

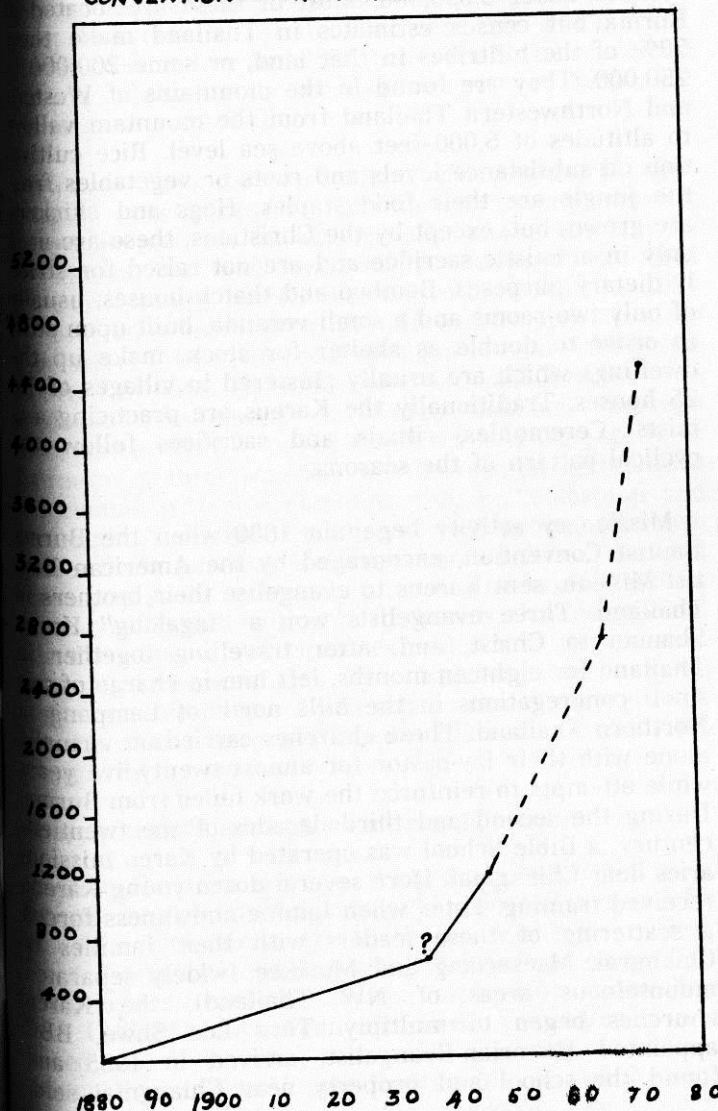
# 10 Fishing in deep waters Among Karens in Thailand

James E. Conklin, Thailand

Sixty-five Karen Baptist leaders and laymen from North-west Thailand representing 29 churches and some 4,500 adult baptized believers (a community of 13,000) enthusiastically accepted a proposal to launch a concerted effort in Church Growth Evangelism called "Evangelism-in-Depth" (See Figure 1). After official vote by the Executive Committee of the Karen Baptist Convention, the effort was launched on a three year basis in May, 1972, and will run through April, 1975. In its first full year measured church growth was up 60% over the previous year of 1972 (May 71 — April 72) or a total of 560 baptized new members! This is indeed good growth and could have been much better if limitations had not been placed on the effort by missionary involvement in a "Church Development Syndrome" of administration and institutional compounds. Key factors in the future of effective Church Growth strategy among the Karens may be seen in the dynamics operating in the E.I.D. programme.

First, it is important to see the Karen Tribe in Thailand in terms of their geographical, ethnic and socio-psychological background. The Karen Tribe is of Tibeto-Burman origins both ethnically and linguistically. Traditional chants tells of a time when the Karen people had a great kingdom between two mighty rivers, probably the Mekong and Salween. Today, their sub-tribes of

FIGURE: 1  
MEMBERSHIP-INCREASE KAREN BAPTIST  
CONVENTION - THAILAND .



Sgaw, Pwo, Bwe, Karenni and several minor groups number about 3,000,000. Most of these are located in Burma but census estimates in Thailand make them 50% of the hilltribes in that land, or some 200,000 to 250,000. They are found in the mountains of Western and Northwestern Thailand from the mountain valleys to altitudes of 5,000 feet above sea level. Rice cultivation on subsistence levels and roots or vegetables from the jungle are their food staples. Hogs and chickens are grown, but, except by the Christians, these are used only in animistic sacrifice and are not raised for strictly dietary purposes. Bamboo and thatch houses, usually of only two rooms and a small veranda, built upon stilts in order to double as shelter for stock, make up the dwellings which are usually clustered in villages of 10-25 houses. Traditionally the Karens are practicing animists. Ceremonies, rituals and sacrifices follow the cyclical pattern of the seasons.

Missionary activity began in 1880 when the Burma Baptist Convention, encouraged by the American Baptist Mission, sent Karens to evangelise their brothers in Thailand. Three evangelists won a "tagalong" Karen Shaman to Christ, and, after travelling together in Thailand for eighteen months, left him in charge of two small congregations in the hills north of Lampang in Northern Thailand. These churches carried on virtually alone with their lay-pastor for almost twenty-five years while attempts to reinforce the work failed from Burma. During the second and third decades of the twentieth century, a Bible School was operated by Karen missionaries near Chiangmai. Here several dozen young Karens received training. Later when famine and illness forced a scattering of these leaders with their families to Chiangrai, Maesariang and Musikee (widely separated mountainous areas of NW Thailand), the Karen churches began to multiply. Thra Loo Shwe, BBC appointed Historian-Evangelist, arrived in 1935 and found the school and property near Chiangmai sold.

Disappointed, he trekked to the churches and exhorted them to teach and train themselves to sing and read the Bible. This resulted in stronger churches and marked growth from a few hundred believers to nearly 1,200 baptized adults by the end of the war in 1945 (see Figure 1 on page 229).

Renewed requests for assistance after the war brought a loaned missionary from Burma. His surveys encouragingly pointed up the opportunity among the Karens in Thailand. In 1952 funds began coming to the field for work among the Karens and others; and in 1954 the first large contingent of American Baptist Missionaries arrived. Detailed records began to be collected and reported in 1956. By 1965 there were 2,700 adult baptized believers among the Karen Baptists. Fourteen missionaries were engaged either in language study or operation of three schools, four hostels, an agricultural programme with five extension centres, a hospital and two medical centres, in addition to teaching responsibilities in a pastoral training centre. Little time and effort was spent in strictly church-centred evangelistic outreach. The prevailing attitude was that evangelism was the work of the churches and not of the missionaries. Occasional efforts by missionary and national teams resulted frequently in baptism and church growth, but the efforts were not coordinated nor was any long-range strategy worked out.

### Church growth through evangelism-in-depth

In 1969 the Karen Baptist Churches, which had been formed into a convention in 1955, adopted a theme for general evangelistic stimulation: "Fishing in Deep Waters". Associational seminar/workshops were held for one week each dry season emphasizing evangelism and Christian Faith and Practice. A missionary was asked to advise the convention in evangelism and pastoral care. Thus it was that on May 1 and 2, sixty-five leaders and laymen gathered, heard, accepted and



began to pray for a concerted Evangelism-in-Depth lay outreach effort. Three features guided in the selection of EID:

1. It was simple and involved the church as a homogeneous unit in church planting.
2. A general stress-reservoir had been building up among Karens because of the failure of animistic practices and the staggering dimensions of the larger world newly opened to them through radio, roads and rural Thai government. Frequently these meant encounter with problems and people unfamiliar and sometimes intent on exploitation rather than genuine assistance. Tensions had grown for which the old religion offered no solutions.
3. The preparation of almost 100 young leaders trained to minister to the physical as well as the spiritual needs of the people had readied the forces necessary to more adequately follow up rapid church growth.

Other factors entered into the focus on E.I.D. as well. The leaders were getting a grip on administration of church affairs. A Joint Advisory Committee for Karen Work, formed in 1957 with missionaries and nationals about equally represented, had developed into the Executive Committee of the Karen Baptist Convention. The Convention appointed the missionary representative to the committee made up otherwise of Karen leaders and the Mission's field executive (Ex-officio). Though begun as an information and advisory group, the KBC Executive Committee now administers budgeted funds, makes requests, reviews programmes and requests missionaries, assigning their work and adjusting responsibilities. Thus an "in-depth" approach which gave the churches responsibility and freedom to follow the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit seemed to be in vogue with the encouraging emergence of national initiative.

### Preparation

During the year preceding the E.I.D. programme, the Karen churches were asked to pray for the success of the anticipated evangelistic effort proposed for the following three years. Pastors and evangelists were asked to (1) preach on the Great Commission and the imperatives of evangelism for one month consecutively; (2) set up prayer groups within the church who would pray for relatives by name asking God to open their hearts to the Gospel; (3) highlight evangelism in the life of the local church by taking available hand-turned record players and Gospel recordings into worship services, holding them aloft and asking for volunteers to take the machine to a friend or relative for whom they had been praying; and (4) develop associational music groups using Christian Karen teachers in government elementary schools and mission schools to train others in music in order that Gospel campaigns might be conducted by local churches on their own initiative. These efforts stirred the Convention delegates in 1972 and fired widespread interest in the E.I.D. programme.

### The programme is launched

In April, 1972, the KBC officially launched the first year of the Evangelism-in-Depth programme. In its first year, E.I.D. had no director. The programme was not institutionalized with an office, official publication staff, budget and time allotment. The missionary-adviser requested and was granted an evangelism committee with whom to work, but it was not possible to assemble members for more than one session because of remote and infrequent contact. The Executive Committee in a late action voted to "test" the plan adopted unanimously by the Convention by allowing it to be tried out during its first year in the Chiangrai Association. This was a great disappointment and uncharacteristic of purely Karen practice. Nevertheless, in compliance with the action, the missionary adviser to the E.I.D. programme and an

interested Karen leader travelled extensively through the churches of the Chiangrai Association and their branch churches explaining the simple steps of the effort to congregations and leaders. In 1972 the Chiangrai churches reported only 22 baptisms! The question of whether such an effort would succeed in Chiangrai or not continued to haunt those concerned with E.I.D. throughout its first year.

As the first year moved along, the missionary-adviser decided to involve himself in a second closely-controlled effort based on E.I.D. principles nearer his home than the Chiangrai area which could be reached only after a full day's travel by vehicle and boat. He chose the area closest to Chiangmai where non-Christian villages could be reached among the hill Karen only two hours journey from the city. Using a team made up of students and available adult laymen and leaders, visits to receptive villages during an eight month period resulted in three villages responding to become Christian together and other villages of Christian members strengthened. It became apparent that E.I.D. could become an effective church growth method if the following principles were followed:

1. That volunteer, local church-based teams make periodic campaigns to nearby villages instead of sending salaried individual evangelists to work alone. The latter tend toward an individualistic approach which often fractures the social cohesion of the village by individual or single family conversions, whereas teams approach the village as a unit.

2. When multi-individual conversions result, a "power encounter" should occur in the life of the seeker in which he turns his back on the old religion and accepts the new Way in Christ.

3. When the converts have voluntarily destroyed the symbols of their old religion (cutting wrist strings), they should be incorporated into the new Faith through

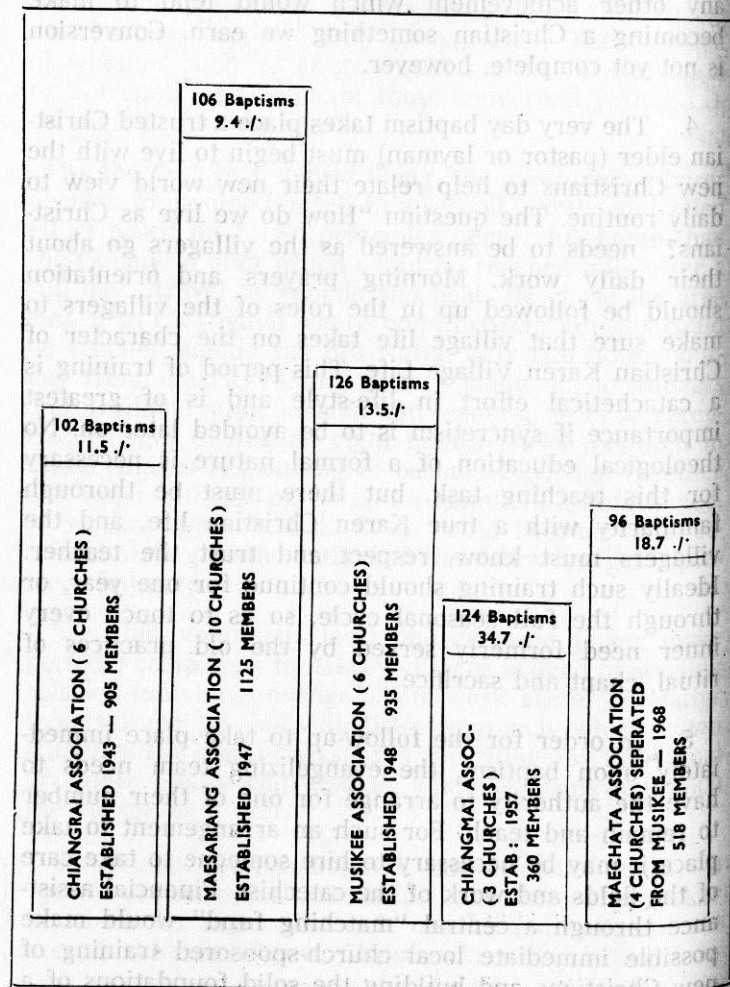
the Biblical symbol of baptism without requiring creedal competence, literacy, demonstrated Christian virtues or any other achievement which would tend to make becoming a Christian something we earn. Conversion is not yet complete, however.

4. The very day baptism takes place a trusted Christian elder (pastor or layman) must begin to live with the new Christians to help relate their new world view to daily routine. The question "How do we live as Christians?" needs to be answered as the villagers go about their daily work. Morning prayers and orientation should be followed up in the roles of the villagers to make sure that village life takes on the character of Christian Karen Village Life. This period of training is a catachetical effort in life-style and is of greatest importance if syncretism is to be avoided later on. No theological education of a formal nature is necessary for this teaching task, but there must be thorough familiarity with a true Karen Christian life, and the villagers must know, respect and trust the teacher. Ideally such training should continue for one year, or through the full seasonal cycle, so as to touch every inner need formerly served by the old practices of ritual, chant and sacrifice.

5. In order for the follow-up to take place immediately upon baptism, the evangelizing team needs to have the authority to arrange for one of their number to remain and teach. For such an arrangement to take place it may be necessary to hire someone to take care of the fields and work of the catechist. Financial assistance through a central "matching fund" would make possible immediate local church-sponsored training of new Christians and building the solid foundations of a new Christian world view upon which sound theological training and missionary education could take place.



## INCREASED BAPTISMS, FIVE KAREN ASSOCIATIONS FIGURE 2



### Problems

In achieving the foregoing principles certain obstacles were encountered and identified. First, there is a widespread feeling that only those who have had theological training can witness and teach new converts. Since in Thailand most trained men are still very young, the effective potential for church growth follow-up using older experienced men is greatly limited. Young leaders are not yet accepted in the culture as respected leaders regardless of their theological training.

Second, baptisms cannot be done by the unordained. This practice greatly limits church growth and frustrates the work of the Holy Spirit because many who wait for an ordained leader to come feel "exposed" to the wrath of certain spirits for their "turning" to God. If misfortunes pile up, the candidate may well revert to his pagan ways and never again be open to the Gospel. Some ordained men have accepted positions on the staff of institutions and cannot go out when requested because of their "duties".

Third, Church growth principles call for all leaders to be engaged in the task of church planting, even those involved in important administrative responsibilities. Young leaders watch those in administration for their standards and priorities. If evangelistic efforts claim important periods in the lives of the national church administrators and the missionaries, the young leaders of tomorrow will hold the evangelistic task of church planting in high priority. The converse is also true.

Finally, traditional "Bible School" training methods have ingrained false concepts and expectations regarding conversion, have brought into being professional churchmen and created "hired evangelists" — all foreign standards in the Karen culture. These problems have become so much a part of tradition, even within the national church and missionary thinking, that to suggest their erroneous nature is to risk being mis-

understood. Ethnological modifications can be brought about to revitalize the churches without hurting the present roles of leaders or radically changing training programmes. To bring this about needs the combined counsel of national leaders and missionaries in several Seminars on Indigenization.

### **Results of the first year E.I.D. programme**

In view of the above limitations and problems, it would be difficult to expect miracles in the first year of the E.I.D. effort. God's Grace, however, is not limited by programmes nor curtailed by problems. In its first year of the projected three-year period, baptisms were up 57% over the previous year, 560 as compared with 320! This in itself is significant. More important, however, is what happened in the individual Associations.

A separate association-centred support programme was maintained in the Maesariang area. The results of this traditional approach may thus be compared with results of (1) E.I.D. principles followed without guidance in the Musikee and Naechatah Associations, (2) the pilot E.I.D. programme in the Chiangrai Association, and (3) guided evangelistic team efforts in the Chiangrai area. Figure 2 compares numbers of baptisms and percentage of growth in the five associations (size of bars indicates the relative membership size of the different associations).

When reading the graph, keep in mind the following factors:

1. Reversions and deaths were not reported.
2. Population density is greatest in Maesariang area and lightest in the Chiangrai Association.
3. No comparison of expenditures for evangelists were reported and needs further inquiry.
4. E.I.D. had only one part-time salaried assistant plus travel funds during the year.

### **Summary of statistical results in perspective**

The graph is for the most part self-explanatory. However, some aspects of the scene are not clear unless seen in the perspective of what had gone before. From this the possibilities of the future of E.I.D. may be found.

1. The presence of strong evangelistic leadership in the Musikee Association through the years has accounted for vigorous growth there, even though the area is most remote from missionary or national leadership at the convention level. Rapid growth with its consequent emerging leadership led inevitably to the division of the Musikee Association in 1967 and the formation of the Maechatah (Musitraw) Association. Even without overt efforts to involve the two resultant associations in the E.I.D. programme because of the "pilot" limitation mentioned, the leaders in those areas set up prayer groups, preached on the missionary motivation and encouraged both individual and team efforts in evangelism.

2. The Chiangrai Association is also the 10th Pahk (District) of the Church of Christ in Thailand, a national Thai Protestant Church made up of several ethnic and denominational backgrounds. Since 1943 the 10th Pahk churches have depended upon annual evangelistic support from evangelists whose scale of salary is several times larger than that of the KBC. Expected contributions from 10th Pahk churches to the CCT Budget are set as per capita contributions (assessments) thus undercutting the appeal for a Biblical stewardship. (In annual meeting, however, April 1973, the 10th Pahk voted to encourage tithing in all its churches). Leaders also began a sustained, regular evangelistic effort at their own expense among Pwo Karens of the Prae Province lowlands, some 200 miles to the South of Chiangmai. The Chiangrai area is thus the scene of concerted evangelistic efforts from both KBC and CCT sources.



3. The Maesariang Association received outside support (missionary specifics) so that individual evangelists were hired in the basis. E.I.D. principles were not encouraged because of the disturbing support results to the evangelists employed. During 1973, the specifics cleared by KBC for use in "Evangelism in the Maesariang Area" totalled in excess of \$1,500. This is in excess of the total amount expended among all the other associations together from both CCT and KBC sources.

4. The large per-capita increase of the Chiangmai Association does not reflect a general revival of evangelistic zeal among the leadership there. Most of this growth can be traced either directly or indirectly to the efforts of a carefully guided single team effort by the missionary Adviser and his Assistant. Efforts in the future throughout the widely scattered churches of this association will depend largely on the direct contact with and mobilization of the local churches in the area. However, the guided effort illustrates what could happen if, instead of near total involvement in institutional programmes, missionaries could spend a portion of their time in direct church-planting using church growth principles.

#### **The Church planting Mother Church —Branch Church method**

Before missionaries arrived on the scene in Thailand, the Karen churches had already developed a unique church growth programme using an indigenous pattern of Mother Church — Branch Church evangelism. Usually all efforts were left in the hands of pastors or evangelists, however, and converts were asked to come to the mother church for worship at least once each month. Though little follow-up was given, some converts remained faithful. Frequently small collections were given for the use of the evangelist-pastor by the converts who formerly had been accustomed to presenting

such gifts to the Shaman in the Karen animistic culture. Converts usually came by family rather than individual baptisms. Christian families often had to move out of their non-Christian villages and build homes some distance removed from their larger kin and village. Once a month or so the pastor-evangelist would come and visit the new Christian home and continue efforts among the other villagers, some of whom openly resented his visits. In recent years group accessions have been more frequent resulting in greater social supports to the culture change with its beneficial results on daily life. The new Christian villagers deciding together to become Christian, have taken a learning stance together. There is more openness to change and less disharmony within the village during the period of change. A Christian elder layman can live in the village, teach the new Christians *How* to live the Christian Karen way and in only a few months establish habits which will hold the village together. Thus the pattern is changing from a one-by-one to a multi-individual response to Christ.

This model is basically a good one, but it has some weaknesses. First, the point of contact with a new village often contravenes existing patterns and fosters a "power crisis" between the evangelist and the village headman. If the village is not assembled to hear the Gospel, contact may after a time break the social solidarity of the village and pose a threat to the general welfare of the people in their animistic orientation. Long hikes to the mother church once a month also focuses the loyalty and interest of the new Christian away from his non-Christian kin rather than making him a witness to his people.

Second, leadership potential of the new Christian group is left untapped. The point of growth has been left unattended. Rather than train the apt layman in the Branch Church, the pastor-evangelist has insisted on remaining the only leader without whom the group will not act. Many evangelistic opportunities are lost

because of this fundamental error. Among the new Christians laymen who have leadership ability and maturity should be selected to receive personalized instruction and guided experience in evangelism, learning at the same time how to read. Later, personal study and occasional visits by the pastor-evangelist will suffice in helping the layman reach out to others of his own kin as well as conduct services for the new Christian group.

The pattern developed by George Patterson, a Conservative Baptist Missionary in Honduras, may be a model easily adaptable to the Karen Churches. In it mother Baptist churches reach out in team and individual efforts to raise up a group of new Christians and mobilize them to not only take care of themselves, but in turn reach out to their friends and relatives with the Gospel. This is called "Multiplying Churches through Extension Education Chains". In reality it is a marriage of church planting with Theological Education by Extension. It sees the homogeneous unit of society as the target of a church. In the case of a culture such as the Karen, it would be the village. The whole congregation (village) becomes the link in the chain of fellowship groups related to the Mother Church. When these links have grown in faith and practice, received some training in leadership, and reached out to reproduce themselves, they in turn become Mother Churches. Theological Education by Extension materials used in the Patterson plan are very simple and use the cartoon-style teaching technique. Extension centres are set up in which regular weekly discussion with students of village experiences entailed in practicing the teaching learned through the material studied that week. Each student is asked to start an "each-one-teach-one" effort with the TEE materials. In this way the effort becomes a fast-learning experience with great results in multiplying churches.

A full summary of Patterson's church planting effort through Extension Education Chains will not be given

here. The reader is encouraged to simply note the case with which such a plan could be adopted by the Karen Baptist Convention in a true Karen cultural style.

Careful use of the Evangelism-in-Depth lay thrust in team campaigns which provide the face-to-face group experience needed to appeal for group decisions may simply be the first step of a continually developing and changing opportunity for church growth among the Karens in Thailand. It was a promising first step in its first year. What happens to it during 1974 and 1975 depend very largely on the willingness of the Convention leadership to allow a truly authentic Karen development of the church through the village cultural dynamics. The statistics would seem to indicate that willingness to free the local church to make its own decisions in evangelistic outreach campaigns and follow-up, including the right to baptize and serve Holy Communion, could be the beginning of a sweeping Christian movement which could go far in reaching the 2,000,000 Karens yet without Christ.