

Reflections on History and the Local Church in Northern Thailand

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Introduction

The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) established its Office of History in January 1988 with a variety of goals and tasks in mind, first among them being the study of local church history. Since the Office of History has just completed its first cycle, this meeting of the History Association of Thailand on the subject of "Local History and Local Wisdom" provides an appropriate opportunity to reflect, briefly, on the Office of History's experience with local church history, particularly among the lowland and highland people of northern Thailand. We have been in search of a process, a search that is still going on, and I hope that the experiences we have accumulated during that search will be of some value to others.

The Office of History currently has a staff of five employees, including three working in its office in Chiang Mai, one in Amphur Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province, and one working in Uttaradit Province. Now, we also have one short-term assistant, also working in Uttaradit. Since 1988, the Office has conducted local church history research in several churches in Chiang Mai Province, conducted a major, five-year project among the churches of Nan Province, carried out a smaller project with a group of Karen churches in Amphur Sangklaburi, Kanchanaburi Province, and is currently supervising and staffing two projects, one among Karen churches in Chiang Mai Province and the other among the churches of Uttaradit Province. All of these projects have been done with churches belonging to the CCT. Through necessity, all of these projects have emphasized collecting data through oral history interviews, although we use such documentary materials as are available. The Office has carried on a wide variety of other research, teaching, and publishing work, but most of our work has been ultimately aimed at supporting and supplementing our local history research.

Foundational Concepts

One hesitates, frankly, to introduce fundamentally religious concepts into a meeting of academic historians and to introduce Christian concepts into a meeting of people of other faiths or no faith. For many academics, religion is a matter of superstition, and for many Thais, Christianity is an alien, intrusive religion that seems to have little respect for the faith of others. Yet, the Office of History's experiences in the conduct of its local history research have been guided from the beginning by religious values and ideas that have to be explained if that experience is to be understood.

First, although an agency of a national Christian organization, the Office has always emphasized the study of local churches and desired to use historical research to strengthen those churches. Strong local Christian communities, centered on churches, are important to the life and work of the Christian faith in every country. They are especially important when the church is a very small minority group, such as is the case in Thailand.

Second, the Office of History sees its own work as a form of religious work, or "ministry," in Christian terms, and it conducts its research according to religious values. These values include attitudes of concern for others, humility, and self-denial. In our research, we have especially emphasized the importance of listening to the life experiences of people in local churches.

Listening is a difficult skill, one that requires close attention to the other person. Religious attitudes, based on the example of Christ (or the Buddha, for Buddhists), are especially important in working with local church people, because the Office of History staff are all "acharns," and there is a temptation to take a superior attitude or treat local people with little respect.

Third, the Office's motivation to serve and strengthen local churches has also encouraged it to emphasize high standards for its own research, standards as high as possible in our situation. We are convinced that there is no contradiction between being individuals of religious faith and professional historians. We are "believers," but we also realize how important it is to set aside our religious beliefs in evaluating and interpreting data. It is important to be self-critical of our own theologies and ideologies. It is especially important not to confuse religious doctrines with actual historical events. As Christians, we are believers, but as historians, we are agnostics. This situation is not any different from other historians, even those who claim to have no religious beliefs. All historians have ideologies, political orientations, and prejudices. All competent historians are both believers and agnostics.

In sum, it is the Office of History's ministry to use the best historical methods possible to the benefit of the churches of the Church in Christ in Thailand. We have to maintain a balance between religious and professional values. And, we have to always keep our ultimate goal of using our professional skills for the benefit of others as the central focus of our work.

Experience

The Office of History began its work in 1988 with a misconception, namely that it would do research for local churches, tell the churches what it had learned, and help the churches to discover new directions for their lives from the results of the research. The approach was a failure. Local churches were happy to have the Office study their histories, but they were unable to use the results of its research in a meaningful way. In one case, a church rejected the major conclusions we reached concerning its life, but even in those cases where they accepted and understood the meaning of our research for them, they could not of themselves move from historical understanding to programmatic change. The Office became aware of this problem within less than two years of its founding, and attempted to deal with the problem by initiating the study of a whole district rather than individual churches. We hoped that districts could make use of historical data, interpreting it to its churches. We chose District Five, Nan, as our field, and during the early 1990s invested a great deal of time traveling to Nan Province to study its 18 churches and organized Christian groups. This approach was also a failure, in spite of the heavy investment in time made by the staff of the Office of History. At the end of the study, we presented a series of conclusions and recommendations that suggested the need for important changes in district thinking and strategy. Some important leaders rejected some of our conclusions. Others did not really understand their importance. In any event, the district leadership showed little inclination to make the changes we suggested. The fault was not theirs. It was ours, for using a research process that did not involve local people in the study of their own histories enough so that they could appreciate the data we presented and experience for themselves the lessons we had learned about them.

It took us several years, but the Office of History finally learned that we could not achieve our goal of using historical research to strengthen local church life by doing that research ourselves. We had to find ways to involve the churches in the research process. To that end, we initiated a project studying the Karen churches of the CCT's District Sixteen, located in Sangklaburi, and employed, part-time, a pastor from that district to carry out the research. The Office trained him in Chiang Mai, and staff members made several visits to Sangklaburi to support, encourage, and supervise his research. Our hope was that a local researcher could become the channel for making use of the data collected on the field and the lessons learned from that data. Although the Office

collected a great deal of material and did publish the results of this project, we failed in our primary goal of "empowering" local churches through historical research. The part-time researcher was not able to divorce himself from his many other duties sufficiently to complete the project or participate in the interpretation of the project to the churches. Sangklaburi is too far away from Chiang Mai for the Office of History to carry out those tasks itself.

Since 1997, the Office of History has entered a third phase in our search for a way to involve local churches in the study of their own lives and use that study to strengthen them as religious communities. We are employing two related strategies that offer increased potential for the use of historical research for local church life. First, we now employ two full-time field researchers, each researcher working with a cluster of churches of which she herself is a member. As indicated above, one researcher works with CCT churches in Uttaradit Province and the other works with CCT Karen churches in Amphur Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province. Second, the Office now sponsors two-month, hot season historical training and research projects for seminary students preparing to become full-time Christian workers. To date we have sponsored two such projects with the Karen churches and one in Uttaradit. Together, the projects have involved 21 seminarians from theological schools in both Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

The Karen church history project and training of Karen theological students has proven itself especially fruitful in unexpected ways. During the 1998 hot season, we trained 9 Karen seminarians in our first hot season project, having them spend several weeks in actual historical research in a number of local churches. Both the students and our Karen field person soon became especially interested in traditional Karen culture and religion. As Christians, they'd lost contact with a great deal of traditional Karen life and were extremely excited as they talked with older Christians, converts who still remembered and cherished the older life of the Karen. The students began to rediscover for themselves their ethnic identity and to see how important it is for Christian churches to preserve and enhance, rather than ignore, traditional culture and beliefs. During the 1999 hot season, a second group of students studied traditional Karen religion more directly and spent time living with and interviewing traditional Karen. Thus, our work with the Karen has taken new directions, emphasizing the study and reclamation of Karen culture and religion for the contemporary life of Karen churches. To a limited extent, our field staff person has been able to involve some local people in this task, and, in November 2000, she led her first consultation on using traditional Karen religious beliefs to interpret and enrich Christian theology.

In the meantime, the Office has become directly involved in the training of theological students, both in the study of Thai church history and in research methods. For some five years, two members of the staff have been adjunct instructors at the McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University. While this instruction is not aimed specifically to the study of local church life, much of it is intended to encourage theological students to gain a better understanding of that life through the study of its history. During the 2000 hot season, six students engaged in a history research project in Uttaradit Province that was fashioned after the Musikee Karen projects. Although these students did not become particularly interested in local culture as such, they did learn a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of local churches and came away with a much deeper respect for the wisdom of local church people. The project emphasized the idea that the local people know their own situation best; in their communities, they are the "acharn" and theological students, though better educated formally, must be their students. They must respect the local people as their teachers.

The Office staff involved in theological training has supervised several masters' theses, most of them directed to topics related to local church life and renewal. They include, among other subjects, study of the current state of religious education in churches, methods for training converts, the financial status of pastors, church assistance for those testing HIV-positive, and the

care of the elderly by churches. In most cases, students become quite enthusiastic about what they learn. Our experience is that the interview process is especially valuable to students because it brings them into direct contact with local people. The use of simple questionnaires has also been very valuable.

Lessons & Future Directions

At this time, the Office of History is planning to expand its educational involvement to include a Lahu Bible school related to the Church of Christ in Thailand. Lahu church leaders have asked the Office to help the Lahu churches preserve their histories, and we have together worked out a three-semester course that will involve the students in studying Thai church history generally (first semester 2001), learning research and writing methods (second semester 2001), conducting research (hot season 2002), and then teaching each other what they learned (first semester 2002). This curriculum will begin this May and will involve about 15 students, if all goes according to plans. The Office of History will also work with the McGilvary Faculty of Theology to assist Masters' students in the research and writing of M.Div. Theses, aiming to make those theses more relevant to local church life and issues. Still another possible project under discussion would involve the Office in training local church pastors to use basic research skills to improve their work, learn to know their church members better, and collect data for solving specific local problems. We should note and emphasize that all of this training will be directed to providing present and future local church leaders with research skills. The goal is to help them learn the value of local wisdom and participate in preserving and using that wisdom in the daily life of local churches.

The Office of History also plans to expand and make permanent its consultations on the relationship of Karen culture to the Church of Christ in Thailand's Karen churches. These consultations could include, eventually, churches in Burma as well as Thailand. The Office's goal is to encourage Karen churches to learn, preserve, and actively incorporate traditional Karen values and beliefs into the life of the churches, while adapting Karen culture to modern realities. One important aspect of this work is the collecting of traditional Karen religious poems and tales, which comprise an important repository for traditional Karen beliefs. In Uttaradit Province, meanwhile, the Office's field staff person has become a key figure in developing better religious educational programs for the local churches, acting as a liaison between national church agencies and the local churches. The Office's work in Uttaradit is also encouraging national and regional leaders to reflect on the problems faced by tiny Christian groups, which lack leadership skills and resources for maintaining a viable Christian community.

Since its founding in January 1988, the Office of History has slowly shifted its emphasis from original research to training others to do research. While the Office still engages in research, it increasingly sees itself as an agency for teaching research skills and attitudes that reflect its central concern with strengthening the lives of local churches and Christian communities. It has shifted its operational focus from its Chiang Mai office to placing full-time researchers in the field. That is to say, it is involving itself more directly and closely in the lives of local people, primarily through employing qualified local people to carry out research and training in their own places. At the most general level, the Office of History began its work with a vision of doing research to provide data for local churches and church leaders. It now believes that its ministry is to provide skills to local church people and leaders so that they can gather and evaluate data for themselves. In the Age of Information, this shift in focus is an important one. It aims to "empower" local churches and leaders by giving them access to informational skills so that they can become independent information producers and knowledgeable, capable information consumers within their own contexts.

Our experience, in sum, has moved us away from doing research for local people to equipping

those who are and will be local leaders with research skills. The original goal of using the study of church history and research for strengthening local church life has remained. It is clear, however, that we cannot achieve that goal through our own research. Our task has become to support and encourage local leaders to carry out those tasks. Our two field workers have begun to make important contributions to the churches they work with and are the focus of much of our efforts at the moment. It may be possible to add a third field worker within the next two years, although it is not clear whether we will be successful or not in doing so. In the long term, however, the Office of History has begun to create a pool of local leaders with some training in research methods and understanding of how to use them for local church life. It is our hope that they will be agents for the preservation and adaptation of "people's wisdom" in the years to come.

Conclusion

Thailand has become a noisy nation. Advertisers shout their message. Politicians shout their message. Loudspeakers blare out everywhere. Televisions and CD players inundate us with sound. The wisdom of the people was born in an earlier, quieter age, one where materialistic values did not dominate and where local voices had authority. While we cannot go back to that simpler time and would not even want to, it does have much to teach us. It is worth listening to, preserving, and adapting to our so-called modern world. Religious values can be an invaluable aid in achieving the goal of preserving and adapting local wisdom in the modern world. Those values teach us to approach local people with humility and a desire to serve them without dominating them, to assist them in gaining a voice in this noisy world. Those values encourage us to listen effectively and to learn truly. The experience of the Office of History over the last thirteen years has reinforced the importance of our fundamental values to our work with local people.

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