

Accepting the Christian Faith in Thailand

In September 1996, the author along with a class of students conducted a survey of the seminary students at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, the theological seminary of the Church of Christ in Thailand. (The Church of Christ in Thailand is the largest Protestant denomination in Thailand, and, in the north of Thailand has been influenced more by Presbyterianism than any other tradition.) The focus of the survey was evangelism. The results, if found to be representative of the larger population, would have significant implications for mission and evangelism in Thailand, and are suggestive of concerns in other places.

Prior to the survey, the students participated in some general discussion of evangelism in Thailand. They made some observations about what might make it hard for Thai people to accept the Christian faith, and what might be the positive influences on those who did accept the faith.

The students assisted in developing a questionnaire which was circulated to the students at the seminary asking about their own experiences of becoming Christian and those factors which have been helpful or problematic in being a Christian. Questionnaires were collected from about half the seminary students. This was not a very good sample, but sufficient for the purpose of learning something about research methods and for producing some interesting ideas for further study and reflection.

One of the questions was about the various barriers to becoming, or remaining, a Christian in Thailand. We put before the seminary students ten possible barriers and asked them to rate how significant each of one had been for them.

Obstacles to becoming a Christian

The most significant barrier among the students was the fact that Christianity was 'not Thai'. Thirteen percent

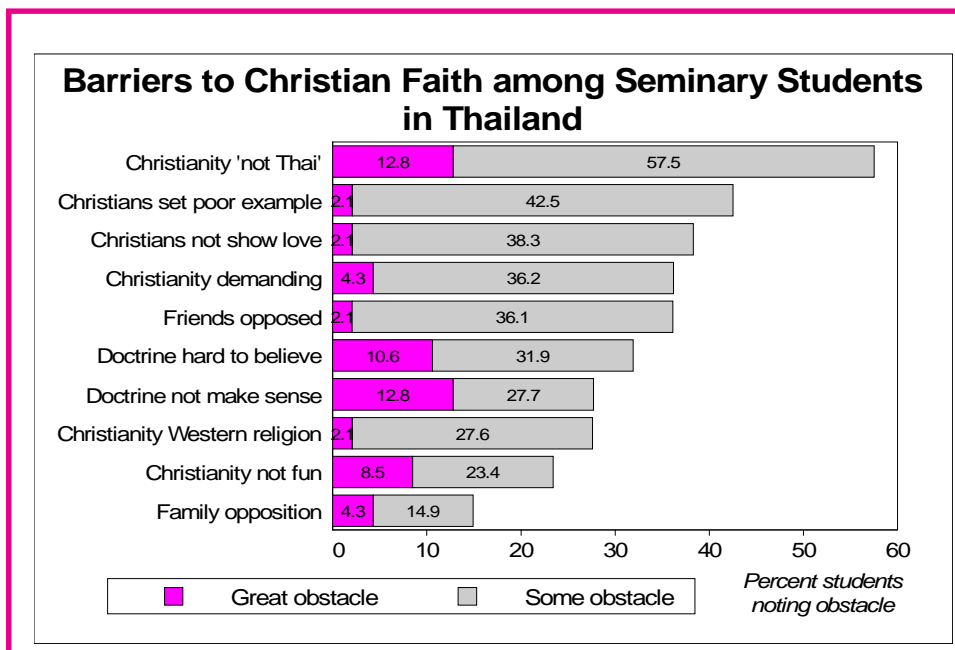
of the students said that it was the most significant barrier for them. Another 45 percent indicated that it was a very significant barrier. Thus, nearly two-thirds of all the students expressed considerable concern.

The fact that 'Christianity' was Western, or might be seen that way in Thailand, was not such a problem. Some of the students suggested that this was because the seminary students knew that Christianity was not, in fact, originally Western.

It was interesting that problems of opposition from family and friends, or problems with the nature of Christian belief itself were not nearly as significant as barriers as the fact Christianity was 'not Thai'. It is also interesting that although this issue was mentioned by both students who had

grown up in Christian families and by those who had grown up in Buddhist families, it was considerably more significant among those who had been Buddhists of whom 100 percent rated it as a significant or very significant barrier to them.

If this result is indicative of Thai people generally, it means that one focus for Thai Christian apologetics should be to deal with this issue. Indeed, it may be something that every part of the church needs to address: in forms of worship, in patterns of faith, in processes of administration. The incarnational principle is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition: that God comes to us in human form, and within specific cultural contexts. Paul put it this way: we should be all things to all people, in order that we might win some!



Poor Examples

Another significant barrier for many of the students was that they were aware of many people who claimed to be Christians but set bad examples, or were not seen as showing Christian love. Forty-five percent of all students said that this was a very significant or the most significant barrier for them.

This barrier was not quite as great among the students who had grown up in Buddhist families as among those from Christian families. Buddhist families would not be so aware, perhaps, of Christians 'setting a bad example'. However, as the sample of students from Buddhist backgrounds was small, the differences were not statistically significant.

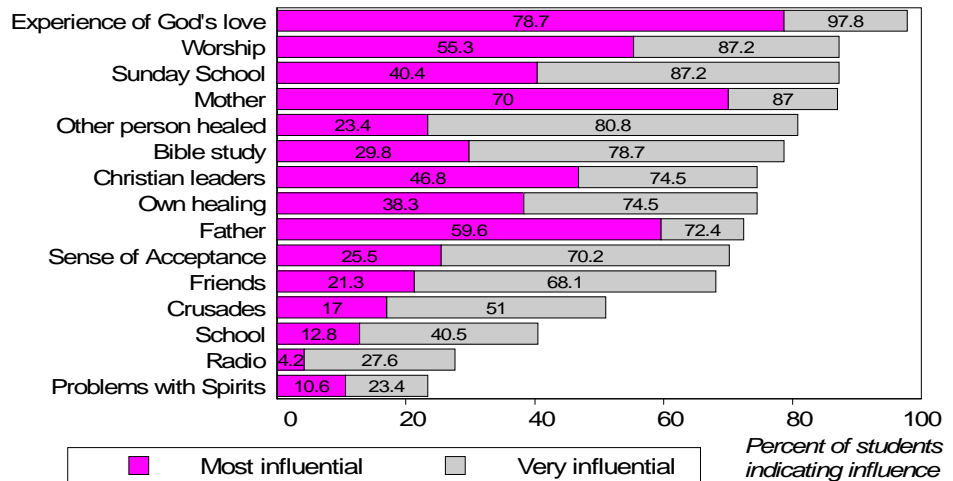
The problem was given a higher rating among younger students than among older ones. Perhaps, older students, with their wider experience of life, were more accepting of people who did not live up to the standards expected of them.

This barrier to belief was rated considerably higher than issues of the nature of Christian belief itself, or opposition from family or friends. It is another reminder that in the processes of evangelism, the example of Christians remains a very significant influence.

Friendship and Evangelism

Two percent of the students said that opposition from friends had been the most significant obstacle in becoming a Christian and

Influences on Being Christian among Seminary Students in Thailand



another 36 percent said it was very significant as a barrier. However, friends could also have a positive influence.

Another question asked about the influences in becoming Christian. The most widely affirmed influence among the seminary students were personal experiences of God's love. Among the wide range of other influences to which they pointed were 'friends'. 24 per cent of the students said friends were the most significant influence on them becoming Christian or remaining Christian, and another 68 per cent said friends were very significant. (It should be noted that the students found it generally hard to choose one or two influences which were 'most significant', often identifying up to ten influences 'most significant'.)

One hundred per cent of those students who had grown up in Buddhist families rated 'friends' as a very important or the most important influence, compared with 66 percent of those who had grown up in Christian families.

'Friends' is a major factor in people becoming Christian in northern Thailand - both positively and negatively. If people find opposi-

tion from their friends to becoming Christian, they are far less likely to do so. On the other hand, friendship can be a very positive influence in bringing people into the Christian faith.

One of the students recounted her own experience in class. She had grown up in a Buddhist family. One of her friends had had a major part in her becoming a Christian. On the other hand, in so doing, she lost a lot of her former friends.

Effective evangelism is not just a matter of teaching about faith. Forming and developing Christian community in which people can build positive friendships is a very important factor. In Australia, the parish where I worked developed a student accommodation scheme for rural students studying in the city. We find that most of the students developed strong friendships with the other students in the four houses we operated. We worked hard to maintain a Christian ethos in the scheme. Many students came into the church through that scheme. It has been the most effective evangelistic program the church has had, certainly within the last twelve years. Providing the opportunity and encouragement for

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the development of appropriate friendships has been the key.

Personal Experience of God's Love and Power

Of fifteen items suggested to students as influences on being a Christian, the most important was experiences of God's love. Personal experience appeared in several other parts of the survey. 38 per cent of the students said that an experience in which they had been healed had been the most important influence on them. 23 per cent indicated that the experience of seeing someone else healed had been the most important influence on them. Between 75 and 80 per cent of the students said that experiences of healing were either the 'most important' or 'very important' among the influences on them becoming or remaining Christians.

Thai people want to see 'evidence' of the power of God. There is a widespread interest in miracles for a similar reason. They expect God to work in ways which will be evident. 38 percent of the students said they had had an experience of something miraculous happening to them, such as being healed in a way they did not expect, several times. Another 25 per cent of students said it had happened to them once. 34 per cent of students said it had not happened to them.

Twenty-five years ago claims of miracles were often considered to be a barrier to faith, or even an embarrassment. Many Western theologians and Biblical teachers sought to explain away miracles. But the tide has swung, not only in Thailand, but in many places in the world. Even outside the church, there is a widespread interest in para-normal phenomena of all types. Miracles are no longer problematic for many younger people. They want to see, and ex-

pect to see, God at work. It is indicative of some very substantial changes in the ways in which people view the world.

Church Life and Its Evangelistic Impact

The second and third most important influences on people becoming or remaining Christian were 'Sunday School' and 'worship'. 40 percent of the students said that 'Sunday School' was the most important influence on them, and 36 percent said that 'worship' was.

For students who had grown up in a Buddhist background, Sunday School was not so important, although 50 percent of these students still said it was 'the most important' or 'very important' influence on them. 66 percent of those who had grown up as Buddhists indicated that worship was 'the most important' or 'very important' for them.

It was very interesting that, in comparison, other explicitly evangelistic programs, such as activities as school, or crusades, had had little impact. 17 percent of students said Crusades were the 'most important' influence and 13 percent said 'school' was. Out of a total of 15 influences put before the students in the questionnaire, crusades came in at number 12, and school at number 13 in comparison with other influences. This is despite the fact that school, university, and city-wide Christian evangelistic crusades are frequently organised by the Thai church.

While crusades or special evangelistic events may have an impact at the time when they occur, looking back, the students were more conscious of the continuing impact of church life, of worship, Sunday School, and Bible studies. Single events, it seemed, did not have

much importance in their own right. While some denominations place a great deal of emphasis on special 'once in a life-time' conversion experiences, such experiences do not seem to have the same meaning in Thailand.

When the students were asked if there had ever been a special time when they had committed their lives to Christ, 68 percent said they had done so several times, 19 percent once, and 13 percent never but had grown gradually in the faith. These results suggest that commitment often is seen as part of the process of deepening one's spiritual life rather than the idea often associated with repentance of 'turning right around'.

Those events which seek to encourage 'conversion' have less impact than worship, Sunday School and Bible studies, and becoming part of a Christian community. It would be most interesting to know how many people make a commitment at a Crusade, but fail to take faith any further. Every person needs ongoing support in faith, not least the person who has just made a commitment of faith. Friends who draw other people into the on-going life of the church are probably more significant evangelistically than large crusades.

The Impact on Faith of Parents and School

In the survey conducted among Thai seminary students in September 1996, one of the most strongly affirmed influences on faith was that of the parents. 70 percent of the students said that their mothers were the 'most important' influence on their becoming Christian or remaining Christian, and another 17 percent said their mothers were 'very important'. 60 percent claimed that their fathers were 'most important', another 13 per-

cent said their fathers were 'very important'. The influence of parents was second only to that of the personal experiences of God's love and to the life of the church in worship and Sunday School.

Interestingly, parents were also important among the few students who had grown up as Buddhists and had converted to Christianity. One hundred percent of the students who had been Buddhist said their mothers were very important or the most important influences, and 75 percent of students previously Buddhist said their fathers were most or very important.

There are several interpretations. One is that many students became Christian because their parents did so. When they were young, their parents were also Buddhists. The family converted as a family. Another possibility is that parents were seen as influential, perhaps encouraging the children to explore the Christian faith even while remaining Buddhist themselves. A third possibility is that parents converted to Christianity following their children, and thus became a source of encouragement.

Whatever the interpretation, these results confirm that parents do have a great deal of influence on their children. While, in Western countries, it is common for children to go through a time rebellion and develop values and attitudes which are deliberately opposed to those of their parents, they often return to the values and attitudes of their parents in later years. These results reaffirm the importance of churches giving support to family life, and, in particular, helping parents to encourage the development of faith in their children.

Conclusion

This survey was conducted only among a small number of people, all of whom had a strong commitment to the Christian faith. Some of the results may not apply to the wider church, or to people of other age groups. However, the results suggest some ideas which might well be tested more widely.

How best can the church in Thailand conduct evangelism? According to these results, it must put its efforts into building a community where the worship is meaningful, where the leaders set good examples, and where the parents of children encourage their children to grow in faith. It must seek to develop expressions of faith which are definitely 'Thai', and perhaps will need to consciously move away from some of the Western forms it currently uses to affirm that God equally be found within the Thai context. It must help people to experience God's love and power in their lives. It would be most interesting to discover how comparable might be results from other locations.

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