

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.

Contact: marie.bauer@uscwm.org

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.”

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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.¹ 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.marithamaephoto.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?² 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)⁴ training course⁵ 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.³ 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



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. 

¹ “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.

² See John 4:5-29, NIV

³ (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)

⁴ 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

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

