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# Reaching Thai Buddhists and Those with a Background in Thai Buddhist Beliefs

## Introduction

One of the greatest challenges for those working across cultures is to understand the unique features of the host culture and the dominant religious beliefs and practices found in the society represented. If this is to be done acceptably, the written and spoken language must be mastered and personal friendships formed with community members. Much damage has been done by Western missionaries arriving with preconceived ideas on evangelism taken from their home country and with an attitude of being holders of superior knowledge in many areas of thought beyond that held by the host culture.

Catholic missionary activity has been on-going in Thailand since 1665, Protestants since 1828, and by Adventists since 1906 (Insom 2006:43; Carmody 2017:54). The early pioneers showed great energy and persistence and one cannot help but have great admiration for them. The experiences and successes recorded have been many and varied. The techniques adopted have included literature evangelism, evangelistic outreach efforts, healing ministries, health promotion, education (primary to tertiary), radio ministry, relief work, and other activities. The overall impact of the total mission effort by all denominations has been minimal with Christians representing an estimated 0.74-1.2 percent of the population (Carmody 2017:49; Christian Presence Map 2018).

A Buddhist Study Center was initially created in Thailand (1992) by Clif Maberly as an initiative of Global Mission coming from the General Conference (Krause 2010; Chavez 2011). This has most recently been replaced by a Center of East Asian Religions and Traditions. Thailand is the stronghold of Theravada Buddhism, but animism and Brahmanism are evident among other influences and in the surrounding countries other forms of Buddhism are practiced. The Adventist International Institute

of Advanced Studies (Philippines) has sought to help in the monumental task of reaching the predominantly Buddhist communities in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam by running Bible conferences with church leaders to familiarize them with methods to introduce people to Jesus and the hope of his soon return (Campbell 2015). Many fine efforts, helpful booklets, and methods have been tried (e.g., Griswold 2014) including those of Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM). This latter organization (established 1985) sends out long-term missionaries to unreached groups (Adventist Frontier Missions 2018). Those who have met Jesus on their journey to find meaning in life usually have encountered authentic people with a passion to share in a manner that is culturally acceptable (AWR360 n.d; Kijai and Matthews 2007; Griswold 2012; Adventist World/Adventist Review Staff 2014). This is in line with the advice penned by Ellen White: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with [them] as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow me'" (1955:143).

### **Creation of the Facilitator's Guide**

Reaching across the cultural barriers is a particularly difficult issue, for considerable cultural diversity exists within the Adventist Church and this influences the missiological approach taken or indeed permitted (Höschele 2004:32-48; cf. Acts 15). Here we highlight the latest initiative of AFM spearheaded by anthropologist and former missionary in Thailand, Daniëlle Koning. A mini-conference held in Khon Kaen in March of 2017 with groups of representatives from AFM, Asia-Pacific International University, the Center of East Asian Religions and Traditions, and the Thailand Adventist Mission, discussed in depth the approach recommended in the manuscript "Facilitator's Guide to Introducing Christianity to Thai Buddhists." The primary purpose of the Guide is to lead those with little or no experience of understanding Christianity to a meaningful experience with Christ and to a knowledge of core Bible teachings. A positive experience will lead to a readiness for baptism and an enthusiasm to invite friends to share a similar experience.

The Guide pays close attention to the characteristics of the Thai people identified by students of the culture (Komin 1991; N. Mejudhon 1997; U. Mejudhon 1997), it promotes a gentle approach and an intense commitment to the value of the single lost sheep/soul, a commitment to satisfy felt needs, and it continually seeks to lead the listener to an appreciation that the most valuable discovery in this life is the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the universe. Consequently, the time taken for this introduction

to become stable is not a major concern. The teachings of the Adventist Church are emphasized as they can be shown to illuminate the character of Christ, can enthuse listeners to seek to emulate his example, and as they provide freedom from fear through the power of the Holy Spirit. Deeper understanding comes with time.

The Guide is structured around two main objectives as follows. First, to connect Thai Buddhists to the Christian God, community, and ethics initially in a way that is closely aligned with their needs and worldview. Second, to expand the understanding of Thai Buddhists towards the Christian God and the practice of Christian ethics and community involvement in such a way as to counter the deeply held works-orientation characteristic of Thai society. The transition involves moving from a giving to gain merit approach to a Christian worldview of giving in response to receiving *grace*.

The Guide is presented in five stages: (1) experiencing love and care in and by a Christian community, (2) experiencing God's power and care, (3) reciprocating God and human beings, (4) relationizing God, and (5) choosing to honor God. The inner logic of the five stages is as follows. Stages 1 to 3 connect Thai Buddhists (TBs) and those with Thai Buddhist background beliefs (TBbbs) to the Christian God, Christian community, and Christian ethics in an initial way that is strongly aligned with their needs and worldview (addresses Objective 1 above). A strong effort is made to contextualize so as to affirm participants. It is significant to TBs and TBbbs to understand how they can be helped now (Komin 1991:171). Stage 1 is benefit-oriented from a community starting point (receiving from community). Stage 2 is benefit-oriented from a spiritual starting point (receiving from God). Stage 3 is morality-oriented: it centers on how to be a good person. This builds on the well-recognized Thai moral principles (Plamintr 2007:133-153). The third stage naturally follows the first two stages, because receiving blessings (in stages 1 and 2) will naturally inspire the desire in TBs/TBbbs to reciprocate to both spiritual and human beings by doing good deeds (in stage 3). In Thai religion, there are two central foci: *power* (or blessing/wish fulfillment) and *virtue* (or moral goodness), which are directly linked to each other. Stages 1 and 2 correspond to the emphasis on *power*, while stage 3 corresponds to the emphasis on *virtue*. Stages 1 to 3 in this way closely align with the fundamental concept of *karma*, the fixed connection between blessings and good deeds, a concept that is central in Thai religion. Stages 1 to 3 therefore build an introduction to Christianity that rests on a culturally familiar logic.

Stages 4 and 5 take TBs/TBbbs on a steeper learning curve to alter and expand both their understanding of the Christian God and their practice of Christian ethics and community life (addresses Objective 2 above). In

stage 4, TBs'/TBbbs' view of God grows from a flat, karmic understanding to a historicized, relational understanding. Growing through these stages demands a meek approach on the presenters part, which includes the possibility of allowing other points of view to exist until the appropriate development has taken place. In other words, maintaining smooth relationships is fundamental to success (Komin 1991:143-146). In stage 5, TBs'/TBbbs are invited to choose a fuller allegiance to God, which includes a more comprehensive application of Christian life-style principles including more controversial issues as well as the choice for baptism.

Further, the five stages are set up in such a way as to counter the deeply held *works orientation* in TB society: doing good to receive good. In stages 1 and 2, TBs first experience receiving. Stage 3 responds to this by doing something in return. Likewise, in stage 4 TBs learn on a deeper level how much they have received from God. Stage 5 consequently invites them to do something in return again, though now on a more difficult level than in stage 3. The biblical order of grace (i.e., giving in response to receiving), instead of the TB order of works (i.e., giving in order to receive) is therefore embedded in the very sequence of the stages.

In practice, the stages may not always be perfectly separate. Stages 1 and 2 may coincide when some level of interaction with a Christian community is combined with prayer experiments. Stages 1, 2, and 3 may coincide when receiving benefits from a community and from God quickly leads to the desire to reciprocate. The stages are therefore not a description of perfectly separate steps. Rather, they are intended to inform the facilitator of the overall most effective sequence of learning objectives and tools in a TBs'/TBbbs' movement towards Christ. The Guide authors have taken seriously the plea "that the Saviour desires [nothing] so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and His character" and give a "manifestation through humanity of the Saviour's love" (White 1911:600).

It is acknowledged that additional content could be added to these stages following field experience. The narrative learning tools in the second and third stages assume an inductive approach to learning that is inspired by the Discovery Bible Study (DBS) method (Beloit SDA Connect 2018). This approach involves the facilitator "teaching" primarily through question asking until the delineated key lesson of the story is grasped. The approach seeks to capitalize on the high self-esteem Thais have for independence and dignity. Great care is taken to avoid entering into dispute (Komin 1991:133).

The Guide rests heavily on Bible stories, many of them related by Jesus. For every Bible story used, in both group and individual study settings, the following format (adapted from DBS) is used:

1. *Review and pray*: Review of one's life; review of the last lesson, its application and sharing it; praying together (in stages 2 and 3, this includes requesting and thanksgiving, in stages 4 and 5, praise and confession are added).
2. *Introduce*: Narrate or read the new story twice.
3. *Retell*: Have the group/individual retell the story in their/his/her own words, after that narrate/read/enact one more time.
4. *Explore*: Ask exploratory questions that guide the group/individual to grasp the delineated key lesson of the story.
5. *Invite questions*.
6. *Add/address/avoid*: Add meaning/address misunderstanding/avoid distraction in regard to the story.
7. *Apply*: Draw out and invite commitment to the practical implications of the story's key lesson.
8. *Share*: Decide which one will share the story and/or practical help with.
9. *Pray*: This time, the prayer is more connected to the story/topic that was discussed.

In the fourth stage the same format is used, but its stories do not consist of Bible passages but of freely synthesized, contextualized biblical narratives related to a particular theme. In the fifth stage, an altered format of the above eight steps is used.

## Field Testing Experience

The outlined stages, objectives, and learning tools in this Guide together constitute a contextualized Christian discipling program tailored specifically to TBs/TBbbs. The program was developed on the basis of extensive cultural research from 2013-2016 among Buddhists and Christians in Thailand. It now has been translated into Thai and has and continues to be field tested, with early promising results.

Jared and Tonya Wright began field testing of the *Guide* in their home early in June, 2018. They began by inviting their housekeeper and her husband, both Thai Buddhists, to study with them and their local ministry partner, Nilubon Srisai, a young Adventist woman, every Wednesday evening. Nilubon would tell the stories and then ask the wife and husband to recite the stories from memory, and answer any questions they might have. After each study session, the Thai Buddhist couple was encouraged to share a printed copy of the Bible story with their relatives and neighbors.

In August, 2018, Jared, Tonya, and Nilubon asked if the Thai Buddhist couple would be willing to help them start a Bible study in their home

village. The couple happily agreed, and helped to arrange a group of about 8-10 of their neighbors to meet every Wednesday evening. About 5-6 people continue to attend regularly, but there is an additional group of 15-20 people who regularly receive a printed copy of the Bible story each week from one of the regular attendees. Often, new people will come to the Wednesday night Bible study and relate how they had been hearing the Bible stories recited to them from a friend or relative. Additionally, there is usually a group of elementary school children who come every Wednesday. Though the Bible study time was not originally intended for kids, Tonya began creating activities for children each week which complements the Bible story being shared. Several adults have come to the Bible study after one of their children brought a printed Bible story home for them and recited the story they had heard the adults sharing.

One of the key factors that Jared and Tonya believe has contributed to regular attendance from week to week and engagement with the Guide, is the prayer and sharing time outlined. Praying with the people for specific issues and situations in their lives and then intentionally asking them to share each week how God answered those prayers, has helped to strongly reinforce one of the main objectives of the Guide, which is that the God of the Bible is a real person who wants to connect with them in their daily lives.

## Summary

The Facilitator's Guide represents, as far as we are aware, the first systematic guide for approaching Thai Buddhists in a culturally sensitive manner and that is set out in a form to encourage wide use. The Guide commences by affirming similarities in values held by Christians and Buddhists, then sharing and experiencing God's care and answers to prayer, which leads naturally to a desire to reciprocate both in respect to God and to share blessings with others. Such an introduction rests on logic familiar to hearers. Forming close, friendly relationships with Buddhists and presenting Christian principles in a meek, non-confrontational way, prepares them for possible changes to their worldview.

The final two stages of the Guide aims at presenting a view of God's character that will attract listeners to participate whole-heartedly in forming a personal relationship with their Creator and Redeemer. This commitment then leads on, hopefully, to a desire to honor God in terms of time, resources, talents, and to a desire to join his church through baptism. Hearers introduced and nurtured in this manner wish to share their positive experience with others.

The approach utilizes the well-known device of story-telling, using the Bible as the principal source. Participants learn to pray together, interact

in various ways such as to explore and comment on the stories related or read to them. Presenters naturally can be effective only as they have experienced God's love and grace and as they respect the Thai cultural ways and sensitivities. Early field testing results have been promising.

## Recommendations

We encourage readers who have contact with Buddhists to implement or adapt the material developed by the AFM team. Feedback to the organization would be welcome. The Guide may be accessed at: <http://www.afmonline.org/resources/reaching-buddhists>. Updates will be made as experience and feedback dictates.

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Nilubon Srisai graduated from Chiang Mai Adventist Academy in Northern Thailand. After completing her university studies, she worked for the SDA Language School in Ubon Ratchathani in Northeast Thailand. She has been working with Adventist Frontier Missions and the Wrights since January, 2017.