

## A CHALLENGE TO DEVELOP THE THAI CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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Protestant mission in Thailand was established in the nineteenth century. The first Protestant missionary entered Thailand in 1828. Living in a strong Buddhist kingdom, the Thais, also called Siamese, have been and are very resistant to the gospel. The evangelization of the Siamese started with John Taylor Jones' translation of the Siamese New Testament, which was completed in 1839 and lacked Hebrews and Revelation. The first translation of the Bible was followed by a literature ministry. The city of Bangkok was the main target for evangelization. Four Chinese believers were baptized by Jones. These four believers, along with some other missionaries, started the first Chinese church in 1837. Today, this church is called Maitri Chit Church (Smith 1982:2).

In general, the work of missionaries has always been more effective and fruitful in many parts of the country other than Bangkok. As far as church growth is concerned, the north east and other provinces of the country experience more growth. Being a primarily Buddhist country, the Protestant Christian percentage is less than one percent despite its one and a half century of mission work. Christianity is looked at as a western religion. Most Christian congregations are still small. A church with three hundred members is considered a large church.

### 1. Leadership Development in the Thai Church

Throughout the history of the Thai church, leadership development has been a great challenge. Pioneer missionaries began working in

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Thailand during the period of 1828-1858. With their effort came a period of Christian expansion, and this was followed by a period of decline during World War II.

During the period of restoration (1946-1980), the Thai church, with the increase of national leaders and the inflow of missionaries, expanded entering every region of the country. No doubt, this period of growth and expansion resulted from the joint effort of both national leaders and overseas missionaries. However, it was a time of confusion as far as leadership development was concerned. The overseas missionaries came to Thailand with their own curriculum, styles and methods. They brought staff trained to work only in their home context. At the same time, Thai Christian leaders were becoming increasingly aggressive in their efforts to reach their people and train them. Since the beginning of its history, the Thai church has experienced this type of critical confusion and disunity in the area of leadership. As Samuel I. Kim declares, "The basic and most difficult problem of the church of Thailand is leadership training" (1980:143). Kim believes that one of the failures of the church in Thailand is its lack of theological education. There have been theological institutions in Thailand since the early 1900s. Unfortunately, most of them have failed to produce successful leaders in the Thai context. Many of their students lack respect for Thai leadership traits such as age, seniority, politeness, and so on. Achan Wichan expresses his experience of disrespect saying that whenever he makes a trip to Chiang Mai, the capital city of North Thailand, and visits the seminary campus, the students pass him or watch him without showing any respect in the Thai style of *wai*. The students ignore and are indifferent to their own church leaders (Kim 1980:147).

Today, there are many theological colleges and seminaries in Thailand. Programs such as Bible study groups, leaders meetings, training sessions during revival meetings, seminars, apprenticeships and internships for leadership development are conducted in local churches and mission facilities. However, many of these programs do not meet the needs of the leaders. Most of the training programs have their own values and agendas in some way or another. The basic needs of the church's ministry remain to be addressed. Some of the most important issues are the following:

First, the Thai church lacks contextualized leadership development. It inherited its concept of leadership and its leadership development from foreign churches. Most of its resources are from other countries. Raymond William Merry writes,

Doing research in the library of Thailand's largest university (Ramkhamhaeng) revealed that most of the books available in the areas of leadership are in English from western countries or they are translations from books published in these countries (1997:37).

This imported curriculum and imported formal training in the institutions does not necessarily produce effective leaders for Thai churches. Jeng says that he did not see even a single book written by a Thai dealing specifically with leadership training (1982:ix). The present non-residential, informal programs such as seminars, workshops, Theological Education by Extension and so on are not quite acceptable, as they are duplicates of imported materials.

Second, theological institutions have not met the need to develop Thai leadership values in their training processes. In the Thai culture, leadership is ascribed. The personal integrity of a leader, his or her family life, age and experience should be the most important aspects of a leader. Unfortunately, most theological institutions are academically oriented or focused on ministry and they fail to deal with the personal values of a leader in his or her context.

Third, the Thai church fails to develop lay leadership. Developing lay leadership might be a very effective strategy for building the Thai church. Through lay leadership those who are already recognized as leaders can be trained in an appropriate way so that they can minister effectively and mentor other emerging leaders. The existing leadership development programs in the churches do not focus on effective leadership development. The Thai church leadership is very much challenged by the secular environment and the non-Christian spiritual environment. The city of Bangkok, being the capital of the kingdom of Thailand, has great influence in all aspects of their lives. The city is full of idols and spirit houses. There is a very strong evidence that the city is dominated by demonic powers. Foreigners, especially those who lack experience with demonic powers, have difficulty understanding the situation in Bangkok. I intend to write this article with special reference to the city of Bangkok to give us the central idea of Thai leadership in Thailand.

## 2. The Genesis of Leadership Development Programs in the Thai Church

Several missionary organizations recognized the need for the Christian leadership development in the churches. Consequently, several steps were taken to develop leaders. The 1970s were a landmark time for

ministry development in Bangkok. Many changes were started in this period. The Vietnam War ended and Communism took over the adjacent countries of Thailand. The US troops left Thailand, and Thailand became a haven for refugees, who flooded in. There was a feeling of insecurity and spiritual emptiness in the lives of the people of Thailand. People were more open to the gospel and more responsive to it for awhile. There was also an increasing development of nationalism. In church related ministries there was evidence of this nationalism with more Thai leaders emerging and taking part in the outreach.

The leadership development began with a church growth seminar held in 1970. From that time on there was more awareness of church growth principles and more stress placed on field strategy, goal setting and leadership development. Also, there was a tremendous increase of national workers in the church and an increase of involvement in national Christian joint programs. It was the right time to train leaders to start indigenous programs.

In 1971 the Bangkok Bible College (now the Bangkok Bible College and Seminary) was established under the leadership of Breidenthal (Scott 1991:5). Like this seminary and other Christian institutions are becoming the foundation for leadership development. They produced several graduates who have served not only in Bangkok but also in other parts of Thailand in different areas of leadership.

Missionary organizations are working with other institutions in partnership to train people for leadership and ministry development. Usually the programs are conducted by someone from outside the country; and sometimes the programs are led in other countries. However, several of them lack to teach the need for Thai leadership development.

### 3. Local Church Leadership Development

Presently some churches regularly organize non-formal leadership development programs for evangelism and outreach for their own local churches. In addition to these programs, the churches organize joint meetings once a year dealing with leadership in evangelism and outreach. The small group leadership training is one of their most appropriate programs. However, most of these programs are organized by outsiders, and, consequently they are duplicates of other culture's materials.

Like in other churches in Bangkok, in the history of the Thai church leadership development has always been a challenge. One of the main problems is that most of the programs implemented in the churches are

foreign or imported rather than creatively designed for Thai context. These programs have not brought total failure, but neither have they brought great success. Regarding leadership development in the churches, it is necessary to evaluate the following areas.

#### 4. The Rapid Changing Cultural Context

Unfortunately, the environment of Thailand, particularly Bangkok, is changing so rapidly that these stages and methods designed by outsiders are no longer relevant. In 1996, one of the major Bangkok newspapers reported that about one thousand people move to Bangkok everyday to get jobs, to do business, or to study. Most of the influential Thai people are living in Bangkok. The Isaan people from the northeast and the Malays from the south also influxed into the city in great numbers. Since the last decade Bangkok has become one of the main centers of East Asia and one of the world's business centers. Modernization and the development of technology have greatly changed the lifestyle and leadership styles of Bangkokians. In this changing situation, the church has to reevaluate its leadership development strategy.

#### 5. Missionary Involvement in the Local Churches

Most missionaries move to a new location after three or four years in an area, and they often are not sure what they have accomplished during their time at a certain place. The programs that they try to implement are sometimes confusing for the young churches with young leaders. I came to realize this problem when I was invited to a meeting of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) leaders and churches in Bangkok in 1992. I was the only missionary there who represented a small church. They did not recognize that I was a foreigner because I look Thai in my appearance. During the meeting, they discussed the aspects of foreign missionaries' ministries that they do not appreciate. At last they said, "Who will correct them?" This was an open question. A common mistake of missionaries is the failure to listen to the local leaders. Missionaries need not teach everything; rather, they need to learn from the locals in some areas (Erion 1997:4).

### 7. Traditional belief about Leadership Development for Ministry

Traditionally, it is accepted that graduates from theological institutions are qualified leaders. Most leaders are trained through theological institutions, and they do well as leaders. However, most of the institutions have been initiated by missionaries and do not provide relevant materials for the Thai context. The missionaries bring their own staff and materials, which they translate or modify. The material becomes mere duplicated material from other contexts. Unfortunately, this system does not necessarily develop the Thai values of leadership that produce effective leaders in the Thai context. Institutions must begin producing their own materials relevant to their context and provide qualified Thai teachers and contextually aware teachers to train leaders. Contextualized leadership development is a great challenge; but contextualized leadership is necessary because leadership programs can be effective only when they are relevant to their context. In this section, we are considering the present situation in Bangkok, which is different from the situations in other parts of the country.

In the past, the leadership programs from outside might have had a tremendous impact on the lives of individuals and on the churches. However, in the changing environment, it is necessary for missionaries to make a paradigm shift in their leadership approach. One should anticipate that Bangkok and other cities in the kingdom will continue to change. Bangkok has experienced change not only as a result of internal cultural influence, but also as a result of international trade and commerce. It is favorably located for international trade and commerce, especially for East Asian countries, which consequently have a tremendous impact on the society. The urban cities in Thailand will continue to require different and evolving leadership styles. Ministry may also continue to change.

In this section I dealt with the historical background of the church showing historical aspects of the church that have had a great influence on the development of leaders. Studies on leadership have revealed that leadership styles vary from culture to culture. Some of these leadership values coincide with the basic core of biblical truth that has to be adhered to in developing principles for Christian leadership.

Unfortunately, according to most research on leadership development programs for Thai churches, the programs have not yet been designed in such a way to be relevant for Thailand's cultural context. The challenge is to design a program for leadership development

to train emerging leaders to meet the needs of the churches. It is true that leadership development finds its relevance in its context; however, churches also need to apply biblical principles to leadership training programs as they practice the ministry relevant to their changing environment. The main question is whether or not churches have relevant Christian leadership development programs for their young leaders. In his 1997 annual report at the OMF Thailand Church Planting Conference, Robert Erion challenged the missionaries saying,

Strategies, visions, and ministries that relate more closely to the associations need to be worked through and we need to listen to the existing church even more in the days to come. Leadership training and developing of national pastors, elders, deacons and leaders is an open door before us, yet we need credibility to be able to offer the church development in this area (1997:4).

This is an urgent challenge for cross-cultural trainers and missionaries as well. We need teamwork and partnership to achieve our common goal of developing leaders. Both churches and theological institutions need to evaluate their leadership development programs in the midst of the contemporary changes.

## 8. Needs for Leadership Development in the Thai Church

One of the most painful experiences of the churches in Thailand is the failure to develop effective leaders. These problems are the result of changes in life, changes in culture and changes in environment affecting the ministries of the church. The church needs to change its ministry and leadership approach, basing them on biblical principles and values to meet the challenges. Some of the main contemporary challenges are as follows:

### 8.1 Need for Homegrown Leaders

A leader who is responsible for a specific group of people always influences people through character, integrity, commitment, and sacrifice. J. Robert Clinton rightly said, "A leader is...a person with God-given capacity and with God-given responsibility to influence a specific group of God's people toward God's purpose for the group" (1988:197). This definition has validity in most cultures including the Thai culture, and it can be seen in scripture as well. Jesus gave a practical test to Phillip

when he saw people coming towards them and said, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (John 6:5). Phillip was a local person of Bethsaida (John 1:44). Jesus asked Phillip, who knew the situation better than the other disciples in that context, because he was a local person. Of course, Jesus knew what he should do, but he tested Phillip (6:6). Jesus did not expect Phillip to provide food for those people, but he encouraged him to participate as an emerging leader. God always selected leaders in the appropriate context. The apostles followed the same principle and appointed local leaders and worked with them (Priest 1994:186-87).

In his book *Effective Church Leadership*, Kennon L. Callahan mentions that when leaders develop in a suitable environment, they develop especially relevant values in their leadership (1990:153-75). A suitable environment in the Thai context includes objectives, continuity, competence and local development. First, Thai people learn leadership best in a leadership environment of objectives, not activity. The leader forms leadership attitudes intentionally and directionally. Second, a leader can learn best in an environment of continuity rather than discontinuity. Third, local development might be one of the most important aspects of leadership development. People learn leadership best in an environment of local development. "Local development creates leaders; centralization creates bureaucrats" (Callahan 1990:170). In order to have local leadership development a church must have a community life that encourages teamwork through which emerging leaders can be developed.

Daniel McGilvary was one of the most prominent pioneers of the missionary movement in Thailand. McGilvary Seminary was established in Thailand in his honor. Out of his rich experience, he wrote:

I frankly confess that our greatest mistake has probably been doing too much of the work ourselves, instead of training others to do it and working through them.... For the ultimate establishing of the church, and to meet the demands of the age, we must have workmen thoroughly equipped (1912:416).

The Thai leadership style in urban areas is different from that of rural areas. Urban society is characterized by *pradet* (power structure); rural society is characterized by *prakhun* (grace) (Jeng 1983:14).



## 8.2 The Need for Community Based Leadership Program

There are several formal and informal training programs in Thailand. These programs have their own place in the development of church leaders. The main issue is whether or not these programs meet the current needs of the ministry in its local context.

Over-functioning leaders (those who try to do everything and decide every thing) are discouraging the development of Christian leaders in many churches. Non-functioning leaders are allowing churches to die. Underdeveloped leaders are not leading to the potentials in many churches. Over-trained leaders are discouraged and discouraging some churches. Inappropriately trained leaders aspire to leadership and misuse power. Drop-out leaders continue to fill the ranks of government and private business (Elliston 1992:10).

The type of leader one becomes depends on one's training. In a changing society, leadership training must be approached from biblical principles and values. If it is not approached in this way, the training facilities will stand by themselves and fail to meet the needs of the church.

In the context of Thai society, leadership qualities can be developed in community-oriented programs in relationship with one another. The most effective programs could be informal and nonformal. Mentoring efforts should be focused on developing emerging leaders in the church. In recent years, lay involvement in the Thai church has been realized more practically (Merry 1997:75). Apart from the existing formal institutions, the churches need non-formal and informal programs to develop leaders in a church context that allows the emerging leaders to identify their giftedness and develop their leadership values in the community.

Apprenticeships and internships are the most effective ways of developing emerging leaders in the Thai churches (Conner 1996:384). These two methods have the potential to be extremely effective in Thailand. Their success is dependent on the commitment of the mentors and students and the method of the mentors. Unfortunately, many missionaries are not doing well with this kind of training due to their lack of cultural understanding and adaptation. Short-term programs conducted by short-termers might have an impact on the life of emerging leaders but not as effective as it should be.

### 8.3 Need for Transcultural Leadership

There are many cultures and sub-cultures in the world. The cultures of the East are distinctly different from the cultures of the West. The Thai culture is unique as well. It has strong leadership traits and values. Some of the most common leadership traits of effective Thai leaders are integrity, servanthood, teamwork and godliness (Merry 1997:77). The fast changing environment of the Thai society tells us that it is crucial to take the challenge to make their leadership relevant to its context. The transcultural leadership model is found in the leadership development model of Jesus Christ such as servanthood, teamwork, empower model, on the job training and releasing gifts.

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