneasy as the above sounds like mixing Buddhism and biblical truth. Finding the fingerprints of God within Buddhism is like putting an engine into a car that does not have an engine; it is putting God into a belief system called Buddhism. To extend this analogy, a car is a car even if there is no engine inside. When someone puts an engine into a car it does not become a tractor. In the same way Buddhism stays Buddhism with or without God. What Buddhists are talking about is a world without God. Will it also make sense if we put God inside of it? Yes, it will, if we connect the different pieces of the engine to the right pieces of the car. We need to get an understanding of what Buddhism really is. To continue the analogy, it is like a car that waits for the engine to be put in and all the pieces properly connected. We do not need to approach Buddhists with the attitude “I’m a tractor, you are a car; I have an engine, you don’t. In order to get anywhere you have to become like me, a tractor with an engine.” We just need to bring them the good news: There is an engine and it makes you drive. There is a path to God and it is Jesus, and He will get you to *nibbana*, to deathlessness.

All concepts in Buddhism are not fleshed out with God in mind, but they can be. In other words we are adding meaning to Buddhist concepts without taking pre-existing meaning away.

When this happens, Buddhists can understand what we mean based on their previous knowledge of truth. They see

how Buddha's teachings were like a masterful preparation for the good news of Christ. They do not have to become non-Buddhists (i.e. a tractor) in order to believe in Christ and trust God. Before, they only had to depend on themselves because they did not know Christ and were stuck in *kamma*. There was no reliable source to depend on. None of the Hindu gods worked out for Buddha. Neither can anyone

a path to walk on. We don't need to fight Buddhists for "wrong beliefs," engaging in defensive apologetics because we feel threatened by their beliefs. We can explore new ways of engaging with our Buddhists friends, because God's fingerprints do exist in Buddhism. 

## Many Buddhist concepts are so biblical that it is possible to think they are straight from the Bible.

rescue someone else while being stuck in the same mud (*kamma*). They can depend on Christ as Buddhists precisely because Christ was always enlightened.<sup>11</sup> Here is the climax of the analogy. Buddhists, as cars without an engine, believed that they had to depend on themselves, but now they can depend on the engine that fits into their cars. They can depend on Christ. This is the good news.

Many Buddhist concepts are so biblical that it is possible to think they are straight from the Bible.

*Metta* is unclinging love, pure kindness, absolute benevolence with no hint of any selfishness involved.

*Metta* is basically what the Greeks called *agape*.

Unfortunately, there are still Bible translations out there that use a desire-clinging love word, putting the love of God straight back into the realm of *kamma*.

While *metta* and *nibbana* make God personal, the word that makes God divine is *nicca*, permanence. *Kamma*, and all conditioned phenomena, are characterized by impermanence, *anicca*. *Nibbana* is not conditioned and thereby permanent. This permanence is what Buddhists see as ultimate, while according to biblical truth God is ultimate. The reason why Buddha did not talk about a "personal" ultimate is because there was no person existing who was unconditioned and permanent and Hindu gods were either impermanent and personal or impersonal. An impersonal godhead would not make any difference to human suffering. The end of human suffering is what Buddha was concerned about.

Further exploring the fingerprints of God within Buddhism might lead to more breakthroughs among Buddhists as they find the permanent God who has brought *nibbana* to them, experiencing His *metta* and transforming their lives. If space would allow we could find dozens of examples of Buddhist concepts that could be employed to communicate the good news.

Once we understand Buddhism better, how it highlights the truth, we see God at work everywhere. He prepared

<sup>1</sup> There are many schools of thought within Buddhism; some have opposing views on different issues. "Buddhism" here is used more in the way it is used in Asia as *Buddha-dhamma*, the teachings of Buddha.

<sup>2</sup> Whatever is included in their definition of "Buddhist," which in most cases is an amalgamation of cultural identity, national identity, moral code, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Suffering, *dukkha* in Pali, should not be understood in the normal English use of that word. It has a much deeper meaning. "*Dukkha* is commonly explained according to three different categories:

- The obvious physical and mental suffering associated with birth, growing old, illness and dying.
- The anxiety or stress of trying to hold onto things that are constantly changing.
- A basic unsatisfactoriness pervading all forms of existence, because all forms of life are changing, impermanent and without any inner core or substance. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dukkha)

"Without any core and substance" is hinting at the underlying unsatisfactoriness which we also see in Gen 3:17-19 (NIV). We were separated from God, meaning death in a wider sense than mere physical death, as Adam and Eve did not die physically that day. See also Rom 8:20 (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> "Unconditioned": not under the influence of impermanence, not-self and suffering

<sup>5</sup> There is a difference between reincarnation and rebirth. Reincarnation assumes that a person exists, and that this person will die and be reborn again. Rebirth assumes that there is no person being reborn but that a person forms out of five aggregates which disassemble at death and reassemble into another person, thus a person is reborn. While the Buddha denied reincarnation, practically, Asian Buddhists believe in reincarnation.

<sup>6</sup> There is a Christian confusion sometimes arising which shows a lack of understanding of what *tanha* (desire) means: "Don't you need the desire of ending desire in order to end desire?" The simple answer is that the word for "desire" of ending *tanha* (Pali) is not *tanha*.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word '*pistis*' for (to believe) can also have the meaning "to trust" depending on the context.

<sup>8</sup> Rom 14:23b (NIV) "...and everything that does not come from faith is sin."

<sup>9</sup> right understanding, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration

<sup>10</sup> Not-self, *anatta* is the negative form of *atta*. For the Buddha *atta* (self) is the same as *atman* (Sanskrit) which can be understood as the "true self of a person," which goes beyond *kamma*. There are different views about *anatta* among Buddhists; even mentioning a few of them would go beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>11</sup> In fact it might be good to point out that "God is light..." John 1:5, (NIV); enlightenment can only happen because God (or Christ) is light. In this sense Christ did not "become enlightened" but is the pure essence of anyone's enlightenment.



## JAY JUDSON

After meeting Dr. George Patterson at a Perspectives class in 1999, Jay was mentored by George for a year at Western Seminary where he learned the dynamics of worship in small house churches as well as how to multiply them in a two month underground church training simulation. In July 2002 Jay moved to Myanmar, serving as Strategy Coordinator for a Buddhist people group numbering 2.8 million. Within three years he established 252 churches. These churches now number over 1,492 with 42,500 believers among 20 unreached people groups. The movements have now spilled across the borders into surrounding countries.

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## HOW 42,500 BUDDHIST BACKGROUND BELIEVERS ARE PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

There have been tremendous evangelistic breakthroughs among animistic tribals, Chinese, nominal Christians, Hindus, and now even Muslims, but there have been very few breakthroughs among the 350 million Buddhists of the world. Surely the Buddhists are one of the few remaining giants in global evangelization.

### INDIGENOUS ELEMENTS OF CHURCH MULTIPLICATION MOVEMENT VISION AND PRINCIPLES

In February 2004 my two of my trainees, the Lawyer and the Farmer, started to see a break-through among their Buddhist unreached people group. Within two months we saw the first seven new churches. Six months earlier we had started a temporary training church modeled after what we learned from Dr. George Patterson. This training allowed the Lawyer and the Farmer to develop a Buddhist-friendly style of worship. I asked, “How can we help Buddhist seekers and Buddhist background believers feel comfortable worshipping Jesus?”<sup>1</sup> The trainees decided to use a Buddhist *gyzee* bell available on the prayer altar in every Buddhist home in the country. We adapted its purpose and the *gyzee* is struck three times to indicate the beginning and end of worship in homes. The trainees adapted the basic outline and terminology of the Buddhist monk’s ordination ceremony to baptism. New believers (novices) are trained in an easily reproducible curriculum we call the Ten Commands of Christ<sup>2</sup> and asked if they lovingly commit to obey our Abbot wherever they go. The novices reply with a Buddhist Pali term *amabondi* (I promise). There is only one Monk—Jesus—whom they bow before.<sup>3</sup> When they pray, the believers use the Buddhist term for amen or well done, *thadu*. In Adoniram Judson’s translation of the Bible

into Burmese, Jesus uses this word in Matt 25:23, giving precedent for its use.

### RAPID OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST'S COMMANDS HAS LED TO RAPID MULTIPLICATION OF NEW DISCIPLES AND CHURCHES.

Sister Than Than's alcoholic husband left her in 2005 because he found out that she was earning money by way of the oldest profession in the world. When Than Than traveled to the city where the Lawyer and I lived, looking for her runaway husband, she heard the gospel, was baptized a week later and was shown a simple model for church. We trained her, shared the vision for a movement and sent her back home. By Christmas 2005, Than Than had started 14 churches in her area. I asked her how she did this, and she was irritated at my amazement. She went on to share her waterfall strategy: "People come to my house on Sunday morning and my daughter Phyu Phyu tells a Bible story using our picture Bible. Then the trainees repeat the Bible story back to the group and I ask the four inductive questions." The last question is "Who are you going to share this story and truth with?" She challenges the trainees to repeat this story at their homes that afternoon. Therefore the Bible flows out of Than Than's house to the second, third, and fourth generation like a cascading waterfall. Nine-year-old Phyu Phyu is the best preacher in that area out of 200 new house church leaders.

The networks often hold leadership trainings inside monasteries and homes. The Lawyer works with monks on community development projects. A handful of monks have been identified as persons of peace<sup>4</sup> who have embraced the Messiah while others have been identified as persons of goodwill.<sup>5</sup> A few monks, however, have proven to be strong opponents of the gospel and have driven 300 believers from nine villages. They are jealous of the large numbers turning to Christ and have placed curses on our leaders, which we have broken.<sup>6</sup> We have learned a great deal about handling spiritual warfare thanks to these monks.

Living in an area with one of the lowest cell phone penetrations in the world, our network leaders continue to struggle with lack of communication between mentors. We have sent "runners" with hand-written letters to encourage other leaders and organize future trainings. The house church networks have taken up offerings to build schools, care for children at risk and provide aid in natural disasters and ethnic conflict zones. After cyclone Nargis washed away 140,000 people in May 2008, the movement crossed cultural barriers and spread into the majority people group numbering 60 million Buddhists.

### EIGHT BARRIERS TO BUDDHISTS RECEIVING CHRIST<sup>7</sup>

While many cross-cultural workers have developed various methods for sharing the gospel with Buddhists, it is more crucial to identify the barriers.

1. The term for heaven: Buddhists desire to be set free from the cycle of sin and suffering (reincarnation).
2. God's wrath and justice: "Your God killed people in the Red Sea?"
3. The term for sacrifice: "Your God wants me to drink blood and eat flesh? Is He like a hungry ghost?" See the story of the Rabbit in the Moon for our way of dealing with this issue.<sup>8</sup>
4. Eternal life: "You want me to be stuck in reincarnation forever? No thanks."
5. The preeminence of Buddha: "Buddha lived before Jesus; therefore Buddhism is correct."
6. God's grace verses merit: "If salvation is free, then it must be worthless."
7. Sin versus crime: "You said 'for all have committed crime and fallen short of the glory of God.' I am not a criminal."
8. Creation: "The monks told us not to think about creation; that it is not important in our religion."

### THE LAWYER'S METHOD (THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS OF CHRIST)

Taking these barriers into account, my trainee the Lawyer developed a presentation of the gospel for those who live under the four laws of Buddhism (Four Noble Truths<sup>9</sup>). He presents the bad news of Buddha's law before proclaiming the liberating good news of Christ. Buddhists call this liberation *nirvana* in Sanskrit (*nibbana* in Pali). The Lawyer proclaims Christ as the way to *nirvana*. The following is my version of his method.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus and Buddha are in agreement that humans have to be perfect. It is impossible with men but possible with God.

**1st Truth:** Suffering and death have an origin (a cause). Suffering and death is the effect of that cause. *See figure 1.1.*

**2nd Truth:** The origin of death is sin. Share the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience (Gen. 3:3) and Rom. 6:23. *See figure 1.2.*

**3rd Truth:** There is a place where suffering and sin no longer exist. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev 21:4, NIV) The goal is to go to *nirvana*. *Ni* means no, *vana* means fire or burning. *Nirvana* is a place of no sin and no suffering. *See figure 1.3.*

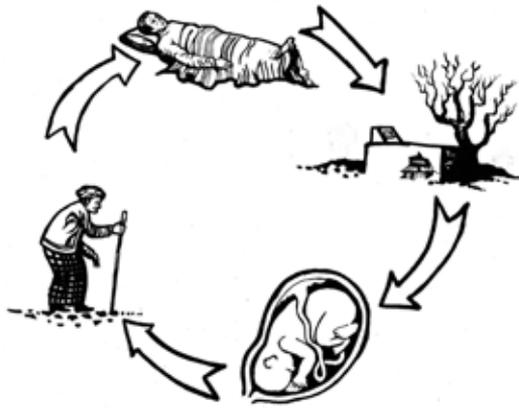


Figure 1.1

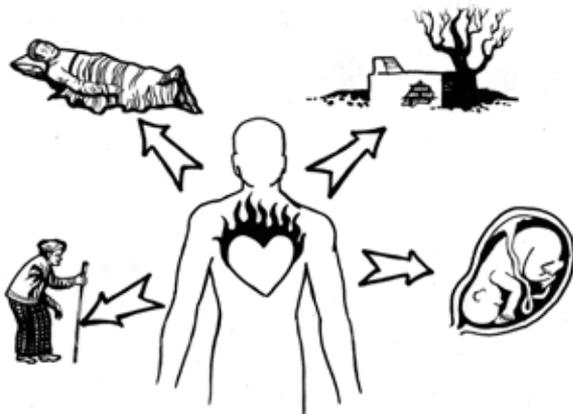


Figure 1.2

**4th Truth:** The Way out of the cycle of sin and suffering is faith in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Christ walks the perfect road through His disciples. He makes them perfect in His eyes. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21, NIV) See figure 1.4.

After praying for the sick, the Lawyer reminds persons of peace that there are many stories in Theravada Buddhism about salvation by grace through faith. For example, most are familiar with the story of a man named Angulimala who murdered his father and repented before the enlightened Gautama Buddha.<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist background believers announce that Christ is very similar to the Lord of Compassion, the *Ari Metteya*.<sup>12</sup>

**MIRACLES, MUSLIMS, HINDUS AND JEWS**

Not only have the Buddhist-background believers in Myanmar seen a missiological breakthrough among Buddhists, they are also spearheading church multiplication movements among Muslims who have recently embraced the good news. Through them over 400 Hindus have also been baptized and are worshipping in 70 churches.



Figure 1.4

**A Theravada Buddhist's view of the Cosmos and understanding of Salvation**

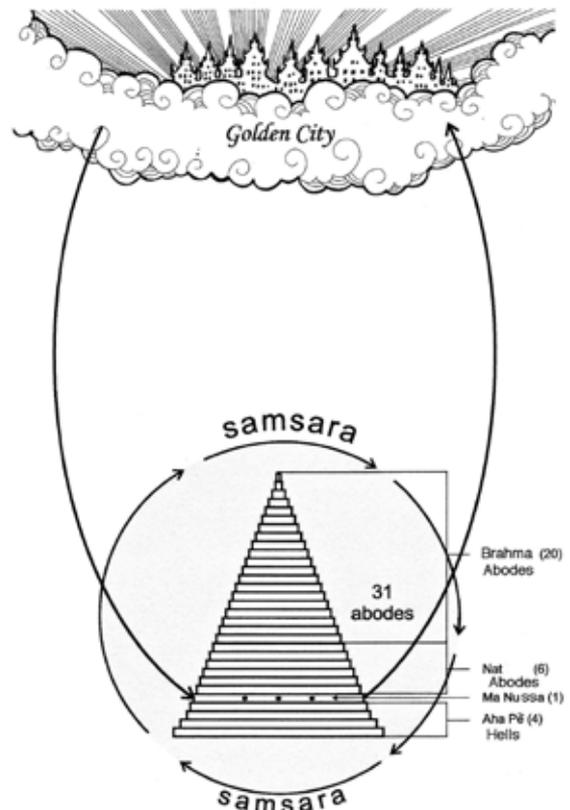


Figure 1.3

My trainees from Israel have conducted a signs and wonders training in Asia. Now our networks in Myanmar are reporting hundreds more healings and even one resurrection. Only Jesus can bring Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jews together in the body of Christ. All the power in the world cannot break down the walls of religion, but with Christ all things are possible. (MF)

\* All illustrations were drawn by Saya Sitthu

\* See online version for footnotes.

# A Visual Journey

## BEYOND PRAYER FLAGS AND STATUES

Responding to the Need Among Buddhist Peoples

### JON HIRST

Jon Hirst is President and CEO of GMI, a ministry that inspires people to action through mission information. GMI releases bi-monthly Missiographics on global mission at [www.missiographics.com](http://www.missiographics.com).

*NOTE: As you read this article, make sure to interact with the missions infographic (Missiographic) on the next page.*

#### What is Buddhism?

#### What do Buddhists really believe?

#### How might I explain this religion to a friend at church or someone at work?

#### How are Buddhists responding to the gospel around the world?

These questions are not easy ones to answer. With hundreds of people groups practicing the various types of Buddhism, your answers to the questions above might vary greatly. The top left quadrant of the Missiographic on the next page gives you a small taste of the differences between the three main types of Buddhists.

But while Buddhism itself remains a mystery to many, the countries where Buddhism is practiced are front and center on the global stage. Think about headlines coming out of China, South Korea, Japan, and Thailand. Consider the persecution in North Korea and the huge transitions occurring in Myanmar. In the bottom left quadrant of the Missiographic, you will see in detail where the top ten Buddhist people groups are from.

The millions of people who practice Buddhism desperately need the gospel and many are responding in incredible ways. Take a look at the top right quadrant of the Missiographic to see the growth of the Christian faith in just a few of these countries.

If you are moved by what you see, here are some suggestions for action!

- 1. Praise God for the harvest in China and Korea!** Pray for all those who continue to spread the news in those countries and beyond.
- 2. Shift your own thinking.** Instead of thinking, “Buddhism is not my area of mission interest. That is for other people,” realize that the Buddhist world as a whole is relatively neglected in mission. Ask the Lord whether you are one of the thousands of people He wants to begin taking a more active interest there somehow.
- 3. Take some baby steps.** As you seek God’s guidance, look around for Buddhists you could get to know yourself. Do some internet surfing on information or images about Buddhism. Put a copy of the Missiographic somewhere that will remind you to pray.
- 4. Plant a seed.** Check whether your church or a mission organization you are involved with has any mission stake at all in the Buddhist world—missionaries, projects or short-term teams. If they do, encourage it and show the Missiographic to reinforce the value of it. If they don’t, then use the Missiographic to plant the seed of Buddhist involvement in their minds and pray that God makes it sprout and grow.

Download your own digital copy of this Missiographic at [www.missiographics.com](http://www.missiographics.com).



## Practicing Buddhists by Type



These three types of Buddhism also are mixed with traditional animist beliefs resulting in countless varieties of "folk" Buddhism.

## Buddhist People Groups

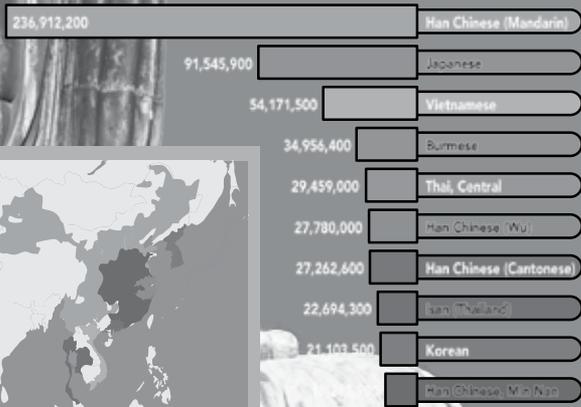
Buddhism is practiced by hundreds of diverse people groups across Asia.

## Largest Unreached Buddhist People-Groups<sup>6</sup>

Japanese = 1.6% Christian    Thai (Central) = 0.4% Christian  
Burmese = 0.1% Christian    Isan (Thailand) = 0.2% Christian

These are just four of the largest unreached groups; there are many more. The last 20 years have seen a wonderful growth in emphasis on missions to the Muslim world. The need is also great in Buddhist areas.

## Top 10 Buddhist People Groups (by population of practicing Buddhists)<sup>7</sup>



## Growth of the Christian Faith

	Christian 2010	Evangelical 1980	Evangelical 2010	% Evan. Growth 30 Years	Evan./Total Chr. Growth Rates
China	7.92%	0.52%	5.70%	996.2%	1.85
South Korea	30.95%	9.94%	16.80%	69.0%	1.11
Cambodia	3.13%	0.04%	1.60%	3900.0%	1.15
Thailand	1.10%	0.17%	0.50%	194.1%	2.70

## Asian Countries with Missions Sending Vision



China and South Korea, two traditionally Buddhist countries, have seen tremendous growth in Christian faith, including a missions zeal to reach out globally.<sup>5</sup>

## Beyond Prayer Flags and Statues Understanding Christian Growth in Traditionally Buddhist People Groups

In light of the complexity and varieties of Buddhism, most Westerners do not go beyond the common images of prayer flags, incense, stone statues and the Dalai Lama. They overlook the mission challenge of the Buddhist world and the amazing ways God is meeting that challenge.

- South Korea sent 21,500 missionaries in 2010<sup>7</sup>
- South Korea and China are in the top 3 mission sending countries<sup>8</sup>
- By 2025, China may be country with most Christians in the world<sup>9</sup>
- China sent 20,000 missionaries in 2010<sup>7</sup>

## What to Do

Learn more about Buddhism through OMF resources: <http://omf.org.us/archives/buddhism>

Seek opportunities to connect with Buddhist neighbors and international students - migration has put many Buddhists in proximity to Christians. There are 3.9 million Buddhists (of all ethnic backgrounds) in North America.<sup>7</sup>

## Why Care

God has been at work in the hearts of the Buddhists and through their culture for centuries, drawing them toward more than they can find in Buddhist mysteries and rituals.

God is on the move in the Buddhist world, especially through Chinese and South Koreans.

Millions of Buddhists are still unreached, still praying to idols that cannot hear or speak.

Praise God that he is sending believers out from every people, and pray for the fruit of South Korean and Chinese missionaries.

See the compelling story of Brother Yun on YouTube. He is a leader God used in forming a vision to carry the gospel from China. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmbsIU9540k> (start at 21:50)

Read *Developing Indigenous Leaders: Lessons in Missions from Buddhist Asia*, Paul H. DeNeui (editor).



Sources:

- Hattaway, *Peoples of the Buddhist World*, 2013 (e-book), page xxiii
- Hattaway, *Peoples of the Buddhist World*, 2013 (e-book), page xv (2010 projected data)
- Operation World Enhanced eBook DVD-Rom 2010*, GMI
- Johnstone, *Future of the Global Church*, 2012, GMI, Figure 8.13 digital collection, data includes missionaries serving in own country as well as externally.
- Blumberg, "China On Track To Become World's Largest Christian Country By 2025, Experts Say," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/22/china-largest-christian-country\\_n\\_5191910.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/22/china-largest-christian-country_n_5191910.html)
- Hattaway, *Peoples of the Buddhist World*, 2013 (e-book), page xv
- Buddhists in North America, Pew Forum <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-buddhist/>

# Bridging Buddhist-Christian Worldviews:



Photo by Maritha Mae Photography: [www.marithamaephotography.com](http://www.marithamaephotography.com)

## COMMUNICATING IN CONTEXT FOR A THERAVADA BUDDHIST BREAKTHROUGH

*W*e have a dream that soon we will see an historic movement of Theravada Buddhists coming to know Christ as Savior. Is this also your dream and your heart's desire?

What's hindering such a movement and limiting response from Buddhists despite decades of effort? Some say that working among Buddhists is like sowing on rocky ground. Some are convinced there are not enough committed Christians working and praying. Others think our methods are wrong. For example, using a literary mode when most Buddhists prefer oral-visual means of communication.<sup>1</sup>

### REV. DR. BANTOON & MRS. MALI BOON-ITT

Dr. Bantoon and Mali Boon-itt, are a husband and wife team serving to improve the communication of the Christian message and making it comprehensible and relevant to Thai Buddhists. Rev. Dr. Boon-itt has written various papers and a dissertation related to this topic. He is the Senior Pastor of 4th Church Suebsampantawong, Bangkok, Thailand.

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### THE PROBLEM: MISCOMMUNICATION DUE TO THE DISPARITY BETWEEN BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEWS

I asked myself two questions: 1) Why is it so hard for Buddhists to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior? 2) Why, even though I preach and teach in Thai, do those who come from a Christian background appreciate my message but non-Christian Thai friends do not? As a Thai pastor, I needed to get to the root of this problem. With this conviction and these questions in mind, for ten years I sought to identify the problem by researching the development of Buddhism and Christianity in Thailand and the interaction between the two religions. I found that, being a Christian, it was hard to work through the many different types of Buddhism that are practiced in Thailand. I discovered several issues.<sup>2</sup>

The main issue is that the message Christians are so enthusiastically pushing toward Buddhists is incomprehensible, unattractive, and irrelevant. It struck me that just as I find it extremely difficult to take off my Christian glasses and put on Buddhist glasses, it must also be hard for Buddhists to see the Christian viewpoint. The root of the problem is that we have not been communicating effectively because we have not realized

that miscommunication will naturally occur due to the disparity between Buddhist and Christian worldviews. We Thai Christians have not grasped the need to learn to understand Theravada Buddhism. Key Christian words and doctrines are generally expressed by Christians in terms that are incomprehensible to Buddhists. An in-depth understanding of Buddhism will help Christians to appreciate why this is so.<sup>3</sup>

### ANSWERS FOUND IN THE BIBLE

Examples from the Bible show that we need to let the context of the listener guide our use of vocabulary, methods, and illustrations to explain about God, what Jesus did on the cross, and His resurrection. Paul

**Key Christian words and doctrines are generally expressed by Christians in terms that are incomprehensible to Buddhists.**

changed the way he presented the gospel according to his audiences.<sup>4</sup> New Testament writers used words and even religious terms from the local context to explain what God did through Christ. Unfortunately, instead of learning from these biblical examples and presenting the gospel in the local Buddhist context, Christians expect Buddhists to comprehend our Christian message the same way as we do, without realizing that a Buddhist's interpretation will be according to the Buddhist worldview. Thus our good news is not good news to Buddhists. Thai Christians need to make the mystery of the cross relevant to Thais where the language of atonement, sacrifice, redemption or adopted sons seems to fail in communicating any relevant meaning.

We see from the Bible that message contextualization is a crucial issue on the way to bring a breakthrough among Theravada Buddhists. This means explaining the significance of what Christ did on the cross to Buddhists in carefully selected terms that they can understand and are meaningful in their lives. It does not simply mean taking Buddhist terms to replace Christian terms. Doing so will be negatively perceived by Buddhists. The Thai language reflects the Thai worldview which in turn is underpinned by Buddhism. One cannot just translate words from one language and expect them to carry the same meaning and nuances in another language with a different worldview. For example, several Christian terms do not even exist in the Thai language outside the church. For the word fellowship, Thai Christians use the



combination *sa mak kee tham* (literally, teaching regarding unity). A non-Christian Thai will not understand that this word means “gathering to get to know and help support one another, sharing food, singing, praying and studying the Bible.” Similar difficulty applies to other key Christian terms, including: God, love, faith, sin, repentance, redemption, sanctification, justification, righteousness, glorification and so on. Many of these terms do not exist in the Buddhist worldview. Even with the terms that do have a Buddhist equivalent, Christians will need to take the time to explain the similarities and differences between their meanings in their two different worldviews. Let me explain a few:

The understanding of the word “God” for a Christian is very different from a Buddhist’s understanding. For a Buddhist, “god” can mean several things but the most common understanding is that “god” means one of the many deities who occupy the different heavenly realms.

The goal of life for a Buddhist is to reach *nibbana* but for a

deeds (*kamma*), but for Christian “heaven is the kingdom of God” whereas “hell is eternal separation from God.”

Sin: in Buddhism there is no such concept, only bad

## Thus our good news is not good news to Buddhists

deeds, *bad*—that is black actions (*kamma*), which in Buddhism is action that is unskillful, *akusala*, hampering one’s attainment of *nibbana*. For a Christian, sin is disobedience to God, falling short of God’s standards. Since in Buddhism there is no such concept of a creator God as in Christianity, the understanding of sin as offense against creator God is meaningless in the Buddhist worldview.

With these differences it is not surprising that Buddhists misunderstand Christianity and find Christianity incomprehensible and not relevant to their lives. There

are several areas where words Christians use do not communicate to the Buddhist what

Christians believe they are

communicating. It is when Christians know the Buddhist worldview and learn about Buddhists’ perception of Christianity that we understand what we are actually saying. Learning about Buddhists’ perception of Christianity has exposed an injudicious introduction of the Christian message to Thai Theravada Buddhists.

## It will not be easy for the established Thai church to change the terms that they have used for nearly two hundred years.

Christian it is to realize the kingdom of God in their lives. This can be perceived by a Buddhist as a self doing things for the benefit of the self to reach heaven and be with God. Heaven and hell for a Buddhist are hierarchical heavenly and hellish realms where beings receive the results of their





Clearly, this means that the Buddhist worldview and terminology need to be understood by the Christian communicator. Without having first grasped the Buddhist worldview one does not appreciate or understand the roots of Buddhists' misperceptions of Christianity. Trying to understand Buddhists' perspective brings the realization that it is Christianity that has failed to communicate. A Christian response to Buddhism can be developed more effectively after grasping their worldview and realizing how Buddhists comprehend our message. Only through trying to understand Buddhists can Christians effectively communicate Christ to them.

Christians may not realize it, but core Buddhist doctrines are intricately interwoven and expressed in the Buddhist way of life: in language, law, morality, belief, culture, tradition, art and architecture. Therefore, we need to understand the core of Buddhist doctrines because they determine people's worldview and way of life. Though the majority of folk Buddhists may not know the Buddhist terminology or be able to explain the Buddhist doctrines, their way of thinking, practice of Buddhism, and the way they view the world have a Buddhist foundation. We need to understand the foundation of classical Buddhism to help us appreciate and understand the various expressions of Buddhism found in the world today. As a comparison, consider how we need to learn the principles and theories of mathematics in order to apply them to mathematical problems. If the basic understanding is weak, solving mathematical problems becomes difficult and even impossible.

A sound knowledge of both Christianity and Buddhism

is needed in order to communicate effectively. The words that we choose need to carry the full Christian theology. Take for example, the challenge of communicating sin to Buddhists. Thai Christians use the word *bap* (as explained earlier). We need to understand what the word *bap* means in the Buddhist worldview and whether it carries the full meaning of sin in the Christian worldview. The word *bap* for sin that Christians have chosen to use currently carries very different meanings in the two different worldviews. Thus, we see that the challenge comes down to choosing the right words—creating concepts and methods of explaining Christian theology in a way that a Buddhist person can comprehend. Perhaps by using a group of words or coining new terms from words that exist in Thai (or the language of that particular Buddhist country) we will be able to communicate without being misinterpreted. All human language has limitations. It is not possible to explain fully the mystery of God or the mystery of the cross. What can be done is to facilitate people coming to Christ, so that they can have a personal relationship with Him and become more Christ-like.

This task requires the cooperation of people from many disciplines such as linguistics and theology. In the Thai context it requires those who understand the Thai worldview (Thai language and culture), those who understand Buddhism, and those who understand Christianity.

The repercussions of message contextualization will be extensive. The Bible societies, Christians and evangelists in Thailand will need to change some terms that are

used in the Thai Bible. The established Thai church will need to change terms with which they are familiar but which Buddhists misinterpret. It will not be easy for the established Thai church to change the terms that they have used for nearly two hundred years to terms that can better communicate to Buddhists the message of the cross.

What if we do not find better terms to communicate the significance of what Jesus did on the cross in a way that is meaningful and relevant to Buddhists? We will continue to experience very little response from Buddhists for many more decades to come. Buddhist friends who hear our message will not understand, even though we use oral (not written) means of communication. What is heard will not connect with the real needs of our Buddhist audience. But if we communicate the message of the cross with cultural sensitivity, in terms to which the Buddhist audience can relate to and be transformed by, the terms will be of deep significance for evangelizing and for discipling. Thai Christians need to be able to pass the gospel on clearly to others. They need to grow in understanding of the two worldviews in order to be able to “gossip the gospel” beyond simply saying, “It’s my experience, just believe.”

## AWARENESS: THE FIRST STEP TOWARD BUDDHIST HEARTS

Awareness of the problem of communication across worldviews is the key step to communicating Christ in a way that can touch Buddhist hearts. This is key for the gospel message to Buddhists in Thailand and applies in other contexts as well. While Judaism, Christianity and Islam have many obvious points of contact in their worldviews, this is not so obvious in Hinduism, Confucianism and the various strands of Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana, Shintoism, etc.). To emphasize, if I am not aware that when I speak Thai with Thai Buddhist friends, they may not understand what I wish to communicate and I may have the impression that they are hard-hearted, or that the message has fallen on rocky ground. Instead of analyzing how I’ve presented the message, I can be lured into thinking that all I need to do is pray more and ask the Holy Spirit to melt their hearts. Their worldview, and my understanding of it, determines their understanding of my message. When I am aware that I am communicating Christ across worldviews, I will be more conscious of how I am communicating. I will be more careful in my choice of words and method of

communication, and double-check that the person has really understood what I have wanted to communicate.

We urgently need to find an effective way of communicating Christ to Buddhists so that what is communicated can really touch their hearts. To make Christianity comprehensible to Buddhist friends will require great acumen as the Christian ideas and concepts are so foreign and so very different from Thai Buddhist ideas. Therefore we need to apply the Christian message into the Buddhist context to help Buddhists understand Christian beliefs. Buddhists may then realize that the Christian message is not entirely foreign to them and they may gain some new insights and realize that there is an alternative response to human suffering or *dukkha*.

It is our dream that the Buddhist community will embrace the gospel message within their cultural context and ignite a breakthrough among Theravada Buddhists. 

- <sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the differences between these types of communication, see [www.ask.com/question/difference-between-oral-and-written-communication](http://www.ask.com/question/difference-between-oral-and-written-communication)
- <sup>2</sup> For instance: the church has failed to encourage and equip Christians to be salt and light in the Buddhist society; instead we pull them out and put them in totally new surroundings with new Christian friends, vocabulary and Western Christian traditions. Thai society perceives Christianity as a foreign (Western) religion. Thais who become Christians have lost their Thai identity. New converts are not given guidance as to how to relate to Thai society as a Thai believer in Christ. Converts discover they have to cut themselves off from their family and former society. No effort is made to build up the Thai Christian identity so that Thai Christians can be perceived as Thais who have not given up their “Thainess” but still remain truly Thai. We rush them to accept Christ even though they have not understood the significance and implications. It is like giving them vaccination against Christ; they think they already know and have been saved. Premature birth gives them less chance to stand firm in their faith.
- <sup>3</sup> Three good sources for understanding the problem are found here:
  - Boon-Itt, Bantoon. 2011 “What is being communicated to Buddhists.” In *Suffering: Christian Reflections on Buddhist Dukkha*. Paul De Neui, ed. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1-22.
  - Boon-Itt, Bantoon. 2007 “A study of the dialogue between Christianity and Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand as represented by Buddhist and Christian writings from Thailand in the period 1950 – 2000.” Ph.D. dissertation, St John’s College, Nottingham, United Kingdom.
  - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_B\\_kVieeqSQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B_kVieeqSQ)
- <sup>4</sup> See Acts 13, 14 and 17

# New Wineskins?

A CASE STUDY ON HOW ASSUMPTIONS  
ABOUT THE WAY WE DO CHURCH  
BECOME MOVEMENT BLOCKERS

## MARIE BAUER

Since 1998, Marie's heart has been for the Shan people to come to know Christ as their Savior and Lord. She spent over a decade among them focused on strategic church planting. Currently her role at the USCWM focuses on Research and Coaching for Buddhist and Hindu peoples.

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Finally released after four years in prison, Ann was thin and tired, but her face radiated joy. Not only the joy of seeing her husband and now seven-year old son again, but the joy of a life transformed by Christ. She had been put in prison on false charges of selling methamphetamines and had had little hope for appeal since she was in Thailand illegally from Burma. Ann had come to know Christ through her niece, Jill, who visited her once a month her last year in prison. Jill also baptized her a few days after her release just below a waterfall made from the overflow of a small irrigation dam, amidst the hills and rice fields.

During Ann's four years in prison, Jill had led about ten others in her family to Christ, including Ann's husband Lung. All of them were from Burma, raised as Buddhists, and worked in orange farms and rice mills scattered throughout the countryside and villages in a corner of northern Thailand. Jill shared how the Creator created the world to be good and had wiped out their bad *karma* (the sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence, influencing one's fate in future existences), and how they could experience *nirvana* (release from the effects of *karma* and death) by making Him Lord of their lives. The family received this news with much joy and many were baptized.

## THE FUNERAL

Joy turned to mourning, however, just 23 days later. On his way home from his night job slaughtering pigs for market, Lung was rear-ended by a semi-truck at full speed and he died instantly. Buddhists believe that anyone who dies a violent death has bad *karma*. The next morning, I went to Jill's house to sit with Ann, and just listened and cried with her. Though severely grieved, her hope in Christ was apparent.

The family decided to cremate Lung in a facility owned by a Buddhist temple, since there was no other practical alternative. Ann approached me with questions about how the funeral ceremony should be done now that she was a believer in Christ. She wanted to follow traditional customs such as using incense while being faithful to Christ. I showed her where incense was used in the Bible and asked her what she thought she should do. She reasoned that using incense is not evil in and of itself, that it also

can be used to worship God. Tom, Jill's Thai husband, overruled Ann's desires in this and other areas based on his understanding of the proper Christian way to conduct funerals. Even though she was older than Tom, Ann submitted, because he was Thai and had been a Christian for several years. (There are no egalitarian relationships in this part of the world; you are either higher or lower than anyone you meet on the social hierarchy.)

The resulting funeral was basically Thai Christian style—held in Jill's house but conducted in Thai language by a Thai pastor (Mr. Y) who lived down the road, wore western clothes and spoke using a microphone. After singing songs translated from English, the pastor preached a lovely four-point sermon, which clearly no one understood. I sensed he was preaching at those present, rather than inviting them or entering into their world. Why should he? Thai people are used to being the “rulers.”

## What had begun as a potential family movement to Christ, ended this day.

My heart was in anguish as I watched; I sensed that this could easily be the one and only chance these family members would be open to hearing about Jesus. This funeral turned them off so vigorously, their hearts became completely closed to anything labeled as “Christian.” What had begun as a potential family movement to Christ, ended this day. Furthermore, the funeral did not do this family patriarch any honor in the eyes of his Shan Buddhist relatives, nor did it show them what it could mean for them to follow Christ. In the eyes of the Thai Christians, however, the event was very satisfactory.

For most Shan people, to *khao Khrit* or *khao Yesu* (literally “enter Christ” or “enter Jesus”) involves giving up one's cultural heritage and identity and adopting a Thai or Western culture and identity.<sup>1</sup> You have to attend church once a week; you can't drink alcohol or go to the temple; and you must follow many rules and suffer the consequences of leaving your culture, such as not being given a proper funeral, losing your inheritance, or not being

allowed to marry a Buddhist or participate in community events. (How do I know this? From asking many Shan Buddhists what they think a Christian is and from seeing it firsthand.) These ideas come from well-meaning missionaries and Christians, yet reveal underlying premises—namely that people in a different culture must live out their faith the same way we do, that they must leave one religion and follow another.

I have often heard Christians say we do not promote a religion but a relationship, and I whole-heartedly agree. Why then do we think it necessary for people to change religions to follow Christ? The last thing I want is to be part of a religion. Perhaps the Thais are not so far off when they say, “All religions are the same; they teach you to be a good person.”

## REAL BAPTISM AND REAL CHURCH

One day after I had lived in the Shan village for a few years, Mr. Y and his wife Sue, while visiting, asked, “When are you going to buy some property and build a church?”. When I replied that I didn't intend to build a church building, Sue asked, “Why not? How will you start a church then? How will you hold meetings?” She went on to ask what denomination I was from and, “Don't they give you the money to build a church?” I explained to her that if Shan people meet in their homes, their families and neighbors can be included and they



Photo by Maritha Mae Photography: [www.marithamaephotography.com](http://www.marithamaephotography.com)

don't have to be dependent on outside money, which is important because the people are so poor, and don't have legal rights to buy land. I will never forget the look of total confusion on Sue's face. After that she didn't ask me again. Somehow a particular church planting strategy had been communicated to her so strongly that she could not imagine any other way. What I proposed sounded ridiculous to her. This is just one interaction, but I share it because it represents the type of viewpoint I encountered over and over again in the surrounding Thai Christian community.

## Rather than the villagers seeing Jesus as something for them, where they are at, the building and those who meet in it are seen as a sort of alien outpost.

Sometime later Ann came to me distraught because a Thai Christian had told her that her baptism wasn't legitimate. She wasn't baptized by a Thai pastor, hadn't taken baptism classes, and didn't have a certificate of baptism. Consequently, she would have to do it all again at the Thai church. I was troubled and spent some time trying to undo the damage and show her how baptism was done in the Bible. However, when a wealthy Thai person who has been a Christian for years comes and says such a thing, who can dispute it? Shan people feel inferior anyway. I do think eventually Ann was able to accept that her baptism was real; her life certainly had transformed. Yet how could I undo all the damage that was done through Ann's interactions with Thai Christians? It felt so unfair for new believers to be stuck in the middle of a strategy clash.

Ann was also chided for not attending the Thai church on Sundays. How could she be a Christian without going to church? In the minds of Thai Christians, our house church was not a true church. We had been holding informal family meetings in the evenings in Ann's younger brother's house, where she now lived. Unlike Ann's brother, Ann's sister-in-law did not yet believe but she listened in from the kitchen as the children played nearby. We sat on the floor with fruit and bottled water in the center of our circle and read the Bible in Shan, using an inductive oral Bible study method similar to what is now known as Discovery Bible Study. The insights that came from Ann and her brother amazed me.

Ann eventually began attending the Thai church on Sundays, even though the journey was risky because of her illegal status and the checkpoints along the way. Her boss threatened to fire her and ridiculed her for wanting

to take Sunday off. Her brother always had to work Sundays so he never accompanied her to church, but even if he had, his inability to speak Thai would have made him feel out of place (Ann had learned Thai while imprisoned).

## EMPOWERMENT VS. SUPPRESSION

When she had led her family in house church meetings, Ann had been empowered in her faith. At the Thai church, however, she felt she could not measure up to the Thai pastor in her prayers and preaching. She learned the pastor had to be the one teaching, laying hands on the sick, giving communion, and of course baptizing. My hope had been to see her and all new Shan believers encouraged and empowered; instead they were "told" they could

not do this or that because they didn't measure up to some standard.

Some months after this, Ann came to me and asked for advice regarding her nephew who had become a Buddhist monk. She wanted to give him clothes and food, but the Thai church was against it because they thought of helping monks as a form of Buddhist worship. Ann's heartfelt desire was to help her relative with his physical needs, so I encouraged her to do it as a way of worshipping Jesus. The Thai church, on the other hand, would have had her say, "I'm a Christian, I don't do that."

Personally I believe there is a way to participate in a Buddhist tradition that demonstrates a deeper meaning, one that reconciles Scripture and culture. Isn't that what Jesus did with the woman at the well?<sup>2</sup> Rather than following cultural norms and expected religious behavior, He showed her love and concern. He showed her His heart.

## ALIEN ABDUCTION

Over the years I watched how this neighboring Thai church functioned. There was almost always a team of young people from America there helping out in some way—with building projects, music, children's programs, outreaches, funding, and so on. I began to see that this church was totally dependent on these teams and would not exist at all without them. Spending an extensive amount of time with the teams, the church leaders and members became more and more Western in their attitude and behavior, which alienated them even further from the Buddhist community around them. In an attempt to help bring understanding of our strategy to the Thai church, I



them? What if the way we approach missions in most situations is damaging to our cause and to others?

## LOOKING AT STRATEGIES

The problem is not with Thai Christians; many are my friends and are true children of God who love others and desire for them to know Christ. Rather, the problem is what was modeled and taught to them. They are unable to see how their ingrained attitudes and strategies hinder large numbers of people coming to Christ. After all, they do produce some fruit. It is critical, however, that we ask important questions as to how the current situation came to be, and what we

need to do differently. People object to culture, not to Christ. But they can't see the forest through the trees.

Some months before all the events described here took place, fresh out of a strategy coordinator (SC)<sup>4</sup> training course<sup>5</sup> in which I had been enormously challenged, I asked myself, "What do I do with these new believers?" This question is a very important one and we often overlook its importance, with the default answer being to take them to church and integrate them so they can be discipled. I struggled. I had learned at the SC course that I should keep them as far away from the established church as possible: Don't take them to church; make them the church. I felt like a criminal hiding new Shan believers from the Christians, even though it is probably impossible in a communal society like that of the Shan and Thai, where everyone knows everything about their neighbors anyway.

Though I struggle, I am utterly convinced that the SC approach is the best way forward. A fledgling Shan believer does not have what it takes to disagree with or stand up against what the Thai church tells him/her is right and wrong. Yet what a wondrous experience to see a new believer with other new, unspoiled believers in their family and community, search the Scriptures together and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance to figure out how to live out what they read, without someone of a higher status telling them, "This is how it's done." Imagine the expressions we would see, and how they would bring glory to God. Imagine how they would be released to discover and grow and multiply, with their identity in Christ, not in a religion or culture.

offered to do a seminar on church planting movements. The reply: "We're really busy right now"—a Thai way of saying no.

A typical outreach effort by this church would go like this: The church chooses a poor village of hill tribe people. A team shows up in a pickup truck. They walk from house to house, speaking Thai language and handing out Thai tracts (inadvertently communicating "your language is inferior" and "God doesn't speak your language"). They ask if they can pray for the sick. Someone may be healed; someone prays a prayer to receive Christ. The next Sunday one of the Christians comes in a car to pick up the new believers and take them to church, and the natural witness of the new believer to their community is cut short. (To the villagers this must seem like an alien abduction.)

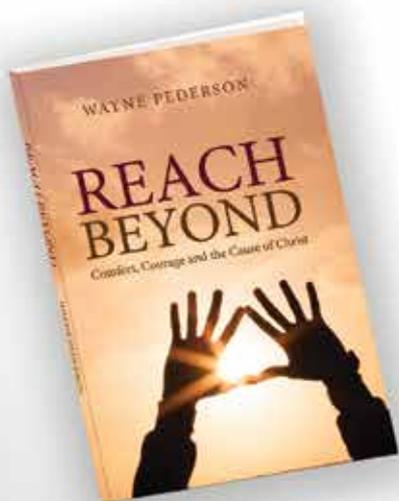
As time goes on, the villagers notice that those who "became Christians" become less and less like them and more and more like the richer, superior Thai people in their attitude and language. In addition, those who might have otherwise engaged in evangelism within their villages as a natural part of their lives are often paid to work for Christian projects.<sup>3</sup> As a result, neighbors become bitter. Eventually, if all goes well, there may be additional believers and occasionally church buildings are built in villages—and sometimes those buildings get burned down. Rather than the villagers seeing Jesus as something for them, where they are at, the building and those who meet in it are seen as a sort of alien outpost. What does this communicate to the Buddhist community about following Christ? What if our pride is keeping us from seeing through their eyes or truly caring about



**CAN YOU FIND  
THE CHRISTIANS  
ON THIS PAGE?**

**THERE PROBABLY AREN'T ANY.**

**ARE YOU OK WITH THAT?**



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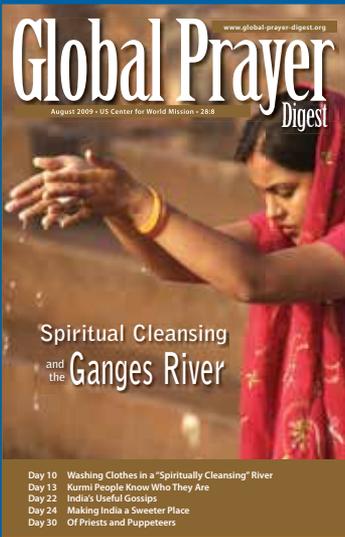
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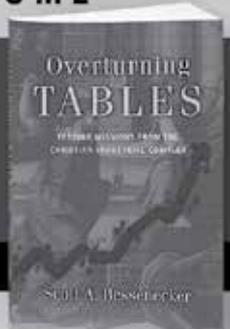
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It is my conviction that if we are ever to see a real movement among the Shan, then churches which spring up must not be birthed out of or become part of churches of a different or dominant ethnic/linguistic group. A movement cannot take off if all Shan churches are in fact Thai, or Burmese. I cannot understand why this would be our default mode. The Shan need to see that Jesus is for the Shan too, not only for the dominant people groups. We need to allow new Shan believers to form churches their way, without the dominant influence of the Thai or Burmese churches dictating how things are done. Today many predominantly ethnic Thai or Burmese churches have a few Shan people in them. But when will there be Shan churches that do things in a way that welcomes Shan people as Shan, without insisting they turn into something else? Only when those who reach out to them do so by delving deep into the Shan culture, language and community, humbling themselves, and letting Shan culture, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit be their guide, rather than expecting new believers to adapt to a foreign way. These extra-biblical requirements place a burden on new believers that should not be there.

I do not have all the answers because I am still in the middle of a searching and struggling process of understanding how to apply the principles that I know have proven effective over time in situations similar to those of the Shan people. Something is drastically wrong in our mission efforts, and we cannot expect different results if we do not challenge the status quo. I am deeply disturbed by some of what I see in missions today.

And my hope for people like Ann is that she can freely celebrate her culture, language, heritage and ethnicity before the throne of God with many others, unburdened by the imbalances, prejudices, and extra-biblical requirements that she struggles with to this day. 

<sup>1</sup> “Shan allege that Christians are no longer Shan because they do not keep Shan culture any more. They accuse us of being westernized. They call us ‘Shan American.’ In wedding ceremonies, traditional ways of marriage are replaced by Western style of marriage or so-called Christian marriage. Paying homage and respect to the parents by kneeling down on the floor and bowing down to the parents is no longer permitted. ...As Shan Christians are abandoning their traditions, Christianity is seen as a threat to their cultures. ...The Christians are being accused of importing Western culture to the Shan.” From Maung Sai Htwe. 2007 *History of Shan Churches in Burma (Myanmar) 1861-2001*, self published, page 204.

<sup>2</sup> See John 4:5-29, NIV

<sup>3</sup> (Eakin, John L. 1938 “Siam” in *Interpretive Statistical Survey of the World Missions of the Christian Church*. Parker Joseph (Ed.), p. 287 quoted in Smith, Alex 1981 *Siamese Gold*. Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 160.). John L. Eakin could have added emphatically, though with less enthusiasm, “One of the most devastating results of missionary labors in Siam is the arresting of the growth of the Church especially since 1914.” He was, in fact, aware of this and expressed concern over it. Continuing he pinpoints one of the major causes for the Church’s arrested growth in this period.

“At first the need for more educational missionaries for this growing work was met by the increase in foreign staff. But, during the last ten years, with an ever decreasing staff, many ordained evangelists were of necessity drawn into fulltime or part time school work. Naturally, the evangelistic work suffered thereby.” (1938:287)

<sup>4</sup> A Strategy Coordinator is “One who develops and implements a strategy to reach a people group, working with a team or network.” from [www.thetravelingteam.org/node/195](http://www.thetravelingteam.org/node/195)

<sup>5</sup> I attended the International Mission Board’s SC training course in Singapore in 2004.



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

# Ministering to Buddhists of the Theravada Tradition



## DAVID STUART

David spent 35 years working in community development in South Asia among both religiously pluralistic and segregated societies. He holds degrees in intercultural studies and sociology. Currently he is the librarian with William Carey International University.

1. **Befriending is key.** Friendship in the Asian context always requires a willingness to go the extra mile or two without counting the cost. Such a relationship not only requires much time, effort, and resources but also a willingness to be used up in service to Christ.
2. **Earn the right to share the gospel.** Rather than imposing from a position of superiority, move with a servant heart. When your actions are loud enough they are going to want to know why you do what you do.
3. **Be patient.** Do not think in terms of days but in months and years. First try to understand their beliefs and values with a sincere motive. Theological concepts like monotheism and the cross are completely alien to Buddhists. Put yourself in their shoes.
4. **Instill a sense of trust.** Once your bonds reach a level of mutual trust and openness, you will be free to discuss anything from politics to religion.
5. **Understand their felt needs.** Their felt needs are usually not what you see on the surface. Practice looking for and discerning that which is hidden and subtle.
6. **Consider the community.** Asian communities function much differently than Western communities. Rarely would a decision to follow Christ be made in isolation from the community in an Asian culture.
7. **Wait for readiness.** When they are ready to seek, then your role is to help find truth (not pounce). The Holy Spirit will gently accomplish his task. Remember you are just a vessel.
8. **Expect benevolence.** Most Buddhists living in the US are peace-loving, hard working, law-abiding people. They can also be fun-loving and enjoy outdoor activities. Look for opportunities to organize or participate in community activities. For example, Buddhists often enthusiastically support blood donation campaigns.
9. **Look for godly qualities.** For example Buddhists would generally consider it below their dignity and a terrible evil to have their elderly parents placed in a nursing home. Much respect and consideration are shown to the elderly. This is one area where the Buddhist family truly demonstrates the sacrificial love Western Christians only speak about.
10. **Do not assume a blank slate.** You may find Buddhists have been exposed to the gospel in some form or shape. For example, Sri Lanka was under foreign rule for 450 years with the Portuguese, Dutch, and British being in control for nearly 150 years each. The impact of these influences, good and bad, cannot be discounted. 

# The New Buddhists

## HOW BUDDHISTS CAN FOLLOW CHRIST

### BANPOTE WETCHGAMA

Banpote describes himself as a servant of God who wants to see Christ born again in other cultures. He was instrumental in the movement of thousands of people to Christ in the Isaan region of Thailand and in articulating the theology of the movement. The original version of this article was much longer and was written in Thai.  
banpote1947@gmail.com

### THE WORD CHRISTIAN: BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

It is inevitable. As soon as a person has converted and believes in Jesus Christ, he or she will be labeled a Christian. This person has suddenly embraced Christianity. Yet we see the word Christian appears only a few times in the New Testament. It was an insult from non-believers. Within the community of faith the believers referred to themselves as saints<sup>1</sup> or children of God.<sup>2</sup> Only later did they refer to themselves and other followers as Christians. When the term was first adopted by believers they interpreted the meaning to be those belonging to Jesus Christ but when people from other languages and cultures started adopting this term the meaning continued to change.

### THE WORD CHRISTIAN: MULTIPLE MEANINGS IN THAILAND

When the Roman Catholics arrived in what is now Thailand, they were called *Khittang*. Later, Protestants were called *Khris-tee-yen*, understood to be different from *Khittang*. Both terms referred to what the foreigners called Christian. Regardless of the term applied, *Khris-tee-yen* or *Khittang*, if they follow only the outward forms, they are merely following cultural expressions of the Western church. For example, someone who attends church each Sunday and doesn't depend upon the grace of God isn't really a child of God.

### KHRIS-TEE-YEN (CHRISTIAN): NEGATIVE MEANINGS IN THAILAND

In Thailand today, particularly in the northeastern region, *Khris-tee-yen* brings the following meanings to the hearts and minds of Thai people:

1. A person who follows a foreign religion
2. A person who works for foreigners
3. A person who has sold out his or her nationality to foreigners (Thai people like to say, "Our religion is fine. Why do you need to follow the ways of foreigners?" When we follow another religion it is felt that we have sold out our nationality to others.)
4. A person who has leprosy (The first Thai people who came to believe in Jesus were lepers. Protestant missionaries in those days had projects to help lepers, who then responded to Jesus and entered into Christianity.)
5. A person who has descended from evil spirits (They were expelled from their villages and established new villages later to become Christians.)
6. A person who did not get a proper funeral attended by Buddhist monk (To a Buddhist this means there was no honor given to the deceased and that they would

not be able to go to heaven.<sup>3</sup> This perception about the death of Christians prevents many Buddhists from becoming Christians.)

## REMOVING CULTURAL BARRIERS

Because the word *Khris-tee-yen* is a barrier that keeps many Thai people from believing in God, some believers in Isaan (Eastern Thailand) no longer use the term. They remove cultural barriers by using one of two alternatives: *Luk Phra Chao* (child of God) and *Puttasasanikachon mai* (New Buddhist).

### 1. *Luk Phra Chao* (child of God)

We have a model of the term *Luk Phra Chao* (child of God) in the actions of God himself when he allowed his Son Jesus to be incarnated as human flesh in the Jewish culture. He did not bring a new religion as a set of new external forms from outside.<sup>4</sup> Instead, God brought the Word (Logos, see John 1:1) into the world born as a Jew, using the cultural forms and rituals of the Jews that were in accordance with scripture. The cultural forms and rituals the Jewish religious leaders (Pharisees) and their ancestors created that were not in accordance with the Word of God Jesus objected to completely and denied

**The way Thai people can be freed from their sins through Jesus—without building barriers—depends on making a change in the way evangelism is done.**

the use. This can be a model for keeping what is in accordance with the word of God within Buddhism.

Following God's approach, when the apostle Paul began his mission to the Gentiles he did not bring the culture of the Jews with him in his message to the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> He did not force Gentiles to be circumcised. The ritual of circumcision had nothing to do with salvation from sin and therefore was not required of the Gentiles. Thai people believe they are born as followers of the Buddhist religion. They are Buddhists, as were their ancestors, a view that mirrors the way Jews saw themselves as Jewish along with their ancestors.

However, only a few Thai people truly follow the heart of Buddha's teachings. Buddhists in Thailand actually follow an amalgamation of beliefs, including animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which blend together into one set of beliefs. None of the three are denied. When Christianity enters into society, Thais attempt to add it to the other three. Rev. Dr. Nantachai Mejudhon has illustrated it like this:

But Christianity, with its roots in Western culture and rituals, cannot be added on top of other Thai beliefs because Thais revere their own traditions and see it as a foreign religion. They believe their own religion is fine. To change is to insult one's ancestors and society.

### 2. *Puttasasanikachon mai* (a New Buddhist)

The way Thai people can be freed from their sins through Jesus — without building barriers — depends on making a change in the way evangelism is done. Instead of presenting the externals of Christianity (Western church forms), the presenter should follow what is suggested in scripture and allow the Word (Logos) to be the main focus. The message of the gospel must be reborn or re-packaged in the best forms from Thai culture that are in accordance with the gospel. Thai people will believe in Jesus without a need to change religions or without believing in Christianity (the external forms). They can still be Thai Buddhists as before, and follow the traditions of their people that are in accordance with the gospel. Thai people who follow Jesus in this way can be called New Buddhists, not *Khris-tee-yen*.

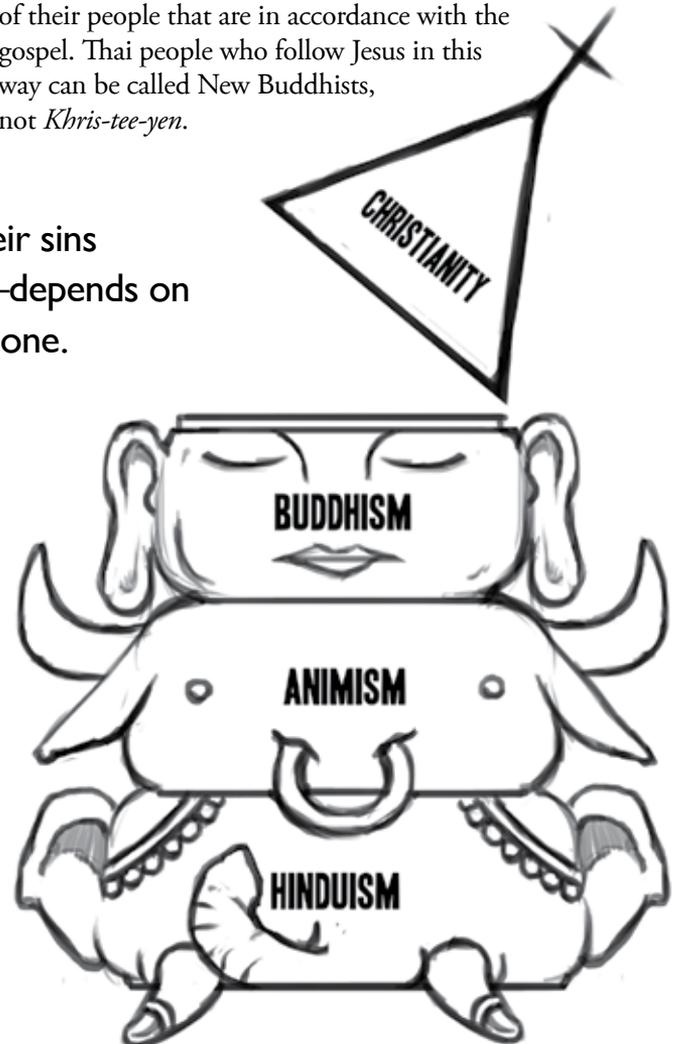


Illustration 29.1

There are two reasons for using the term New Buddhist:

1. Buddhism is incomplete:
  - Those who are followers of Buddhism have not received salvation from their sins.
  - Buddhism teaches that we must depend upon ourselves for everything and that life is suffering.
  - The only way to be released from suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>6</sup>
2. Buddhists know they cannot keep the teachings of Buddha.

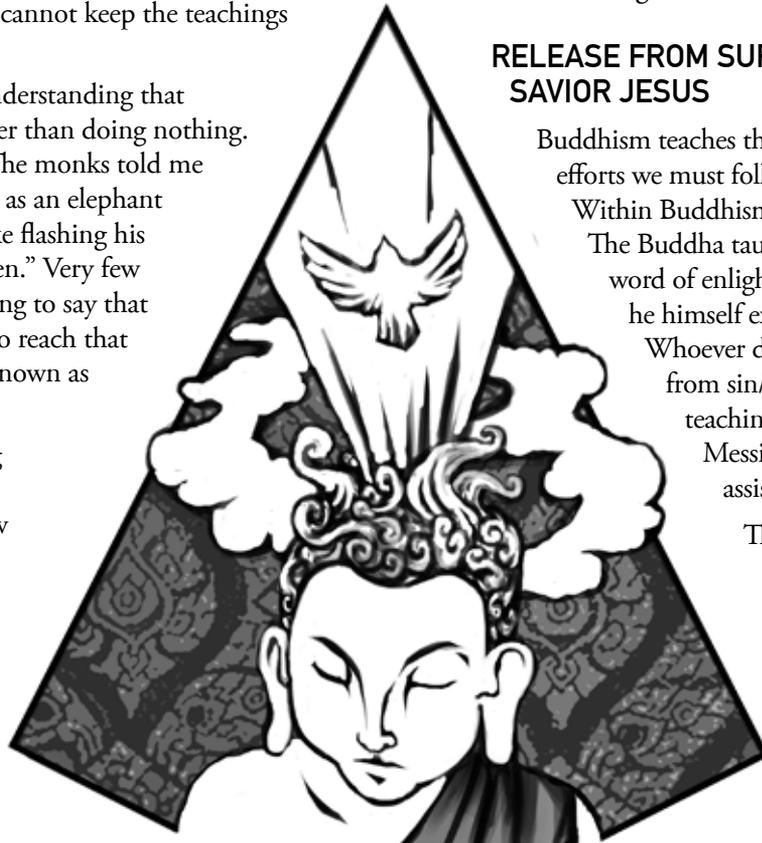
They attempt to do it, understanding that attempting a little is better than doing nothing. My mother once said, “The monks told me that if I did as little good as an elephant wiggling his ear or a snake flashing his tongue, I will go to heaven.” Very few Buddhists would be willing to say that they have done enough to reach that stage of enlightenment known as *nibbana*.<sup>7</sup>

The certainty of attaining *nibbana* is missing in Buddhism, but for a New Buddhist Jesus brought *nibbana* to them.

### CHRIST IN THE HEART OF BUDDHISTS

When we understand this issue we can bring the heart message of the gospel to Buddhists. The Bible teaches that all have sinned and Buddhism teaches that all life is suffering. Both have a common origin, the desire for possession (in Genesis 3 the possession of the knowledge of good and evil). A Thai proverb warns that “What is mine is mine, the source of suffering.” This means that the desire for possession is where suffering comes from. It is important to release all desires for possession, which will allow a person to be released from suffering. The problem with people is that in their own power they are unable to disconnect. The root of sin is to cling to everything mine.

The Bible does not teach that just doing wrong is sin but that doing wrong is the result of the sinful nature. Buddhists are not willing to accept that we are born with a sinful nature. However, if we give reasons and examples, we can show that humans are sinful from birth. There is an in-born tendency towards sin because people are inherently self-centric and desire to be great. This is why humans are the enemy of God and ultimately encounter death. Death, therefore, is suffering, as in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha.



Thai people who believe in Jesus in cultural forms known as  
**NEW BUDDHISM**

### RELEASE FROM SUFFERING AND SIN: SAVIOR JESUS

Buddhism teaches that through our own efforts we must follow and obey the teachings. Within Buddhism there is no Messiah figure. The Buddha taught that he brought the word of enlightenment to others because he himself experienced enlightenment. Whoever desired to be released from sin/suffering must follow his teachings personally. Unlike the Messiah, the Buddha cannot assist anyone in the process.

The problem is, no person has the individual potential to do enough to escape death and suffering. Therefore, humans must rely on God to assist us since we are unable to do it ourselves. Jesus died and paid the debt of sin and suffering to God because “...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ

Jesus.” (Rom. 6:23, NIV) Jesus was victorious over death in the place of all humans. Anyone who believes in this will be released from sin and suffering. There is no need to change the external forms or religions. This completes what is unfulfilled in Buddhism. These believers are still Thai people according to rituals and customs as they were before.

Teachings of the Buddha that are incomplete must be replaced with Scripture. For example: the teaching of the dependence upon self in order to reach *nibbana* will

be replaced with the scriptural teaching that says that humans are not able to depend upon themselves; humans are sinful and therefore human life is suffering. Effort for doing good is insufficient for *nibbana*. To use Christian terms, the good deeds of humans are insufficient to reach God. Therefore it is necessary to find a new way. The new way to reach *nibbana* or God himself is Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

### CHRIST, NOT A CULTURAL FORM, SAVES THAI BELIEVERS

Therefore, those who believe in Jesus in Eastern societies, particularly Thai society, do not need to change the external forms of their religion or replace them with Western external religious forms. Christianity in and of itself cannot save. Jesus is the only one who can do this. He is the way. He can be in any cultural form or expression because all cultural forms come from the Creator.

### THE GOOD NEWS REBORN IN EASTERN EXPRESSION

For Eastern people, to understand and accept the true heart of the gospel without any barriers, we must allow the good news, or the *thamma*,<sup>8</sup> to be reborn in the forms and cultural expressions of Eastern people. In the Thai Buddhist context, we can easily explain the meaning of the release from sin and suffering using the teachings of Buddha himself. This is another reason why these followers of Christ can be called New Buddhists.

I have never told someone who did not know beforehand that I was a Christian or that I followed Christianity. Instead, I have told people that I am a New Buddhist. I do this because if I were to say to people that I am a Christian, people would have no further interest in pursuing a friendship with me or spending time with me. Opportunities to share what it means to be released from the result of sin and suffering would no longer be available. However, if I say that I am a New Buddhist people ask, “How does this differ from the old Buddhism?” I then have an opportunity to explain what the difference is between the old and the New Buddhism. In the old Buddhism I had to depend completely upon myself. New Buddhism means complete dependence upon God and his grace as expressed through his Son Jesus Christ. If we depend upon the grace of God, we will receive salvation from our sins. We will be released from our suffering to reach *nibbana* which is equivalent to being with God in Christian terms.

Therefore, the person who is a New Buddhist is a person who knows that the source of life is God Himself and that she will see God in the end, free from suffering. Aside from this, the person is awakened and conscious of what is happening to him. The person being awakened refers to one who does not fool himself with any animistic practices. Blind belief or belief without any foundation of reason is an animistic form of belief which was also rejected by Buddha himself.<sup>9</sup>

The term Enlightened One means the one who is pleased to gain this knowledge, not one who receives it as a burden. The person is happy, joyful, even if life is full of difficulties. There is still a happiness from inside because of the knowledge that the person is no longer in debt to their sin. He is released from suffering. When this life is over that individual knows that he will go and be with God (*nibbana*).<sup>MF</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Acts 9:13, KJV and Rev.19:8, KJV as examples. The term saint in the Thai Bible refers to the followers of the truth and referred to all believers. It was not limited only to those of special merit as in the definition from the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase children of God appears 13 times from Matt. 5:9, NIV to I John 5:19, NIV.

<sup>3</sup> Many Buddhists believe in many heavens and even hells.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:14-18, NIV

<sup>5</sup> Acts 15:1-21, NIV

<sup>6</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble\\_Eightfold\\_Path](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path)

<sup>7</sup> *nibbana* is a Pali term used by Buddhists (nirvana is the Sanskrit equivalent used in Hindu tradition, the meanings are not the same but have similarities). In a nutshell, *nibbana* is the goal of Buddhism, a cessation of suffering and death. It is not a place or a thing, neither is it nothingness. It is attained through enlightenment. Literally it means roughly “blowing out”.

<sup>8</sup> *thamma* is the truth taught by Buddha. In its meaning *thamma* comes very close to Logos. Because *thamma* is understood in a sense of ultimate truth, truth that leads to *nibbana*, some use it in the sense of the word of truth. The apostle John used Logos (John 1:1, NIV) in a way it was never used before, basically meaning Christ, in the same manner some are using *thamma*. As much as Jesus is the good news, *thamma* is the good news.

<sup>9</sup> Kalama Sutta AN 3.65, [www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html)

# God of the Thai

## HOW ONE MOVEMENT OVERCOMES THE PERCEPTION OF A FOREIGN GOD

JIRAPHON  
SERITHAI

JiraphonSerithai (real name withheld for security reasons) was a Thai church worker who opened her heart to understanding the Buddhist mindset. She is being used greatly by God as one of the leaders behind a movement in Thailand. She loves to study cultural traditions and explore how Christ followers can follow Him in a Thai way. This article was originally written in Thai.

As a Thai Christian, it troubles me that after centuries of mission effort in Thailand, so few Thai people believe in Jesus Christ. In my search to understand why, I discovered some events which seem to hold the key. In 1622, Patriarch Pierre Lambert de la Motte (a Roman Catholic from France) tried to convert King Narai of Siam (as Thailand was then known) to Christianity. At that time, King Narai had a younger brother who was crippled. The king asked Lambert and all the believers to pray for his brother's healing. After three days and nights of prayer and fasting the king's bother was able to move his legs, and he continued to improve.<sup>1</sup>

After this, Pope Clement IX and King Louis XIV of France sent letters to King Narai inviting him to convert to the Roman Catholic Church and join in the sacraments with the priest. King Narai refused, though he cherished their goodwill. He wrote "My gratitude to King Louis XIV for your love that desired me to join your religion, but I have not had faith in my heart and it might be the will of God that He wants us to believe in different religious ways like the chapter that said God created mankind with different colors and animals with different kinds and species...."<sup>2</sup>

Based on this story I had two conclusions: first, Lambert and I are running into the same problems and second, though they acknowledge Jesus is very good and there is no one like Him, the majority of Thai people aren't interested. Intrigued, I researched further.

"After King Narai's reign, the Christian mission in Siam began to deteriorate. The next king did not obstruct their efforts, but he did not support them either. Some of the priests continued to teach and preach the gospel in a way that was in opposition to the royal court. At the time of King Thai Sa (1730) it came to a head when Mr. Teng Butluangkraikosa charged and prosecuted the priesthood on many counts of blaspheming Buddhism. During the trial, instead of rectifying the accusation Patriarch Tesia De Cerale testified that 'Because this world has only one God who created heaven and earth and who reigns over all, therefore humankind should have only one religion to bring us to the only good.' This answer closed the door for the Roman Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Siam."<sup>3</sup> Instead of promoting understanding, De Cerale's statement offended the Thai people and set up a future of strife, misunderstanding and failure to communicate the message.

My studies showed me that this problem has existed for the last 350 years. It may be that we keep using the same methods and therefore get the same result. The Lord continued to teach me when I attended a seminar of a missions<sup>4</sup> organization. I heard reports from various places where God is moving. One group from India reported that every day they have new disciples and thousands of people were baptized in a very

Photo by Maritha Mae Photography: [www.marithamaephotography.com](http://www.marithamaephotography.com)

short time. I could not return home without asking some questions of the people who gave the report. I and my church colleagues came away challenged in our thinking and with a greater passion for spreading the gospel. Since then we have received training from this group from India.

I want everyone to understand that we Christians are proclaiming the gospel to a people who are unresponsive due to the conflicts in our history. Our method of presenting the gospel has been opposed to the Thai peoples' lifestyle, language and culture. If we had purposefully brought Jesus in a Thai way with Thai culture and language, Thai churches would be sending missionaries to Laos, Cambodia and Burma by now. But the way things were done resulted in generation after generation recognizing that following Jesus Christ meant joining a Western religion.

Thai people see Christians as employed by foreigners and as betrayers of their country. This must be the reason why believers in Thailand are under 1% and we have a shortage of young people who follow Christ. I myself was rejected by my friends and family for becoming a Christian and as a result, could not attend family funerals. My older sister passed away due to cancer but my other four siblings did not tell me because I am a Christian. I found out 18 months later. Most Thai Christians

experience this same rejection.

If we acknowledge that nothing happens on its own and that God created all things then that must include Thai language and the beautiful Thai culture. It is time for us to bring what is ours back to glorify our God.

The good news needs to be announced to others in a common, natural way. The old method of presenting a Western gospel did not pierce the hearts of Thai people. They had no reason to announce it to others. But I

## Every believer can lead others to salvation and perform baptisms, rather than waiting for the pastor or Sunday to come.

believe today is a new day for Thailand, where words will overflow in a natural way, people will share the good news with others in a way without pressure, duty or command, where it is normal to tell the people we love most and then our neighbors, where whole families will come to Christ together.

People who follow the new approach do not present Jesus as another religion, but they will say that Jesus is the way of release, *nirvana*, He is the truth and the life. They will not go around telling people they are sinners, but they will say "we have karma". They will not say that the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to declare the year of His favor to you, but that this is your golden year because if you are in





Christ every year is your golden year. Every believer can lead others to salvation and perform baptisms, rather than waiting for the pastor or Sunday to come. These things demonstrate the essence of the new things God gave to us through the training from our Indian colleagues.

We have adjusted our words in presenting the gospel and adapted ourselves to include ceremonies and activities from the cultural and religious background of the believer (Buddhism), using the methods that Jesus gave us for adjusting to the context of Thai people, and we have seen great success. These are essentials which we have overlooked for 350 years. It maybe these things are too close or too little to see. We have seen the power of the Holy Spirit moving among believers when they read the Bible and practice daily repentance; reconciliation and mutual understanding takes place in their household, workplace and community. They lay hands on the sick and they are healed, the dead come back to life, even animals with broken legs stand up and walk, and plants that had been eaten by bugs are mended. They stop stealing and lying, and instead tell each other the truth. They are people of faith. All of this happens because Jesus is building them to be the church and the Holy Spirit is their teacher. They recognize God's voice and we clearly see how God is wonderfully taking care of their rapid growth.

At this time all the discord in the past between Christianity and Buddhism no longer affects my coworkers and me. With this new method we cannot look at the ID cards of Thai people to verify that they are Christian,<sup>5</sup> but we can verify the importance they give to it when we see Bible verses in homes, shops, hospitals, police stations and bus stops. People like to meet in their houses more than the temple because they have a new value in opening their homes for fellowship with one another and they receive more blessing than giving to hundreds of temples. Some blame the decrease in giving to temples on economic conditions or insincerity of religion, but

the reality is people have found new value in giving money to the poor and good food to prisoners, giving money to the widows and seniors in their community. People are generous to one another, the rich give to the poor, and we see funerals that testify to life after death in Jesus Christ. Wedding ceremonies follow Thai cultural traditions in using powder to anoint the forehead as a symbol of exchanging vows in the name of Jesus. They sing their

tomorrow until the end of time. And do you know? In the end they always fall in love with the God who lives.

We see their quality of life positively changed they might not become rich, but they are happy. They have families full of laughter and reconciliation, living a healthy life, having hope. Some of them pass away from disease, but their loved ones rejoice because they do not have to suffer



prayers to Jesus in their houses and worship with poems and proverbs. These things happen little by little until they become new traditions and new culture. All of this is the vision that God has given us to see multiplication 30, 60, and 100 times more (see Mark 4:8).

I used to pray that God would give Thai people faith. God told me, “They already have it, they were born with it, you only need to move their faith into my Name.” Since then I understood that I only have the job of introducing Jesus for them to taste as an alternative, while they remain in their religion. We do not need to tell them to throw everything away in order to come to Jesus, but while they are still believing in other gods they can call upon Jesus’ name and experience that the God who lives is better than the gods who are dead.

I want to tell every believer that we do not need to be afraid that God’s name will be tainted, damaged or in disgraced. If we present Him for Thai Buddhists to choose, He will go and sit on the throne of their hearts, even though He might be sitting with all the gods that are hanging on their necks,<sup>6</sup> God will not feel uncomfortable or condemn us. He is very pleased and desires to be with them even though they might wear ten gods around their neck. God’s holiness will not decrease or increase because He never changes: He is the same yesterday, today and

in the circle of life anymore but are in heaven forever.

All the power in heaven and earth was given to Jesus and He has sent us out to work, study, and cultivate rice, with a life that shows love to others that they might know we are His disciples. Teaching and making disciples will follow. The spiritual ground in Thailand is not as hard as you may think, and the number of believers is more than you may think. “Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”<sup>7</sup> God has been active in our history and will continue until its end. (MF)

<sup>1</sup> [haab.catholic.or.th/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=51:2012-08-10-08-57-09&catid=233:2013-06-27-07-02-38&Itemid=27](http://haab.catholic.or.th/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=51:2012-08-10-08-57-09&catid=233:2013-06-27-07-02-38&Itemid=27) (Thai language source).

<sup>2</sup> [www.oknation.net/blog/print.php?id=922822](http://www.oknation.net/blog/print.php?id=922822) (Thai language source).

<sup>3</sup> [haab.catholic.or.th/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2926:2014-02-25-02-53-53&catid=221:2013-06-26-09-00-43&Itemid=30](http://haab.catholic.or.th/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2926:2014-02-25-02-53-53&catid=221:2013-06-26-09-00-43&Itemid=30) (Thai language source)

<sup>4</sup> name withheld for security reasons.

<sup>5</sup> The Thai government requires everyone to carry an ID card, and the religion of the carrier is indicated on it.

<sup>6</sup> Most Thai people wear amulets or Buddha images around their necks for protection and peace of mind.

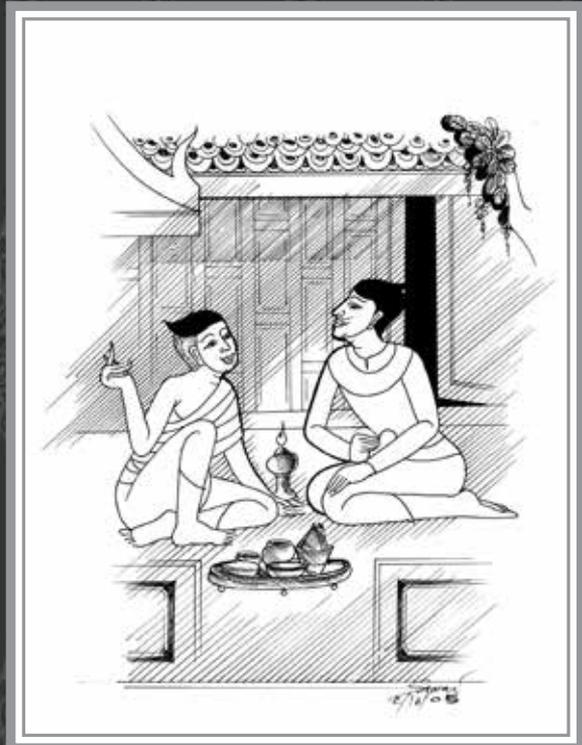
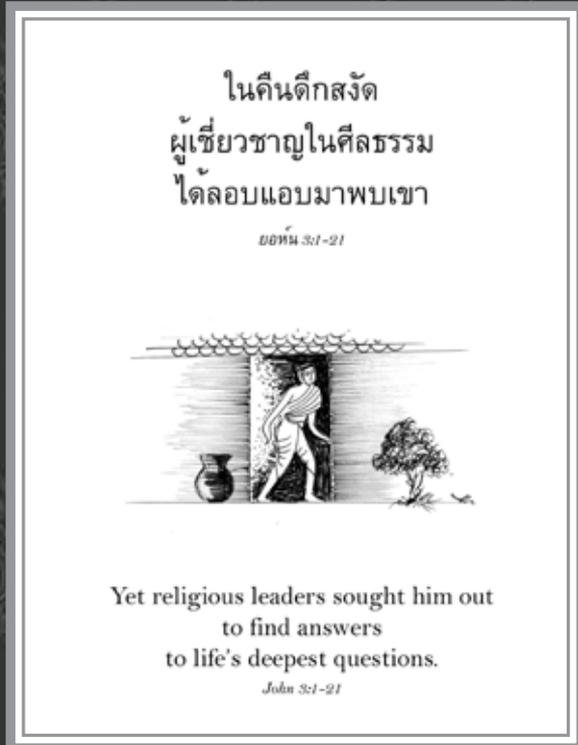
<sup>7</sup> Hab. 1:5, NIV

# THAT MAN WHO CAME TO US

SAWAI CHINNAWONG  
& PAUL DENEUI

This is a sample from a book illustrating the gospel in a Thai context. Through illustrations, the book answers these questions: What would it have looked like if Jesus was born in Thailand? And how can we communicate the gospel to Thais in a Thai way?

Chinnawong, Sawai, and DeNeui, Paul. 2010 *That Man Who Came to Us*.  
Pasadena: William Carey Library, 32, 33, 36, 80, 81, 84, 85. [missionbooks.org](http://missionbooks.org)



It is unusual for anyone to seek out another at night unless it is desired to be kept secret. In the large picture, betel nut and condiments are laid out to welcome the guest even at the late hour. Nicodemus's robe and bared shoulder show he is a religious devotee.

เปิดตาเปิดใจให้ผู้ไม่แสวงหา  
ได้เห็นสิ่งอัศจรรย์

ลูกา 24:13-35



He appears to seekers  
and opens their hearts.

Luke 24:13-35



When Jesus raises a cup of water, the two followers suddenly recognize who he is. The water container in the front is northern Thai style. Water is drunk at the end of the meal in Thailand. Water is also a symbol of life.

การตายของเขา  
ทำให้เราได้มีชีวิตใหม่

โครีนธ์ 1:53-4



Through his death  
All can have new life.

1Corinthians 15:3-4



81

Generally, Thai people keep bodies for three days before cremation. Those who die of unnatural causes are not cremated but buried. In some regions of Thailand, people tie the wrists of the dead together as shown. The scars of torture are still visible even after cleaning. In this drawing, flames symbolically protect the body from decay.



# THE S.O.I.L.S. OF THE CPM CONTINUUM

## THE SLIDING SCALE OF STRATEGIC TIME INVESTMENT

**STEVE SMITH** / Steve Smith works with the International Mission Board (SBC) globally to catalyze learning lessons from and training for biblical Church-Planting Movements. He is the author of the book *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* with Ying Kai (WigTake Resources 2011). You can follow Steve's musings from his devotional thoughts and kingdom ministry on Twitter @kingreigncome and Kingdom Kernels on Facebook.

**T**he training participants were drawing near the end of their three-week CPM (church planting movement) training. As they heard God speak, each drew up a three-year strategy plan for the city or people group he or she represented.

As my wife and I met with them to review these plans, the questions that rained in were “Where do I start?” and “Whom do I give my time to?” It would make sense that each participant, receiving the same training, should endeavor in similar paths using similar biblical principles. And this was true.

Yet their contexts were so different that the starting points along the path of the CPM continuum (see the Sept-Oct 2014 article) varied with each. Whom they invested their time in was going to vary depending

on the starting point. We found our advice varying widely because of this.

CPM practitioners have to invest their time in the right people with the right activities at the right stages and then must adjust their relationships and activities along the way for the movement to progress in a healthy manner. There are strong scriptural precedents for this, especially in the life of Paul.

### ADJUSTING HOW WE SPEND OUR TIME – PAUL’S EXAMPLE FROM EPHEBUS

The Ephesian movement was the high-water mark of Paul’s three journeys. In two year’s time, through his work in the capital of Ephesus, everyone in the Roman province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19:10) Ephesus illustrates how

Paul shifted whom he invested in and what he did with them to help launch and sustain such a movement.

Upon arrival, there were very few if any believers. When you lack believers, what must you do? Share the gospel a lot. For three months, Paul devoted his time to the lost sharing the gospel of the kingdom (Acts 19:1-8)

When persecution emerged after three months, Paul shifted how he spent his time and with whom. Acts 19:9 marks this crucial shift with the word “but.” Paul began to devote more time now discipling and training his new disciples rather than in personal evangelism. He used a rental hall daily over the next two years to accomplish this. (Acts 19:9-10) As he trained these disciples, they began to take the gospel all over the province during this period of time. (Acts 19:10)

Paul monitored the situation to ensure that the gospel was getting to the major segments of the province in the same manner he brought it to Ephesus. (Col. 2:5) For example he tracked and prayed for the progress of the gospel to other cities like Colossae and Laodicea— disciples he had never met in person. (e.g. Col. 1:3-9, 2:1)

In all likelihood while Paul worked in Ephesus, he eventually shifted much of his time to develop leaders in this movement – Timothy, Epaphras (Col. 1:7), Archippus, (Col. 4:17) etc. To underscore this

shift in activities, at the end of his third journey Paul made a point of returning to visit and exhort only the leaders (rather than all the disciples in Ephesus) at a remote location during his return to Jerusalem. (Acts 20:17)

The Asian movement (with Ephesus as its epicenter) emerged and grew in a healthy manner in large part because Paul shifted his attentions appropriately at various stages.

For us to live in the same manner, it is helpful to think about five groups of people that should be invested in in varying degrees along the CPM journey. They are the S.O.I.L.S. of the CPM continuum. S.O.I.L.S. helps us clarify how we are spending our time so that we can most fully cooperate with the Spirit in launching and sustaining CPMs.

## EVALUATING YOUR SITUATION

The first step comes with finding your starting point on the CPM continuum. You do this by evaluating the situation of your target group – a city or people group. In a CPM many disciples and churches are multiplying generation by generation. The key to all of this is local believers living out this vision and lifestyle.

What is the nature of your situation toward that end vision in terms of local partners?

- **NONE to FEW** – Are you at the earliest beginning point in terms of few or no target group believers?

- **SOME to MANY** – Do you have a good number of target group believers who are willing to partner in the vision toward CPM?
- **ABUNDANT** – Is there an abundance of churches among your target group multiplying generation by generation?

Your situation determines in **WHOM** you will invest your time and **HOW** you will invest in them. As the situation progresses along the CPM continuum you will shift the **WHOM** and **HOW** to keep the momentum building.

## WHOM & HOW: FIVE RELATIONSHIPS TO INVEST IN

An observable progression in CPM development is that effective CPM practitioners invest in the right people with high value activities at each stage. These five relationships can be summed up with the acronym S.O.I.L.S.: Spirit, Outsiders, Insiders, Leaders, Segments.

### Spirit – Fervent prayer always

The first major relationship that we need to cultivate, and an activity that never wanes, is fervent prayer to the Spirit of God for kingdom breakthroughs in our contexts. Prayer precedes and pervades every effective CPM strategy. We, our teammates and our national partners fervently seek God’s face to open the hearts of the lost, to open our mouths to be bold and to establish His church.

### Outsiders – Mobilizing them, winning houses of peace and planting the first churches

If you have few or no target group believers, then much of your activity is spent as an outsider mobilizing other outsiders—often near culture believers and sometimes far culture partners—to begin the evangelism process to find the persons of peace and houses of peace that the Spirit is preparing. This involves much vision casting to mobilize partners and many “pushes” (like Luke 10) to win the first households to faith and plant the first churches. Hundreds and thousands of gospel conversations are needed to establish the first groups of believers you will invest in during the next stage.

### Insiders – Training new local believers in reproducible ways for evangelism, discipleship, church planting and leadership development

As you and your team have more local believers, you begin to shift your focus to disciple them regularly for the long-term. Your focus is to train them in reproducible ways to help them grow in their faith and become healthy churches. You also train them to repeat the process of evangelism, discipleship, church planting and leadership development in a way they can obey and then train their new disciples to emulate. The most effective CPM practitioners fill up their calendars with such training/discipling groups.

You may already have some local believers in your target group. In

that case, this stage also involves a lot of vision casting to them about partnering together for kingdom movements. In this stage, you are hoping to find groups of believers willing to partner together with you toward this end vision. If they are willing, then you begin to train them just like you do with the disciples you win yourself.

**Leaders – Raising up, developing and multiplying leadership at every level**

As the number of groups and churches grows, you and your team must again shift your focus and spend more time developing leaders of these groups and multiplying leaders to keep pace with the growth of the movement. Now you will spend less time in personal evangelism, and eventually less time training your own groups of believers, while you spend more time investing in leaders at every level the movement needs.

**Segments – Repeating the process until every major population segment is reached**

As churches begin to reproduce among certain population segments or geographical areas, you must evaluate where the kingdom has yet to come. Gradually you must repeat the process to make special pushes into these unreached segments to plant new churches among them until there is “no place left.” (Rom. 15:23) Most people groups will require thousands of churches before they are fully reached. We must be careful not to leave before the vision

and momentum are in place to accomplish this.

**THE SLIDING SCALE OF TIME INVESTMENT**

Essential to the progress of a CPM is that we know in whom to invest our time and how to relate to them at each stage of the work. On the sliding scale of the CPM continuum, we must adapt our role appropriately. I find that effective CPM practitioners appropriate their ministry investment in the approximate ratios shown below at each stage. These approximate ratios give you the idea of how to

shift your attention so that the momentum of a CPM will continue.

**THE DANGER OF NOT GIVING ATTENTION WHERE IT IS NEEDED OR OF NOT SHIFTING ALONG THE WAY.**

Two dangers arise as practitioners seek to implement a CPM approach: 1) they do not give their attention to the right persons in the right ways. 2) they do not appropriately shift their attention along the way.

It is not uncommon for us to default to the activities and relationship we most enjoy and are good at.

<b>S.O.I.L.S.</b> <b>Sliding Scale Time Investment on the CPM Continuum</b> <i>Evaluate your stage along the CPM Continuum &amp; shift the approx. % of time you invest in each relationship</i>		NONE:	FEW:	SOME:	MANY:	ABUNDANT:
		No target group believers	Few target group believers	Some willing target group believers	Many willing target group believers	An abundance of multiplying churches
		Your Situation 				
<b>SPiRiT</b> Fervent prayer	Your time investment 	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%
<b>OUTSiDERS</b> Evangelism pushes & church planting		80%	70%	50%	10-20%	5-10%
<b>INSiDERS</b> Training in reproducible processes			10%	20-25%	30-40%	25-30%
<b>LEADERS</b> Developing & multiplying every level				5-15%	15-30%	30-40%
<b>SEGMENTS</b> Spreading the CPM to new areas & UPGs					5-10%	15-20%

- For example you may enjoy developing leaders. But if you are at the “NONE” or “FEW” stage, you will not have local leaders to develop if you don’t engage in evangelism, church planting and training of local believers.
- Perhaps you love the outsider phase of looking for persons of peace. But if you are at the “MANY” stage and do not shift your time, your local leaders will not get the attention they need.

However you accomplish it, you and your team (including your national leaders) must find ways to give attention where attention is due at each stage. If Paul had continued evangelizing in the synagogue in Acts 19:9 rather than shifting his focus to training his disciples, it is very possible that verse nine might have read: “But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, they dragged Paul out of the synagogue and stoned him.”

Frequently we must shift doing what we enjoy for the sake of doing what is essential.

### Common pitfalls

Since shifting requires a conscious effort, it is easy to fail to make the proper adjustments along the way. Here are a few of the most common pitfalls:

- **“O” stage**
  - o Not mobilizing enough partners to share the gospel

broadly to find the persons of peace. For example, if the ratio of persons of peace to non-interested persons is 1:100, your team will have to generate hundreds and thousands of gospel conversations.

- o Stopping when you have one or two houses of peace. Getting just a couple of groups to invest your time in at the “I” stage is not enough. You need many of these groups, so keep finding persons of peace.
- **“I” stage**
  - o Not investing in enough discipling/training groups. Since you do not know who will bear good fruit, you must train many people to find them. Most effective CPM practitioners train multiple groups simultaneously.
  - o Not casting vision to existing churches/believers because you think they will not be willing to partner. Some existing churches may be shallow in faith, tradition bound or cautious about CPM. But patient, loving, vision-casting and biblical encouragement can help many of them become good partners. Don’t rule them out because they don’t look ideal from the start.

- **“L” stage**
  - o Failing to begin middle level leadership training in time. It is very common for practitioners to invest in group/church leaders, but planning to train leaders who have several groups and several generations (middle level) must be a top priority as generational growth begins.
- **“S” stage**
  - o Leaving the work before multiplication is happening in every major segment consistently. Many CPM workers want to “exit” their work once a CPM starts. But many CPMs fail to penetrate every population segment. Instead of exiting, “expand” the work until you see fourth generation churches in every major segment and then launch CPMs in nearby people groups. Don’t exit but expand.

One of the most refreshing aspects of the S.O.I.L.S. is that it helps us prioritize our time and say “no” (or “less”) to relationships and activities that will distract us from the advance of the kingdom. May there be no place left!

How do you need to spend your time? 

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF A MISSION HOSPITAL IN CONGO – PART 2

## Western Medicine and Spiritual Transformation

GLENN J. SCHWARTZ / Executive Director Emeritus, World Mission Associates.

Author of *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* available at [www.wmausa.org](http://www.wmausa.org)

This is the second article in a series of two. In an article in the Sept/Oct 2014 issue of *Mission Frontiers*, I wrote about the transformation of Vanga Hospital located in Northwestern Congo. I gave details about the transfer to local ownership and local management, a process which began in the early 1960s. I mentioned in that article that there was more to the story and that I would seek to deal with it in a subsequent issue of *MF*. This article seeks to deal with preventive healthcare and spiritual issues in an African context. Of course, the first question that comes to mind is what this has to do with sustainability issues. I suggest that time spent promoting preventive medicine or spiritual healing can significantly reduce the amount of time, effort and expense in providing hospital or curative care.

Early in his career, Dr. Fountain began to look into the lack of sanitation in villages surrounding Vanga Hospital. He wanted to know what it would take to reduce the number of patients with bacteria borne diseases coming to the hospital.

On one occasion a young lad of nine or ten years of age was brought into Vanga Hospital with a growing mass in his abdomen. Dr. Fountain proceeded to perform surgery on what turned out to be parasitic growth the size of a baseball.

Thankfully, with that removed, in a few days the boy was dashing about ready to go back to his home.

About six months later the same boy was back at Vanga with a similar growth. Dr. Fountain was again called to assist. His first reaction was that he was being asked to repeat the surgery because no one did anything about the reason why the boy was there in the first place. So Dr. Fountain stayed in his home to reflect and pray about the situation he and the young boy were facing. As he prayed and meditated, the Lord seemed to say that he should go and lay hands on the boy – but the Spirit also said, “When you lay hands on him, be sure that you have a scalpel in your hand”. He was to remove the mass again – yes – but also to do something about the cause or the boy would be back again after six more months due to conditions that produce the parasites.

Dr. Fountain began to visit the villages and advocate latrines as a way to cut down the exposure to such the infection caused by the parasites. However, he encountered resistance from villagers who simply did not believe in—or see the need for—latrines. He pointed them to Deuteronomy 23:12-13 which says that they should take a hoe with them and cover their excrement. That was enough to convince the villagers that what he was saying about sanitation should be

given consideration. After all, it was in the Bible!

As he proceeded along this line of thinking, a different kind of problem began to appear. It became clear that man’s sinful behavior also had to be reckoned with. He showed, for example, how people can become ill and die because of a curse put upon them by a disaffected relative. He acknowledged that this view was not part of his traditional medical training in North America. One illustration from his book shows the implication in Dr. Fountain’s own words:

John, a sixteen-year-old high school student, came to the hospital quite ill with . . . tuberculosis. We hospitalized him and put him on our standard triple therapy.... However, after one month of directly observed therapy, John’s condition was deteriorating.... Within another couple of weeks it was clear that John was dying.... The student nurse caring for him talked and listened to him and eventually found out why John was dying. He had been cursed by his maternal uncle, and he knew he was going to die.... I was dumbfounded. Asking about a curse was not part of my usual history-taking, nor did I have a clue how to treat a curse. Mrs. Masieta [a hospital chaplain] entered the picture. She knew the treatment for this situation. She and [the student nurse] introduced John to Jesus and John asked Christ to enter his life. He became a Christian, and therefore

I assumed our job was done; when he died of tuberculosis, he would go to heaven. Wonderful! But Mrs. Masieta was not yet satisfied. She was convinced that he did not need to die of tuberculosis and that she knew what impeded his healing.

She read John stories of what Jesus did—healing the sick.... She then asked John who was more powerful: Jesus or his uncle [who had cursed him]. Mrs. Masieta assured him that he was now under the protection of Christ and that this uncle's power could no longer get through to kill him. In this way she treated his fear, and with success.

She then tackled a much more difficult problem. She asked John if his uncle had done him wrong. "Of course," he replied. "He tried to kill me." She read to him the words of Jesus about forgiving those who do us wrong....

John finally released his uncle to God in prayer and asked God to heal the anger and hatred in his heart. God did, and within a few days John's fever disappeared, his appetite returned, and he went on to complete recovery, healed in body, mind, and spirit.

I share this illustration to show how recognizing a local resource such as prayer for healing or exercising forgiveness can sometimes outweigh complex and expensive medical procedures that might be available. Prayer for healing is a local resource available to all who believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. No funding proposals are required. No outside funding is required. No local fundraising program is required. No government grants are required. It simply requires faithful people who

believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and who fill the role that every believer is privileged to fill. Because God is sovereign, He does not heal everyone whether through medicines or spiritual deliverance. But both options are valid and both are a provision from the Lord. Be on the lookout for resources that are locally available at little or no cost.

If you have not done so, I heartily recommend that you acquire and read *Health for All: The Vanga Story*. It is a rich treasure of lessons that Dr. Fountain learned over thirty-five years in a rural hospital in Africa. It is available through William Carey Publishers at [www.missionbooks.org](http://www.missionbooks.org)

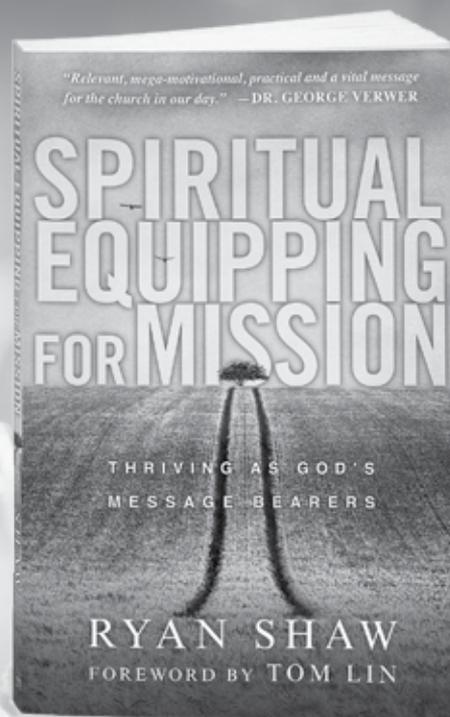


<sup>1</sup> This quote can be found on page 132 and following in *Health for All: The Vanga Story*.

## FRUITFUL MISSION *from the* INSIDE OUT

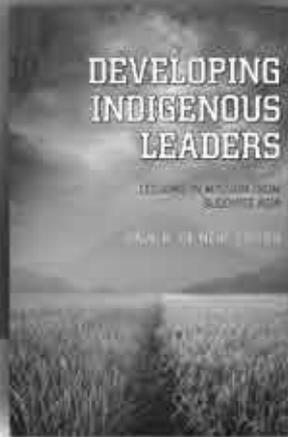
*"Ryan Shaw rightfully challenges us to not fall into the temptation of emphasizing the mission at the expense of our own souls. Ryan also brings this pastoral vision down to a practical level, giving us very helpful 'spiritual keys' that will help us cultivate a deeper inner spiritual life. If we heed these words and apply these keys, I believe we will not only be more spiritually equipped, but also will spiritually thrive in engaging the Great Commission."*

—From the foreword by **Tom Lin**, vice president for missions, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA





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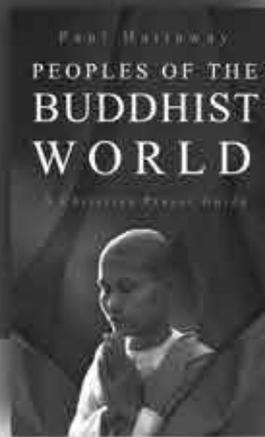
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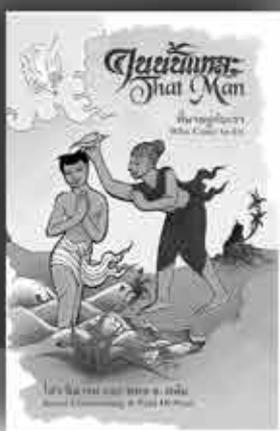
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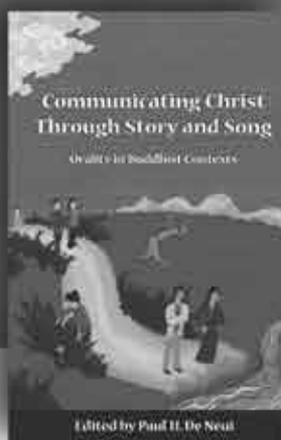
Sawai Chinnawong | Paul H. De Neu, (Authors)

*That Man Who Came to Us* tells the story of the life of Jesus Christ through traditional Thai art. Featuring black and white line drawings inspired by an art form born in northern and central Thailand, *That Man Who Came to Us* tells the story of Christ as fully God, yet fully human. Artist Sawai Chinnawong employs the regions' popular distinctive artistic style originally used to depict Buddhist morals, principles and with other religious themes.

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Sawai Chinnawong and Paul H. De Neu (Authors)  
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Orality in Buddhist Contexts

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*Communicating Christ Through Story and Song*, the fifth volume in the Buddhist World series, presents models and case studies of communication of the Gospel through orality in Southeast Asia. With contributions from seasoned practitioners working in Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Philippines, this insightful book explores the biblical foundations and the cultural imperative of employing oral tradition to effectively communicate in Buddhist contexts.

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ISBN 978-0-87808-511-8 Paul H. De Neu (Editor)  
WCL | Pages 320 | Paperback 2008



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### Communicating Christ in the Buddhist World (SEANET 4)

Paul H. De Neu | David Lim (Editors)

Compiled from papers presented at the annual SEANET Missiological Forum in Thailand, *Communicating Christ in the Buddhist World* delivers fresh insights from mission theologians and practitioners. The first four chapters reflect on the theological framework by which Christians can fulfill the biblical mandate to evangelize and transform peoples. The next five chapters consider the significant sociological issues that have arisen in the Christian encounter with Buddhist peoples. The final three suggest some strategic ways forward for effective evangelism in the Buddhist world.

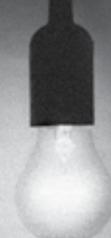
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ISBN 978-0-87808-510-1  
Paul H. De Neu | David Lim (Editors)  
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# TOUGH CHOICES:

WITHOUT A BIBLE, BUT WITH A CHURCH OR WITHOUT A CHURCH BUT WITH A BIBLE?



GREG PARSONS  
/ GLOBAL DIRECTOR,  
U.S. CENTER FOR  
WORLD MISSION

I have a friend from high school who worked in SIL's literacy program in South America. He had the privilege helping many among the people group to which he was assigned to develop a deepening understanding of the Bible

and seeing that understanding impact the lives of many people. But during this same time period, another worker from my home church labored for years with a Native American group in northern Canada. Eventually they had the New Testament in their language, but there was no response. I vividly recall this missionary coming back to the church and sharing. It was not the kind of story you would highlight for "missions week." His story was the story no Bible translator wanted: nothing happened. The people were (are now?) still in sin and living painfully difficult and tragic lives that resisted the Word they so desperately needed.

As I reflected on the difference between these two stories I was reminded of a conversation I had back in the 1980s at a conference I attended in the Philippines. Back in those days I worked in our Frontier

Media Productions department and produced a low-budget video series called "Mission Update." I attended this particular conference so I could film some interviews with experienced mission leaders who were in attendance. One of those interviews was with a highly respected and well-known international leader of Wycliffe Bible Translators. What he told me stopped me in my tracks: 85% of the translations Wycliffe was working on were for people groups (usually "tribes") that already had a church. That means that only 15% of their translation projects were among people groups without a church or a Christian presence. I have been told these figures are nearly the same now—or possibly even more disparate!

Here is my point: As much as people need access to God's Word, the vast majority of the world's unreached populations—even those with completed translations—have yet to hear and understand a clear message of God's saving and transforming grace through Christ. There are so many that have the Word but do not have a viable church.

Consider Bihar. This one state in India includes 105 million people. That is about one-third of the population of the entire U.S. living in a land that is about the size of the state of Michigan. It has been a place where workers go but do not stay—the so-called "graveyard of missions." It has Bibles in a number of its most common languages.

Bengali, Hindi and Urdu alone cover approximately 95 million people in this state.

So, the task there is not mainly a translation task—they have the Word. But there remain massive human and spiritual needs. Here's the good news: God has been moving brothers and sisters to go there, and things are beginning to shift. But they need our prayers and support!

We must pray for, invest in, and work towards Bible translation efforts. But we must also pray for, invest in, and work towards impact from the transforming power of the Word. In many places, newer translations may be what are needed—as languages continually change and translation techniques and tools are improved. Pray for this especially among the unreached peoples in places like South Asia.

A Bible translation is an amazing and necessary tool—be it for print or for oral use. But seeing the Word impact every people is the "coalface" of the great commission. This is not an either or choice. There must be both a Bible and a church in "every tribe and language and people and nation." (Rev. 5:9, NIV) Will you pray with me to this end? 

Follow Greg on Twitter: @parsonsglh.

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