

A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THAI LEADERSHIP STYLE WITH APPLICATION TO CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP MODELS AND CHURCH GOVERNANCE IN THAILAND

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Abstract

Although some research studies have been conducted on Thai leadership styles, a survey of the literature on the subject reveals that these studies have not been applied to the Christian churches in Thailand. This short review of the literature shows that the preferred leadership style of Thai people is changing from the traditional authoritarian leadership style to a consultative leadership style. However, American and other international church denominations in Thailand continue to favor their own non-Thai governance systems over the more natural Thai church governance structures. I contend that this is detrimental to church growth and, based on the literature, I make several suggestions for mission agencies striving to indigenize Thai church leadership structures.

Introduction

As a missionary of my denomination in Thailand, I recently participated in the implementation of a new national governance structure for the national church. In a national convention, bylaws were approved and a new national board and national president were elected for the denomination in Thailand.

The nationalization or indigenization of the national church by the implementation of a constitutional structure and elected leadership is often the goal of American denominational mission agencies. The government and leadership structure is often similar, if not exactly the same, as the American denominational government structure. It is a good intension and worthy goal to create a self-sustaining, self-governing, and self-propagating indigenous church organization that is no longer dependent on missionaries or missionary organizations. However, during the process, several questions were raised in my mind. While consulting with other missionaries who were in the same process, both within and outside my organization, I found that they, too, had the same concerns.

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Is the governing structure we are leaving our “indigenous” church a natural one, or is it actually an unnatural governance structure that we are imposing on the indigenous church? During the colonial era, Western powers often imposed Western governance structures on their colonies. After the colonial powers left, government structures often fell apart, leading to disastrous circumstances. I am not saying that mission agencies are a colonizing force, but there is a similarity. We often want to create a governance structure that is similar to our own because we believe our structure is biblical and the best leadership structure for the Christian church. However, are we making the same mistake as the colonial powers? Is our leadership structure the best for that cultural situation? While elections are often held as a way to legitimize authority, power in Asia is often held by elders or an oligarchy. I use the term “oligarchy” not in a pejorative manner, but as an expression of a traditional governing structure that is accepted throughout most of Asia. Elders are seen as experienced, wise, and able to lead. This oligarchical structure can be beneficial to the country, as it has been in Singapore, or disastrous, as it was in Myanmar. Historical precedence aside, we still come back to the same question. Are we really helping the church sustain itself by imposing Western governance models on non-Western churches? What would a truly indigenous leadership structure look like? What would a truly indigenous Christian leadership structure look like in Thailand?

Purpose of this Review

This review of the literature seeks to discern the preferred leadership style of the people in Thailand. Literature related to leadership in Thailand will be examined and analyzed to see if our Western forms of governance and leadership are natural for Thai churches. From this study I would propose further research questions for greater understanding of this topic. It is hoped that this limited study of Thai leadership models can help denominational leaders consider multiple models of indigenous church and denominational leadership structures. Further research could be conducted to see how these constructs might be applied across the region.

Biblical Leadership Models

Daniel Wallace (1999), of Dallas Theological Seminary, contends that the biblical model of church leadership is a multiple eldership. “The argument from scripture is in fact so strong that most commentators today assume it” (p. 1). Wallace argues that there is no distinction between the Greek terms for presbyter (πρεσβύτερος) and bishop (ἐπίσκοπος). The New Testament uses these terms interchangeably. For example, in the first chapter of Titus, Paul commands Titus to “appoint elders” (Titus 1:5). Immediately following that, Titus is told that such bishops “must be blameless.” In other words, the elder is equated with the bishop. They are one and not separate leadership roles (Wallace, 1999).

Furthermore, the New Testament record seems to indicate that each local church had more than one leader or elder (Acts 11:30; Acts 14:23; Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; Acts 16:4; Acts 20:17, 28; Acts 21:18). Wallace contends that the biblical model is in line with the team model of leadership. Furthermore, we see that the greater church structure was flat as well. From the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) until the fifth century, decision making for the larger church body was done exclusively through councils without any single bishopric taking precedent. This was changed with the Roman claim to primacy by Pope Leo I (440-461 CE). According to Northouse

(2013), effective teams “lead to many desirable outcomes” (p. 364). Leadership by teams can produce greater productivity, adjust quickly to changing environments, create greater innovation, and be more effective at problem solving than traditional leadership structures.

However, others have argued that the biblical model calls for a single leader or episcopal structure. Sutton (2009) writes, “Undoubtedly the strongest argument for Bishops is the fact that the Apostle Paul at the end of his ministry tells individuals, Timothy and Titus, to appoint Presbyters (Titus 1:6). Why doesn't he give this directive to the Presbytery?” (p. 77). In other words, Paul has individuals as appointed elders in the church. Timothy and Titus acted as single bishops with authority, not as a plurality of elders.

Also, in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7, the word “bishop” is singular, while the Greek “deacons” (διάκονος) is plural. Those who support episcopal leadership will also make other arguments. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, there is only one angel over each church. It is argued that the angel may refer to a single elder or pastor who watches over the church. Also in 2 John chapter 1 and 3 John chapter 1, John refers to himself as the “elder.” Perhaps he means that he is the sole elder or pastor over this congregation. Sutton's (2009) argument and the argument from Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus make a much stronger argument than the appeal in the books at the end of the New Testament.

Church historian Bruce Guenter and theologian Doug Heidebrecht (1999) note that “a tour of church history reveals that different circumstances and cultural situations gave rise to a variety of leadership models within the church, all of which claim to be based on the NT [New Testament]” (p. 156). These scholars assert that the church faced many cross-cultural challenges and adjusted accordingly. The early church father Irenaeus promoted apostolic succession, or a more episcopal model, in order to protect the truth of the gospel from gnostic heretics. However, this model was not universally accepted (Guenter & Heidebrecht, 1999). By the sixth century, a fully hierarchical leadership model had been established in the church. Yet, a brief examination of church history shows that leadership models differed and varied depending on time, situation, and cultural conditions. Today, we have many different church leadership and governance models that all claim some justifications from Scripture.

According to the respected New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd (1974), “It appears likely that there was no normative pattern of church government in the apostolic age, and that the organizational structure of the church is no essential element in the theology of the church” (p. 534). Therefore, we might say that accountability is essential in church leadership, but structure is not. This was reflected in the multiple elder format of the early church. However, the church did adjust the leadership structure according to the culture, in holidays, eating habits, dress styles, and even liturgical language. The Bible was translated into Latin, Coptic, and other languages to promote expansion of the church.

Cultural Studies Related to Thai Leadership Styles

Despite the belief of most Americans that liberal democracy is the best form of government, non-democratic views abound in most of the world. Wit Wisadavet (2003), argues that “democracy is not the ideal social system according to Buddhism” (p. 169), which the religious and cultural construct of Thailand. Buddhist teaching promotes the ideal of a righteous dictator. This is an

idea advocated in many Asian societies, including Singapore, Malaysia, and China. Not everyone in Asia agrees, but it is a view held by at least a plurality.

According to historian Meic Pearse (2004) and Mark Thompson (2004), democracy is often perceived as too chaotic. Asian cultures and many other non-Western cultures prefer stability and safety over freedom and democracy. Since the establishment of the first constitution in 1932, Thailand has had twenty different foundational documents. Even now, in 2016, Thailand is writing yet another constitution. That is an average of one new constitution every four years. Votes and constitutions are often promoted as ways to gain legitimacy in the eyes of Western powers, not as something beneficial to the country. Presently, Thailand has a military government. A large population supports this military government because of the peace and stability it brings.

The following are samples of studies conducted on governance structures related to the style of Thai leadership.

Schwartz Study

In a study conducted by Israeli sociologist Shalom Schwartz (1999), Thailand was found to favor a hierarchical structure, which reflects toleration for an unequal distribution of power. Thailand also has a very conservative culture, with high respect for tradition and social order. These findings were consistent with an even earlier examination of culture and business by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997).

Hofstede Appraisals

According to Hofstede Centre (The Hofstede Center, n.d.), Thailand is culturally different from Western countries on many levels. Thailand culture is much more collective, while Western culture is more individualistic. Thai people value long-term relationships and commitments to the group. Loyalty to group, family, and friends are very important. These loyalties often take precedence over societal laws, rules, and regulations. However, as a high “uncertainty avoidance” people, Thai people also favor clear laws and regulations. These rules help people avoid confrontation when they know where the limits are. It was found that Thai people rank high in femininity, which means that they are less competitive or assertive in relationships and business. Thailand is a high-power distance country. Thai people accept inequality between superiors and subordinates. The Hofstede Centre summarizes it as an acceptance of a high degree of centralization and autocratic leadership.

The GLOBE study

House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) have studied the relationship between culture and leadership. Their findings have been published in *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*. The GLOBE study groups Thailand with a South Asia cluster of similar cultures. This cluster includes the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Iran. “These countries exhibited high scores on humane orientation and in-group collectivism” (Northouse, 2013, p. 439). And humane orientation is defined as having a high value on community and social support. These countries “demonstrate strong family loyalty and deep concern for their communities” (p. 439). These traits will be exemplified in leadership

orientation and structure.

According to Northouse (2013), the GLOBE results show that South Asia countries “believe leaders who tend to be autocratic are more effective than those who lead by inviting others into the decision-making process” (p. 446). Accordingly, Thailand and countries within the cluster “find participative leadership ineffective” (Northouse, 2013, p. 446). Leadership tends to be “self-centered, status conscious, ... face saving, and procedural” (p. 440). At the same time, and incredibly contradictory, this cluster group of nations and cultures feel that “effective leadership is collaborative, inspirational, sensitive to people’s needs, and concerned with status and face saving” (Northouse, 2013, p. 446). Why is there such a stark conflict here? Is it a difference between how leaders lead and what followers desire? Is the culture changing so rapidly that we see these conflicting results in the study?

Research on Thai Leadership Models

Thai researcher Vimolwan Yukongdi (2010) notes that there is a dearth of literature specifically focused on Thai management and leadership. Furthermore, there has been no thorough study of Thai leadership styles or effectiveness in Thai Christian churches. All we can look at is the present scholarship on leadership styles in secular arenas.

Beginning with an early study, Suntaree Komin (1990a, 1990b) conducted a study on Thai work-related values. Her results have been widely cited and repeated. The following values are listed as a continuum of importance from high to low.

1. Ego orientation
2. Grateful relationship orientation
3. Smooth interpersonal relationship orientation
4. Flexibility and adjustment orientation
5. Religious-psychical orientation
6. Education and competence orientation
7. Interdependence orientation
8. Fun-pleasure orientation
9. Achievement-task orientation (Komin 1990b, p. 691)

Interpreting this list, Komin (1990b) claims that “Thai people have big egos and a deep sense of independence, pride and dignity. Violation of this ‘ego’ self, even a slight one, can provoke strong emotional reactions, despite the well-known description of the Thai as being gentle, ever-smiling, non-aggressive and affable” (p. 691). Thai people want to “save face” and avoid giving or receiving any kind of criticism.

Thai people also have a high value on reciprocal relationship. In the Thai language this is referred to as “bunkhun” ((บุญคุณ). It forms the basis of the patron-client relationship structure found in Thailand. The superior provides and cares for the client (employee, church member, family member, etc.). In return, the client remains loyal to the patron and serves the patron’s needs. It is a psychological bond that can be expressed in positive and negative ways.

Thai people avoid conflicts through non-assertiveness and outward politeness which includes displays of humility. This is an outward expression to avoid conflicts and does not necessarily

contradict the true ego orientation noted above.

Thai people are very flexible and they value personal relationship over principles, rules, and even laws. Being polite and flexible are valued over honesty in expressing feelings or thoughts. Thai people are also very much tied to a supernatural worldview of fatalism and superstitions. Even government decisions are often made after consulting a medium or fortune teller (Satrusayang, 2015).

Education is seen as a means to social status and not as a value in and of itself. Thai people are interdependent and do not value independence or independent decision making. Thai people prefer fun to hard work most of the time. This does not mean that Thai people do not work hard, but that work must also be seen as fun. Therefore, the leader must provide a fun environment for work. Finally, social relationships are valued over task completion. Thus, leaders in Thailand need to be aware of these factors, especially foreign leaders (Pimpa, 2009, Pimpa & Moore, 2012).

Philip Hallinger and Kantamara, in the conclusion of a research study on leadership, found that the Thai public sector favors a central control system of leadership (Hallinger and Kantamara, 2001). This might come from Buddhism which has deep roots in Thailand, and its belief that strong central leadership is key to harmony and peace in Thai society. Hallinger and Kantamara (2001) also found that Thai people are collectivists. Leadership that focuses on the group rather than on the individual is most effective.

Another research project studied Japanese management in Thailand (Raoprasert, & Zeidan, 2006). They found that Thai employees were hesitant to express their opinions or to be involved in decision making. These traits were a significant barrier to creating effective teams.

Kamila Baczek (2013) had a more positive assessment of Thai leadership. She believed that “Thai leaders possess similar characteristics as any other global leaders” (p. 9). However, she asserted that there are “extra dimensions necessary to become an effective leader in Thailand. When entering leadership roles, Thai leaders need to hold on to the old traditions in order to have a mix of both effective Western practices and important Thai values. Maintaining healthy, strong relationships and traditions plays a significant role in Thai society” (p. 9). Again, the concept of *bunghun* is mentioned. A full understanding of one’s position and cultural obligations is needed to navigate Thai leadership responsibilities if one is to become an effective Thai leader. The leader is expected to show kindness and generosity to the worker. The worker is to work hard, but also to show gratitude to the leader. The key factor in effective leadership, according to Baczek (2013), is for the leader to show understanding and give respect to the worker. Special attention must be made to networking and building relationships.

Patron-Client Model

The downside of Thai leadership is a lack of creativity within Thai organizations. One of the possible reasons for this is the ingrained tradition of the patron-client relationship and a deference to seniority. (Baczek, 2013). Thai cultural anthropologist, Chai Podhisita (1985) noted that the patron-client cultural construct is ingrained at a young age:

A significant part of socialization is oriented toward making the young learn appropriate behavior to deal with it [client-patron social structure]. In particular, they are taught to recognize the difference between high and low status "*thi sung thi tam*" (literally "high place" and "low place") and the behavior appropriate to each. Those who do not recognize and conform to the norm of behavior of "*thi sung thi tam*" are frowned upon and disliked in society (p. 32).

The patron-client construct was codified by King Trailok in the fifteenth century. The king organized all citizens according to ranks (Wyatt, 1984). This ranking was based on numbers. Each person in society was given a ranking according to their position in society.

Ordinary peasant freemen were given a *sakdi na* of 25, slaves were ranked 5, craftsmen employed in government service 50, and petty officials from 50 to 400. At the *sakdi na* rank of 400 began the bureaucratic nobility, the *khunnang*, whose members ranged from the heads of minor departments at a *na* of 400 to the highest ministers of state, who enjoyed a rank of 10,000. The upper levels of nobility ranked with the junior members of the royal family and most princes ranked above them, up to the heir-apparent, whose rank was 100,000. In the exhaustive laws of Trailok's reign, which read like a directory of the entire society, every possible position and status is ranked and assigned a designation of *sakdi na*, thus specifying everyone's relative position. (Wyatt, 1984, p. 73).

The patron client structure is incorporated into the Thai language. "In Thai society, language is not structured by gender (he, she, it), but by status. A person's relative status to another person determines the pronouns or titles one would use to address that person. Not to use the correct address is to commit a social blunder that could have consequences (Hilderbrand, 2016). When meeting someone for the first time, it is not uncommon to ask that person questions about his age, status, and education. Once the relative position is established, an appropriate relationship can be developed and each person can be addressed properly, according to his rank and status in society.

More Recent Studies

Wattanasupachoke (2006) conducted a study on leaders' self-understanding of leadership style. According to the study, Thai business executives focus on harmony and unity. They are concerned with teamwork and wish to enhance the image of their firms with moral and ethical standards. They also strive to be socially responsible. While the study may legitimately express the desires of Thai leaders, it is not sure that we could find real answers to problems with a survey of self-perception.

Dr. Yongkondi (2010) took a better approach in studying the preferred leadership styles of the followers. Yongkondi (2010) examined four leadership styles: "autocratic (tells), paternalistic/persuasive (sells), consultative (consults) or participative (consensus)" (p. 166).

The study started with the hypothesis that "A larger proportion of employees will prefer either an autocratic, a paternalistic, or a participative manager, while few employees will favor a consultative manager" (p. 167). This fits what earlier literature predicted.

However, the results were startling:

The results indicated that nearly half of the employees preferred a consultative manager (47%), followed by a participative manager (42%). A smaller number of employees preferred a paternalistic manager (10%), while an even smaller proportion preferred an autocratic manager (1%) (Yokongdi, 2010, p. 174).

Newer studies give evidence that managers in Thailand appear to be adopting more consultative styles of leadership as well. In the construction industry, a transformational leadership style was found to be more frequently adopted than a transactional style (Limsila, & Ogunlana 2007). Thai managers with high emotional intelligence are more open to changing their leadership styles and to delegating (Sunindijo, Hadikusumo, & Ogunlana, 2007). It also appears that younger managers are changing their leadership styles to be more flexible to the needs of workers (Ralston, Hallinger, Egri, & Naothinsuhk, 2005).

However, is this simply an educated, urban phenomenon? It would appear not. The subjects of Yokongdi's study (2010) were employees in manufacturing, not urban elites. This is an indication that new leadership values are rising among people of lower ranks (Yokondi, 2010).

Thai Christian Leadership

Historically, the Christian church in Thailand was established on the traditional patron-client model. Moving from this model to a more Western model of governance has usually been disastrous for church growth. Daniel McGilvary (1828-1911) famed missionary to Thailand, built a strong Christian movement in Northern Thailand by adhering to the traditional patron-client model of leadership. This was the first significant Christian movement in Thailand. The organization created by this movement, Church of Christ in Thailand, is still the largest Christian organization to date. McGilvary understood the cultural situation and became a client of the commissioner of Chiang Mai. He then operated as the patron of the Christian churches of Northern Thailand.

Growth in that region was constant until the imposition of a Western model of governance in 1895. Anthropologist Edwin Zener (1987) noted that the growth of the church was rapid until a Western polity based on American democratic principles replaced the traditional patron-client Thai structure of governance. Churches and churches members were expected to submit to elected committees instead of an elder who had earned the respect of the people. OMF missionary Stephen Taylor (1997) commented that, "it was unfortunate that a western democratic system was introduced rather than a biblical one" (p. 103).

Most denominational churches in Thailand teach courses on polity that reflect their own history and structure. But these courses seldom reflect on what foreign factors present in the polity and how adjustments should be made to make it fit the Thai culture.

Then, what kind of leadership style might best fit the Thai Christian context? Ideally it should be a Thai Christian leadership style that is biblical, culturally acceptable, and effective in making disciples and managing the church. So, what would it really look like?

Analysis

Looking over these studies, and reflecting on my 17 years of experience in Thailand, I agree with Kamila Baczek (2013) that “Thai leaders possess similar characteristics as any other global leaders” (p. 9). In other words, Thai leaders are as capable as leaders of other cultures, but they must be able to manage complex cultural expectations. Recent research indicates that Thai followers want to be consulted before leaders make decisions. They want to be heard and respected.

Leadership Models

According to Limsila and Ogunlana (2007), transformational leadership styles are being applied more commonly. A transactional approach would fit a patron-client form of leadership, but so would transformational leadership. According to Northouse (2016), the transformational leader “is more attentive to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their fullest potential” (p. 162).

This fits well with the findings of Yokongdi (2010) that employees preferred managers, and by implication leaders, who were consultative, and care about what followers think and feel. It fits the leadership styles that emphasize consultative leadership, such as servant leadership theory, adaptive leadership theory, path goal theory, etc. However, Yokondi’s findings do not necessarily imply that a team approach would work in Thailand. Culturally, Thai people still favor a strong leader, but desire a leader who cares for the followers. In other words, this fits into the non-democratic model of Wisadavet (2003) of “democracy is not the ideal social system according to Buddhism” (p. 169).

Yokongdi’s (2010) results seem to indicate that people do not want a father figure as much as they want a leader who listens to the needs of the followers. Fathers are not always right, so the leader must take into account the opinions and feelings of the followers.

This means that Thai church leadership should not be as dictatorial as it has been in the past. Elders must listen to their followers and make adjustments accordingly. Thai Christians will no longer follow their pastor simply because he or she is the pastor. Leadership is earned through a model of care. The leader must be concerned for the needs of church members, applying a transformational or servant-leader model of leadership that takes into account the thoughts of the followers.

Several years ago, a local missionary taught a congregation how to hear God’s voice. Regardless of our theological leanings on this issue, the missionary was implying that each member of the congregation could get their own direction from God through prayer. The pastor of that church was furious at the teaching. He even attempted to make this missionary lose his visas. In this pastor’s opinion, God speaks to the pastor, and the pastor speaks to the congregation. The pastor believes that it is the job of the congregation to listen and to obey the pastor. This church was not a fringe group; it was a member of a very large and well-known denomination. This incident shows that dictatorial church management is not uncommon in Thailand.

The incident also indicates that dictatorial style is no longer an effective model of leadership. In the past, the most successful churches applied a “shepherding” model of leadership. Within this model members were controlled by church leaders. Relationships inside and outside the church

were tightly controlled so that people would grow in holiness. Dating was controlled, travel and employment choice were also controlled. Weekly activities were structured so that members would spend most of their time in church activities and stay away from things that could distract them from holiness.

The goal was worthy, and the structure brought discipline into the lives of many who needed that. The closeness of the group created a new family that often replaced the old family that rejected them when they left Buddhism. It was a model that worked for many decades and brought great growth to these groups. It was an effective model.

However, culture has changed and these denominations are losing control over their members. One large Christian group has recently split into several smaller groups. There were many reasons for the division, but one cause was that members and lower level leadership no longer tolerated absolute control.

What does this mean for the Thai Christian church? Adjustments must be made. Leadership style must change. This does not mean that Western models of leadership should be applied in all cases or unilaterally. It does mean that more consultative, and in some cases, depending on the situation, participatory leadership should be applied in a culturally appropriate manner.

Governance Models

No form of government or style of leadership is perfect if the people filling that role do not have the appropriate character (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). As John Adams noted, even a democracy will only work if the people leading the government do so morally, because “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other” (Adams, 1848, pp. 266).

However, when transitioning church leadership from a missionary-led model to an indigenous model, Western organizations should not be quick to conform their model church governance after their own Western denominational models. Using the aforementioned studies as guidelines, I would like to offer the following suggestions.

1. The age-old patron-client system should not be considered inferior. In fact, it might be the best governance model for the Thai church and social system. Followers are not looking for a paternal leader (Yokongdi, 2010), instead, they are looking for a sponsor or a patron who will help them succeed. This is why the transformational leadership model is being adopted by secular organizations in Thailand (Limsila & Ogunlana, 2007). A truly “Christian” patron will listen to the concerns and needs of the clients and lead accordingly. He will also look after the welfare and needs of the clients. Furthermore, the patron is interested in developing the gifts or skills of the client in order to better expand the kingdom of God. Servant-leader and other models fit into this mold. It is not just a transactional relationship that is wanted; the leader must work for the good of the organization (Kingdom of God). Nor is it a dependency model only; it is an interdependency model where the leader and the followers both benefit from the relationship in the traditional Thai model of care and loyalty.

Issues of money often come into the patron-client model. The model is not based on money. However, a leader or elder board must have the resources to care for the members of the church,

and the matter of money does need to be taken into account. A quick transition to an indigenous church that rapidly decreases support is not wise. I have found the best way forward is to move from a model of direct support to a model that uses financial resources to train, plant churches, and provide emergency support when needed, including medical help, tuition support for children, retirement accounts, etc.

Furthermore, a leader must have the status to lead. Larry Persons (2016) recently published an excellent study on Thai “face” and leadership. He points out that in Thai society leaders must have enough cultural prestige and status to be considered as leader. Status comes from financial resources, education, outward appearance, and family status. It will be difficult to lead a national movement if the leader has no status in society, or if he comes from a tribal or lower class family. Pastors must have not only moral status but also enough Thai cultural status to be leaders in their communities. This may be difficult for Westerners to understand, but it is an accepted axiom in Thailand.

2. Unelected elder boards are also not illegitimate or unbiblical. A system of checks and balances needs to be considered, but election may not be the answer. Elections sometimes produce more heat than light. Election should be held only when it is appropriate and accepted by members of the organization. There should also be clear guidelines about who can vote. Universal suffrage may not be culturally appropriate or wise in every situation. This may sound like heresy to the Western ear, but it is common sense to the Thai people. We must ask, “What are the qualifications to be eligible to vote?”

3. Multiplying the number of committees and boards is not necessarily effective or necessary. It may have the appearance of participatory leadership, if decisions are not really made by the boards and committees. Then the structure is only for show and not truly indigenous.

4. A succession model should be put in place. Leaders do not always prepare for the future. The best thing a Western denominational leader can do for an indigenous church is to help them set up a procedure for replacing a leader when the time comes. This can be done through an internship program in which potential successors learn from and work with the present leader.

5. A culturally appropriate and face saving system should be put in place to remove immoral leaders, even the most powerful ones. Without it, power can become dangerous.

6. Term limits sound like a check on power, but in a culture that values elders and wisdom, term limits can cause confusion and shame. It might also become a hindrance to growth.

Conclusion

What would a truly indigenous and effective church governance structure look like? I don’t know. More research needs to be done. The first step is to look at what we know, and we know so little. People have made so many assumptions about Thai society. Yet, culture changes, expectations change, and the Thai society is changing. The church needs to lead the way by demonstrating effective moral leadership.

I once heard a startling admission by a Thai Buddhist that “The Christian church is protecting Thai culture.” The Christian churches promote modesty in dress style, chastity, respect for

elders, and family values, while the Thai culture in general is drifting away from traditional values. The Christian church can lead the way by promoting a Thai cultural model of leadership that corresponds to what the Thais believe to be the best model of leadership, led by a patron-client/elder through whom to build a church family that cares for its followers. Such leadership will help the churches fulfill the Great Commission of making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus taught (Matthew 18:19-20).

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