

The Emergence of Mission and Missiology

One-Way Missions in the Age of Global Christianity A View from Thailand

by *Edwin Zehner*

This article outlines the rapidly increasing level of missionary activity by Thailand's Protestant churches and then notes a tendency for missions to flow from groups of higher prestige and socio-economic power to groups of lower prestige. Noting that the same pattern is observable among Christian missions worldwide, the author calls for greater attention to the patterns of church-mission partnerships, greater openness to spiritual leadership from groups of lower status, and greater attention to the work of non-Western missions worldwide. He also notes that failure to correct these patterns could sometimes lead missions to overlook the very kinds of movements among less respected peoples that had given rise to the churches in which their own personnel had been raised.

The article has three primary purposes. First, it seeks to compliment the Thai churches' growing vision for outreach both within their own country and across national borders. Second, it draws attention to some important patterns of mission flows both in Thailand and internationally, and to note their tendency to flow not from the stronger churches to the weaker ones (though this is certainly a factor), nor from the spiritually more mature to the less mature, but rather from more prestigious to less prestigious groups. Finally, and most important, it critiques these mission flows as manifestations of social ranking systems whose influence, though understandable, essentially violates New Testament prescriptions for relationships within the church. In so doing, it draws on the anthropological thinking of the past 20–30 years that has called for greater attention to power differentials between peoples and groups, and it recommends that contemporary discussions of intercultural church and mission partnerships devote greater attention to such differentials.

Indigenization of Ministry and Mission in Thailand

As an observer of Thailand's churches since the early 1980s, I have been impressed over the years by the rising interest and participation in both intra- and international missions by the Thai people themselves. The high level of

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participation was particularly evident on my most recent visit, in the middle of 2007, as several pastors talked freely to me of their interregional and international outreach efforts. That same year a broader survey of Thai pastors (discussed below) revealed that nearly 40% of their churches may have had members going on short-term missions abroad.

This high degree of participation was truly surprising. Thailand is still regarded, at least among North Americans, and probably also among Koreans, Singaporeans, Taiwanese, and Europeans, as a missionary-receiving country. As of 2007, nearly 1,000 missionaries were registered as serving a community of 350,000 Protestants, and it was thought that the number of unregistered missionaries was much higher.¹

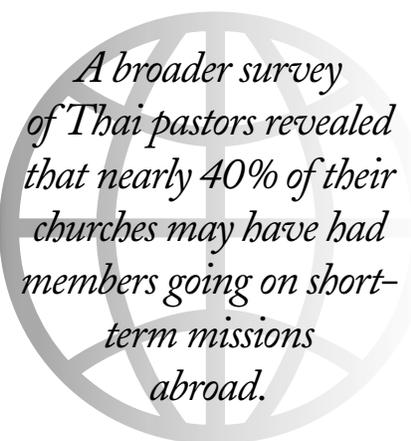
Moreover, as of 1982, when OMF Missionary Alex Smith published his 1978 D.Miss. (Fuller School of World Mission) dissertation on Thai church history as *Siamese Gold: A History of Church Growth in Thailand*, only a couple of Thai missionaries were known to be serving outside the country.

Globalization and Indigenization

Things began changing rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s. When I was living in Thailand from 1984 to 1988, several Thai churches were already encouraging their members to start thinking of missionary service overseas. This was a time of rapidly rising economic means and expectations. Thailand enjoyed nearly double-digit annual economic growth for more than a decade from the mid-1980s onward, and the country's economic growth has averaged nearly seven (7) percent a year from the 1970s to the present (Higgins 2010). From 1965 to 2007 the real GDP per head, at 1988 prices, soared from 10,000 baht per person to nearly 65,000 baht per person (Baker and Pasuk 2009:201), and from 1982 to 2007 alone it nearly tripled (Higgins 2010). Furthermore, over the three decades since 1980 the poverty rate has dropped from 42 percent to about 8 percent (Higgins 2010). In an

additional sign of economic transition, manufacturing exports surpassed agricultural ones in the mid-1980s and continued surging upwards, while middle-class commercial and service sectors expanded in parallel, especially in Bangkok and the larger towns.

The 1970s and especially the 1980s were also a time when charismatic Thai pastors were truly starting to outshine, at least locally, the missions with whom they had worked. It was becoming increasingly common for the faculty members of Thai Bible Colleges and Seminaries, some of



the best-known of them founded as recently as the 1970s and 1980s, to obtain advanced educations abroad before returning to teach in the schools' increasingly enhanced curricula. In this same period, in an unprecedented development, some Thai Buddhists who had gone abroad to study at overseas universities or graduate schools were coming back home as Christians, sometimes moving directly into church leadership or even starting church movements of their own.² In this period, for Thailand's Christians along with the rest of the nation, the idea of the "foreign" no longer seemed so "strange."³ Though assertions of "Thai" identity and culture remained an important and growing aspect of public discourse (and have been made a core element of the country's enormously successful self-marketing as a tourist destination), the previously suspect notion of the "foreign," which had more recently become closely

associated with notions of "modern," "up-to-date," and "fashionable," had also become an equally integral part of popular urban culture (see, for example, Mills 1999). As a result, the idea of the foreign, and of foreigners and their culture and lifestyle, no longer seemed as intimidating or unobtainable as it might have earlier.

Preparing for Mission: The Hub-and-Spoke Pattern

Meanwhile, several Thai church groups were developing structures and habits potentially useful for foreign missions efforts by developing regional missions or church-to-church mentoring relationships within Thailand itself. Typically this was done in a hub-and-spoke fashion with a "mother church" (*kbritsajak mae*) located in Bangkok or one of the provincial centers becoming the governing and training center for an array of "daughter churches" (*kbritsajak luuk*).⁴

In these efforts, the Thai terms for "mother" and "daughter" normally indicated the tenor and style of the relationships rather than necessarily indicating genealogy. Therefore, though some of these "daughter" churches were new church plants, others were existing congregations in the provinces or rural areas who were (re)affiliating with churches and leaders in the larger urban areas who were likely to give them the nurturing desired.

In many cases, the mother church offered training and other kinds of assistance, and in some cases it might also make personnel decisions at the local level, a development that involved the daughter church surrendering some local authority in exchange for receiving the services of trained and highly motivated and committed leaders supervised and mentored from the center. These networks operated both within, apart from, and sometimes across the lines of authority developed by the foreign missions with which the mother churches might be associated.

By the late 1980s, several large congregations in Bangkok had become

the supervising centers of networks such as these. Among the best known were four large Pentecostal/charismatic congregations in Bangkok, including the independent Rom Klao churches, the Chai Saman church associated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the Rom Yen church associated with the Assemblies of God, and the *Khvam Wang* (Hope) churches centered on the independent Hope of Bangkok church and its brand-new Hope of Thai People (later Hope of God International) grouping.

But the hub-and-spoke model was not limited to Bangkok nor to the Pentecostals. Another, albeit smaller, grouping was being developed by the evangelical Mueang Thai church based in Bangkok. And the 12th (primarily Chinese Baptist) district of the (mostly Presbyterian) Church of Christ in Thailand was becoming so effectively committed to outreach that it had more churches in the hills of northern Thailand than it did in the Bangkok-area Chinese communities in which it had been founded. Besides these Bangkok-based examples there were also instances of church networks revolving around hubs located in the various provincial centers, such as Ubon or Khon Kaen in the northeast or Chiangmai in the north.

By the 1990s, some of these networks revolving around congregations in Bangkok had become so large and complex that the Bangkok mother churches were supervising provincial churches (or groups of churches) that in turn were supervising and mentoring local congregations down to the district, sub-district, and village level. Not surprisingly, the Bangkok-based centers of several of these groups were headed by self-made pastors/administrators who had been educated abroad, at least two of them to the doctoral level. At least a couple of these groups had even been founded by such individuals.

Mission Extension

Once patterns of intra-country outreach and supervision had been

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established, it became rather natural for these patterns to be extended across national borders. In some cases this was done in the form of individuals following what they took to be the call of God to serve (sometimes temporarily) in another location, and in other cases the overseas outreach was done by extending the hub-and-spoke structure to yet another level. Only very rarely did it involve a Thai individual joining an existing international mission organization that had been doing missions in Thailand.

Perhaps the most outstanding of these international hub-and-spoke organizations was the one associated with the Hope of God International churches, which by the end of the twentieth century had daughter churches on almost every continent. Some of these overseas congregations were under local leadership, others were under the leadership of Thai expatriates who had already been living overseas, and still others were under the leadership of experienced personnel who had been trained, had worked, and proven themselves in Thailand and had then been sent out from Bangkok to head associated congregations in the Philippines and elsewhere. Some of the overseas congregations, such as Hope of Singapore, were large enough to be regional mission-sending and mentoring congregations in their own right.⁵

Thus, by the turn of the twenty-first century, Thailand had become a missionary-sending country even while being a missionary-receiving one. Perhaps because the Thai Christian population was still so small (less than 1 percent of the country's population) and the local spiritual need so great, and because so many foreign missionaries were still flowing into the country, most of this outgoing missionary activity floated entirely under the radar

of the foreign missions and personnel still crowding into Thailand.

A Recent Survey of Thai Home and Foreign Missions

But even the above account seriously understates the amount of Thai-origin missions that was happening, because it focuses on the activities of the largest churches. In fact, Thai mission work—on both local, regional Southeast Asian, and broader international levels—was highly robust across the board, regardless of church type.

This became apparent in the summer of 2007, when the Thailand Evangelism and Church Growth Committee (TEC) of the Thai Protestant Churches Coordinating Committee (TPCC)—which included representatives of the Southern Baptists, the Church of Christ in Thailand, the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, and some of Thailand's independent churches and organizations—conducted a series of regional pastoral training sessions in support of its strategic plan for planting churches in all unchurched districts of Thailand. At each of those regional sessions the leaders administered a survey that had been developed by Robert Priest and his colleagues at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and then expanded slightly by the TEC with Dr. Priest's permission.

The survey was designed to assess several measures of pastoral welfare and of local participation in short-term missions efforts. In exchange for helping create connections between Dr. Priest and the TEC leaders, I was given permission to cite some of the results in my own work.

The results of the survey were truly remarkable. Of the more than 650 pastors who returned survey forms, 39% said that members of their con-

gregations were going on short-term missions trips to other countries (10% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, and 9% mildly agreed), and 23% said they had personally traveled to another country as part of such a team. This was a much higher incidence of international missions efforts than I think anyone had anticipated.⁶

Missions to other regions within Thailand were even more common, with 60% of the pastors saying they had personally gone on such ministry trips. Only some of these are likely to have been an outgrowth of the hub-and-spoke inter-church organization described earlier. Many others are likely to have been one-time evangelistic efforts, social welfare projects, and/or cases of partnerships between sister churches.

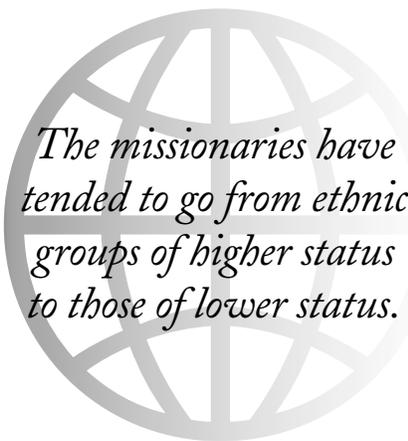
These outward-flowing efforts were still overshadowed by the influx of short-term missionaries from abroad, as 77% of the pastors said that at some time during their current pastorate their church had hosted a short-term mission team from abroad. Some 53% said they had hosted a team from the United States, and 49% had hosted a team from Korea. Anecdotal evidence from my interviews with pastors in the summer of 2007 suggested that there were also significant numbers of short-term teams and individuals coming from other parts of East and Southeast Asia, especially Singapore.

Yet the efforts by Thai churches within the country were already more significant than the efforts of the foreign missions. Not only had the Thai mission personnel become more numerous (especially if one includes short-term teams), but in some ways their efforts had become uniquely vital. Church-to-church relationships were somewhat more personalized, regional mentoring could be more sustained (Thai church leaders did not go on furlough), and there were more grounds for local creativity (as when a local pastor decided to help some upcountry churches develop more sustainable means of self-

support) and for continuing projects begun by others (as in the case of a slum ministry begun by a European but then continued by volunteers from a local church).

Thus, although there were still more missionaries going into Thailand than were coming out, much regional mission within Thailand was being done by locals, while the outward flow was also becoming significant.

As for the Thai churches' efforts overseas, the survey cited above does not tell us where the Thai missionar-



ies were going, but anecdotal evidence suggests that many were going to neighboring countries in mainland Southeast Asia, such as Burma, Cambodia, and possibly Laos, often clandestinely. Others were going farther abroad, ministering among ethnic Thai communities in places like Singapore, East Asia, Australia, and even the United States. Still others were genuinely cross-cultural missionaries, sometimes even self-funded. For example, at one church I visited in 2007, a Thai team was reporting back, via video, from a church-planting effort in an African country, where the team was supporting themselves through a small business enterprise (a restaurant or a hair salon) that doubled as the site of worship and teaching.

Directionality and Hierarchy in Multinational Missions

All this is incredibly encouraging for those who care about mis-

sions and cross-cultural ministry. Clearly Thailand had become a missionary-sending country while still receiving missionaries.

However, there was also an underlying pattern that was a little more disturbing. And it was a pattern that I believe is not limited to the Thai churches. The pattern I saw was that, though there are exceptions, the missionaries have tended to go from ethnic groups of higher status to those of lower status. Pulling back to the larger picture in East and Southeast Asia, I found this to be true not only of Thailand, but also the Pacific and Indian Ocean Rim more generally.

It can be argued whether the one-way flows of missionaries are determined by relative affluence (those with more money going to those with less money), or if (equally likely) it is an expression of different groups' perceptions of their relative rank. Most likely the motives draw on a little of both. Either way, the flows and peoples' perceptions are associated with unacknowledged assumptions that those of greater rank (and usually of greater power and affluence) have something to say to those of lower rank, while the opposite is rarely true.

When originally presenting this article as a conference paper, I referred to the attitudes underlying these flows as "*human differential hierarchicalism*." I offered it tongue-in-cheek (who wants to learn or use such a long and abstract term?). But I also offered it intentionally.

On the one hand the pattern I've just outlined looks like racism, as when white North Americans go to Africa, South America, or darker-skinned Asian communities. But in other ways it goes beyond racism, because the same patterns can be observed among social classes in the same country or ethnic group.

The term denotes two separate conceptual moves in creating these flows: (a) the creation or maintenance of socially differentiated groups or identities (the constructions of "us" vs. "them") and (b) the notional arrangements of

these groups into hierarchies in such a way that those at “the top” seem to be there “naturally,” and the ones at the bottom seem to be there because there is no other place they could be expected to be. In other words, their relatively low ranking is rarely questioned or thought “odd” by those above them.⁷

Once peoples have been differentiated and arranged in this way, the effects on mission flows arise almost naturally. Quite simply, missions almost always flow from higher-status groups to lower-status ones, or from the more respected or powerful ethnic groups to the less powerful, and rarely the other way around.⁸

Given that the communication of the gospel is often accompanied by a great deal of cultural baggage, this social hierarchicalism is a problem. And given how some of these hierarchies are constructed outside the realm of Christian ministry—yet in ways that parallel the flow of Christian mission—the directionality of mission flows should be a matter of great concern, and cause for self-examination, among missionary-sending churches, countries, and organizations. Specifically, it is worth asking why the one-way flows are happening, what the implications may be for missionary-sending countries and churches, and what (if anything) can be done to invite counter-flows?

Hierarchies in Thailand and Hierarchies across Borders

That the patterns of mission rest on patterns of perceived social hierarchy is especially evident in Thailand, where indigenous social hierarchies are somewhat more explicit and have long received comment by Thai scholars and western academics alike. But I believe the analysis also applies elsewhere.

Particularly useful in understanding these patterns are publications by the noted Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul and the noted evangelical Christian linguist William Smalley. Thongchai notes that Thai people in

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the late twentieth century tended to work with a scheme of relative rankings by which the country's various hill peoples (or *chao khao*), such as the Karen, the Akha, the Lahu, and the Lue, would be at the lowest level, being associated with the uncivilized wilds of the “forest” (*pa*). The next level up would be the villagers of the rural areas, who might be termed *chao bannok* (peasants, or what suburban Americans might call “hicks”). These might be considered more “civilized,” but still lacking in sophistication, education, judgment, and association with modernity. Next level up are the *chao krung*, or “city people,” who are associated with some of the major provincial centers and especially Bangkok, which is itself the quintessential locus of modernity in Thailand. Meanwhile, the people of Bangkok are looking outward to the *farang* (Westerners), who are (or at least have been) considered to be at the pinnacle of “modernity” (Thongchai 2000a, also see Thongchai 2000b).

Thongchai (2000a:57) represents these categories as shown in Table 1.

As Thongchai notes, most Thai people are familiar with the terms in the top row, and would probably be generally familiar with the listed relationships. He also argues (2000a, 2000b) that these relationships have deep roots going as far back as the late nineteenth century, and that these notions have significant effects on the ways different peoples are treated, perceived, and displayed in Thailand today.

Looking at languages rather than peoples, William Smalley (1994) has noted similar sorts of rankings. Describing what he calls the “language ecology” of Thailand, he outlines an arrangement whereby people speaking the various “marginal” languages (Shan, Karen, and so forth) tend to learn standard Thai and/or one of the major regional languages (such as Central Thai, Northeastern Thai, or Northern Thai). Meanwhile, speakers of the regional languages learn the Standard Thai taught in schools and universities, and educated speakers of standard Thai may aspire to mastery of one of the international languages, especially English, which Smalley terms “the language of Thailand abroad,” and which he similarly notes is used “to symbolize modernity” even if used and understood in only rudimentary fashion (1994: 15, 17). In other words, people tend to learn the languages higher in the hierarchy, but rarely learn the languages that are perceived to rank lower. The point being made here is that, regardless of one's place in the system, there is a relative hierarchy of prestige that, at least at the top, is taken as “natural” or perhaps “common sense.”

Where this becomes relevant to missiology is that the directional flows of missionaries tend to be top-down [or left-to-right] in the manner predicted by the ranking systems described in Smalley's “language ecology” and Thongchai's notion of “ethno-spatial differentiation.” Missions flow in

Table 1: Categories of peoples in Thailand and their status.

[Lowest Status]		[Highest Status]	
<i>Chao khao</i>	→	<i>Chao bannok</i>	→
“hill tribes”		Villagers (peasants)	
Mountain forest		Rural areas	
[Uncivilized]	→	Civilization	→
		<i>Chao krung</i>	→
		City people	
		Bangkok	
		<i>Farang</i>	
		Westerners	
		the West	
		Modernity	

from the west (America, Europe, New Zealand, Australia), or at least from the relatively “modern” outside (Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore), while within Thailand they flow from Bangkok to the countryside (including the provincial centers), from Bangkok and the provincial centers to the rural areas, and from all of these to the so-called “hill peoples.”

While there are notable counter-examples of hill peoples pastoring urban Thai congregations, or of country boys and girls who became leaders of major Bangkok congregations, the general flow of the mission efforts themselves is from center to margins, or from more prestigious/ civilized/ modern to less prestigious.

Unidirectional Flows in Global Missions

It does not take much reflection to realize that something similar is going on internationally. To take just the Pacific Rim, missions tend to flow from North America to Asian countries like Japan and Korea; from more economically “advanced” or “modern” countries like Korea, Japan, and Singapore to less advanced countries like Thailand; and from Thailand, to the extent possible, to even less economically advanced countries such as Burma and Laos.

There is of course considerable reverse mission from Asia, Africa, and South America to the United States, but rarely is it accorded the same respect as missions going the other way. Rarely is it expected that such missionaries should play major instructional or administrative roles in North American churches, often the missions are primarily to people who share the ethnicity of the missionaries, and rarely are the missionaries accorded much respect or attention by fellow ministers in the communities to which they go.

Though the directionality of these flows may seem “natural,” it does not require much effort to point out how odd they are. Consider a recent

exchange in a church I was recently attending. This particular church had been developing an increasingly multinational congregation, drawing from international students attending a nearby university.

One day, soon after I had arrived, I was conversing with a couple of members from Kenya. When one of them asked what my church background was, I said that I had been raised in the CMA (Christian and Missionary Alliance).

“Did you say CMS?” he asked. “No,” I said, “CMA.”



As I was explaining what I meant, I realized that the exchange was highlighting a very important point. The structure of relationships between Western and non-Western churches often implies that the “Western” churches are “senior” or “more mature,” while the non-Western ones are relatively weak, new, and immature.⁹ Even the titles of relatively broad-minded works like Philip Jenkins’s *The Next Christendom* (2002) and *The New Faces of Christianity* (2006) build in this implicit notion of “newness” even while proclaiming the vigor of non-Western churches.

But this newness may be an illusion (Wuthnow 2009, chapter 2, makes a similar point), for the initials CMS refer to Church Mission Society (or Church Missionary Society), which was founded in 1799, while the churches I had been attending were founded a century later. Thus the history of Christianity among black

Africans is much older than the North American denominations in which I had been raised (CMA, founded in the late 1800s) and in which I was then participating (Assemblies of God, established in 1914).

Not only may the sense of relative age be misleading, but so also with the sense that missionaries are being sent from “Christian” countries to less Christian ones. For example, when asked what was hardest about their adjustment to the United States, one of the Africans in our congregation noted her surprise that her university campus was so irreligious, whereas back home she had been used to an environment where open expressions of Christian faith were more normal.

Yet Africa, including the predominantly Christian areas of countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria, are assumed to be the places in need of missionaries,¹⁰ usually from higher-status countries like the United States, while North Americans (or Koreans or Singaporeans) are rarely considered to be in need of the spiritual advice of Africans. Granted, African clergy are increasingly evident in the pulpits of the Catholic and even the Episcopal church, and some Episcopal congregations have recently placed themselves at least nominally under the authority of African bishops. However the latter is motivated more by protest against American leaders than by an actual desire for spiritual instruction by the African ones.

Thus when God “speaks to the churches today,” most North Americans still assume that he normally does so through the leadership of white North Americans, and only rarely through the leadership of people of color from abroad whose congregations and spiritual homes may have equally deep roots in church history.

Awareness of this set of assumptions should have significant implications for discussions of multicultural mission partnerships or of relation-

ships between Western missions (and churches) and Majority World churches (and organizations). Yet in these discussions there has still been relatively little attention to identifying and challenging the assumptions potentially underlying persistent imbalances in staffing and authority structures.

Correcting Perceptions

Given how infrequently these matters are discussed, I should clarify that I am not advocating abandonment of mission. Rather, I am advocating greater attention to the power and status imbalances that are so often built into our thinking and practice.

I am echoing, for example, Hansung Kim's concern (2009) that in missions around the world "[i]t is not unusual to see a multicultural team where the leader is a westerner and the majority of the members are from the Majority World. And yet, the Majority World members may feel that they are not heard," due to many structural advantages built into the very ways that the mission organizations are comprised, and the languages and organizational cultures they employ. It is rare that such issues are discussed.

I am also drawing attention to the fact that evangelical missions publications aimed at North American audiences only rarely include the voices of supportive but critical non-North Americans (recent counter-examples include Mallouhi 2009, Ngaruiya 2008, and Simiyu 2007).

And while there have always been non-North American leaders who have gained North American audiences (examples include Luis Palau, Ravi Zacharias, and of course Cho Yong-gi), I wonder how well we have attended to the broader possibility that the non-North American churches (and their missions) may have something to say to North American churches or their missionaries, or that Thai or Burmese Christians may have something to say to Korean or Japanese ones?

I am advocating greater attention to the power and status imbalances that are often built into our thinking and practice.

Perhaps it is time to start paying attention. Perhaps more could also be done to invite non-North American Christians into the leadership deliberations of the missions seeking to serve them, just as the missions have long sought to continue influencing the deliberations of the churches they have founded or which they are assisting. Perhaps more could be done by the editors of missiology journals, and the authors who write for them, to more actively seek out the voices of Christians and Christian leaders from the two-thirds world.

Staying Tuned to the Social Sciences

As we do so, it will be important to remain attuned to the mainstream social sciences. Just as earlier forms of anthropology and social sciences gave us the notion of the "people group," so also the more recent versions may give us tools for addressing unintended power inequalities. And just as earlier versions gave us an appreciation for "culture" and relational networks, so also the more recent versions may give us tools for appreciating and engaging the accelerating global flows of people and ideas. Though evangelicals may not agree with all the emphases that have arisen in the academic world, there have always been perspectives that could be of use in the missions enterprise. One of those developments has been greater attention to the power differentials inherent in any exchanges across boundaries of culture, class, and even gender.

Though North American anthropologists have often been no better than North American missiologists when it comes to taking their own advice, insights like these are still worth taking on board and working through in our own ways. For power differentials have been at the root of crosscultural missions for centuries. I would like to suggest that more seri-

ous efforts to right those imbalances would not undermine the missionary enterprise at all. Rather, it would root that enterprise more deeply in Christian notions of the priesthood of all believers and the equality of all cultural backgrounds, once dedicated to Christ.

Finally, I would suggest that failure to attend to the assumptions motivating one-way missions in the age of global Christianity could lead North American missions to overlook the very kinds of settings and people that gave rise to the evangelical Christian movements in which they are themselves rooted, movements like the lower-class revivals on the Kentucky frontier, or the message of the shoemaker turned evangelist who founded Moody Bible Institute.

As former IJFM editor Ralph Winter has often pointed out, in many parts of the world this dynamic has been centered in the so-called independent churches, and international missions have often been uncertain how to live with them. It may be time to start considering such questions more seriously.

One of my favorite passages from the Wisdom books of the Old Testament tells of a small town that was invaded by a powerful army. The tragedy is that there was a man in the town who was so clever that he could have saved it, but nobody thought to ask his advice, because he was poor (Ecclesiastes 9:13–15, TEV). I strongly suspect that we are missing out on a lot of potential power, creativity, and insight in mission by overlooking the wisdom of those who are deemed to be "poor" and of "low estate" in terms of their financial resources, social ranking, formal education, or international visibility. It may be time to more intentionally seek them out.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

¹ The figure for number of Protestants comes from nation-wide fieldwork conducted in 2004 by fieldworkers associated with the Thai Protestant Churches Coordinating Committee (TPCC), an effort that I'm told is being updated on an annual basis.

The full number of actual missionaries is much harder to determine, because so many are working in what might be called the "black market" or "gray market" of cross-national missions, doing work that is essentially ministerial, or being resident primarily for the purpose of doing cross-cultural ministry, while pursuing careers or holding visa statuses that normally suggest otherwise.

Unlike some other countries, Thailand actually grants special visas to missionaries who are registered with organizations who are in turn registered with one of the five major recognized Christian organizations in Thailand. One of these is Roman Catholic, another is the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the other three are Protestant groups, namely the Southern Baptists, the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), and the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), the last of which is a loosely structured organization established in 1969 that functions today as a covering and coordinating group for a wide variety of evangelical churches and organizations. By 2007 there had developed a high degree of cooperation among the three Protestant organizations. However, the number of official missionary visas had been capped for many years, and the politics of transferring visa slots from shrinking (or defunct) organizations to newer ones could be rather arcane; for these and other reasons, there had long been efforts by both churches and missionaries to get around the process altogether.

For this reason, many individuals are doing missionary work while officially in the country in some other role, such as teacher, social welfare worker, tourist, or even businessman. In some cases these people are true “tentmakers,” dutifully playing the role they have listed themselves as doing, and conducting their ministry on the side. In other cases, hopefully very few (as such behavior by the few could harm the welfare and reputation of the many), the official role is merely a barely-transparent covering for the full-time ministerial work to which they are actually devoting their efforts.

Thus the number of expatriate individuals doing “missions” or “ministry” in Thailand is much larger than the number of missionaries officially registered with the government. When I was visiting Thai church leaders in the summer of 2007, I encountered a good deal of ambivalence as to whether this influx of foreign personnel was truly strengthening the work of God, or if much of it was merely wasting international churches’ time, personnel, and resources, while disrupting (or even competing with) the work of the Thai churches themselves. The need to consider more seriously the impact of one’s own work on the efforts of the locals among whom one ministers is another of the main points of this article.

² This dynamic may have been unique to the 1970s and 1980s, for as the quality and availability of higher education has improved, the need to study abroad has lessened. Nevertheless, the desire to learn English and to study and work abroad is, if anything, even stronger today than it was in the 1980s.

³ The two concepts can be closely related in the Thai language, just as they are in French.

⁴ Incidentally, the term *luuk* (offspring) is *not* gendered female in Thai. It merely indicates a genealogical or dependent relationship when addressing or speaking of a child.

⁵ Some of these groups are now independent of each other, but the overall dynamic by which the network was built continues to provide important insight into some dynamics of Thai church ministries in general in this period.

⁶ It has been pointed out that the pastors responding were likely to have been disproportionately urban. Even so, these numbers are higher than expected.

⁷ Note that the first of these moves, the differentiation of peoples into groups, was fully accepted by the “church growth”

school of missions promoted by Donald McGavran (e.g., 1955, 1980) and the “unreached peoples” concept promoted by Ralph Winter (e.g., 1984a, 1984b), particularly in their more extreme versions. To some degree they also accepted the second move, albeit as a descriptive feature of human nature that had to be taken into account rather than as a conceptual move advocated for missionaries themselves. Having developed his theory and strategy of missions in India, with its sharply distinguished and ranked castes, McGavran would have been especially aware of these social factors, and his strategy was expressly designed to take them into account, particularly at the stage of gospel proclamation. In this, I believe he was wise. However, the “church growth” advocates seem not to have drawn the lens back far enough to note the ways in which similar processes were happening in mission and in mission-to-church and even church-to-church relations, where tolerance and maintenance of such differentiation is less justifiable. The present paper is focusing on this latter set of relationships.

⁸ I am aware that no social hierarchy is entirely accepted or agreed on by all the people it affects. I am aware that no two sets of people construct the social hierarchies exactly the same way. I am also aware that rankings are rarely clear-cut, and I am aware that there are always “underground transcripts” of resistance to whatever social or notional hierarchy may be in place (Scott 1985, 1991). Hierarchies are often challenged. Nevertheless, there is often general agreement on the arrangement of these hierarchies. Due to the often invisible effects of what many, following Antonio Gramsci (1971), have called “ideological hegemony,” the cultural-ideological notions legitimating the socio-economic power differentials are often shared throughout the ranking system. Because, for these same reasons, the assumptions seem like “common sense,” those assumptions can be extremely difficult to identify and address. Thus, despite occasional evidences of “resistance,” the general perceptions shared by members of these ranking systems, often all the way down through the rankings, are often similar to the very notions serving the interests those at the top levels, for whom the entire system seems “natural” rather than in any way “imposed” by them. Many have observed the tendency of lower classes—both racial minorities and the lower middle classes of the dominant group, the latter termed

by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984:421) and anthropologist John Comaroff (1989: 661, 663) as the “dominated fraction of the dominating class”—to share, or implicate themselves within, the ranking system of the elites. The work of James Scott and others in highlighting the “resistance” of the dominated classes was not meant to undermine this concept but rather to demonstrate that the seeming acquiescence to dominant structures is not as thoroughgoing as it might appear. By now the study of “hegemony” and “resistance” are no longer “hot issues” in anthropology and other social sciences to the degree that they were in the early 1990s, though they still provide some of the important foundations on which later work has been built. It is important to draw attention to these discussions, for unlike the anthropology of earlier years, which had given rise to the whole body of work known to evangelicals as “missiology,” this conceptual work from the 1970s through the 1990s never quite made its way into missiological thinking, and it would be useful for missiologists to think through these concepts more intentionally. This is yet another reason for writing the present article.

⁹ This is a set of notions that even I share, despite my best intentions, which is why the realization recounted here took me by surprise.

¹⁰ In the case of these three countries, the former status as British colonies may be compounding the intensity of the flows, due to the relative ease of access for English-speaking short-termers and social workers. Here again, the pattern is not unique to evangelical missions, but rather reflects larger phenomena. A noted Asian economist recently told me that international development aid programs for Africa were flowing so disproportionately to two of these countries—because the locals spoke English, not because the need was greatest—that the development ministry in one of them started turning down requests so that its personnel could get their work done.