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**HOPE OF
BANGKOK CHURCH**

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The Hope of Bangkok Church was started in 1981. The church first met on the ninth floor of a hospital building where the elevator was occasionally out of order. Nevertheless, God caused us to expand. In a few months, we had outgrown the small meeting room and moved to the second-floor chapel. The next few years were a time of training disciples. In 1985, a second church was started in the northern part of Thailand.

THAILAND AND BEYOND

Now, in 1997, more than 800 Hope of God churches have been planted, covering most districts of Thailand. Another 40 churches have been established internationally in 19 countries, including the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia and most of the countries in Southeast Asia.

Although most of these churches emphasize a schedule of regular weekly activities, some of the larger churches have also been able to devote a part of their resources to community projects. Some of the churches operate centers to help the underprivileged and medical clinics to serve the poor.

THE HOPE OF BANGKOK PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

The main tenets of our philosophy of ministry are outlined as follows:

- Obedience to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ;
- The importance of the local church;
- The need for every Christian to serve God fully according to the giftings and endowment God has given;
- The recognition that church leaders are appointed by God, not by people;
- The importance for every Christian to be under spiritual covering;
- The understanding that a church is both an organization and an organism;
- Strong commitment of the members to their local church;
- Unity within the members of the local church, and cooperation between the local churches in recognition of the universal Body of Christ;
- The role of the church as salt and light within its communities, cultures and nations;
- Establishing the church as a place of security and blessing to people.

Before people formally become members of our churches, they have a chance to learn about our philosophy of ministry so they can thoroughly understand us. In turn, they also learn of our expectations for membership in the local church.

Our vision is to continue to be in total obedience to the Great Commission. We want to play a significant part in having this fulfilled. As an outworking of this, we would not be satisfied to make only a token effort. We want to be involved in planting churches worldwide.

Nonetheless, we know that the task of fulfilling the Great Commission in its entirety is beyond the capability of any single church or family of churches. Therefore, we hope that our declared intention to do so inspires many other churches to do likewise. Collectively, then, we will be able to finish what our Lord first commissioned His Church to do.

OUR ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The smallest component of the typical Hope of God church is the care group. People are divided into groups ranging in size from 5 to 10 individuals who are supervised by a leader. The grouping is done in as homogeneous a manner as possible. Thus, student care groups may meet on campus, encourage each other in the midst of their studies and reach out to their classmates together.

Those in the medical profession group together to build strong fellowship links, serve the church and reach their colleagues. Because of their small size, care groups are an excellent forum for personal teaching and pastoral care. In addition, care groups offer visitors an informal setting where sharing needs, testimonies and the Word of God can be done in an atmosphere of love and concern.

To preserve a good balance, we provide opportunities for fellowship among people of various backgrounds during larger-scale church activities.

The tiered approach found in our churches originates from the principles found in the Bible. Two or three care groups form a unit. One level higher, two or three units are grouped together and headed by another leader. This configuration extends upward to the pastoral team, which is headed by a senior pastor.

Although our people participate in many decentralized activities of their respective care groups throughout the week, they are all brought together on Sundays for a celebration meeting.

Sundays are strategically important in the growth of our church. They are the times when we can worship God, reach out and plan together for the coming week.

ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS AND TEAM BUILDING

We believe that proper spiritual covering is biblically essential. To facilitate this, each member of our church is accountable to a more mature member through a network of relationships within the church. For example, members are accountable to their care group leader, care group leaders to their unit leader and so on.

In each of the relationships involving any pair of individuals, the

more mature Christian spends some time with the less mature Christian regularly each week. Such time is spent getting to know one another, studying the Word of God, praying, discussing the work of the ministry, working through problems, and various other activities that benefit the care receiver and help him or her grow. Such individual attention facilitates rapid spiritual growth for the care receiver. These weekly one-on-one meetings are a good forum for deep sharing, ensuring that individual problems are handled with proper care and concern.

To avoid potential problems, care giver-care receiver relationships are established between individuals of the same gender. Furthermore,

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to prevent abuses of the system, those receiving care are given ready access to higher-level leaders should the more mature Christian's behavior or teaching ever become questionable.

In this way, strong ministry teams are built because the individuals in groups have already been together for some length of time, facilitating team building. This is also a practical way of incorporating every member of the church into ministry, as all the members of each care group are given responsibility in the support structure to help them successfully fulfill their duties. Care groups foster strong interpersonal ties as members serve together for several years and help each other through periods of great success as well as times of barrenness in ministry.

TRAINING OUR LEADERS

Church leaders must normally be trained and selected from within, not from without. Leaders who have been converted and matured within a local church are well versed in the preferences of that church as well as with its philosophies of ministry. At the same time, their giftings,

abilities and character are apparent to the leaders appointing them. They also have already established relationships with the members and gained their acceptance. In this way, appointing leaders can be based solidly on an in-depth discernment of their gifts, strengths and callings.

We believe people should be functioning as leaders before they are appointed as such. In this way, we can recognize God's anointing on their lives. We view upright character as essential for leadership, using Paul's Epistles to Timothy and Titus as the basis for this conviction.

We also recognize that leadership is key to the growth of a church. The size of a church depends on the quantity and quality of its leadership at every level. Vital churches must always be developing leaders because growing churches always seems to have an insufficient number of leaders.

TRAINING PROGRAMS

To handle this need, regular leadership training programs are a part of our churches. Some of the programs are formal, others are less structured. At the same time, we seek to balance acquiring theory with on-the-job experience. Seminaries have been established in several of our churches. They offer courses that combine rigorous academic standards and biblical teaching along with practical character development and ministry training. Because of the great need for leaders at all levels of ministry, we seek to meet the needs of students from a wide range of academic backgrounds.

Our seminaries offer a variety of programs, each having different entry requirements for a candidate's academic background, Christian maturity and ministry potential. While in seminary, students are disciplined by pastors. A strong emphasis is placed on practical service. The placement of such seminaries within the local church provides a ready-made laboratory where students may apply their acquired knowledge in real-life situations.

The second form of leadership training is more informal through groups we call David's Mighty Men. Here people within the group study Christian doctrine, character development and ministry practices. Informal training is prevalent at all levels of leadership formation. Potential leaders develop by watching their own care group lead-

ers lead worship, teach and counsel. The leader at each level is responsible to train those for whom he is responsible.

HOW WE REACH OUT

To ensure that the Great Commission is fulfilled, each member of a church is required to be involved in evangelism regularly. It would not make sense for churches to rely on transfer growth, especially in countries that have low percentages of born-again Christians. At the same time, the churches themselves must be obedient to the Great Commission. Thus, evangelistic activities are planned on a variety of levels, from the individual to the entire church. Evangelism is the means of establishing new churches in order to fulfill the Great Commission.

Our churches are started in a variety of ways. Many times, when a member moves to a new locality we seize the opportunity to plant a new church. If those who move away are not ready to start a church themselves, we send others along to help them. When the churches are

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started, the whole process of sharing the gospel, welcoming new members and discipling them is set into motion. In turn, some go out from there to new locations and start additional churches.

To ensure quality of all these churches, regional pastors travel frequently to their regional daughter churches to make sure the new pastors receive sufficient help and understand how to run their church. Likewise, regional churches support the smaller churches in their care.

At the international level, the process is very much the same, but with an added dimension. Some churches have been started when God brings individuals to us from new countries who want to join us and start churches in their own home countries. Administratively, they are

coordinated by a central missions office, helping to ensure they are all moving synonymously in a biblical direction.

To make sure the pastors receive sufficient input, Hope of God International organizes a quarterly conference for pastors and leaders within its family of churches. These leaders gather for intensive Bible teaching and practical training as well as for spiritual input, fellowship and strategic planning. It is also a time when they can share their joys and sorrows, and usually after a few days they are refreshed so they can continue their ministry with renewed zeal and enthusiasm.

PRAYER AND POWER MINISTRIES

We emphasize prayer at both the individual and corporate levels. Members are regularly encouraged to have a consistent private relationship with the Lord. We realize that we are only instruments of the Lord and that we need to rely fully on the Lord to help people mature in their relationship and service to God.

Prayer activities take various formats. Every Sunday morning we meet for a corporate prayer meeting. Some of our churches sponsor a church-level prayer meeting some other day of the week. In other churches, especially those in large cities, it has been more practical to decentralize these meetings.

Although the time set aside for prayer is given importance, we seek to inculcate a spirit of prayer into the lives of our people. They are taught to pray before, during and after each meeting, even if it is only between two individuals. It is not uncommon for our people to plan a regular schedule for fasting and prayer each week. Members regularly spend their lunch hours praying for their friends, relatives and acquaintances.

In response to our prayers, signs and wonders are often visible in our midst. Healings of people who were sick beyond medical aid are documented regularly. We have documented cases of paralytics and cancer patients who were miraculously healed after prayer. Our people are taught about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit soon after they are converted. Because of this, boldness in proclaiming the gospel is often the result.

In many cases, healings are powerful evangelism tools in the countryside where people already have worldviews recognizing spiritual

reality. Demonstrations of God's authority help villagers realize that our God is real. Sometimes God works in amusing ways. One of our pastors was able to start a church when some sick cattle were healed. The owner's testimony convinced other farmers to give their lives to the Lord.

Leaders teach our people that everybody can move in the power of the Holy Spirit. For example, in our church in Bangkok, we pray for the sick in quarterly prayer meetings. Very often, we celebrate miraculous healings when a group of young believers earnestly prays for the sick.

FINANCIAL PRINCIPLES

Our understanding of the Bible leads us to believe that the local church should be self-sufficient. We teach our churches that from day one, they must support themselves. Nonetheless, some special circumstances could arise where help from other churches is warranted. For example, when a church building is damaged by a natural disaster, other churches rally around to help, not unlike the situation when Christians in the Antioch church sent help to their brothers in Judea during a time of famine.

In this way, the members of the church have a greater sense of involvement. The success of the local church depends very much on each and every individual member's support and giving sacrificially. Initially, the pastor is a tent maker, working for a living while serving the Lord, the same as the other members in the church. When the church grows larger and a need exists for a full-time pastor, then the pastor is paid by the church.

We also teach our people to financially honor the pastor and other full-time workers. They should be paid reasonably and as much as the church can afford. At the same time, good-hearted people normally do not make demands on the church for their salaries.

Within the local church, the pastor and his leadership team make the decisions about expenditures within the limits of the church income and budget. The pastor himself does not handle money, however, to avoid any possible accusations. Counting the money is normally taken care of by a team to avoid embezzlement of funds. Proper financial, accounting and auditing procedures are instilled into our churches.

CONCLUSION

Operating a church is a complicated matter. Although many of us know what it takes to grow a church, applying and maintaining all the factors is a challenging task. We do not want to make a mistake by building strongly in some areas, but missing out in others. To be successful in building the kind of church Jesus stipulated, we need to build according to the various facets suggested in the Bible.

At the same time, when so many components are involved, effort must be made to ensure that the right balance is maintained. Much wisdom is needed to build with the right emphasis according to the biblical pattern. We need to "major on the majors" and "minor on the minors."

For example, we cannot seek to organize our church without recognizing that it is also an organism that has its own life force. On the other hand, if a church is only treated as an organism without us making any attempts to coordinate its efforts, chaos could result. A fine balancing act between organizing the organization while preserving the inherent life of the organism has to be coordinated adroitly.

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