

1-1-2013

Converge International Missionaries and Their Churches in Thailand: Different Strategies Reaching Different People Groups in the Bangkapi District of Bangkok, Thailand

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Recommended Citation

Easterling, J. F. (2013). Converge International Missionaries and Their Churches in Thailand: Different Strategies Reaching Different People Groups in the Bangkapi District of Bangkok, Thailand. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 4(2), 262-279. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj/vol4/iss2/9>

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VOL. 4 • NO. 2 • WINTER 2013

**CONVERGE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARIES AND THEIR
CHURCHES IN THAILAND: DIFFERENT STRATEGIES REACHING
DIFFERENT PEOPLE GROUPS IN THE BANGKAPI DISTRICT OF
BANGKOK, THAILAND**

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John F. Easterling

abstract

In 1990, two missionary families moved to Thailand under the supervision of the Baptist General Conference to study the Thai language, intern under a Thai pastor, and eventually plant churches. Their coming to Thailand was following many years of Buddhism that is firmly established in the land. Christianity has not had an easy reception, but slowly the Christian church has been planted by men and women with faith, a call, determination, vision, and hard work. As these two missionary families began to work together, they started to realize that they each had a distinct calling. After twelve years, their one church became two in order to better develop their strategies for reaching the Thai people with the gospel.

a brief history of buddhism in thailand

Thailand is a Buddhist country, and it has small Muslim, Hindu, and Christian minorities. Theravata, or Hinayana, Buddhism first came from the Bihar State in India over the third century B.C. as was propagated by the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka. During the second half of the first century A.D., Mahayana missionaries began to spread from India to the Indonesian archipelago, and by the seventh

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century, Buddhism had moved up to Kameron and eventually Thailand. A third wave of Buddhist penetration came from Burma in 1057 A.D. when King Anuruddha (Anawratha) gained power over all of Burma, with his capital at Pagan (Central Burma). Anuruddha extended his kingdom right up to Thailand, especially the northern and central parts, covering areas now known as Chiangmai, Lopburi, and Nakhon Pathom. After the Pagan Buddhism of Burma, came the fourth and final wave in 1153 AD when Parakramabahu the Great (A.D. 1153–1186) became king of Ceylon, known in ancient days as Lanka, and eventually extended his influence as far away as Thailand. Buddhism became the dominant religious force for the Thai for the centuries following, and although Christianity and Islam have both grown more recently, Thailand continues to identify itself as a Buddhist nation. Today 94 or 95 percent of Thailand is Buddhist, nearly all of which is Theravada Buddhism, and it continues to be foundational to the Thai worldview.¹

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christianity, its early beginnings and growth over the past five hundred years

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Thailand in 1518, and the Thai king gave them permission to work in the country. He gave them a large donation to build the first Christian (Roman Catholic) church in the country.² The success of the first attempt saw the community in Siam grow to 1,500 members by 1554.³ The Franciscans arrived in 1583, the Jesuits arrived in 1606, and the vicariate of Siam was erected in 1673. English traders arrived in 1612 as agents for the East India Company and were more interested in building a factory than a church. Under King Narai, who showed true interest in the West, European missionaries and adventurers were given considerable influence at court. However, when King Narai died in 1688, members of the government, fearing the missionaries proselytizing efforts, killed or expelled all Westerners from Thailand. It remained a closed country to the Europeans for the next one hundred years.⁴

In 1780, King Taksin permitted some French missionaries to enter Thailand and like a previous Thai king, helped them to build a church. In the early part of the nineteenth century, it was estimated that there were approximately one thousand Thai Christians in Bangkok; they were thought to be descendants of the Portuguese who were widely intermarried with the Thai.⁵

¹ Karuna Kusulasaya, "Buddhism in Thailand Its Past and Its Present," The Wheel Publication, no. 85, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy (2005).

² Marja Woensdregt and Chompuu Kanjanda, "Religious History of Thailand," (YWAM Thailand Bangkok 2011).

³ Howard R. Culbertson, "A Chronology of Church History from the Perspective of the Expansion of Christianity," (2006), home.snu.edu/~hcubert/line.htm.

⁴ Marja Woensdregt and Chompuu Kanjanda.

⁵ Ibid.

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Protestants were first to arrive in Thailand when the London Mission Society and the Netherland Missions Society (LMS and NMS) sent missionaries in 1828. The missionaries were joined by American Baptists in 1831 working largely with the Chinese and American Presbyterians and in 1833 working largely with the Thai.⁶ The work was incredibly slow: twenty-two missionaries worked for eighteen years without a single convert. They did, however, make a significant impact on scientific knowledge and western medicine. In 1835, American missionaries set up the first printing press using the Thai alphabet.⁷ King Mongkut (1804–1868) learned English from his American missionary friends who introduced him to Christianity. He approved of their work in Thailand but not of their teachings. He could not accept divine revelation or redemption of sin, only pure human reason. He once said to his missionary friends, “What you teach them to do is admirable, but what you teach them to believe is foolish.” He saw no harm in the missionary’s Christian faith if it helped other people, especially to both Catholics and Protestants during his reign.⁸

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The Presbyterians experienced some growth in the early 1900s, but this slowed down. In time, the major Protestant groups included the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Disciples of Christ, and the Lutherans of the Marburger mission.

During World War II, the number of missionaries diminished. By the time the war was over, there was an influx of more missionaries serving under missions such as Overseas Missions Fellowship—the former China Inland Mission—New Tribes, WEC International, the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), and others.⁹ Today there are missionaries serving in Thailand coming from Europe, North America, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, India, the Philippines, and other countries.¹⁰

In 1959, the historic denominational missions merged into the Church of Christ of Thailand, and they were fully integrated together.¹¹ This is the largest Protestant fellowship of churches in Thailand today. This includes Thai, Chinese, and Karen congregations.¹² Some indigenous Christian movements exist, but they are not the dominant Christian force in the land. The church is still small and fragile in Thailand. Even though Christianity is nearly five hundred years old in Thailand, it has yet to penetrate deeply into the heart of the Himayana Buddhist

⁶ David Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 735.

⁷ Marja Woensdregt and Chompoo Kanjanda.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Marja Woensdregt and Chompoo Kanjanda.

¹⁰ Barrett.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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worldview that is effectively atheist and sees no need for a Savior. Most of the Thai
have yet to hear and understand the Good News of Jesus Christ in a personal and
penetrating way. The fact is that many Thai would see that a fellow Thai cannot
become a Christian without abandoning the Thai community.¹³

the baptist general conference in thailand, the beginnings and the building to the initial team 1989–1993

Historically the Baptist General Conference (BGC), now known as Converge, has
had missionaries in Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Ethiopia, India, Philippines, and
Japan. Their unified budget was a constraint on expansion, and some of the
members of their churches ended up going under other boards as there was not
possibility for their appointment. However, over the late 1970s and early 1980s, the
structure of the mission moving from a unified budget to personalized support
gave the denomination the ability to plan for expansion to new fields and new
ministries in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia.

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In 1981 Pastor Phaitoon Hathamart returned to the US to begin studying for
his Master of Divinity degree at Bethel Seminary. He went on to complete his
Doctor of Ministry degree in 1988. Pastor Hathamart, his wife, and three
daughters lived together in an apartment in Bethel Seminary Village.¹⁴ His
daughter, Nopaluck, completed her Master of Arts degree at Bethel Seminary and
then did her Masters in English Literature at the University of Minnesota. In
addition, at Bethel Seminary, Nopaluck met Steve Cable, a pastor's son from
Pennsylvania. God brought the two of them together bound with a vision for
reaching Thailand.¹⁵ While in Minnesota, Pastor Hathamart worked with a church
among Laotian immigrants that met at Bethlehem Baptist Church. This work was
originally started by Florence Martin, a retired C&MA missionary in the late
1970s.¹⁶ After Pastor Hathamart returned to Thailand, he started a church,
“*Santisuk*”¹⁷ of Bangkok, where he continues to be the senior pastor. In 1988,
Steve Cable took over pastoring the Laotian group upon Dr. Hathamart's return to
Thailand and helped to officially organize and establish the Laotian Church of
Peace which was welcomed into the Baptist General Conference in 1990 as a
daughter church of Bethlehem Baptist Church.¹⁸

¹³ Ibid. Buddhism places all responsibility on humans to change to prepare for their future by avoiding Karma, following Dharma, the Eight-fold path, and all other ways of renouncing passions and desires in this world to obtain enlightenment. This contrasts so much with the Christian's realization that we can do nothing by ourselves; it is not I, but Christ who can change one's life and give eternal peace.

¹⁴ Steve Cable, email message to author, February 29, 2012.

¹⁵ Steve and Nopaluck Cable in discussion with the author, May 2011.

¹⁶ Cable, email.

¹⁷ Santisuk means peace.

¹⁸ Cable, email.

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God brought two other young adults together who each had a heart for missions. Kevin Walton was the nephew of Elizabeth Walton who served as a career missionary with the Baptist Christian Mission in India under the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society (CBFMS) for several decades. Kevin went to Nagapur to test the waters of missions. Kevin's future wife, Cynthia, who served with AIM (Adventures in Missions) in the Philippines, also learned more of her heart's desire. Both Kevin and Cynthia experienced ministry to the poor, which later was to become the focal direction of their ministry. After returning from overseas, the two married and went to Bethel Seminary. They became part of Calvary Baptist Church in Roseville, Minnesota, and worked in their Hmong congregation. Again while working with refugees, their hearts were burdened for the poor. While at Bethel Seminary, they both met Pastor Hathamart and his family. A friendship formed between the Waltons and the Cables, and they saw a vision of serving in Thailand together.¹⁹

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In 1989, the Baptist General Conference opened Thailand as a new mission field. The inspiration behind opening the new field came from Pastor Hathamart. That same year the mission appointed these two couples to plant churches in Thailand, and the synergism of these two couples helped to raise support and prepare for the field.

In 1990, the two missionary couples arrived in Bangkok and plunged into language study. Nopaluck had no need of language school and kept very busy with a small child at home. The Cables and Waltons worked their first three years²⁰ with the Peace of Bangkok church as a practical internship while mastering the language. As the two young couples worked under Nopaluck's bilingual father and went through the language acquisition process, the team formed strong bonds with the culture, the language, and each other.²¹

working together with two visions for bangkapi district of bangkok, thailand 1994–2002

With the first phase of language learning, cultural acquisition, and adaptation, and the affirming internship working under Pastor Hathamart, the Cables, Waltons, and their growing families chose to plant a cell church in a northeast district of Bangkok called Bangkapi. The Waltons had a vision for reaching the urban poor and the Cables for reaching the Thai through teaching English and other means. A cell group structure was a practical selection, as it would make it possible for small

¹⁹ Kevin and Cynthia Walton in discussion with the author, May 2011.

²⁰ Cable, email.

²¹ Ibid.

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groups to develop among acquaintances and then reach out to touch lives from their own personal contacts. In time it became very natural for a group to be made of urban poor who worked in the area, and another cell group focused entirely on university students. Like the first church where the missionaries interned under Pastor Hathamart, it, too, took on the name “*Santisuk*” Peace Community Church. Under Kevin’s help, the new church was able to eventually acquire a lease on a building that was located on a side street off of Ladprao, a major boulevard. It was not far from a large central commercial center, the Bangkapi Mall, and only a short distance from many bus routes and the Water Taxi. As the group grew, the Cables helped to acquire a neighboring attached multi-story unit, and the members worked at taking down some non-support walls, always working on making room for growth. A third unit was also leased and added to the structure.²²

Kevin Walton pointed out that the two missionary couples chose a structure for Santisuk Community Church that was based on small groups formed from one’s personal contacts using relationships as the natural strategy for outreach and evangelism.²³ As the church grew, new cell groups started. Using relationships as a key for evangelism, the cell groups grew, developing ministries with children and youth.

Nopaluck wanted to open a language school registered with the ministry of education. It could not be called a “school” until recognized by the government. Its unrecognized status could pose a potential difficulty for the long-term stability of the “English Center.” Complaints from unsatisfied students and others could close down an unrecognized English Center, especially one of its size, as it was reaching nearly one hundred students every month and might have drawn the attention of supervising officials. Nopaluck Cable wanted the operation to succeed and worked tirelessly through all the red tape and government channels until one day in September 2003, official recognition by the Thai government transformed the operation into the Santisuk English School. Christians advised Nopaluck not to register the school with the Thai government using their Bible-based curriculum,

²² My first visit to Santisuk Community Church was in February, 1998, with a group of Northwestern College students on an overseas, two month missions internship. After a month in India, my students and I visited Bangkapi for a week. The female students stayed in the facility on the top floor of their building, sleeping in sleeping bags on the floor of their computer classroom and in their video/movie room. They had to get up early as the first classes were at 7:00 a.m. The men on the team stayed with two staff members in a very basic apartment across the street on the same street. At that time they were trying to teach English, computers, and doing what they could to reach the student world of nearby Ramkhamhaeng University, one of the two open universities in Thailand. There are over 600,000 students (http://www.iis.ru.ac.th/IIS/RU_about.htm). In addition, the outreach to the urban poor was developing. I subsequently visited Santisuk Community Church in 1999 and 2000. In 1999, our housing was in a guest house, “The Mansion” for young workers in studio apartments. My students helped with teaching English and general outreach to the community. With each visit we saw the church grow both in students/young adults and also among the urban poor. By the time of the second visit in 1999, a second narrow, multi-story unit was acquired next to the original property, walls brought down, and the facility was continually filled. The twin congregations—students and poor—worked together, but there was little breathing room.

²³ Walton, interview.

Easterling: Converge International Missionaries and Their Churches in Thailand as they believed the Thai government would never approve a Bible-oriented curriculum.²⁴ Nopaluck did not get discouraged when one of the Christian leaders said, “Don’t include the Bible, or you might have to be declared as a religious school.”²⁵

Kevin and Cynthia had a heart for the urban poor and wanted to develop programs that would reach out to this group using a micro-loan program, a short-lived daycare center, and even a shop selling some unique products like shoe repair materials for the poor.²⁶ Steve and Nopaluck started their English Center and a computer school. From the start of the Santisuk Community Church, the vision of the two different target groups was to be complementary, with each reaching different segments of society, but because of the limitation of adequate space, they were also competitive ministries.

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The computer school attracted both students and businessmen in the early days. In time, however, its effectiveness began to weaken, and it was eventually closed. The daycare facility did not have enough of a following, and it, too, closed its doors. Santisuk English Center grew and became the main strategy for the Cable’s outreach to the student world.

In 1998, the Baptist General Conference of the Philippines started to send short-term missionaries to help the ministry. Most Filipino short-term workers came for a period of time, perhaps up to ten months at a time. However, two of these women, Marquit Gido and Ethel Alino, came in 1998 and 2001 respectively and ultimately joined the leadership team of the school. This partnership made Santisuk English Center more “international,” and it developed into a long-term partnership between the BGC Philippines and the Santisuk fellowship of churches in Thailand.

However, the small facilities were overtaxed, and the two missionary couples came to see the need for a separation so that the Waltons could focus on ministries geared on reaching the urban poor, while the Cables could focus on teaching English as a platform for evangelism and church planting.

On September 2, 2002, Peace Fellowship Church moved to Ladprao 97 and held a dedication service on September 6. Their membership included 18 Thai and 8 foreigners, 24 of the original 70 members formed the new church.^{27,28} Peace

²⁴ Cable, email.

²⁵ Walton, interview.

²⁶ Shoe repairmen had to travel to a distant part of Bangkok for supplies, which was quite expensive. Santisuk Community Church opened a small shop selling shoe repair supplies. This has helped the church to identify with the working poor in the area who would otherwise have to travel to a distant part of the city for supplies. The shop employs a member of the church.

²⁷ Cable, interview.

²⁸ *A Brief History of Peace Fellowship Church*, 2010.

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Community Church was left with four cell groups that fed into their church,²⁹ but
the new church was half of that.

Kevin Walton likened this experience to rice seeds being planted and that when
shoots come up too close when spouting, they are pulled up and replanted further
apart to give the greater harvest. Likewise, the two missionary families needed to
separate so they would not choke each other out but rather have room to grow to
their full potential.³⁰

peace community church discovers a new strategy

After the departure of the Cables and their church family, the Waltons continued
with the cell groups in Peace Community Church. No real changes occurred for
several years, but in 2005 when the missionaries were leaving for a home
assignment in America, an associate came to help the church grow. The help was
needed, but he informed Kevin that he was not intending on staying long term, as
he had other plans for his life that did not include focusing his life on low-income
families.³¹

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PCC was a good fellowship with activities for the members, children, and
youth. The entire ministry, though, was centered on the leadership of missionaries,
which ultimately lacked sustainability. No process was in place to reduplicate the
work of the missionary, and PCC knew that they had to make real changes. That
year, four cell groups became house churches which met weekly, like mini churches,
only relating back to a large gathering once a month. This was a costly and painful
change, but it was necessary if the church was to be able to make a meaningful
impact on the slums of Bangkok.³²

The four cell groups, now house churches, included:

House church #1: older members living close to the church, who would meet in
the center on Sundays,

House church #2: members who lived and met in a slum,

House church #3: a member reaching to her neighborhood near the weekend
market, and

House church #4: older members, real leaders in the church, a gathered group
not geographic.³³

²⁹ Walton, interview.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ For house churches to work, the members need to be geographically in proximity to one another rather than cell groups
that are based on a group gathered together who share common relationships. This group was doomed to failure as it
was unable to transition to becoming a house church.

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In time, house church #4 fell apart, and the members joined another church. The negative influence of house church #4 over #3 caused it also to fall apart although the key member of this group maintained fellowship with the church. The church was in real decline.

The new structure was based on three goals: (1) weekly gatherings in the local community, (2) discipleship during the week taking place through the house churches, and (3) visibly working in the community. Each cell would have a designated elder, and all elders make up the church's elder board.³⁴

a strategy for reaching the slums of bangkapi and beyond

Kevin observed that the poor near the church were more open to the gospel than the average Thai, but the slum dwellers were more resistant due to a greater community pressure to conform. By the planting of house churches within each slum community, the gospel would be able to penetrate more effectively and reach the community through the slum's hard social barriers.³⁵

In 2003, the year after the separation of the two groups, Kevin started to work with Servant Partners, a mission based in Pomona, California. It grew out of those attached to Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. This group sends out those who want to work through churches to transform the communities by living in the slums themselves. In 2011 there were four Servant Partners living in the slum communities, practicing holistic church planting and demonstrating incarnational mission.³⁶ The first group of three workers came in 2004 and lived there for five years. Another group came in 2007 with plans to stay until 2012. They came to learn the language while living and working among the people. This group is similar to Servants, Word Made Flesh (Asbury).³⁷

When house church #4 fell apart, it included the departure of key leaders who did not see the new strategy as an improvement but rather as a retreat from a

³⁴ Walton, interview.

³⁵ According to Kevin Walton, there are 3,000 slum communities in Bangkok holding one hundred to a couple of thousand residents. The largest is near downtown Bangkok with eighty thousand members. When Christians go to try to work in the slums, they are looked upon as patrons to help share their resources (paternalism) or as evangelists (wanting to convert). Both of these don't accomplish the desired goals. Community organizing and empowering those in the slums to help the communities to use their own resources brings trust and opens hearts. Peace Community Church has two employees—one works for the Santisuk Foundation and also serves as the secretary/receptionist as the first contact person at the Center, and the second person worked in micro loans to help small businesses and is now working in community development. One slum lost their land, and through PCC's help, the slum dwellers are now getting loans to purchase the land and build houses with proper construction. Seven Christian families joined in the project and ten percent of the slum will be Christian.

³⁶ Walton, interview.

³⁷ Others in this movement were described in "The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor" by Scott A Bessenecker. Other works by Bessenecker include: "Quest for Hope in Slum Community: A Global Urban Reader" 2005; "How to Inherit the Earth: Submitting Ourselves to a Servant Savior" 2009 and "Living Mission: The Voices and Visions of New Friars" 2010.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 9 weekly worship of the entire church. It was discouraging. Kevin concluded that first you have to let your own plans die³⁸ to allow God to take the lead and direct the ministry. Rather than growth, there were several years of decline. In 2009 with the coming of the new team from Servant Partners, there was the start of growth. From 2007 through 2008 there were no baptisms, but in 2009 there were seven, in 2010 eight, and nine baptisms over the first five months of 2011.³⁹

By mid-2011, there were four house churches and two pre-house church groups. Several of these reside in slums, fulfilling the desire to have churches within a slum that serve the community.⁴⁰

The division of the two groups might have been just a simple example of multiplication of churches by division of members, but it was much more. Steve and Nopaluck Cable and their new fellowship moved out with the goal of developing a strong, independently-functioning cell group-based church and the establishment of a fully accredited English school, an official outreach arm of the church. At the same time, Kevin and Cynthia Walton began to evaluate the progress and the ultimate sustainability of their ministry working with the urban poor. The ultimate decisions were almost like starting over, but today there is a real sustainable future for the new Peace Community house church model.

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the birth and growth and development of peace community church and the santisuk english school

It took months of searching for a facility that could house the Santisuk English Center and the new sister church to Peace Community—Peace Fellowship. These difficulties were compounded with the need to find rented facilities that were both visible and accessible to buses and that hopefully had a parking lot.⁴¹

When the Cables first went to Thailand, Steve said his goal for a lifetime would be to plant a church of forty baptized believers in his adopted land.⁴² It was not unusual for a missionary to spend an entire career planting a church in Thailand due to its significant resistance. However, the Cables did not, at that point, even envision the blessings and the real fruit of their hard work.

³⁸ Walton, interview. John 12:24 says, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (NIV)

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ The goal of each house church is to see each one of them branch out and become their own churches in time. The church's facilities lease will run out in the not-too-distant future, but because of the changes of direction of Santisuk Community Church, this will only help in its church-planting strategy. With three thousand slums in Bangkok, Peace Community Church sees endless opportunity, but because the house churches are not dependent on missionary leadership, the church and its future is much more sustainable when the missionary moves on.

⁴¹ Cable, interview.

⁴² Cable, interview.

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The new church and English center looked at a building that was for sale, but the time-consuming negotiations fell through. In 2002, they ended up renting a very beautiful multi-storied facility at 97 Ladprao. It had parquet floors and marble bathrooms, a very nice kitchen, office space, and real classrooms. These luxuries replaced the curtained off “classrooms” prior to moving out.⁴³ These helped the school and the church to stabilize and even grow. The original core of members was quite committed to the new church—nearly all the Thai members had become believers through the ministries of Santisuk.⁴⁴

The new facility even had a parking garage, but while parking, many cars hit the maze of pillars. Santisuk proposed to the owner to remove some of the pillars at their own expense, and the owner agreed but later refused. After this drama, they began to realize that they needed their own facility.⁴⁵

272 Steve Cable went back to the owner of the facility they had looked at originally, and the owner was willing to work with the church. The process started in 2003. Over 2004–2005, the congregation attacked significant remodeling that transformed this four story shell of a building into a school with a chapel on the newly added fifth floor. Peace Fellowship Church dedicated their new facility on September 4, 2005. The new structure ultimately cost 19,150,000 Thai Baht (\$425,555 US). A quarter of the funds came from Thailand, and the rest were donations from overseas. This partnership of Americans, Filipinos, and Thai gave Santisuk English School and Peace Fellowship Church a permanent home in a prime, visible location with a parking lot, as well.⁴⁶

In 2005 the goals of Peace Fellowship Church were set out as follows:

- To support and send out one missionary unit
- To have twenty percent of the membership be men
- To plant three churches
- To be evaluated by an outside group yearly
- To become a church of fifty cell groups.⁴⁷

The cell-church model worked well for this new group from the beginning. The cell groups met in members’ homes/apartments on Sunday mornings to build on the friendships of the members of each group. The worship gathered on Friday evenings at the facility and has steadily grown over the years.

Concurrent to resolving the building needs for the school and the church, Nopaluck Cable presented Santisuk English Center to the Ministry of Education

⁴³ “Santisuk Building: A Testimony of God’s Goodness February 21, 2010,” 2–3.

⁴⁴ Cable, interview.

⁴⁵ “Santisuk Building,” 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–5. Calculations of dollar conversion are based on 2005 currency exchange rate.

⁴⁷ *A Brief History.*

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 9 and succeeded in official recognition in September 2003. When Santisuk English School completed the installation of their new facility, it proved to be one of the nicest facilities of all English language schools in Thailand.⁴⁸

From the beginning, Santisuk English School stressed five principles for being a quality church-based English program: Excellent, Evangelistic, Evaluated, Ethical, and Effective.

The school slowly developed. In the decade between March 1993 and 2003, there were approximately 2,500 different students at Santisuk English School. From mid-2003 through January 2011, 6,041 different students studied there. The growth of the school is significant and impressive.⁴⁹

The school has grown steadily and in 2011 hired twelve full-time Thai in offices as well as in the classroom. Part-time employees were also hired. Twenty percent of the total full-time teachers were Filipinos, while the remaining were Thai. In addition, many volunteer short-term teachers came from America. These volunteers often would come multiple times and range in age from recent high school graduates to an 86-year-old man, Mr. Eldon Schultz from the Twin Cities.⁵⁰

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present day santisuk english school

Because the standardized curriculum utilizes the Bible for stories, there are discussions about Jesus Christ in the classroom. The Thai are polite but are slow at making decisions to follow Christ. Still, 63 are/were baptized members of Peace Fellowship Church, and another group of at least 40 have accepted Christ before the church was started or moved away. This is 1.21 percent of the total number of students. Three paths for the students to build relationships with Christians include: at the school in both the classroom and in outside activities, on Sunday morning cell group meetings, and on Friday night services of worship. The church has seen a steady growth over the years.⁵¹

The church has seen about eighty percent of the Thai worshippers come to Christ on an average Friday night service of worship because of the English School. Nearly all the staff of the church and the school came to Christ through

⁴⁸ Early in the history of Santisuk English Center, they sought to recruit at Ramkhamhaeng University, but as the school and its reputation grew, most recruitment today is by word-of-mouth for new students.

⁴⁹ "Welcome to Santisuk English School," 4-7. From January 1, 2001 through December 2010 there were 21,176 total registrations or a total of about 28,000 total registrations since March 1993. Santisuk operates 10 four-week sessions per year and had an average of 186 different students each session in 2010.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-11. There was an average of 15.2 teachers per month in 2010 including Thai English teachers. Some volunteers stay for a minimum of one month, some two, three, or six months or longer. In 2010, there were 77 different foreign teachers.

⁵¹ "Peace Fellowship Church Membership." There have been 114 members to join PFC since 2002. Twenty-six of these have transferred out, and thirty-four are inactive.

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the English ministry. Over the years, this strategy has seen slow but steady
growth.⁵²

This partnership has helped to use short-term volunteer teachers⁵³ along with Thai Christians to teach English and to share the gospel. This strengthens the Thai Christian church's outreach, helps to develop Thai leaders, and uses Christians who are native English speakers from overseas to help expand their ministry. However, no school funds come from overseas. All short-term volunteers come with their own support. All Thai workers' salaries are paid by the school's income as is the general maintenance of the plant.⁵⁴ Both the church and school pay a fee, "rent," to the Expanding the Kingdom Fund, a total of 45,000 Baht (\$1,500. US) a month⁵⁵ used in mission outreach to start new churches, support members preparing for ministry in various schools, and to send their own missionaries.

The church made these goals in November 2010:

- Peace Fellowship Church (PFC) will double from six to twelve cell groups.
- Church outreaches will focus on people living in Bangkok and Santisuk English School (SES) students. Mission trips will focus on the two existing ministries in South Thailand (Phang-Nga) and Latkrabang (near the Bangkok airport), visiting each of them at least two times year.
- Thirty percent of our active members will be men.
- At least fifty percent of our members will be active in foundational ministries: Sunday Bible classes, daily Bible reading and prayer, and cell and worship attendance.⁵⁶

The church has sent a missionary to Southeast Asia and plans on sending another. A growing number of men are coming to church, which is an answer to prayer. They have helped to plant two additional churches, one near the international airport and one in the south of Thailand. They seek to continue to reevaluate their ministry as they attempt to expand as God directs.

The long-term strength of PFC is that the church has a pastoral team leading the church together. Some of these leaders are in transition, such as Tong, who just completed seminary at Azusa Pacific University in California and returned to Thailand. He has started a Sunday night English service to Thai people interested in English but not so much into spiritual things. They would be willing to come to

⁵² "Welcome to Santisuk English School," 12.

⁵³ Steven Cable's father has been a volunteer for a number of years. He is a retired teacher and pastor. The widower came regularly and found his Thai bride in PCC. The two spend half their years in Pennsylvania and the other half in Thailand.

⁵⁴ Cable, interview.

⁵⁵ "Santisuk Building," 5. Expanding the Kingdom fund helps in outreach beyond the local church and has been helpful in establishing other churches, supporting members of their church who have gone to do training locally and overseas, as well. They are supporting a missionary in one Southeast Asian country and will be supporting another member in a different country in the near future.

⁵⁶ "Planning Meeting in Bangkok," 1. Email message to author, February 2, 2012.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 9 a “church service” for the benefit of improving in English. That is where Tong was thirteen or fourteen years ago and how he eventually found Christ. Steve’s father, Rev. Clair Cable, preached the first sermon on February 12, 2012. Other leaders include Kaan, who finished seminary in March 2012, and Awe, a member who served the past two years in a Southeast Asian country as a missionary sent out and supported by the church. Nit, who served in the south for several years in the Santisuk English Center and related church, has a number of plans over the last few years that could take her away from PFC. Pakorn and Mariquit are also key pastoral team members.⁵⁷

While building a strong base with both the English school and the church, Steve and Nopaluck Cable and their church family have seen a church that is now successful and sustainable even in their year-long absence from Thailand over 2011–12. The leaders of the church have asked that when the Cables return to Thailand at the end of July 2012, that Steve serve PFC as their senior pastor while having great freedom to help the church plants in Latkrabang and Phang-Nga. The Cables’ exact roles will be worked out in time, but the team of Thai leaders has taken responsibility for the direction for the future of PFC.⁵⁸

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santisuk churches and english school expands to the south of thailand

On December 26, 2004, when the tsunami created such devastation from Indonesia to Somalia, Thailand also suffered with death and destruction in Phuket and Phan-Nga. Eight thousand lives were lost, along with some property severely damaged. PFC responded with sending two members, Nit and Maew,⁵⁹ to Phang-Nga to help in an outreach in the rebuilding of lives. This led to the establishment of a Santisuk branch in Phang-Nga in Southern Thailand. The focus of this group came from an English Center. They also used music as an outreach—teaching young people to put together their own bands and other activities.⁶⁰

Following the tsunami, the Filipino missionaries took the ministry in the south of Thailand to heart. Following four years of academic training in the Philippines and four more years working with Steve Cable since 2003, Ian John Arcenas eventually moved to Phang-Nga in 2007 and settled in Takuapa in the south of Thailand where he worked together with Nit sent by PFC. Arcenas was a natural youth pastor. He developed a following of about fifty teenagers. His music outreach attempted to teach student groups to work together as teams. The

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁹ Cable, email. Maew is not the same Maew married to Melton John Ybanes.

⁶⁰ Melton John Ybanes in discussion with the author, June 2, 2011.

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families of the youth did not see this music program to be spiritually threatening as he worked with their children. Each group would master three genres of music—a love song, a rock song, and a Christian song followed by group competition in a contest format. Both Buddhists and Muslims participated, and the words of the songs were often in English. For the members of each music group, the story of Jesus was able to come through to the hearts in a gentle and natural way.⁶¹ Arcenas had seen some fruit in his labor, but it was limited. His events have made the group known in the community in a positive sense, but the goal of the church was yet to be truly realized.

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By 2007, they had their first baptism of seven young teenage girls from two different villages. They were mostly contacts of Nit. The two missionaries decided that their goal was to have three cell groups that fed into the celebration service. Most of their contacts were young teenagers, average age of fourteen or fifteen. The progress of the infant fellowship suffered a loss when Nit transitioned back to Bangkok, and her contacts fell away without her presence.⁶² The group has seen growth, one by one, but their target was youth. When most new believers finished high school, they would move away to do their university studies, and the church attendance would inevitably decline.⁶³

Nevertheless, the team continued to reach out. The cell group concept stood as somewhat of a theory, due to the limited growth and concurrent attrition. Only one cell existed in June 2011, after six years of ministry, but there were hopes to develop more cells in the future. On May 29, seventeen attended worship on Sunday, four of which were the missionaries. Growth has been painfully slow.⁶⁴

new leadership team for phang-nga

In 2011, new missionaries came to join the team in Phang-Nga. Ethel, a long-term missionary from the Philippines serving in Bangkok, came as a full-time English teacher on the team. Melton John Ybanes and his Thai wife Meaw also came. Melton has a pastor's heart and desires to see the church grow. With his Thai wife, they may be the key for the church to move from a youth group to a growing church.

⁶¹ John Arcenas in discussion with the author, June 1–2, 2011.

⁶² Ian John Arcenas in discussion with the author, June 1, 2011.

⁶³ From my observations and interviews, the group tried to have a similar strategy as the Santisuk English School in Bangkok, but because the target age was young, the stability has suffered. The church needs to reach adults who will be around for a longer time. Possibly if the Santisuk English Center were able to attract adults, there would be greater opportunity for the church to reach a greater age span.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Arcenas returned to the Philippines for home assignment over the summer of 2011. At that time, he made a decision to transfer to help open a new field for the BGC mission of the Philippines,⁶⁵ but he subsequently withdrew from the BGC Philippines mission.⁶⁶ The Ybanes family and Ethel have attempted to move the group into a stronger position to reach out to families, men, and women, and move towards the goals of the original church planting mission.⁶⁷

santisuk attempts to expand in greater bangkok

A few years ago, PFC/SES attempted to expand by starting a school in the south part of the city. It proved ineffective and closed down within a year. In 2009, PFC/SES decided to try to plant a new church in Latkrabang near a university by the new international airport. This was much more intentionally done by sending members from their congregation to help establish this group. Latkrabang is considerably underevangelized—it has four evangelical churches with three hundred Christians in a population of 140,000.⁶⁸

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Don-don and Carol Estrella were the team leaders.⁶⁹ They worked for three years with Steve Cable before PFC sent them out to start the new ministry. After the Estrellas' first year in the new school, they returned home to the Philippines for a home assignment. When they came back to Thailand, they found a more suitable location for the English Center. By June 2011, there were three Filipino teachers and one Thai teacher. In addition, they received periodic help of three American volunteer teachers—Jenny for three months, Annette for six months and Willington for one month.⁷⁰

To join the Estrellas, PFC sent Joy, one of the cell church leaders, but she later resigned and moved away after marriage. PFC also sent another member, Phaeng, to help. She served as secretary for the Latkrbang Santisuk English Center. The fledgling church already averaged about ten or more in worship, five of whom were

⁶⁵ Arcenas Prayer Letter, fall 2011.

⁶⁶ Steve Cable, email to the author, February 4, 2012.

⁶⁷ "Planning Meeting in Bangkok," 5. Teaching English in Bangkok has worked as a strategy at Peace Fellowship Church, but there are not the large numbers to draw from in Phang-Nga as there are in greater Bangkok. In addition, the more traditional Thais in the south, both Buddhist and Muslims, have not opened up their hearts to the Christian message. A question that plagues the church is, does there need to be a critical mass of potential students to use teaching English as a means of evangelism church planting strategy? If the Ybanes family is committed for the long term, perhaps a very strong church could emerge, but it will take time. The church in Bangkok plans on sending a couple to join the missionary team to help in building a core in this church.

⁶⁸ Estrella in discussion with the author, May 28, 2011.

⁶⁹ The Estrellas are from the Philippine Islands and are missionaries with the BGC Philippine Islands to Thailand. They met in the Baptist Theological College of Cebu in 2002. Carol was an MA student and Don-don was starting his Bachelor of Theology degree. He was the keyboardist, and Carol was the worship leader. Carol was from Oromoc, and he is from Masbate. They met in Cebu. They speak multiple languages and handle Thai language with ease.

⁷⁰ Estrella, interview.

Easterling: Converge International Missionaries and Their Churches in Thailand baptized on May 21, 2011. This included four young adult women and a young mother of a six-year-old son. This young boy and the Estrella's son, CJ (Carl Jezreel), age two and one-half, made up the start of the children's ministry.⁷¹ Their plans were to use the cell group structure, but like the church in Phang-Nga, they had only one cell by the end of May 2011.

The Estrellas worked hard to reach out into the community. Carol taught at the local high school one day a week. Walking distance from the center is KMITL (King Mongkut Institute of Technology Latkrabang) with 20,000 students, providing great potential for their ministry. Don-don saw the need of teachers with a heart for reaching out to the university, using sports such as basketball and badminton, music, and just hanging out with students. Although this church has taken its first baby steps, in time it will succeed.⁷²

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assessing the future of the walton and cable paradigms for church planting in thailand

Thailand has been an incredibly slow mission field throughout history, between Catholic missionaries off and on for five centuries and Protestants reaching out for nearly two centuries. Only a small percentage of Christians can be found in this country. In 2009, there were 339,048 evangelicals in the country with 4,186 churches.⁷³ Many of these Christians are tribal peoples, especially the Karen, an oppressed minority people from Myanmar.

For over two decades, Converge International ministries have supported these two missionary families in Thailand. Both couples have their calling. The Waltons seek to plant house churches in the slums to serve the urban poor of Bangkok; the Cables use a quality Conversational English School as an open door for their church. Both have drawn upon short-term workers—the Waltons have developed the relationship with Servant Partners who come to serve, to live among, and to evangelize the urban poor, while the Cables have drawn on volunteer teachers from overseas to teach one or more months, in addition to local Thai who have degrees in English and are able to teach in the school.

Both of these two strategies have worked in an urban area. The slow, steady growth at the Latkrabang church reinforces this. However, the church plant in Phang-Nga needs to broaden its focus, perhaps with multiple age groups to have a long-term growing ministry. With two couples in leadership, this is a real possibility.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Dwight Martin, "Protestant Thai Christians 2009," (power point presentation).

return home, and there was no one to replace them? The funding for these ministries has been considerable, but the fruit of these ministries is solid.

I believe that in the slums of Bangkapi, several groups would carry on the vision in their own communities and hopefully to others. Santisuk English School would continue to receive students, and PFC would advance because of the strong commitment of the members who came to know Christ through these ministries.

Certainly, the synergism of the American and Filipino missionaries working with the Thai believers creates a stronger advance at evangelism, but both of these strategies have one thing in common—the missionaries do not see the ministries as their own, but as God's ministries in partnership with Thai believers.

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