

Early Church Planting in Central Thailand

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When missionaries moved into Central Thailand in the first half of the fifties with a view to preaching the Gospel and thus getting local churches started, those eight counties were virgin territory, a real pioneer area. There was nearly complete ignorance about God, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation. To begin with the Lord's servants had no language, were unfamiliar with the culture, knew no one and were known by no one. If the Gospel was to be preached and people exhorted to commit themselves to a God and Deliverer who was a stranger to them, contact of a strong, enduring character must be made with people. But most people held foreigners with considerable suspicion, doubting their motives, and misunderstanding their message. For they were not able to distinguish between the true, living God who is called Jehovah, and the numerous local gods whose names were displayed above the many local shrines, and were supposed to hold lordship over the very land on which their houses were built, and over their fields.

How was contact to be made and developed to the point where it could bear the strain of asking people to forsake their gods and their past through realising their uselessness, and turn to commit themselves and their future to the Lord Jesus Christ, who seemed to be the whites' God? Leprosy work soon proved to be the effective means of making contact with many people. As leprosy work required a long period of time, in fact years, before the disease was overcome, there thus was sufficient time in which to develop that contact past the superficial stage until contact was made with the real person hidden inside. In many cases society had so ill-treated leprosy sufferers psychologically that they had lost all trust in their fellow human beings, and had turned in upon themselves. Like a tortoise in a hostile, threatening world, they had withdrawn their heads into their own shells, or like a hedgehog under threat, they had curled up with only the spikes facing out the way. In some cases the damage has been so great that two years of trying to make contact have been necessary before that person starts to pop the head out or unfurl towards selected fellow human beings. Then they begin to trust a few of their fellow human beings and believe what they have to say.

Leprosy Work and Church Planting in Uthai

The county of Uthai with so many bad cases of untreated leprosy turned out to be the most fruitful county in Central Thailand for the Kingdom of God. In the mid-fifties work got started in this large western county which stretched seventy miles east to west, and fifty miles north to south in the far western sector. Much of it was thick with jungle and beautified by seventy-two mountains, some rising to nearly six thousand feet. There was no access to the county by either road or rail. The internal roads were just dirt which was mud in the wet season, and dust in the dry; to be avoided if at all possible. The dirt footpaths through the fields linking up the villages were to be preferred, especially in the days of the bicycle, then the small motorbike. It did not look to be very promising territory for church planting, nor did it look to be a strategic centre out of which the Gospel would go to other places. In fact, instead of being central, it was out on a hidden limb. Yet looking back over thirty years, it turned out to be a fertile branch spiritually.

A leprosy clinic was started on the outskirts of the county town, again not centrally placed geographically, for it was just inside the eastern county border, on the edge of the river, the chief line of communication then. Bit by bit people heard via gossip that strange foreigners were here treating leprosy sufferers with modern medicine, instead of the more familiar incantations to the spirits. A few of the bolder types ventured into society and made the fearsome journey to the primitive clinic, mere bamboo poles and thatched roof, to see what could be done for them. The timorous ones took as much as two years in which to pluck up courage to venture out and seek the foreigner for modern medicine.

Right from the first day, ministry to both the physical and spiritual needs of patients was made. People were examined, medicines dispensed and sores treated in a loving, kind way, accompanied with gentleness of voice. This was so different from the previous experiences of these benighted people when they were treated roughly and harshly spoken to in a dictatorial manner. The day started with a hymn of worship, a proclamation of Good News from God, and a prayer for God's help. The Gospel was not preached in beautiful language; on the contrary every rule of grammar was probably unwittingly broken, and the tones grated on the ear, but it was preached in love. And love is

able to cross all language barriers. Later in the morning a period of Bible teaching was given. Also there was the steady gossiping of the Gospel as the nurse treated the sores, touching the skin of people who had never felt the touch of a human hand for years. The handling of those sores was a most eloquent language conveying meaning easy to be understood. The nurse talked to them about their health, their anxieties and concerns, about their family, their fields and farm animals. And the clinic evangelist sat beside the waiting patient with open Bible, and asked them about their home situation, thus getting to know them and their situation, and showing a concern for every aspect of their lives. All this was new and strange to the patients. They had not been used to people showing an interest and concern in them personally.

Hearts began to open and interest arise, so that they took note of what was being said concerning the Good News from God who was inviting them to come to Him, promising not to throw them away like trash, as their fellow humans did. Great was the thrill to stand before these helpless people covered in smelly sores, fingers missing and noses receding, and proclaim the message of Grace, knowing that God Himself was proffering His only Son to them who had been despised and rejected by human society. God had mercy on both His servants and hearers and gave believing hearts in the early stages. Thus a little group of Christians, all suffering from leprosy, came into being. A beach-head had been made for the Gospel. From now on the Gospel was going to spread out through the county and triumph over man-made ways of merit-making.

Baptisms were held in the nearby river and thus a visible church was formed. One of those baptised on that first day was Mr Jer, a Chinese charcoal merchant. His brother, Mac, was to be baptised, but not he. Nevertheless, he dashed down the bank and into the water, asking to be baptised too. Hesitatingly, those officiating complied, wondering if it was right to do so, for he had not been to any preparation classes. Thirty years of time have proved that it was right. But, as for his brother Mac, he prospered financially over the years and became a businessman, throwing the Lord away, so much so that when his Christian mother died he hired sixty-five priests to perform merit-making ceremonies for her at a cost of thirty thousand baht, the price of a decent middle class house.

Among those early leprosy patients in Uthai there was a harvest ready for reaping; and it was reaped despite inadequacies in language and knowledge of culture. Soon a group was organised into a local church. One member loaned a plot of land, and another member sold a field to raise money to buy the materials, and the church's place of worship went up to the glory of God's grace. A new and holy society had been formed. Once more these deprived people were inter-relating, and on a much higher level for they were now related to God, who through His Spirit had taken up residence in them individually and as a group. A new type of temple made of human beings was now present in a country filled with hundreds of man-made temples dedicated to local gods.

These new leprosy Christians needed teaching to build them up and help them function as active Christians. Apart from regular Bible teaching at the monthly clinics, training classes were held weekly to equip them and give them practice in personal work, leading meetings, preaching and Sunday School teaching. From the very beginning the Christians were expected to take part in the worship service, in leading, praying and preaching, and as things advanced to go and preach in other emerging groups.

They also bore witness to their Saviour. Fingerless and toeless, Mr Thongyou was a good example. He was in very poor health and had expected to die, so had disposed of his land to his policeman brother, who squandered it on whisky. Through care and treatment death was beaten off, and Mr Thongyou was converted becoming a man full of life. He taught himself to read and started to witness, first to his own relatives, even to the extent of following his brother-in-law ploughing the fields. His sister and brother-in-law were converted and a worship service started in their house for non-leprosy people. Thus through leprosy sufferers contact was made with 'well' people.

By the end of the fifties a programme of Short Term Bible Schools was introduced. This gave Christians an opportunity to study in greater depth one book of the Bible, one doctrine and a practical subject such as personal work, how to lead a worship service, how to preach. They got practice as well as theory. The leprosy Christians took these week-long courses for several years until replaced by another programme of systematic teaching.

By the beginning of the sixties Uthai Sala Church¹ was big enough and mature enough to have elders. A course of study was given on eldership. Then the congregation chose their first elders. Thus the church soon learned to be self-governing under the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ.

As the leprosy work grew and spread both in Uthai county and the rest of Central Thailand, so the number of Christians steadily grew. It was soon realised that scattered and often isolated leprosy Christians needed more

1. A *sala* is a simple shelter, usually just posts, a thatch roof and open sides. Because the leprosy clinics were held in such simple structures, the emerging leprosy church was called the Sala Church.

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fellowship than could be provided for in the monthly services, where there may be only three or four present. So the Uthai Sala Church organised a conference which grew to be an annual event run by an elected organising committee. As the conference lasted for three or four days and people came from long distances, it was necessary to build primitive sleeping accommodation and dining shelter. So people went into the surrounding fields to gather straw and pieces of wood with which to build the booths. Bamboo was split and made into tables and benches. A simple kitchen was built as well as a special fireplace on which to cook rice for two hundred people. In the meeting hall (shelter) itself people just sat on the floor, as they would in their own homes. Well-known national preachers were invited to come and address these keen people, three or four times per day for three days. Just meeting together as a Christian group of two hundred or more people to share blessings and exhorting one another to endure patiently the subtle persecution, was a great blessing in itself to these people. They never noticed the primitive conditions of sleeping rough. To them it was like heaven, and they talked away into the night. These annual meetings carried on for nearly twenty years until the Association of Sala Churches and the Association of Well Churches amalgamated, and the venue for the annual conference was moved to the permanent Hang Nam Conference Centre where it was no longer necessary to go into the fields to gather straw for sleeping booths.

With responsibility for looking after the affairs of the church being gradually handed over to the Christians from the very beginning, several of the members felt the need for further training. There was no Bible school in Central Thailand, so these men had to go over to North East Thailand where the Christian and Missionary Alliance had opened a Bible School specifically for those suffering from leprosy, and called it Maranatha. Some did the year's course, such as Mr Jer the charcoal merchant, and Mr Samut the farmer. But several stayed for the full four-year course, such as Mr Thongyou, Mr Boonmee and Miss Sawang. All these Christians were 'mature students', that is mature in years, being in their thirties or early forties, but not mature academically. None of them had more than four years of poor primary schooling. Mr Thongyou did not even have that; he had had to teach himself to read, and harder still, to learn to write with hands which were minus all thumbs and fingers. He overcame the latter difficulty by inserting his pen under a rubber band made from lorry rubber inner tubing, placed over the palm of the hand.

Mr Thongyou returned to Uthai to become the pastor of a small group of scattered Christians in the Sawang area, twenty miles northwest of Uthai town. His feet were in poor shape, having no toes, so were in danger of breaking into ulcers if used too much. So there was need of suitable transport to visit his scattered flock. A bicycle was bought and fitted with back-pedal brake and adhering pads fixed to the handle bars. Mr Thongyou had never ridden a bicycle in his life. He was now forty-five and also fingerless. So much motivation and perseverance was needed to learn to ride a bicycle over unpaved roads, and along paths on embankments between the fields connecting the villages. He did learn, thanks to drive coming from the Grace of God within his heart. The local church was too small to support him, but other small churches all over Central Thailand each took on a share in this responsibility. Also a Danish agricultural expert trained him up to rear cockerels to supplement his living. These were fine birds reaching seven pounds in weight, so easy to sell to the Chinese restaurants. They were far superior to anything else reared locally. But they became a liability. Mr Thongyou had to sleep with his cockerels to protect them from thieves. In the end he had to stop rearing cockerels for it was too dangerous. Thieves could have shot him in order to steal these desirable birds. Mr Thongyou still had two other modes of self-support. Even though he had no fingers he learned how to cultivate a kitchen garden to supplement his diet, bringing better balance and thus propagating better diet by example. The Rehabilitation Centre in the Leprosy Wing of Manorom Christian Hospital taught him how to make teak furniture and adapted carpentry tools to be suitable for his fingerless hands.

Gradually more leprosy clinics were opened in Uthai County, gradually moving westward as the wooded territory opened up. Wherever clinics were opened small groups of leprosy believers arose, and services were organised, firstly on a monthly basis. Then as Christians became more capable these services became fortnightly, then weekly. To begin with travel was by bicycle. As the roads improved and the Japanese introduced 50 and 90 cc lightweight motorbikes, the teams became mechanised and thus were able to cover a larger area, even doing as much as a hundred mile trip in a day over roads shaped like the surface of the sea in a swell. Now preachers were able to do two or three services in different places each Sunday, taking a leprosy Christian along to share in the ministry. Care had to be taken that feet without feeling did not get burnt on the exhaust or get into the back wheel.

With improved communication came the opening up of the vast area of Western Uthai to new settlers in search of more fertile and better watered land. The large trees, some enormous in size, were felled by logging firms and carted the fifty miles to the river at Uthai town where they were floated down to Bangkok. The scores of logging lorries turned the dirt roads into dust tracks with a foot of powder-like dust as fine as flour. It was like riding through a foot of fine dry snow. The jungle was steadily pushed back and the burnt stump-ridden land turned into fields in which to grow maize, beans and peanuts for the Japanese market. The Government portioned out land to settlers, twenty acres

per person. Among the many settlers moving west were several leprosy Christians. One of these was Mr Prasert who farmed impoverished land in Dong Yen (cool woods) village three miles from Uthai town. A little worship service was held in his house until he moved west. Mr Prasert and his family and his brother's family all moved thirty miles west in search of better farming land and settled in Edang just outside a Karen tribal village in front of the big mountain. Then came the long strenuous task of converting the jungle into fields. At that time he was only a nominal Christian. But when his brother and sister-in-law died of the common 'jungle fever', a form of malaria, and he himself was seriously ill, he was jolted into life. What had been sown in his heart started to spring up. He was either converted or revived and became an active Christian holding worship services in his house, and witnessing to the greatness of God's saving acts. People were converted, even one or two from the Karen village. Leprosy Christians in eastern Uthai heard about the better soil and more adequate rainfall so they ventured out west too and joined Mr Prasert. Thus a Christian community was formed as a result of this leprosy patient. Over the years the community has grown and carried on an effective witness in other areas and other groups of Christians have arisen.

Mr Boonmee had returned from Maranatha Bible School and settled in his own village of Lao speakers, but farming was hard and harvests uncertain, only two decent harvests in five years, so he moved to join Mr Prasert at what had now become known as Larn Sak, a sub-county. There he started dry farming which the Lord blessed with good harvests, serving the Lord on Sunday. He was elected to the committee of the Association of Central Thailand Churches, and for several years was the chairman.

Mr Prasert was a musical man, both able to play traditional type instruments and to write scripts for Christian musical plays. Others also were able to play and sing. A drama group was formed to be used as an evangelistic instrument to proclaim and portray the Gospel in play, song and speech. This was a most acceptable mode of conveying truth, for it was culturally in keeping with what the people were used to. Rural people don't read newspapers. (There are none on sale). Instead the news is versified and set to tunes calypso fashion, and sung at fairs and other gatherings. Mr Prasert used this conventional method to good effect. The group grew in size and ability and got invited all over Central Thailand to help in evangelistic campaigns. And one month each year the drama group has gone round the villages in the Larn Sak district evangelising. Now Mr Boonmee and Mr Thongchai, one of the first leprosy Christians in Central Thailand, are the full-time pastors in the Larn Sak district.

Uthai was a fruitful field for reaping and establishing small rural churches through the ministry at the Leprosy clinics and in the homes of believers. The numbers of groups having a worship service grew to over thirty. The need for preachers grew too. In order to meet this need the annual Short term Bible Schools were turned into fortnightly training sessions. Most of the churches sent along a leader or two to these sessions held from Wednesday until Thursday. During these sessions they had both theory and plenty of practice, especially in preaching. The congregation of leaders were the adjudicators of the sermons. After each sermon they passed their critical comments on to the preacher. Some of the leaders who had been to Maranatha also had a share in the teaching and counselling of these fortnightly sessions.

These training courses still did not fully meet the needs of the leaders and local churches. Nearly all the leaders never did any private study from one fortnightly session to the next. They went home promising themselves some daily study, but it never materialised. Even those having a share in the teaching at the training sessions failed to do any study. A new system was thought up and a pioneer group launched in Uthai for the Leprosy Christians who were leaders. It was eventually called the Home Bible Seminary. Each leader participating was given a month's supply of programmes of study on the Bible and was expected to do one hour's study at home each day. Once a week a tutor paid a visit, not to teach but rather to motivate and help to solve problems encountered during the week. The studies were so geared that the student was able to use them at the weekend for his teaching of the local believers. This further motivated him and he could see that the daily studies were relevant to the daily needs of those under his care. One day a month all those in the Uthai County doing the course met together to sharpen one another up, exchange experiences and encourage one another. And every year there is a week's residential course which emphasises practice and giving out. With this scheme now into its fifth year there is no need for Christian leaders with both family responsibilities and local church responsibilities to go away to Bible School. They get training on the job instead.

As the years have passed by so the families of the early Leprosy Christians have grown up, and free from leprosy too. Several of them have gone to either Bible School or Theological College and have returned to be the pastors and Bible teachers in their area. Uthai Town Church has grown to over fifty strong, and so has the place of worship. It is no longer just a corrugated roof shelter resting on poles, but is a big two-storey brick and concrete building with facilities for conferences and weekend seminars and accommodation for Christians in other areas coming for Short Term Residential Bible Schools.

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Not only has the building changed, but also the nature of the membership. No longer are leprosy Christians in the majority. In fact they are fast becoming a small minority as the membership grows. Leprosy work has been a good bridge or beach head into the community as a whole. It gave the first essential points of contact with people by which the work of Church planting could get started, then spread into the much larger but more resistant community of so-called 'well' people.

The Stigma of Leprosy and Church Planting

The story of Church Planting through Leprosy work in County Uthai is much brighter than in most other counties. Out of the eight counties of Central Thailand half the Christians are in the single county of Uthai, yet just as effective a leprosy work is carried on in the seven other counties, so there is contact made. Just over the border from Uthai there is the sub-county of Watsing where Leprosy work has been carried on for over thirty years. Two clinics were opened and now there are five or six points of dispensing medicines. To begin with the work looked promising church-wise. Early on two leprosy sufferers were converted and were baptised at the opening ceremony of the Manorom Christian Hospital in August 1956. These two are now in full-time service but outside their county of birth; one, Mr Thongchai, whom we have mentioned is a pastor in Larn Sak, Uthai. Mr Sawaeng, a school teacher, is a Bible teacher in Northeast Thailand. But no one from either of these extended families has become a Christian, even though much witness and intercession has been made.

One of the clinics is out in the village of Nongjik. It was held in the grounds of Mr Sawaeng's mother-in-law. Things started well. Within two years over twenty people met for worship on Sunday and eighteen were baptised. It was hoped that these eighteen would give access to many homes and contact with many people. Actually there was access and contact but nothing came of it. Bit by bit the members moved away or died, so the group dwindled to four or five. And no new life was added. This group of eighteen leprosy sufferers becoming Christian and meeting together for worship in a single village was very conspicuous. The people throughout Watsing knew of them and came to the conclusion that Christianity was for those with leprosy. Also there was the big hurdle of stigma attached to leprosy. A group of eighteen disfigured people meeting together was off-putting rather than attracting. Well people were unwilling to join such a group, and they closed their minds to Christ, saying to themselves, He is the Saviour of leprosy sufferers not well people. But it was not all negative. Mr Laiad faithfully prayed for his own family and village. He visited every home in the village many times. He attended training classes over in Uthai to better equip himself. His wife and daughter made professions of faith, but these turned out to be mere words for man's ears. No contact had been made with the living God through Christ. Fruit did come, however, in the next village. Mr Laiad spoke to a jobbing carpenter farmer, Mr Put, about Christ. This man was prepared of the Lord; he believed and has grown steadily. His work has prospered so that he is now a building contractor. He has moved into the town of Watsing and become the leader of a group of believers. He, in turn, on his visits to an older brother in another village, bore witness to a young man just out of monkhood. This man was converted, went to Bible School for four years, married the daughter of a pastor, and returned. Now he is serving the Lord full-time in Watsing where they are well on the way to getting a town church started which will be the centre for radiating the gospel out to the rest of the sub-county with its forty-three thousand people.

Down in the area round Nong Saeng village things seemed to backfire, for instead of the group of Leprosy 'Christians' being an asset in evangelism and church planting, they became a liability. Because of the high incidence rate of leprosy in that area of six villages, a clinic was opened in Nongjik, and the simple building was used for worship services on Sundays, and for the periodic Short Term Bible School. Instead of 'Christians' growing into being responsible citizens who were light and salt, a beggar mentality set in which has persisted for years. Instead of being active doers they have been like two-week old birds in a nest, beaks wide open to receive everything mother and father can bring to them, and fighting among themselves to get the biggest 'worm'.

All is not dark in this county of Chainat, for up in the northern sub-county of Manorom there is the Leprosy Wing at the Christian Hospital. This wing has had a very important role to play in church planting throughout Central Thailand, and even much further afield. It has been the centre from which the gospel has spread out through the many outpatients at the weekly Thursday clinics, through inpatients going back home after treatment, Bible teaching and reviving of heart because of good fellowship, and through the national staff who are also leprosy sufferers going out to minister in many counties. And it has been the centre to which people have come, being both a medical and spiritual centre which gave a longish period of residence for those receiving reconstructive surgery, being stabilised to modern drugs, and attending the rehabilitation centre where they learned a suitable trade.

During these protracted periods lasting six months or more there was an opportunity to be exposed to Gospel preaching, good systematic Bible teaching and spiritual fellowship. Each day started with a period of worship and devotional message before breakfast. On Sundays there were longer periods of Bible teaching. Many did Bible correspondence courses and listened to teaching tapes in bed. As the work developed an evening Bible school of two hours per week was opened where the leprosy Christians were taught how to study the Bible for themselves using modern systematic methods. An attempt was made to sharpen their faculties so that they read with purpose, were able to observe and take note of more and more, then beat out the meaning of the passage being studied according to good rules of interpretation, then to think of ways in which to apply what had been learnt to their own lives, to their own local church and in society around. All this was necessary because there are hardly any books explaining the Bible. Having been taught a system and been given plenty of opportunity to delve for themselves, their interest and ability increased. And more important still they took what they had learned home, along with the sharpened faculties, and applied it in their own church situation, thus many more people benefitted, and the local church had better equipped leaders.

Once the rehabilitation centre and the hostel were opened providing accommodation and better meeting facilities it was possible to conduct month-long Residential Bible Schools attended by about sixteen leprosy Christians at a time. These were aimed at equipping existing church leaders. As people improved in health and were able to work more or less full time it was not so easy for them to attend a month's course. So weekend seminars were used instead and were attended by as many as fifty leprosy Christians at a time.

The numbers of leprosy Christians employed by the Leprosy Wing increased as the work developed. And the Christians were organised into a church called the Manorom Sala Church. They had their own elected elders, who did much of the teaching on Sundays, proclaimed the Gospel at the Thursday clinics, conducted the morning devotional talks on the wards, and were supply preachers for several other churches.

Music has always played an important role in Christianity, for we are called on to praise the Lord in song and on various instruments, and to teach one another in psalms and spiritual songs. The Leprosy Wing has been a most creative place in music. Several members of the national staff, plus one or two long-stay patients wrote hymns which are now included in several hymn books, are sung all over the country, and are to be heard on the radio. A little orchestra of Thai instruments was formed for playing at Sunday services and to be used when recording hymns for use in other places and for the disseminating of new hymns, so that the same tune was known throughout the country. Apart from this, two or three skilled instrumentalists ran training classes to pass on their skills to young people. Now some leprosy Christians are helping in the compiling of a fully fledged national hymnbook with an adequate number of hymns for all occasions and having tunes which are composed locally to fit the tonal Thai language. Thus the church throughout the country is being greatly benefitted.

The church both in Manorom and throughout Central Thailand has grown and matured spiritually. Now there is no need to have two churches: a well church and a sala church. They have amalgamated both at local level and at field level. The two Associations of Church joined to become the Association of Sampan Churches. Now both Leprosy and Well Christians worship together and both Leprosy and Well Christians sit together on the organising committees. Of course, by now these so-called leprosy Christians should be classed as 'well' for they are healed and free of the disease; some of them just bear the scars of leprosy, which to the outsider may be a bit off-putting, but this is counteracted by the beauty of spirituality and the wise contribution they have to make. Many of them can give wise, mature counsel. They have learned and developed spiritually through the many trials they have patiently and triumphantly endured, so through God's grace they stand head and shoulders above the rest in the spiritual realm.