

have on church finances.

These are just three examples of small steps taken in the attempt to encourage Christian commitment to our social, economic and political context. In no sense are these illustrations put forward as models. They are limited in their scope, partial in their concerns and institutional in their origins. They only touch indirectly upon the wealth of experience both personal and community, that is being built up "on the ground" by Christians experiencing and sharing in the powerlessness of many people in our society. But they do illustrate how issues like these may be approached through powerlessness.

Conclusions

A number of concluding comments need to be made. First, issues of power and powerlessness are not easily defined. The powerful are powerless in some circumstances, and vice versa. Secondly, concentrating on questions of power involves difficult judgments; tensions and conflicts are often exposed. There is plenty of scope for misunderstanding between fellow Christians. Thirdly, an approach "through powerlessness" will often make it impossible to boast of "success," even if that is the dominant drive in wider society. Fourthly, such an approach may well undermine those aspects of our lives to which we look for security—our homes, our patterns of work activity, our self images and our church structures. Fifthly, we

may well find ourselves involved in particular issues with those who do not share our Christian faith. But are not these things the very nature of discipleship? Do we not have Jesus as our example, as our Lord and as our power through powerlessness?

—Reprinted from *City Cries*. No. 6 (Autumn, 1984). Used by permission.

Endnotes

¹"Manifesto for Urban Mission." Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, 130 City Road, London EC1V 2NJ.

²Some of these themes are explored in relation to the inner city in the U.K. in "Powerlessness and the Inner City" edited by Richard Farnell and in "The Inner City—Study Outlines for Christians" prepared by the Shaftesbury Project Inner City Group.

³Sheppard, D. (1983) *Bias to the Poor* (Hodder & Stoughton) and Kirk, A. (1983) *A New World Coming: A Fresh Look at the Gospel for Today* (Marshalls).

⁴See Guinness, O. (1983) *The Grave Digger File* (Hodder & Stoughton).

⁵Report of an Inquiry by the Rt Hon the Lord Scarman, Cmnd 8427, *The Brixton Disorders, 10-12 April 1981*, (HMSO).

⁶Available from ECUM, address above.

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Hope of Bangkok

A Visionary Model of Church Growth and Church Planting

Kriengsak Chareonwongsak

As the Church of Jesus Christ develops strategies to reach the continent of Asia with the gospel, we cannot ignore the Buddhist bloc, which forms a major portion of the Asian population. In that light, Thailand is probably the most strategic country in Buddhist Asia. The World Fellowship of Buddhism and its president are found in Thailand, where ninety-four percent of the population confess Buddhism. Many believe that "to be a Thai means to be a Buddhist."

Consider further the fact that Protestant missionaries first entered Thailand in 1816, and by 1978, 162 years later (according to Alex Smith's doctoral dissertation in missiology with Fuller Theological Seminary), there were only 58,953 Protestant Christians in Thailand (Barrett 1982:664). Today, an estimate of the Protestant population is probably around 80,000 at the most,¹ an insignificant number compared to the bulging population of fifty-six million. With its population of over six million people, over 1,020 slums and a population growth of over 750,000 per annum (Bakke, Hart 1987:35), Bangkok makes an ideal site in which to test and apply strategies for urban mission in a highly resistant area.

The Hope of Bangkok Church is the largest and fastest-growing single Christian church in the history of Thailand. It was born out of a God-given vision. It was started in

September 1981 with five members, and in December 1988 had over 4,500 members in Bangkok alone. It has become a church planting movement within the past three years, and has planted over twenty daughter churches in Thailand and overseas.

Being a Thai indigenous church and not a branch of any foreign denomination, the Hope of Bangkok seeks to be a biblically and culturally relevant, contextualized Thai church. In so doing, it has challenged many traditional Thai concepts. One of these is that Christianity is Western-owned. The walls of prejudice are slowly breaking down, and people have become more open to the gospel.

Moreover, programs and activities catering to the needs and spiritual development of the members have been carefully designed to be culturally sensitive right from the start. This has enabled members to grow spiritually and to be equipped for ministry in our unique cultural setting. Our efforts have been at times misunderstood by conventional Christian onlookers. It has not been easy to pursue this path in evangelizing this nation. The challenge is enormous and without God's help, the task of reaching this city and country would be a mere dream.

Our Vision

In all church activities, the Hope of Bangkok Church has carefully defined goals and utilizes strategic, administrative planning to monitor them. The God-given vision for the church is to plant a church in every district of Thailand (approximately 685). Even before the church began, our vi-

sion has been to saturate this country with churches by the year 2000.² The history of missions in Thailand makes it clear that without God's help, this is an impossible task.

With our goals and vision clear, we have gone on to share the value and urgency in serving Christ and in accomplishing this vision with church members from the outset of congregational life. Our church-planting vision has been shared clearly and constantly with the members at every practical opportunity, such as corporate prayer meetings, small gatherings, celebration worship services, etc. This has encouraged active participation and made the vision a part of individual lives. The level of involvement and participation of different church members varies with the depth of their maturity and commitment. But constant prayer and encouragement has allowed the church to work corporately in great unity, pressing ahead tirelessly.

Church Growth

The rapid membership growth of the Hope of Bangkok Church can be seen in our need to move several times to accommodate the expanding congregation. We rented a hospital room for our first meeting in September 1981 with five members and a few onlookers. About six months later, the room became too small and the meeting was then moved to the hospital's chapel. Fourteen months later, this too became overcrowded and we moved to the Crystal Ballroom of the Sheraton Hotel. Growth continued and in November 1984 we signed the lease on the Oscar The-

atre, the largest available auditorium in town. In December 1988, our membership was 4,500.

This kind of growth is unprecedented in Thailand. Obviously, it is God who gave the increase. We believe he blessed our corporate and personal prayer, along with an appropriate application of biblical principles and strategies for church expansion.

One principle that has been important in the growth of our church has been our emphasis on local church-centered evangelism. This approach enabled us to enfold new converts into church life. As a local church, we can integrate evangelism, follow-up, and nurturing with sensitivity to personal and community needs. The Thai concept that "to be a Thai is to be a Buddhist" is steadily being eroded as the community is slowly sensing that a visible, strong, and thriving Christian church is here for good. The sincerity of the movement to live and bring Christ's love to the Thai people has also helped to shift people's attitudes toward Christianity to a more favorable perspective.

Strategies

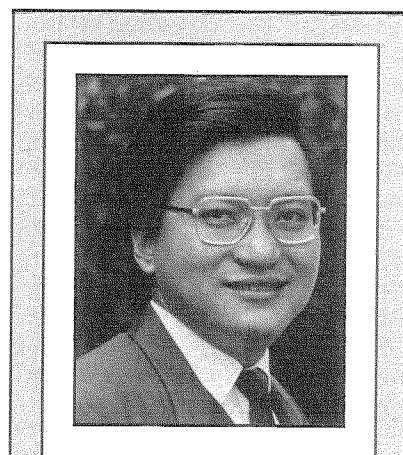
Donald McGavran summed up the difficulty of urban mission by saying, "No one yet knows what modes of mission promise most for communicating Christian faith to urban man" (Bakke, Hart 1987:35). Solutions can only come about by applying Spirit-led, biblical insights into a variety of mission circumstances. The principles described below have proved effective in our urban situation. It is hoped that they can be helpful in urban mission elsewhere.

Urban Church Planting: A Bridge to Rural Areas

Because cities are the centers of complex social interaction, they are home to the nation's social, commercial, political, military, artistic, entertainment, educational, and mass media life. To evangelize a whole nation requires us to use these resources and concentrate on the cities first.

Targeting for a Larger Urban Church

Thais by nature enjoy big, exciting, festival events. They call this *sanuk*, which means "fun." In this culture, a church must be perceived as being big enough to warrant their interest. A big urban church is necessary to work in Bangkok successfully. We need to make the



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Hope of Bangkok Church.

church visible so that it can attract people's interest and confidence.

There are many benefits in having a large church. For instance, people can be ministered to in a holistic manner. The church needs to be large enough to cater to felt and real needs. Also, the membership can function in the specialization of their gifts and talents when the church is of a sufficient size.

The Hope of Bangkok Church has been able to win a large number of converts into it. Its membership is drawn from around every sub-district in Bangkok. The larger the church, the more spiritual impact it can assert on society.

Mass Evangelism

The purpose of mass evangelism is not solely to incorporate people into the church. At the Hope of Bangkok, it is used primarily as a tool to stimulate personal evangelism. It also serves as a means of secular public relations for the church, and creates a "dynamic equivalent" festivity for members

to enjoy. These serve to replace Thai celebrations which are thoroughly Buddhist and animistic in origin, content, philosophy, and practice.

The Hope of Bangkok uses every possible opportunity for mass evangelism. Special occasions draw people best, therefore the church often holds mass meetings on Valentine's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and Christmas. One recent event, Miracle Christmas '88, illustrates our method.

Prior to the event, all members are asked to list at least four people whom they would invite to the program, and to pray specifically for God to prepare their hearts. Attractive posters announcing the event and highlighting special programs are posted by the members on city buses, in public places, universities, office complexes, etc. Membership involvement at this grass roots level encourages their interest in inviting people to attend these programs. Full scale advertisements draw the involvement

of businesses and celebrities to participate in the event, which attracts further interest from the public.

Miracle Christmas was a time of great excitement for the members. The atmosphere of festivity, together with the spiritual eagerness in preparing for new believers to join the church, created a refreshing spirit in outreach. As a result of "Miracle Christmas '88," the Hope of Bangkok Church was able to present a gift of over 500 new believers to our Lord Jesus Christ on Christmas Day, and the spirit of evangelism was once again rejuvenated.

Personal Witnessing

Witnessing is a way of life for members of the Hope of Bangkok Church. It is taught, emphasized, modeled, and encouraged; members are continually equipped and mobilized to witness with confidence. Emphasis is placed on reaching out via webs of friends and relatives, who have proven to be most responsive. Almost all of the members of the Hope of Bangkok Church have been led to the Lord through these relationships. "Faith is not usually spread between strangers but between persons who know and trust each other" (Wagner 1986:71).

Members of the Hope of Bangkok Church have been trained to look for small and large units of responsive people to evangelize. They are usually consciously watching for people's needs and inviting them to be exposed to Christian solutions, as well as attending church-related activities. Concentration on outreach is crucial if the church is to grow. Members are

taught to depend on the Lord and pray for his preparation of hearts. Statistics show that 49.33 percent of our members pray for those they want to lead to the Lord (Sinsirichavang 1988:145).

An incredibly high proportion (ninety-five percent) of the growth of the church has been due to conversion. The burden for lost souls has been instilled into the membership by encouraging them to utilize every available opportunity for reaching out with the gospel message. This includes, for example, printing personal testimonies as tracts and distributing them at engagement ceremonies, birthdays, funerals, etc.

Follow-up

Having new believers join the church will not lead to church growth if proper follow-up strategy is not well executed. Data collection for statistical analysis plays a vital role as a diagnostic tool for leaders by revealing follow-up problems as well as enhancing systematic follow-up. Hope of Bangkok keeps precise records of all visitors and new believers. Correct names, addresses, important dates, maps and convenient places of contact are filled out when these people first enter the church.

These forms are computerized and a copy of the printout is given to the pastoral leader overseeing that given geographical area. Follow-up within twenty-four hours of the conversion decision is emphasized. This helps to ensure that all doubts can be dealt with and proper spiritual nurturing and encouragement can be given from the start of their newfound faith. Thereafter, the person is visited

once or twice a week to lay proper biblical foundation for their faith in Christ.

Cell and Mini Cell Groups

A key thrust of the Hope of Bangkok Church is its cell group structure. In December 1988 there were approximately 700 cell groups in Bangkok, serving as bridges into the community in every sub-district of the city. Cell groups offer a non-threatening setting where open sharing of needs, blessings, experiences, and the Word of God takes place in an atmosphere of love and concern. Because of their small size, they are an excellent forum for personal teaching and pastoral care.

Since Bangkok is a city made up of many subcultures, the Hope of Bangkok has organized its pastoral care structure around homogeneous cell groups. We have allowed the members to fellowship at the intimate level with their ethnic and cultural peers, yet the church is a heterogeneous church. In order to maintain a good balance between homogeneity and diversity, we teach, expect, and provide fellowship between people of different backgrounds as well. Membership of the Hope of Bangkok Church includes people from virtually all backgrounds, including household members of one of the billionaires in Thailand, high ranking government officers from the immediate family of a past Prime Minister, as well as slum dwellers and ex-heroin addicts. Some homogeneous groups in the church are business executives, professionals, students, farmers, and laborers.

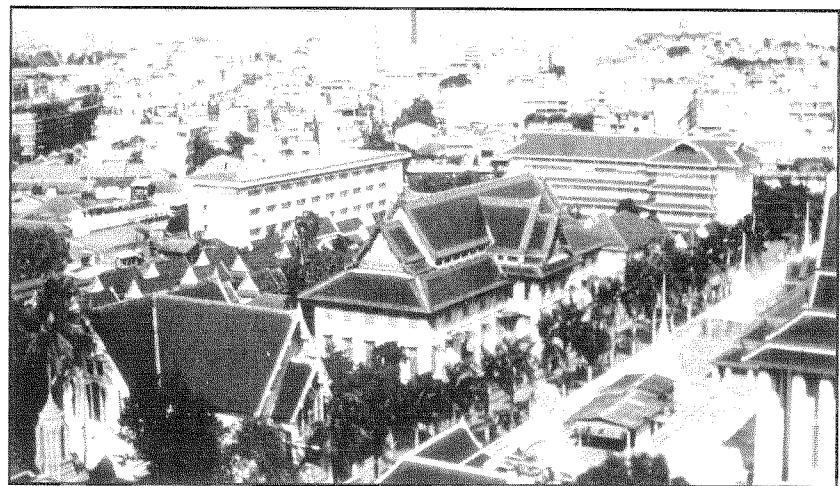
Effective evangelism, however, should be carried out through the

group that is similar to the target audience. "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers and this should occur with a minimum of social dislocation" (Wagner 1986:71).

We have seen the effectiveness of this principle with the church's Student Fellowship. The student community comprises nearly twenty percent of Bangkok's population (Thailand). A distinctive evangelistic approach to meet the needs of students has greatly enhanced the growth of this group in the church. By forming the Chinese Fellowship, we have for the first time enfolded ethnic Chinese converts into our church. We have avoided cultural barriers by having a Chinese approach another Chinese.

Applying this principle in our pastoral nurturing ministry, we have found that people are more responsive to small group fellowship when they are being cared for in a homogeneous setting. As they mature spiritually and learn to accept other ethnic groups in Christ, they can be transferred into cell group leadership in their geographical settings and become actively involved in shepherding others. They know that in Christ there is no room for segregation.

A step beyond cell groups is the mini-cell group, which promotes stronger relationships within the cell group. Each mini-cell consists of two or three people from the larger cell, who learn to grow and serve together especially in evangelism, visiting new believers, and joining together regularly in prayer and Bible study.



Aerial view—Bangkok.

Leadership and Discipleship Training

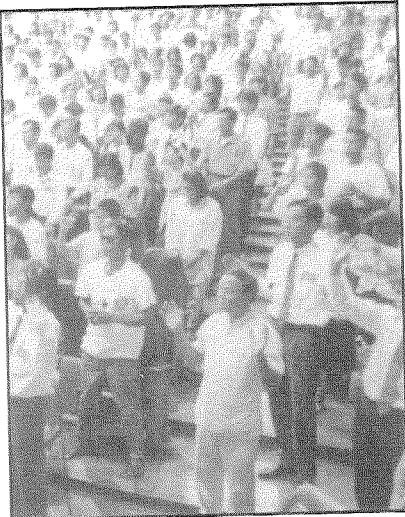
A convert is someone who has genuinely and biblically changed his mind Christ-ward. A true disciple is a convert who follows through on his conversion commitment by allowing his life to be changed to follow Christ all the way. A convert may sometimes slip back and be content in the comfort of knowing that he is redeemed and Christ is in his life, but a disciple desires to walk closer to God. He is willing to be biblically trained so that his life may be transformed into the likeness of Christ and to be involved in serving him.

Therefore, having new converts in a church is hardly sufficient for a biblically functioning church. The Hope of Bangkok stresses strong personal and corporate discipleship training, with a vision to see a church full of committed participants, and not merely spectators, in God's Kingdom.

Thais are accustomed to the idea

that religious devotion means to personally practice a religious teaching, with or without visiting the temple. Hence, they may only attend Buddhist temples a few times in their lives or perhaps not at all, though they call themselves Buddhists. This attitude often continues after conversion to Christ, which means that getting new converts to attend church can be a real struggle. We have to teach them immediately that Christianity is not simply a religion but a way of life, and that church attendance is not optional but mandatory for spiritual health, growth, and well-being.

Discipleship naturally leads to leadership training. The majority of the leaders at the Hope of Bangkok Church were converted and trained here, so perhaps our model of training new converts to become leaders within a relatively short period would be useful for church development and church planting elsewhere, especially in Christian minority and resistant areas.



Worship at Hope of Bangkok Church.

Discipleship Training

The Hope of Bangkok Church has strong one-to-one and group follow-up programs with a well-structured discipleship process following the initial nurturing. Apart from natural and personal shepherding, there are a variety of programs to enhance spiritual and ministerial development. When non-believers accept Christ into their lives, they are pursued through the church's follow-up system, which is cell group-oriented. On-the-job training, personal instruction, as well as the exercising of their gifts and talents promote maturity.

When they evidence sufficient maturity, these believers become cell group leaders. At this point, they join our "David's Mighty Men Groups," which are small discipleship groups led by their immediate pastoral leader. Character training, doctrinal teaching and ministry development schemes are some of the lessons taught in these

groups. Transferable teaching materials are written and taught from the top down to ensure that all levels of leadership are adequately and systematically trained. I, as the senior pastor, meet with area leaders once a week; they in turn meet with those under them. This tier system has enabled the pastoral care of these hundreds of leaders to be more personal and relational.

In a virtually "gospel-virgin" area with a relatively young church consisting mainly of new converts, this system has helped to prevent false doctrines from creeping in. In addition, the unity of the whole leadership has been strengthened.

Leadership Training

"The problem of the shortage of pastors and the lack of trained leaders is not only a temporary problem to the Thai churches but historically it has been a thorn in the flesh. The Thai churches and Christians have been brought up without trained pastors" (Kim 206). Strong church growth requires competent leaders. Thailand Bible Seminary was established by the Hope of Bangkok Church in June 1985 to offer four levels of training: School of Christian Life, School of Ministry, Bachelor of Theology and Master of Divinity. All these courses combine high level academic and biblical teaching with character development and practical training in discipleship. They also provide on the job ministerial training through the church's example and model of effective church growth and church planting. Leaders and potential leaders are trained with the sole aim of pioneering and leading strong, growing churches.

Over 400 leaders have completed this training. Most are either serving as leaders in daughter churches or have continued with advanced training at our seminary.

A unique aspect of Thailand Bible Seminary is that students are disciplined by various pastoral leaders, producing in-depth interaction between students and practicing church-mission leaders. In addition, the various levels of training can accommodate people of different educational backgrounds. Thirdly, the Hope of Bangkok Church becomes a "laboratory" for students to test their academic and theoretical input from lecturers, who are models of their teachings in real church life situations. Thailand Bible Seminary has grown very rapidly, making it a strategic and effective training ground for home grown leaders. Its motto sums up its purpose well: "Godly in Character, Depth in the Word, Effective in Ministry."

The second form of leadership training is more informal. I, as the senior pastor, meet with a group of selected and potential leaders to share Bible teachings, theological insights, concepts, and strategies in church work and missions. This close-knit group meets once a week. Such an opportunity has enabled leaders to share the burden for God's work. Strong leaders are raised up steadily as much emphasis is placed on this program.

Membership Participation

The Hope of Bangkok Church does not separate believers into "laity" and "clergy" distinctions. All believers are called to minister with their God-given gifts. In the past, the Christian church has put

forth very little effort to utilize the potential of the laity.

Clergy and laity distinction must be scrapped not only in our theological formulation but also in actuality. In fact I see no room for allowing the people to simply attend church and watch the performance of the "full time" chosen ones! All gifts must be employed for the advancement of God's Kingdom. This is clearly one definite concrete way to demonstrate the priesthood of all believers. There is no place for professional ministries in the church. All clergy must be laity and all laity must be clergy! God does not and never has called anyone to the "full time" ministry. There is none!

At least seventy-five per cent of our church attendants are actively involved in ministry at the Hope of Bangkok. Growing opportunities for church growth require effective programs to equip the membership to minister more effectively. Emphasis is made at our church that all should serve God to the fullest possible capacity. To serve God in the way that he has called us is to devote our whole being, work, home, time, possessions, etc. to service. If, while being employed in a secular job, time constraints prevent one from serving God effectively, then only should "full time" employed ministry be considered. At the moment, we have approximately fifty full-time staff in Bangkok and over one hundred altogether in Thailand. Volunteers are also a major component of church ministry at the Hope of Bangkok. They serve God with much vigor, strength, and vitality.

Much formal and informal biblical and practical training is given to the laity. To name just a few, interest clubs such as Artists, Evangelism, Radio Programs, Guitar, Drum and Drama draw people of the same interests together, to train and equip them to serve God.

Life Example, Sacrificial Spirit

In a survey of church members, the high level of lay participation was attributed to the life example and sacrificial spirit of the leadership. The life-style of the leadership has been challenging for the members.

The pastoral team consists of well-educated men and women, successful in their careers, who have chosen to forsake secular "success" to serve God in full-time capacity, with much lower pay. Some serve with no salary at all. This spirit of putting the Kingdom of God first has been passed on to the whole church body to the glory of God.

An example of this sacrificial spirit came when we were raising money for evangelistic needs. As a young church made up mostly of students, financial backing appeared almost impossible. I prayed about the need and shared it with our pastoral team, inviting each one to seek God personally in this matter. The burden was then passed on to the different levels of leadership and membership.

At the end of three months, 10 million Baht (approximately U.S. \$400,000) was raised (that was in 1986 when membership was around 1,000 and the annual average income per person in Thailand was U.S. \$750).

To fulfill the task of winning this nation to Christ, the leadership

sacrificially started off by selling their cars, houses, and valuable jewelry. Members had the same spirit. Life savings and many valuable items were pooled to participate in this exciting, God-honoring venture. God blessed the church as a whole through this sacrificial act.

Teaching and Preaching

Consistent expository preaching has been vital in the growth of our church. Balanced, systematic, structured preaching has enabled members to mature with a firm, biblical world view. Church members are taught to live holistically and balanced Christian lives. Expository preaching has also taught the church to realize the applicability of the Bible in real life situations.

Each Sunday there are four worship services in Thai, one in English and one in Chinese. Sixty different two-hour Bible study classes in our Christian Education program are offered either before or after regular worship service. At least sixty percent of church attendants study in these classes.

Worship, the Holy Spirit and Miracles

At the Hope of Bangkok Church, members are encouraged to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them during worship and their daily lives to express their love and gratitude to God. Spontaneous worship and orderly functioning of the gifts of the Holy Spirit have drawn members closer to God. Signs and wonders are performed by the Holy Spirit, especially through members laying hands on one another in prayer. These experiences confirm

in people's hearts that God is powerful and still free to work today.

In a country where even nonbelievers believe in miracles by supernatural power, signs and wonders through the God of the Bible have partially contributed to the significant growth of this church. This is reflected in the innumerable verifiable testimonies that members share about God's healing power and answered prayers. The joyful, expressive, lively, contagious, victorious praise and celebration in our worship services is an important aspect of the Hope of Bangkok. They remind people that God is alive and in our midst. For fun-loving Thais, this has added to the "fun" of coming to church. God loves his people to rejoice before him, and so do we!

Conclusion

Though this movement is only seven years old, God has used it to effect his work in this nation in a spectacular way. More life and vigor has entered into the Thai church. Tapes of sermons, teachings, and worship choruses from the Hope of Bangkok have influenced a large proportion of Thai churches. Many of the strategies and methods of the Hope of Bangkok have been used by other churches and have brought about visible changes.

We cannot boast or be contented with the present level of growth, as much is yet to be done. We have

hardly scratched the surface yet. We can only say that the strategies applied have been meticulously spelled out for us by the Lord of the Church, and to him be the glory in his church both now and forevermore. Amen!

Endnotes

¹This is a figure reported by Reverend Charan Ratanabuttra, chairman of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand in the *Asia Christian* newspaper, March 1988, p. 8. A common problem in compiling figures from various missions is that one believer is counted by two (or more) missions due to unreliable membership rolls. My own guess is that active church attendance of Protestants in Thailand does not exceed 25,000.

²See details of the vision of the Hope of Bangkok Church in, for example: 1)Summary of Charoenwongsak, Kriengsak's message given at a plenary session at Lausanne Pastor's Consultation, in *World Evangelization*, A bi-monthly Magazine of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Vol. 15, No. 52 May-June 1988 pp. 30-32.

2)An article, "Lessons from the East" in *People of Destiny* magazine, January-February, 1987 pp. 6-10. 3)An article, "Church that Won't Stop Growing" in *Renewal* magazine, No. 134, July 1987, pp. 6-11.

³Quoted from McGavran, Donald, found in Wagner, Peter (With Win Arn and Elmer Towns), *op. cit.* p. 17. For detailed exposition of this concept, see also the seminal book by McGavran, Donald, *Understanding Church Growth*.

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