

**CHURCH PLANTING IN THE SLUMS OF BANGKOK:
MOVING FROM A MISSIONARY DEPENDENCY MODEL
TO A VULNERABLE MISSION MODEL**

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Abstract

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

Introduction

Is it possible for a missionary family to change the underlying philosophy of their ministry? Can one move from a building-centered, cell church structured, and missionary-directed church planting ministry to a house church approach, where each location is owned by the nationals and the missionary works alongside the leaders in the developing groups? This is the story of one couple that wrestled with a good deal of soul-searching, disappointment, and

decline, but after making the decision to become an empowering missionary to the slums of Bangkok, God turned a ministry around.

The BGC in Thailand: Beginnings and Building to the Initial Team 1989-1993

In America there are over thirty different Baptist denominations. These groups all have unique histories—some were formed for doctrinal reasons, some for polity and still others for organizational structure. There are several that are made up of almost entirely African-Americans, and others trace their heritage back to a particular homeland including Germany, Russia, and Sweden. This case study comes from the Swedish Baptists, the Baptist General Conference (BGC), now known as Converge. This denomination has about 950 churches and 194,000 members in the United States. Traditionally they had missionaries in Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Ethiopia, India, Philippines and Japan. Their unified budget was a constraint on expansion, and prevented expansion to the point that potential qualified and fully trained missionary candidates in their churches waited to be selected as missionaries, but with a lack of any extra funds in the central budget, the denomination was unable to expand. Often, members in their churches joined other mission agencies after realizing that there was no possibility to work under the BGC. However, over the late 1970s and early 1980s the structure of the mission moved from a unified budget to personalized support which gave the denomination's mission the ability to plan for expansion to new fields and new ministries in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. New missionary candidates are able to draw personalized support from multiple churches, family, and friends even outside the denomination. Today the mission continues to grow.

In 1981 Pastor Phaitoon Hathamart returned to the US to begin studying for his Master of Divinity degree at Bethel Seminary. He went on to complete his Doctor of Ministry degree in

1988. Pastor Hathamart and his wife and three daughters lived together in an apartment in Bethel Seminary Village.¹ His daughter, Nopaluck completed her Master of Arts degree at Bethel Seminary and then did her Masters in English Literature at the University of Minnesota. In addition, at Bethel Seminary, Nopaluck met Steve Cable, a pastor's son from Pennsylvania. God brought the two of them together, bound with a vision for reaching Thailand.² While in Minnesota, Pastor Hathamart worked with a church among Laotian immigrants that met at Bethlehem Baptist Church. This work was originally started by Florence Martin, a retired C&MA missionary in the late 1970s.³ After Pastor Hathamart returned to Thailand, he started a church, "*Santisuk*"⁴ of Bangkok, where he continues to be the senior pastor. In 1988, Steve Cable took over pasturing the Laotian group upon Dr. Hathamart's return to Thailand, and helped to officially organize and establish the Laotian Church of Peace which was welcomed into the Baptist General Conference in 1990 as a daughter church of Bethlehem Baptist Church.⁵

God brought two other young adults together who each had a heart for missions. Kevin Walton was the nephew of Elizabeth Walton who served as a career missionary with the Baptist Christian Mission in India under the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society (CBFMS) for several decades. Kevin went to Nagapur to test the waters of missions. Kevin's future wife, Cynthia, served with Adventures in Missions (AIM) in the Philippines where she also learned more of her heart's desire. Both Kevin and Cynthia experienced ministry to the poor, which later was to become the focal direction of their ministry. After returning from overseas, the two married and went to Bethel Seminary. They became part of Calvary Baptist Church in Roseville,

¹ Email from Steve Cable, February 29, 2012.

² Interview with Steve and Nopaluck Cable in Bangkok, Thailand May 2011.

³ Email from Steve Cable, February 29, 2012.

⁴ *Santisuk* means peace

⁵ Email from Steve Cable, February 29, 2012.

MN and worked in their Hmong congregation. Again while working with refugees, their hearts were burdened for the poor. While at Bethel Seminary, they both met Pastor Hathamart and his family. A friendship formed between the Waltons and the Cables, and they saw a vision of serving in Thailand together.⁶

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

In 1990 the two missionary couples arrived in Bangkok and plunged into language study. Nopaluck had no need of language school and kept very busy with a small child at home. The Cables and Walton's worked their first three years⁷ with the Peace of Bangkok Church as a practical internship while mastering the language. As the two young couples worked under Nopaluck's bi-lingual father and went through the language acquisition process, the team formed strong bonds with the culture, the language, and each other.⁸

Working Together with Two Visions for Bangkapi District of Bangkok, Thailand 1994-2002

With the first phase of language learning, cultural acquisition, and adaptation, and the affirming internship working under Pastor Hathamart, the Cables, Waltons, and their growing families chose to plant a cell church in a north-east district of Bangkok called Bangkapi. The Waltons had a vision for reaching the urban poor and the Cables for reaching the Thai through

⁶ Interview with Kevin and Cynthia Walton in Bangkapi, Thailand May 2011.

⁷ Email from Steve Cable, February 29, 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

teaching English and other means. A cell group structure was a practical selection, as it would make it possible for small groups to develop among acquaintances and then reach out to touch lives from their own personal contacts. In time it became very natural for a group to be made of urban poor who worked in the area, and another cell group focused entirely on university students. Like the first church where the missionaries interned under Pastor Hathamart, it too took on the name “*Santisuk*” Peace Community Church. Under Kevin’s help, the new church was able to eventually acquire a lease on a building that was located on a side-street off of Ladprao, a major boulevard. It was not far from a large central commercial center, the Bangkapi Mall, and only a short distance from many bus routes and the Water Taxi. As the group grew, the Cables helped to acquire a neighboring attached multi-story unit and the members worked at taking down some non-support walls, always working on making room for growth. A third unit was also leased and added to the structure.⁹

Kevin Walton pointed out that the two missionary couples chose a structure for Santisuk Community Church that was based on small groups formed from their personal contacts using relationships as the natural strategy for outreach and evangelism.¹⁰ As the church grew, new cell

⁹ My first visit to Santisuk Community Church was in February, 1998 with a group of Northwestern College students over a 2 month overseas missions internship. After a month in India, my students and I visited Bangkapi for a week. The female students stayed in the facility on the top floor of their building sleeping in sleeping bags on the floor of their computer classroom and in their video/movie room. They had to get up early as the first classes were at 7:00 a.m. The men on the team stayed with two staff members in a very basic apartment across the street on the same street. At that time they were trying to teach English, Computers, and doing what they could to reach the student world of nearby Ramkhamhaeng University, one of the two open universities in Thailand. There are over 600,000 students (http://www.iis.ru.ac.th/IIS/RU_about.htm). In addition, the outreach to the urban poor was developing. I subsequently visited Santisuk Community Church in 1999 and 2000. In 1999, our housing was in a guest house “The Mansion” for young workers in studio apartments. My students helped with teaching English and general outreach to the community. With each visit we saw the church grow both in students/young adults and also among the urban poor. By the time of the second visit in 1999, a second narrow, multi-story unit was acquired next to the original property, non-supporting walls were taken down, and the facility was continually filled. The twin congregations—students and poor worked together but there was little breathing room.

¹⁰ Walton Interview, May 26, 2011.

groups started. Using relationships as a key for evangelism, the cell groups grew and the church developed ministries with children and youth.

Nopaluck wanted to open a language school registered with the ministry of education. It could not be called a “school” until recognized by the government. Its unrecognized status could pose a potential difficulty for the long-term stability of the “English Center.” Complaints from unsatisfied students and others could close down an unrecognized English Center, especially one of its size, as it was reaching nearly 100 students every month and might have drawn the attention of supervising officials. Nopaluck Cable wanted the operation to succeed and worked tirelessly through all the red tape and government channels until one day in September 2003, official recognition by the Thai government transformed the operation into the Santisuk English School. Christians advised Nopaluck not to register the school with the Thai government using their Bible-based curriculum as they believed the Thai government would never approve a Bible-oriented curriculum.¹¹ Nopaluck did not get discouraged when one of the Christian leaders said, “Don’t include the Bible or you might have to be declared as a religious school.”¹²

Kevin and Cynthia had a heart for the urban poor and wanted to develop programs that would reach out to this group using a micro-loan program, a short-lived day care center, and even a shop selling some unique products like shoe repair materials for the poor.¹³ Steve and Nopaluck started their English Center and a computer school. From the start of the Santisuk Community Church, the vision of the two different target groups was to be complementary, with

¹¹ Email from Steve Cable, February 29, 2012.

¹² Walton Interview, May 26, 2011.

¹³ Shoe repairmen had to travel to a distant part of Bangkok for supplies which was quite expensive. Santisuk Community Church opened a small shop selling shoe repair supplies. This has helped the church to identify with the working poor in the area who would otherwise have to travel to a distant part of the city for supplies. The shop employs a member of the church.

each reaching different segments of society, but because of the limitation of adequate space, they were also competitive ministries.

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

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

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

On September 2, 2002, Peace Fellowship Church moved to Ladprao 97 and held a dedication service on September 6. Their membership included eighteen Thai and eight foreigners, twenty-four of the original members formed the new church.¹⁴ Peace Community Church was left with four cell groups that fed into their church.¹⁵

¹⁴Cable Interview, May 21, 2011, and A Brief History of Peace Fellowship Church, 2010.

¹⁵ Walton Interview, May 26, 2011.

Kevin Walton likened this experience to rice seeds being planted, and that when shoots come up too close when sprouting, they are pulled up and replanted further apart to give the greater harvest. Likewise, the two missionary families needed to separate so they would not choke each other out, but rather have room to grow to their full potential.¹⁶

Peace Community Church Discovers a New Strategy

After the departure of the Cables and their church family, the Waltons continued with the cell groups in Peace Community Church (PCC). There were no real changes for several years, but in 2005 when the missionaries were leaving for a home assignment in America, an associate came to help the church grow. The help was needed, but he informed Kevin that he was not intending on staying long-term as he had other plans for his life that did not include focusing his life on low-income families.¹⁷

PCC was a good fellowship with activities for the members, children and youth, but the entire ministry was centered on the leadership of missionaries, and ultimately lacked sustainability. There was no process to reduplicate the work of the missionary, and PCC knew that they had to make real changes. That year, four cell groups became house-churches which met weekly, like mini churches, only relating back to a large gathering once a month. This was a costly and painful change, but it was necessary if the church was to be able to make a meaningful impact on the slums of Bangkok.¹⁸ There were four cell groups, now house-churches—

House Church #1 older members living close to the church who would meet in the center on Sundays,
House Church #2 members who lived and met in a slum,
House Church #3 a member reaching to her neighborhood near the weekend market, and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Walton Interview, May 21, 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid.

House Church #4 older members, real leaders in the church, a gathered group not geographic¹⁹

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

The new structure was based on three goals: (1) weekly gatherings in the local community, (2) discipleship during the week taking place through the house-churches, and (3) visibly working in the community. Each cell would have a designated elder, and all elders make up the church's elder board.²⁰

A Strategy for Reaching the Slums of Bangkok and Beyond

Kevin observed that the poor near the church were more open to the gospel than the average Thai, but the slum dwellers were more resistant due to a greater community pressure to conform. By the planting of house-churches within each slum community, the gospel would be able to penetrate more effectively and reach the community through the slum's hard social barriers.²¹

¹⁹ For house churches to work, the members need to be geographically in proximity to one another rather than cell groups that are based on a group gathered together who share common relationships. This group was doomed to failure as it was unable to transition to becoming a house church.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ According to Kevin Walton, twenty years ago, the government reported there to be 1,000 slum communities in Bangkok holding one hundred to a couple of thousand residents. Slums are essentially squatter settlements, exist at the mercy of the absent property owner, and are temporary by nature. The largest is near downtown Bangkok with eighty thousand members. One of the slum communities where this ministry works has 3,000 residents. When Christians go to try to work in the slums, they are looked upon as patrons to help share their resources (paternalism) or as evangelists (wanting to convert). Both of these don't accomplish the desired goals. Community organizing and empowering those in the slums to help the communities to use their own resources brings trust and opens hearts. Peace Community Church has two employees—one works for the Santisuk Foundation and also serves as the secretary/receptionist as the first contact person at the Center, and the second person worked in micro loans to help small businesses and is now working in community development. One slum community lost their land, and through PCC's help, the slum dwellers received loans to purchase land and build houses with proper construction. Seven Christian families joined in the project and ten percent of the slum is Christian.

In 2003, the year after the separation of the two groups, Kevin started to work with Servant Partners, a mission based in Pomona, California. It grew out of those attached to Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. This group sends out those who want to work through churches to transform the communities by living in the slums themselves. In 2011 there were four Servant Partners living in the slum communities, practicing holistic church-planting and demonstrating Incarnational mission.²² The first group of three workers came in 2004 and lived there for five years. Another group came in 2007 with plans to stay until 2012. They came to learn the language while living and working among the people. This group is similar to Servants, Word Made Flesh (Asbury).²³

When house church #4 fell apart, it included the departure of key leaders who did not see the new strategy as an improvement but rather as a retreat from a weekly worship of the entire church, it was discouraging. Kevin concluded that first you have to let your own plans die²⁴ to allow God to take the lead and direct the ministry. Rather than growth, there were several years of decline. In 2009 with the coming of the new team from Servant Partners, there was the start of growth. From 2007 through 2008 there were no baptisms, but in 2009 there were seven, in 2010, eight, and nine baptisms over the first five months of 2011.²⁵

By mid-2011, there were four house-churches and two pre-house-church groups. Several of these reside in slums, fulfilling the desire to have churches within a slum that serve the community.²⁶ The number of house churches is in flux with some groups open for a season and

²² Ibid.

²³ Others in this movement were described in “The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor” by Scott A Bessenecker. Other works by Bessenecker include: “Quest for Hope in Slum Community: A Global Urban Reader” 2005; “How to Inherit the Earth: Submitting Ourselves to a Servant Savior” 2009 and “Living Mission: The Voices and Visions of New Friars” 2010.

²⁴ Walton Interview, May 21, 2011. John 12:24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (NIV)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The goal of each house-church is to see each one of them branch out and become their own church in time. The church’s facilities lease will run out in the not-too-distant future, but because of the changes of direction of Santisuk Community Church, this will only help in its church-planting strategy. With over one thousand slums in

sometimes reopening or reforming in other ways. Two house churches have always met, and the highest number of groups that were active at one time was six. In the fall of 2013, there are two house churches and outreach and activities in four other communities. As a grassroots small group entity each group is rather vulnerable, yet as an organism it is quite durable because it is not really dependent on the maintenance of any leader, property or institution.²⁷ Eventually the leases will run out on the church's property, but now that the church is based in homes in multiple slums, the central location does not serve the same as before. The future of the facility will be made by Thai leadership as Kevin is no longer the missionary in charge.

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

Over 2012-2013 the Waltons were on home assignment speaking in their supporting churches, and also working on a Doctorate at Bakke Graduate University in urban transformational leadership. Kevin studied on-site the ministry to the poor in Fresno, California

Bangkok, Peace Community Church sees endless opportunity, but because the house-churches are not dependent on missionary leadership, the church and its future is much more sustainable when the missionary moves on.

²⁷ Email from Kevin Walton, September 5, 2013.

and then he traveled to Manila to see how a network of churches is transforming the slum communities through a combination of church planting and community development.²⁸

Upon the Walton's return, they were excited to see what God had done in their absence. The house churches continued under Thai leadership. The mission team organized under the Santisuk foundation continued to integrate Thai leaders, and welcomed new international members, developed new programs to serve churches, and strengthened the program for youth leadership development. With a strong local leadership at Peace Community Church, the Waltons are exploring new roles mentoring younger leaders and connecting their team with other churches and ministries in Bangkok.²⁹

Assessing the Future of the Waltons' Paradigm

Thailand has been an incredibly slow mission field throughout history between Catholic missionaries off and on for five centuries and Protestants reaching out for nearly two centuries. There is still only a small percentage of Christians in this country. In 2009 there were 339,048 evangelicals in the country with 4,186 churches.³⁰ Many of these Christians are tribal peoples, especially the Karen, an oppressed minority people from Myanmar.

For over two decades, Converge International ministries have supported missionary families in Thailand. The Waltons realized that their calling was to plant house churches in the slums to serve the urban poor of Bangkok. They have drawn upon short-term workers by developing the relationship with Servant Partners who send out recent college graduates who

²⁸ Kevin Walton. "A Word from the Waltons" April 2013.

²⁹ Kevin Walton. "A Word from the Waltons" Summer 2013.

³⁰ Dwight Martin, "Protestant Thai Christians 2009" power point presentation.

come to learn Thai, to serve, to live among, and to evangelize the urban poor. Their strategy is advancing as they minister in the slums of a mega city.

How sustainable are all the Walton ministries? What if Kevin and Cynthia Walton were to return home and there was no one to replace them? The funding for these ministries in the past has been considerable, but the fruit of these ministries is solid. I believe that in the slums of Bangkok, their groups will carry on the vision in their own communities and also to others.

Certainly, the synergism of the American missionaries and the short-term servants to the poor working alongside with the Thai believers creates a stronger advance at evangelism. The Waltons and their team have learned to work as partners with Thai believers and to serve both with and under their leadership.

Biography

Dr. John F. Easterling has been a professor of Intercultural Studies at the University of Northwestern - Saint Paul in Minnesota, since 1988. Prior ministry included church planting in France with World Venture and a pastorate. He earned a B.A. from Baylor University, a M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell theological Seminary, a D.Min. from Fuller Theological Seminary, a diploma from the Toronto Institute of Linguistics, diplomas in French language, culture, and civilization from the University of Paris-Sorbonne, and a D.Miss. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His specializations include church planting, evangelism and cross-cultural training conducting student mission internships overseas. In the fall of 2014, he will lead a 9 week trip to work with team building and volunteer time in the UK for a week, working with a graduate of UNWSP, a church planter in Albania for a week, the Bangkok district of Bangkok, Thailand for 4 weeks, Taiwan for 10 days followed by six days of debriefing enroute back to Minnesota. He can be contacted at jfeasterling@unwsp.edu.³¹

³¹ This paper is partially drawn from an earlier article published by the author in the Great Commission Research Journal, Volume 4, No. 2, pages 262-279. The article was entitled "Converge International Missionaries and Their Churches in Thailand: Different Strategies Reaching Different People Groups in the Bangkok District of Bangkok, Thailand."