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“In the Beginning ...”

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THE ARRIVAL OF PENTECOSTALS AND CHARISMATICS IN THAILAND

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The year 2000 marked 172 years of a Protestant Christian presence in Thailand, the first resident missionaries having arrived in 1828. It also marked fifty-two years of Pentecostal work in the country. Overall the growth of the church in Thailand has been very slow. Initial Christian presence dates back to 1511 when the Catholic Church first began sending priests into the country, but in its first three hundred years of existence in Thailand, the Catholic Church was able to plant only six churches.¹ Likewise, it took the efforts of Protestant missionaries within the country twenty-one years before leading the first ethnic Thai to accept Christ,² although there had been some success among the Chinese population.

From 1880 until the start of World War I, the church in Thailand began to experience some degree of growth, primarily in northern Thailand.³ But the church largely stagnated between the two world wars, and actually decreased during World War II when Thai Christians were a focus of persecution while the country was under Japanese occupation. However, following the close of second world war, a new surge of evangelistic activity by mission organizations and national churches led to a time of increased growth on the part of the church in Thailand.

¹ Kenneth B. Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand* (Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand, 1958), p. 5.

² Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1981), p. 22.

³ Smith, *Siamese Gold*, p. 93.

Thailand's First Pentecostal Missionaries

It was within the context of this new surge of evangelistic activity that the first Pentecostal missionaries, Verner and Hanna Raassina, came to Thailand with the Finnish Free Foreign Mission. They met while studying in Helsinki to prepare to serve as missionaries. The day after their wedding in August 1946, they set out for Burma where they initially thought God was leading them.

Soon after leaving Finland, Verner fell ill with typhoid. They used most of their cash treating this illness. When they were finally able to continue on to Rangoon, they were denied entry visas and rerouted to Bangkok, arriving on November 17, 1946. They found that because Burma was in the process of separating from Great Britain, there were not granting any new missionary visas.⁴ At this point they considered going to China to join other Finnish missionaries, but in a vision Verner was shown that if they went to China they would be forced to return in a very short time. A few days later a letter arrived informing them that missionaries in China were being forced to leave.⁵

The Raassinas began looking at the need around them. At that time Thailand had around 14 million people,⁶ over 90% of whom were Buddhist. Although the gospel had been proclaimed in some of the larger provinces, there were still thousands of villages and smaller cities in rural areas where the gospel had not yet reached. These factors helped to sway the Raassinas to remain in Thailand.⁷

Their initial years in Thailand were difficult ones. Shortly after making the decision to stay, their home church notified them that all missionary support had ceased because the newly formed communist government in Finland forbade any additional support for missions.⁸ They were living in a hotel at the time. When Boonmak Kittisan, a pastor associated with the Presbyterians, heard about their plight, he invited them to stay in his home. On a day when they were feeling particularly discouraged they received money from an unknown source in Norway.

⁴ Hannu Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong [Golden Fields]* (Bangkok: Finnish Free Foreign Mission and Full Gospel Churches in Thailand, 1996), pp. 21-22.

⁵ Ervin E. Shaffer, *Missions – Thailand: Under the Shade of the Coconut Palms* (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, no date), p. 11.

⁶ Today's population is around 60 million.

⁷ Shaffer, *Missions – Thailand*, p. 11.

⁸ Shaffer, *Missions – Thailand*, p. 12.

This served as a sign to them that God's hand was on them and that he would care for them.⁹ They were able to move into a home of their own in the Thonburi area west of Bangkok.

Although the Raassinas now had sufficient funds to continue living in Thailand, they had no money to pay for language school. However, in Songkhla, 900 kilometers to the south, the wife of Huang Hock, a Chinese pastor who had been educated in the United States, felt the Lord stir her to travel to Bangkok where she learned of the Raassinas plight. She stayed with them for a full year teaching them Thai and cooking for them without receiving any salary.¹⁰

In 1948, Jukka and Irja Rokkak from Finland joined the Raassinas in Bangkok. They originally came to serve in China, but after eight months there they had to leave due to problems Irja developed during her pregnancy. Her doctor advised them to immediately return to Finland. While on their way home, God miraculously healed Irja prior to the ship docking en route in Bangkok. They decided to remain in Thailand. They lived with the Raassinas for their first few months and helped them develop a new work that would become the first church associated with the Full Gospel Church of Thailand in Thonburi. They played a crucial role during a time when foreign missionaries were being forced to leave China in 1949, some of whom chose to continue their ministries in Thailand. The Rokkaks helped about thirty missionaries from eleven different countries to obtain visas. Following a furlough to Finland in 1952, they went on to serve in Japan instead of returning to Thailand.¹¹

In the meantime, the Raassinas felt the Lord leading them to start a new work outside of Bangkok. One day while traveling on a train to northern Thailand, Verner saw some mountains at a distance and asked a traveling companion "what lies beyond there?" He was told that it was Petchabun, a province with the highest rate of malaria in the country, and where many bandits lived. In spite of the dangers, as soon as he saw the mountains he was certain that was where God was sending them. The Raassinas, and other missionaries following them, have spent many years of fruitful labor in this province. It became a place of great joy and of great sorrow.

⁹ Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, p. 24.

¹¹ The information for this paragraph came from Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, pp. 25-33 and from Robert Nishimoto, *Prawattisat Khong Pentecost Kap Charismatic Nai Prathet Thai* [*The History of Pentecostals and Charismatics in Thailand*] (Bangkok: Rock Ltd., 1996), pp. 54-55.

The joy came with the response to the gospel that they began to see. Since they were the first Caucasians to ever live in Petchabun, people come from all around the town of Lomsak, where they resided, to observe them. Within a few months the Raassinas were able to win the confidence of those living nearby.

One day a man arrived telling them about an old man who lived in a remote village who believed in the same God that they did. His relatives called him "Old Father Nothing" in disgust because he no longer served the old gods. The Raassinas decided to visit his village of Huay Sawing. As they neared the old man's home, he greeted them with the words, "Teacher, you have finally come." He explained that thirty years before a Thai Christian had met the villagers and given them "The Book." Only one man in the village could read, and rather poorly at that, so they understood little of what was read. The old man said, "I have prayed for thirty years for God to send us a man who could explain the book to us. Finally, you have come." Verner was deeply moved as he realized that it was the very year in which he was born that this man began praying for God to send someone to that village who could explain the book and about how to worship the living God. There was a good response to the gospel in this village, with membership growing to two hundred within two years. It later became the place of the first major outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Thai people.¹²

Sorrows came in the way of personal tragedies. While still in Bangkok the Raassinas lost a son in childbirth. In Petchabun, a daughter and son were born to them. But in 1950, the older child died of cerebral malaria at the age of two. While preparing to return to Finland for their first furlough in 1951, their fifteen-month old son fell ill with tropical dysentery and died on board ship their first day at sea. Hanna later gave birth to another two sons – Levi and Asher. However, at the age of 34 on October 14, 1956, Hanna Raassina, along with the child she bore, died in Lomsak due to complications following another childbirth.¹³

New Arrivals from Abroad

Meanwhile an increasing number of Pentecostal missionaries were responding to God's call to serve in Thailand. In November 1950, Elis

¹² Shaffer, *Missions – Thailand*, pp. 18-20.

¹³ The information in this paragraph comes from Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, pp. 49, 51, 54 and Shaffer, *Missions – Thailand*, p. 37.

and Anne Pehkonan arrived in Thailand from Finland. They went to work alongside the Raassinas in Lomsak.¹⁴ Starting in 1951 Pentecostal missionaries from a number of Scandinavian countries began arriving in the country. In 1951 Adolph and Karen Nilsen with the Swedish Free Mission transferred from China to Thailand. In that same year Esther Bastrup with the Norwegian Free Foreign Mission also transferred from China to Thailand. Later the Danish Pentecostal Mission and Orebro Mission from Sweden also sent missionaries to Thailand. Because each of these groups shared a similar background and beliefs, in 1973 they merged their works organizationally under the name Scandinavian Pentecostal Mission, and formed churches called the Foundation of the Full Gospel Churches in Thailand.¹⁵

The Impact of a T. L. Osborn Crusade

In March 1956 an event occurred that would have a profound effect on the growth of Pentecostal churches within Thailand. At Verner Raassana's invitation, T. L. Osborn, a healing evangelist from America, held two weeks of services in Bangkok and another two weeks in Trang in southern Thailand. Initially they had received permission to meet in the Bangkok Royal Stadium. Later the government rescinded that permission, at which point Muan Kittisan (the wife of Boonmak Kittisan) allowed the meetings to be held on the grounds of a school that she operated.

During those meetings many people were saved and healed. One significant healing took place in the life of a thirty-one year old Presbyterian pastor named Saman Wannakiet. Wannakiet had suffered with a heart disease since he was eighteen. At one point during the meetings he fell over and lay without moving on the floor. Some thought he had died of a heart attack. But after fifteen minutes he got up from the floor completely healed. A Baptist friend of Wannakiet's, Chaiyong Wattanachan, was healed of cancer. Shortly after the meetings, both of these men were filled with the Holy Spirit. The two of them teamed up to travel throughout Thailand holding evangelistic services.¹⁶

¹⁴ Nishimoto, *Prawattisat Khong Pentecost Kap Charismatic*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Nishimoto, *Prawattisat Khong Pentecost Kap Charismatic*, pp. 149-150.

¹⁶ The information for the above two paragraphs came from Nishimoto, *Prawattisat Khong Pentecost Kap Charismatic*, pp. 174-75; and from Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, pp. 52-53.

Wannakiet felt a particular burden for the Presbyterian churches in northern Thailand see revival. Because of his affiliation with the Presbyterians, they received many invitations to speak in the north. Although some churches readily accepted the move of the Spirit, other church leaders began to force out those who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit at their meetings. Out of concern for the spiritual well being of those who had been put out of their churches, several Finnish missionaries traveled to the north to teach them and assemble them into groups within their particular locale. This was one incident that led some groups to accuse the Pentecostals of “sheep stealing.”¹⁷

In 1957 Wannakiat and Wattanachan held evangelistic meetings at Bamrung College in Nakorn Pathom. One of the people who responded to the gospel that day was a fifteen year old student named Wirachai Kowae. Kowae would later become the founder of the Thailand Assemblies of God.¹⁸

One member of the team that traveled to Thailand with T. L. Osborn was Don Price. Price remained behind in Thailand for a few more weeks after the Osborn crusades had ended. He traveled to Huay Sawing with Wannakiet, Wattanachan, and others to participate in the dedication of a church building for that congregation. While teaching in an afternoon service, many in the congregation suddenly began speaking in tongues, dancing in the Spirit, and some started rolling around on the floor. The praise emanating from the service was so loud that a steady stream of people from the village came to observe. Even the local school closed for the day so that the students and teachers could see for themselves what was happening there. This is generally looked upon as one of the first truly powerful Pentecostal services to take place in Thailand.¹⁹

The Establishment of Bible Training Schools

In the aftermath of the evangelistic crusades held by T. L. Osborn, new Pentecostal churches began to be established throughout the country. Prior to this time training in the Bible had taken place in local churches

¹⁷ Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, p. 88; and Robert Nishimoto, “Pentecost Nai Prethet Thai [Pentecost in Thailand],” in *Krob Roop 10 Pi Phantakit Romyen [10th Anniversary of Rom Yen Missions]* (A 10 year anniversary souvenir brochure, Bangkok: Rom Yen Missions, 1993), pp. 14-17 (15).

¹⁸ Based on an interview with Wirachai Kowae in Bangkok on April 29, 1997.

¹⁹ Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, pp. 65-66.

via seminars and short-term training programs. But as increasing numbers of people began to respond to the gospel it became evident that some kind of formal training program was needed.

The first of several Bible training institutions to be established by Pentecostals in Thailand began in September 1960. Don Price, recognizing the need, raised sufficient funds in America to purchase land and start construction of the Full Gospel Bible College at Muban Setiket near Thonburi.²⁰ The school initially held classes for only three months a year during the rainy season. Since most of the students were from rural areas, this was the most convenient time to study as it fell between the sowing and harvesting seasons. Several students who studied in this first session went on to become well-known preachers. Among them are Wannakiet, Kowae, and Nirut Chantakorn, who later established a number of churches in Petchabun and Bangkok.²¹

The Coming of Many New Mission Organizations and National Churches

In the 1960s and early 1970s, a whole new array of Pentecostal ministries was developed in Thailand. The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada sent their first missionary couple to Thailand in 1961, William and Ellen Butcher. The churches that developed in association with them are called the Full Gospel Fellowship Church of Thailand. In 1962, Boonmak Kittisan, who had been working with the Finns, came under the influence of “Jesus Only” teaching, and established a Thai branch of the United Pentecostal Church. In 1967 Charles Austin, an American G.I. stationed in Udorn Thani, began the first Church of God (Cleveland, TN) work in Thailand. Churches affiliated with the Church of God are called “Plukjit.” In 1968 Ervin Shaffer, the first American Assemblies of God missionary to Thailand, arrived to work with American G.I.’s who were stationed in Southeast Asia. In that same year other missionaries started working alongside Kowae in establishing the Thailand Assemblies of God. In 1977 the Church of God of Prophecy sent their first missionary to Thailand.

²⁰ Anonymous, “Prawat Prachristham Prakittikun Somboon [History of the Full Gospel Bible College],” in *40th Anniversary: The Full Gospel Bible College*, ed. Ermo Farni (Bangkok: Full Gospel Bible College, 2000), pp. 10-11 (10).

²¹ Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, p. 255.

In addition to a focus on church planting, a number of support ministries began to be developed in Thailand. The first Pentecostal publishing venture, called Gospel Press, began in 1965 when Don Price moved to Thailand bringing a printing press with him. The first Christian radio programming was begun in Chiang Mai in 1967 and later moved to Bangkok to begin a popular program known later as the "Way of Life" Broadcast.

The influence of the Charismatic movement started to effect the Christian world in Thailand starting in the 1970s and continuing to the present time. Many of the early Charismatic works initiated by missionaries came in the form of training programs. Duane Kleppel started the Christ to Thailand Institute in Chonburi. Pedro Belardo and Sonny Luziano began the Christ for Thailand Mission training program in Khon Kaen.

During the same period, a number of independent church movements were started. In 1979 Wan Petchsongkhram separated from the Southern Baptists and began what are now known as Rom Klaw churches throughout the country. In 1981 Kriengsak Charunwongsak began what is now the largest Charismatic church in Thailand called The Hope of Bangkok. Churches that have developed under his leadership both in Thailand and abroad are called "Hope" churches. Nirut Chantakorn separated from Full Gospel Fellowship Churches to form his own organization called Ruam Nimit in 1991.

It seems that whenever any new Pentecostal or Charismatic movement affects other parts of the world, that movement soon finds its way into Thailand. In just the past few years Thailand has seen offshoots of Foursquare Churches, Vineyard Churches, Word of Faith Churches, and Catch the Fire reaching this country.

What started out as a very small trickle, one lone missionary family choosing to spend their life in Thailand in response to the spiritual need they saw around them, has grown to a virtual flood over a period of fifty-two years. Pentecostal and Charismatic works have grown to such an extent that exact figures are hard to find. The influence of the Holy Spirit upon the Thai church is evident, though, as even many traditionally non-Pentecostal churches (such as Baptists, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Presbyterians) have worship services where there is a flowing in the gifts of the Spirit. The growth of the church in Thailand

²² The information in this section has been taken from either Nishimoto, *Prawattisat Khong Pentecost Kap Charismatic*, pp. 185-408; or Kettunen, *Thung Ruang Thong*, pp. 337-41.

may be slower than some of the neighboring countries, yet it is evident that God has not forgotten this ancient kingdom of Siam, and is using Pentecostal and Charismatic believers to help bring about the establishment of his kingdom within the hearts of many Thai people today.