

that can meet all of the needs of the urban family. Their philosophy of ministry is to reach the "up-and-outer as well as the down-and-outer." The staff plans to use technology heavily. Houston is the wealthiest city in the nation. If this wealth could be channeled toward evangelism and church planting, there is no limit to what could be accomplished.

The five strategies discussed in this chapter are shared with a view to stimulating interaction and discussion. Many other models or classifications of models could be given. Through dialogue and unification of overseas missions and home missions, world-class cities can be more effectively evangelized.

12

Megachurches for Christian Minorities: Hope of Bangkok

Kriengsak Chareonwongsak

As the church of Jesus Christ develops strategies to reach the continent of Asia with the gospel, we cannot ignore the Buddhist bloc, which forms a major portion of the Asian population. Thailand is probably the most strategic country in Buddhist Asia. The World Fellowship of Buddhism and its president are found in Thailand, where 94 percent of the population confess Buddhism. Many believe that "to be a Thai means to be a Buddhist."

Protestant missionaries first entered Thailand in 1816, and by 1978, 162 years later, there were only 58,953 Thai Protestant Christians.¹ By 1988 the Protestant population probably stood at around 80,000 at the most,² an insignificant portion of the bulging population of 56 million. With its population of over 6 million people, over 1020 slums, and a population growth of over 750,000 per annum,³ Bangkok makes an ideal site in which to test and apply strategies for urban mission in a highly resistant area.

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1. David Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 664.

2. This is a figure reported by Reverend Charan Ratanbutra, chairman of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand in *Asia Christian* (March 1988), p. 8. A common problem in compiling figures from various missions is that one believer is counted by two (or more!) missions due to unreliable membership rolls. My own guess is that active church attendance of Protestants in Thailand in the late 1980s did not exceed 25,000.

3. Ray Bakke with Jim Hart, *The Urban Christian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 35.

The Hope of Bangkok Church is the largest and fastest-growing single Christian church in the history of Thailand. It was born out of a God-given vision. It was started in September 1981 with five members and in September 1995 had more than 10,000 members in Bangkok alone. It has become a church planting movement within the past eight years, and has planted over 300 daughter churches in Thailand and overseas.

Being a Thai indigenous church and not a branch of any foreign denomination, the Hope of Bangkok seeks to be a biblically and culturally relevant, contextualized Thai church. In so doing, it has challenged many traditional Thai concepts. One of these is that Christianity is Western-owned. The walls of prejudice are slowly breaking down, and people have become more open to the gospel.

Moreover, programs and activities catering to the needs and spiritual development of the members have been carefully designed to be culturally sensitive. This has enabled members to grow spiritually and to be equipped for ministry in a unique cultural setting, though the efforts have been at times misunderstood by Christian onlookers who want only conventional ministry. It has not been easy to pursue this path in evangelizing this nation. The challenge is enormous, and without God's help, the task of reaching this city and country would be a mere dream.

The Vision for a Resistant City

In all church activities, the Hope of Bangkok Church has carefully defined goals and monitors them with strategic, administrative planning. The God-given vision for the church is to plant a church in each of the approximately 685 districts of Thailand. Even before the church began, our vision was to saturate this country with churches by the year 2000.⁴ The history of missions in Thailand makes it clear that without God's help, this is an impossible task.

With clear goals and vision, we shared the value and urgency in serving Christ and in accomplishing this vision with church members from the outset of congregational life. Our church planting vision has been shared clearly and constantly with the members at every practical opportunity, such as corporate prayer meetings, small gatherings, and celebration worship services. This has encouraged active participation and made the vision a part of individual lives. The level of involvement and participation of members varies with the depth of their maturity and commitment. But constant prayer and encouragement has allowed the church to work corporately in great unity, pressing ahead tirelessly.

4. See details of the vision of the Hope of Bangkok Church in the summary of Kriengsak Chareonwongsak's message at a plenary session at Lausanne Pastor's Consultation, in *World Evangelization* 15, no. 52 (1988): 30-32; "Lessons from the East," *People of Destiny* (January-February 1987): 6-10; "Church That Won't Stop Growing," *Renewal*, no. 134 (1987): 6-11.

Church Growth

The rapid membership growth of the Hope of Bangkok Church can be seen in our need to move several times to accommodate the expanding congregation. We rented a hospital room for our first meeting in September 1981 with five members and a few onlookers. About six months later, the room became too small, and the meeting was moved to the hospital's chapel. Fourteen months later this too became overcrowded, and we moved to the Crystal Ballroom of the Sheraton Hotel. Growth continued, and in November 1984 we signed the lease on the Oscar Theater, the largest available auditorium in town. In December 1988 our membership was 4500. In January 1992 we were able to move to our own premises at Hope Place, allowing us to expand further with a larger auditorium and multiple services. Services were also held on other days of the week and recently have met in other locations around Bangkok to cater to the ever-increasing number of people coming to church. In September 1995 over 10,000 people regularly attended the Hope of Bangkok Church.

This kind of growth is unprecedented in Thailand. Obviously, God gave the increase. We believe he blessed our corporate and personal prayer, along with an appropriate application of biblical principles and strategies for church expansion.

One principle important in the growth has been our emphasis on local church-centered evangelism. This approach enabled us to enfold new converts into church life. As a local church, we can integrate evangelism, follow-up, and nurturing with sensitivity to personal and community needs. The Thai concept that "to be a Thai is to be a Buddhist" is steadily being eroded as the larger community senses that a viable, strong, and thriving Christian church is here for good. The sincerity of the movement to live and bring Christ's love to the Thai people has also helped to shift people's attitudes toward Christianity to a more favorable perspective.

Strategies

Donald McGavran summed up the difficulty of urban mission by saying, "No one yet knows what modes of mission promise most for communicating Christian faith to urban man."⁵ Answers to McGavran's riddle can only come as Spirit-led, biblical insights are applied to a variety of mission circumstances. The principles described below have proved effective in the Bangkok situation and may be helpful in urban mission elsewhere.

Urban Church Planting: A Bridge to Rural Areas

Because cities are the centers of complex social interaction, they are home to the nation's social, commercial, political, military, artistic, entertainment,

5. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 285.

educational, and mass media life. To evangelize a whole nation requires us to use these resources and concentrate on the cities first.

Targeting for a Larger Urban Church

Thais by nature enjoy big, exciting, festival events. They call this *sanuk*, which means "fun." In this culture, a church must be perceived as being big enough to warrant their interest. A big urban church is necessary to work in Bangkok successfully. We need to make the church visible so that it can attract people's interest and confidence.

There are many benefits in having a large church. For instance, people can be ministered to in a holistic manner. The church can cater to felt and real needs. Also, the membership can function in the specialization of their gifts and talents when the church is of a sufficient size.

The Hope of Bangkok Church has been able to bring a large number of converts into it. Its membership is drawn from around every subdistrict in Bangkok. The larger the church, the more spiritual impact it can assert on society.

Mass Evangelism

The purpose of mass evangelism is not solely to incorporate people into the church. At the Hope of Bangkok it is used primarily as a tool to stimulate personal evangelism. It also serves as a means of secular public relations for the church and creates a "dynamic equivalent" festivity for members to enjoy. These replace Thai celebrations, which are thoroughly Buddhist and animistic in origin, content, philosophy, and practice.

The Hope of Bangkok uses every possible opportunity for mass evangelism. Special occasions draw people best; therefore the church often holds mass meetings on Valentine's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and Christmas. One recent event, "Miracle Christmas '88," illustrates our method.

Prior to the event, all members were asked to list at least four people they would invite to the program and to pray specifically for God to prepare their hearts. Attractive posters announcing the event and highlighting special programs were posted on city buses, in public places, at universities, and in office complexes. Member involvement at this grassroots level encourages their interest in inviting people to attend these programs. Full-scale advertisements draw the involvement of business and celebrities to participate in the event, which attracts further interest from the public.

Miracle Christmas was a time of great excitement for the members. The atmosphere of festivity, together with the spiritual eagerness in preparing for new believers to join the church, created a refreshing spirit in outreach. As a result of Miracle Christmas '88, the Hope of Bangkok Church was able to present a gift of over 500 new believers to our Lord Jesus Christ on Christmas Day, and the spirit of evangelism was once again rejuvenated.

Personal Witnessing

Witnessing is a way of life for members of the Hope of Bangkok Church. It is taught, emphasized, modeled, and encouraged; members are continually equipped and mobilized to witness with confidence. Emphasis is placed on reaching out via webs of friends and relatives, who have proven to be most responsive. Almost all of the members of the Hope of Bangkok Church have been led to the Lord through these relationships. "Faith is not usually spread among strangers but among persons who know and trust each other."⁶

Members of the Hope of Bangkok Church have been trained to look for small and large units of responsive people to evangelize. They consciously watch for people's needs and invite them to be exposed to Christian solutions, as well as to attend church-related activities. Concentration on outreach is crucial if the church is to grow. Members are taught to depend on the Lord and pray for his preparation of hearts. Statistics show that 49.33 percent of our members pray for those they want to lead to the Lord.⁷

An incredibly high proportion (95 percent) of the growth of the church has been due to conversion. The burden for lost souls has been instilled into the membership by encouraging them to take advantage of every available opportunity for reaching out with the gospel message. This includes, for example, printing personal testimonies as tracts and distributing them at engagement ceremonies, birthdays, funerals, and weddings.

Follow-up

Having new believers join the church will not lead to church growth if proper follow-up strategy is not well executed. Data collection for statistical analysis plays a vital role as a diagnostic tool for leaders by revealing problems as well as enhancing systematic follow-up. Hope of Bangkok keeps precise records of all visitors and new believers. Correct names, addresses, important dates, maps, and convenient places of contact are filled out when these people first enter the church.

These forms are computerized and a copy of the printout is given to the pastoral leader overseeing that given geographical area. Follow-up within twenty-four hours of the conversion decision is emphasized. This helps to ensure that all doubts can be dealt with and proper spiritual nurturing and encouragement can be given from the start of their newfound faith. Thereafter, the person is visited once or twice a week to lay proper biblical foundation for faith in Christ.

6. C. Peter Wagner, with Win Arn and Elmer Towns, eds., *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1986), 71.

7. Witoon Sinsirichavang, "Communication Characteristics in Evangelism Employed by Christian Organizations in Thailand" (Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1988), 145.

Care and Mini-Care Groups

A key thrust of the Hope of Bangkok Church is its care group structure. In December 1988 approximately 1000 care groups in Bangkok served as bridges into every subdistrict of the city. Care groups offer a non-threatening setting in which open sharing of needs, blessings, experiences, and the Word of God takes place in an atmosphere of love and concern. Because of their small size, they are an excellent forum for personal teaching and pastoral care.

Since Bangkok is a city made up of many subcultures, the Hope of Bangkok has organized its pastoral care structure around homogeneous cell groups. We have allowed the members to fellowship at the intimate level with their ethnic and cultural peers, yet the church is a heterogeneous church. In order to maintain a good balance between homogeneity and diversity, we teach and provide fellowship among people of different backgrounds as well. Membership of the Hope of Bangkok Church includes people from virtually all backgrounds, including members of the household of one of the billionaires in Thailand, high-ranking government officers from the immediate family of a past prime minister, as well as slum dwellers and ex-heroin addicts. Some homogeneous groups in the church are business executives, professionals, students, farmers, and laborers.

Effective evangelism, however, should be carried out through the group that is similar to the target audience. We accept the wisdom in the Church Growth Movement principle that "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers and this should occur with a minimum of social dislocation."⁸ We have seen the effectiveness of this principle with the church's Student Fellowship. The student community comprises nearly 20 percent of Bangkok's population. A distinctive evangelistic approach to meet the needs of students has greatly enhanced the growth of this group in the church. By forming the Chinese Fellowship, we have for the first time enfolded ethnic Chinese converts into our church. We have avoided cultural barriers by having a Chinese approach another Chinese.

Applying this principle in our pastoral nurturing ministry, we have found that people are more responsive to small group fellowship when they are being cared for in a homogeneous setting. As they mature spiritually and learn to accept other ethnic groups in Christ, they can be transferred into cell group leadership in their geographical settings and become actively involved in shepherding others. They know that in Christ there is no room for segregation.

A step beyond the care group is the mini-care group, which promotes stronger relationships within the care group. Each mini-care group consists of two or three people from the larger care group, who learn to grow and

8. Wagner, Arn, and Towns, eds., *Church Growth: State of the Art*, 71.

serve together especially in evangelism, visiting new believers, and joining together regularly in prayer and Bible study.

Leadership and Discipleship Training

A convert is someone who has genuinely and biblically changed his or her mind Christ-ward. A true disciple is a convert who follows through on his or her conversion commitment by allowing his or her life to be changed to follow Christ all the way. A convert may sometimes slip back and be content in the comfort of knowing that he or she is redeemed and that Christ is there, but a disciple desires to walk closer to God. A disciple is willing to be biblically trained so that life may be transformed into the likeness of Christ. A disciple is involved in serving.

Therefore, having new converts in a church is hardly sufficient for a biblically functioning church. The Hope of Bangkok stresses strong personal and corporate discipleship training, with a vision to see a church full of committed participants, and not merely spectators, in God's kingdom.

Thais are accustomed to the idea that religious devotion means the personal practice of a religious teaching, with or without visiting the temple. Hence, they may only attend Buddhist temples a few times in their lives or perhaps not at all, though they call themselves Buddhists. This attitude often continues after conversion to Christ, which means that getting new converts to attend church can be a real struggle. We have to teach them immediately that Christianity is not simply a religion but a way of life, and that church attendance is not optional but mandatory for spiritual health, growth, and well-being.

Discipleship naturally leads to leadership training. The majority of the leaders at the Hope of Bangkok Church were converted and trained here, so perhaps our model of training new converts to become leaders within a relatively short period would be useful for church development and church planting elsewhere, especially in Christian minority and resistant areas.

Discipleship Training

The Hope of Bangkok Church has strong one-to-one and group follow-up programs with a well-structured discipleship process that follows the initial nurturing. Apart from natural and personal shepherding, there are a variety of programs to enhance spiritual and ministerial development. When nonbelievers accept Christ into their lives, they are pursued through the church's follow-up system, which is care group-oriented. On-the-job training, personal instruction, and exercising of their gifts and talents promote maturity.

When they show sufficient maturity, these believers become cell group leaders. At this point, they join our "David's Mighty Men Groups," which

are small discipleship groups led by their immediate pastoral leader. Character training, doctrinal teaching, and ministry development schemes are some of the lessons taught in these groups. Transferable teaching materials are written and taught from the top down to ensure that all levels of leadership are adequately and systematically trained. I, as the senior pastor, meet with area leaders once a week; they in turn meet with those under them. This tier system has enabled the pastoral care of these hundreds of leaders to be more personal and relational.

In a "gospel-virgin" area with a relatively young church consisting mainly of new converts, this system has helped to prevent false doctrines from creeping in. In addition, the unity of the whole leadership has been strengthened.

Leadership Training

A shortage of pastors and of trained leaders is not only a temporary problem to the Thai churches. Historically it has been a thorn in the flesh. The Thai churches and Christians have been brought up without trained pastors. Strong church growth requires competent leaders. Thailand Bible Seminary was established by the Hope of Bangkok Church in June 1985 to offer four levels of training: School of Christian Life, School of Ministry, Bachelor of Theology, and Master of Divinity. All these courses combine high-level academic and biblical teaching with character development and practical training in discipleship. They also provide on-the-job ministerial training through the church's example of effective church growth and church planting. Leaders and potential leaders are trained with the sole aim of pioneering strong, growing churches. More than 1000 have completed this training; most are either serving in daughter churches or have continued with advanced training at our seminary.

A unique aspect of Thailand Bible Seminary is that students are disciplined by various pastoral leaders, producing in-depth interaction between students and practicing church-mission leaders. In addition, the various levels of training can accommodate people of different educational backgrounds. The Hope of Bangkok Church is a laboratory in which students test their academic training in real church life situations. Thailand Bible Seminary has grown very rapidly into a strategic and effective training ground for home-grown leaders. Its motto sums up its purpose well: "Godly in Character, Depth in the Word, Effective in Ministry."

Another form of leadership training is more informal. I, as the senior pastor, meet with a group of selected and potential leaders to share Bible teaching, theological insights, concepts, and strategies in church work and missions. This close-knit group meets once a week. Such an opportunity has enabled leaders to share the burden for God's work with developing leaders. Much emphasis is placed on this program.

Member Participation

The Hope of Bangkok Church does not separate believers into "laity" and "clergy." All believers are called to minister with their God-given gifts. In the past, the Christian church has put forth very little effort to tap the potential of the laity.

Clergy and laity distinction must be scrapped, not only in our theological formulation, but also in actuality. I see no room for allowing the people to simply attend church and watch the performance of the "full-time" chosen ones. All gifts must be employed for the advancement of God's kingdom. This is clearly one definite way to demonstrate the priesthood of all believers. There is no place for professional ministries in the church. All clergy must be laity, and all laity must be clergy. God does not and never has called anyone to the "full-time" ministry.

At least 75 percent of those who attend worship are actively involved in ministry. Church growth requires that effective programs equip members to minister more effectively. We emphasize that all should serve God to the fullest possible capacity. To serve God in the way that he has called us is to devote our whole being, work, home, time, and possessions to service. Only if time constraints in a secular job prevent one from serving God effectively should "full-time" employed ministry be considered. We have approximately fifty full-time staff in Bangkok and more than 100 in Thailand. Volunteers are a major component of church ministry at the Hope of Bangkok. They serve God with much vigor, strength, and vitality.

Much formal and informal biblical and practical training is given to the laity. Interest clubs meet around many areas of ministry, such as art, evangelism, radio, guitar, drums, and drama. People with the same interests are trained to use those abilities to serve God.

Life Example, Sacrificial Spirit

In a survey of church members, the high level of lay participation was attributed to the life example and sacrificial spirit of the leader. The leadership lifestyle has challenged the members.

The pastoral team consists of well-educated men and women, successful in their careers, who have chosen to forsake secular "success" to serve God in full-time capacity, with much lower pay. Some serve with no salary at all. This spirit of putting the kingdom of God first has been passed on to the whole church body to the glory of God.

This sacrificial spirit was demonstrated when we were raising money for evangelistic needs. As a young church made up mostly of students, financial backing appeared almost impossible. I prayed about the need and shared it with our pastoral team, inviting each one to seek God personally in this matter. The burden was then passed on to the different levels of leaders and members.

At the end of three months, 10 million Baht (approximately \$400,000) was raised in 1986 when membership was around 1000 and the annual average income per person in Thailand was \$750.

To fulfill the task of winning this nation to Christ, the leaders sold their cars, houses, and valuable jewelry. Members had the same spirit. Life savings and many valuable items were pooled to participate in this exciting, God-honoring venture. God blessed the church as a whole through this sacrificial act.

Teaching and Preaching

Expository preaching has been vital in the growth of our church. Systematic, structured preaching has enabled members to mature with a firm, biblical worldview. Church members are taught to live holistic and balanced Christian lives. Expository preaching has also taught the church to realize the applicability of the Bible in real-life situations.

Each Sunday there are four worship services in Thai, two in English and two in Chinese. Sixty different two-hour Bible study classes in our Christian education program are offered either before or after regular worship service. At least 60 percent of those who attend worship study in one of these classes.

Worship, the Holy Spirit, and Miracles

At the Hope of Bangkok Church members are encouraged to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them during worship and their daily lives to express their love and gratitude to God. Spontaneous worship and orderly functioning of the gifts of the Holy Spirit have drawn members closer to God. Signs and wonders are performed by the Holy Spirit, especially through members laying hands on one another in prayer. These experiences confirm in people's hearts that God is powerful and still free to work today.

In a country where even nonbelievers believe in miracles by supernatural power, signs and wonders through the God of the Bible have partially contributed to the significant growth of this church. This is reflected in the innumerable verifiable testimonies that members share about God's healing power and answered prayers. The joyful, expressive, lively, contagious, victorious praise and celebration in our worship services are important aspects of the Hope of Bangkok. They remind people that God is alive and in our midst. For fun-loving Thais, this has added to the "fun" of coming to church. God loves his people to rejoice before him, and so do we.

Conclusion

God has used this young movement to effect his work in this nation in a spectacular way. More life and vigor has entered into the Thai church. Tapes of sermons, teachings, and worship choruses from the Hope of Bangkok have

influenced a large proportion of Thai churches. Many of the strategies and methods have been used by other churches to bring about visible changes.

We cannot boast or be contented with the growth, as much is yet to be done. We have hardly scratched the surface. We can only say that the strategies applied have been meticulously spelled out for us by the Lord of the church, and to him be the glory in his church both now and forevermore.