

A Short History of the LDS Church in Thailand 1854 through 2017

In the fall of 1852, President Brigham Young called four adult men to serve missions in Siam. They traveled to Calcutta, India, with nine elders called to serve there. Those called to serve in Siam were: Elam Luddington, Levi Savage Jr., Chancy West and Benjamin F. Dewy. Elder West was elected President of the Siam mission by the others. After arriving in India, Elders Savage and Luddington attempted to make it to Siam by traveling through Burma. In Rangoon, they were supported by Matthew McCune, a British soldier, baptized in India and now serving in Burma. After a time, Elders Luddington and Savage split up because Elder Savage could not get along with brother McCune. Several months later Elder Luddington found a way by boat from Rangoon to Bangkok, Siam, arriving there on April 6, 1854. The next day he preached the gospel to a group of about twenty people (who were mostly British citizens). After the meeting, James Trail and his wife agreed to be baptized. These were Elder Luddington's only baptisms in Siam. After much frustration with the Thai language, he departed Bangkok on August 16, 1854, and returned to Great Salt Lake City.

The war in Vietnam would open the door by which the next missionaries would arrive in Thailand. As the war in Vietnam grew, many LDS soldiers and LDS families were assigned to military or other U.S. government jobs in Thailand. With Latter-day Saints living in Thailand, the Church prepared to send missionaries to Bangkok.

Elder Gordon B. Hinckley of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles was authorized by President David O. McKay to dedicate Vietnam and Thailand. On November 2, 1966, in Lumpini Park in Bangkok, Elder Hinckley dedicated Thailand for the preaching of the gospel. He was accompanied by Elder Marion D. Hanks (a seventy) and President Keith E. Garner, president of the Southern Far East Mission in Hong Kong.

Almost one hundred and twelve years after Elder Luddington arrived in Bangkok, new missionaries arrived from the Southern Far East mission. President and Sister Garner brought six missionaries to Thailand on February 2, 1968. The six were: Alan H. Hess, Peter W. Basker, Craig G. Christiansen, L. Carl Hanson, Larry R. White, and Robert W. Winegar. These elders first had to learn the Thai language, but while doing so they visited homes in the Bangkok area. Elders White and Hanson were tracting when they found a Thai sister by the name of Srilaksana. They were able to speak to her in English. At first, she showed little interest in the gospel, but Elder White had a strong impression during the first visit that somehow, she would become a member of the church. They left her a copy of the Book of Mormon in English and continued to visit with her.

One evening, Sister Srilaksana had some time to before she had to leave for a social engagement. She picked up the Book of Mormon and opened it to page 287 and began to read. Almost immediately she felt the power of the book. The impact upon her was similar to what happened to Joseph Smith when he read James 1:5. She was completely overcome physically as tears filled her eyes. She called her friends and told them she would not be coming. She held the book tightly as she went upstairs to her room where she knelt in

prayer for the first time in her life. She addressed God as “my Father” and realized that God knew her and loved her. She cried for twenty minutes before gaining control of her “tears of joy”. She knew how to pray because she had attended Catholic schools when growing up. Shortly thereafter, she and her daughters of age were baptized. This began a lifelong love of the Book of Mormon and her appointment as the primary translator for the Thai Book of Mormon (1st edition) in 1970. Through prayer and fasting, Sister Srilaksana received revelation for many difficult issues during the translation. The Book of Mormon was first available in the Thai language in October 1976, followed by the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price in 1979.

Before the end of 1968, six more Elders were sent to Thailand, three of whom had not served in Hong Kong nor Taiwan. Elders were also sent to Korat before the end of the year. Elder Ezra T. Benson planned a trip to Thailand for December 1968 and asked the elders to set up an appointment with Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The Elders looked at each other and said, “How can we do that?” As December approached, it looked like there was no way to obtain the appointment. They persisted on with fasting and prayer. Just before Elder Benson arrived, word came back, “This is very unusual, but the King will see your Elder Benson for fifteen minutes.” At the meeting, Elder Benson gave the King an English copy of the Book of Mormon. The King was enjoying the visit so much that it consumed an entire hour.

As the numbers of missionaries increased, several more cities were opened to missionary work including, Chiang Mai (1970), Khon Kaen (1970), Thonburi (1970), Pitsanulok (1970) Lampang (1971), Udorn Thani (1971), Nakhon Sawan (1972), and Chiang Rai (1973).

All Thailand missionaries in these early years held a Thailand tourist visa. This required them to leave Thailand and re-enter the country every ten weeks. In the early days that meant a trip to Laos. Later the trip was to Poi Pet Cambodia, a two to three-hour drive from Bangkok. When that border was shut down, trips returned to Laos and later were made to Malaysia. In the early 1990s, things improved so that missionaries no longer had to leave the country, but their visas did have to be renewed once or twice during their mission. Finally, in April 2012, two-year visas were granted and work permits provided for LDS missionaries, thus resolving all legal requirements for LDS missionaries to serve in Thailand.

In November 1969, the Southeast Asia Mission was created with headquarters in Singapore. Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore were part of the new mission under President G. Carlos Smith.

In May 1971, Elders Gary L. Willis and Robert B. Huntington were returning to Bangkok from Laos, having just renewed their visas. While traveling by taxi, a bread truck crossed the centerline and collided with the taxi. Both Elders were killed as were a few Thai citizens. The accident occurred just outside Khon Kaen. There was great sadness felt by the Thai members and all of the elders then serving.

Church meetings were first held in the new Asoke chapel in Bangkok on November 7, 1972. At this point, the Asoke chapel became the center point for the church in Thailand, replacing the original residence where the first elders had lived.

In June 1972, President G. Carlos Smith was about to return home. Before departing, he visited with the elders serving in Thailand. While visiting the elders in northern Thailand, the group decided to visit the ruins at the ancient capital of Sukhothai. While there, Elder Wall decided that his family could better understand the size of the ruins if he climbed on top of a statue of Buddha. He had Elder Larson (who was serving with him in the city of Nakorn Sawan) take a photo of him. Upon return to Nakorn Sawan, Elder Wall took his photos to be developed at a film store in the city. An employee of the film store noticed the photo of Elder Wall on top of the Buddha and sent it to a newspaper in Bangkok.

While President Smith was on his way home to Utah and President Shurtleff had just arrived in Singapore, the photo was published in a Bangkok newspaper. This sparked outrage all over Thailand. Just as Elders Wall and Larson were about to leave Nakorn Sawan to return to Bangkok, they were arrested by local police. In just a few days a trial was held. They were sentenced to one year in prison (reduced to six months because the authorities believed they had confessed). There was a brief moment when Elder Larson who took the photo might have been set free. He chose to go with Elder Wall and be his companion for six months. Elder Wall was grateful for his personal sacrifice. Fortunately, the warden at the prison in Nakorn Sawan took compassion on the two missionaries and made their stay in prison as comfortable as possible. The Thai immigration department asked for all missionaries to report to an immigration office in Bangkok a few weeks later. The missionaries believed that they would all be thrown out of Thailand. To their relief, they were just asked to report their locations in the country and use better judgment when visiting sacred Buddhist sites.

After the elders left prison and returned to Salt Lake City, members of the Seventy asked them not to talk about what happened to anyone. Thus, they did not even share the experience with their parents or future families. Church members in Utah persecuted the two Elders and their future family members over the incident. Elder Larson later died of cancer at a young age. Elder Wall bravely visited Elder Larson's parents to tell them what had happened. Later in 2002 (30 years after the event), Elder Wall recounted his experiences for a group of former Thai missionaries at a missionary reunion in Utah. After that event, he said that he felt like a great burden had been lifted from him.

The Church learned important lessons from this event that attracted news headlines around the world. The key element was that missionaries cannot just be taught the language, they must also be taught the culture of the people among whom they would serve. Meanwhile, in Thailand, this event led to a dramatic reduction of active LDS members. There were practically no baptisms until October 1974, more than two years later.

The Thailand Bangkok mission was created on August 1, 1973, as church leaders decided it would be best to have a mission president serving in Bangkok. Paul D. Morris, who had

been working and living in Thailand was called as the first president of the new mission. Later that month, twelve missionaries, the largest group of elders (up to that time) sent to Thailand brought the number then serving to fifty-one. With a mission headquartered in Thailand, the missionary count grew rapidly with more than two hundred serving less than two years later. More cities were opened including: Lumphoon (1973), Chonburi (1973), Chachoengsao (1973), Ayuthaya (1973), Samut Prakan (1974), Lopburi (1974), Nakorn Pathom (1974), Mahasarakham (1974), Ubon Ratchathani (1974), Chantaburi (1975), Rayong (1975), and Nonthaburi (1975). In 1976 missionaries were sent to four cities in southern Thailand, however, they stayed for only a few months and then were recalled. No proselyting missionaries have served in southern Thailand since that time.

President Morris organized a group of missionaries to perform music in Thailand as a good way to bring attention to the Church. The group was named, "Sithichon Yuk Sud Thai" or "SYS". The group was recreated numerous times over the next 30 years to continue reaching out to the Thai people.

In June 1974, sister missionaries were first assigned to Thailand. Most of the elders were unhappy with the news. If sisters were now sent to Thailand it meant that Thailand was no longer a frontier mission. Two sisters from the United States with medical backgrounds along with two sisters from Thailand were the first to serve.

The end of the war in Vietnam in April 1975 soon brought devastation to many people in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Soon thousands of refugees poured into Thailand from those countries. Before long, these refugee camps were very large in size. Elder Marion D. Hanks, a member of the Seventy, had spent much time in Southeast Asia. He saw the difficult lives the refugees had and then convinced Church leaders that the Church should offer their support. He had selected a group of sister missionaries already serving in nearby countries to be the first assigned to these camps. This effort gave birth to what is now known as LDS Humanitarian services worldwide. Floyd and Catherine Hogan were assigned to a refugee camp in Thailand at the time they were called to lead the Thailand Bangkok mission in 1982.

On June 18, 1995, the Thailand Bangkok stake was organized by Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. Selected as stake president was Tiparat Kitsawad and as Thailand's first Patriarch Ponchai Juntratip.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, church president, visited Bangkok in June 2000. He spoke to over 2600 church members at the Royal Thai Air Force convention center. President Hinckley stated, "The Lord has heard our prayers. He has let us endure difficulties for a long season, but now heaven is smiling on us. I thank Him from the bottom of my heart." This is the only time a president of the church has visited Thailand.

On Sunday, December 26, 2004, massive devastation was unleashed all around the Indian Ocean by one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded. The quake was centered off the southern coast of Indonesia. A huge Tsunami then inflicted heavy damage and the loss of many lives along the Andaman Sea in southern Thailand. Few church members

were living in that area. In March 2005, Elder David and Sister Delores Zaugg were assigned to Phuket as humanitarian services missionary to support recovery efforts. One project they joined in with other service organizations, was a project to build new fishing boats for those who had lost them. The last of seventy boats constructed and outfitted was named “Families are Forever” in their honor.

In 2008, a search for a suitable property on a major road in Bangkok was undertaken. Property values were low at the time and the church wanted to tie down a nice piece of land in Bangkok to meet future needs, including a stake building for the Thailand Bangkok Stake. Finally, a bank building on New Petchaburi Road, not far from the Asoke chapel was selected and purchased. Today the existing building is home to all church offices in Thailand.

The second edition of the LDS scriptures in Thai was released in 2010. A triple combination of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine, and Covenants and Pearl of Great price was printed in Salt Lake City. For the first time, this provided the scripture supplements in the Thai language that first appeared in the 1981 English edition of the LDS scriptures.

In the fall of 2011, Bangkok and much of central Thailand was under water from extreme flooding. Massive amounts of water flowing south to the Gulf of Thailand spilled over much of the region. The church came forth with humanitarian aid efforts to help flood victims. This effort seemed to build a great amount of goodwill between the Church and the Thai people in Thailand’s most populated region.

In 2012, the first “stake sized building” was dedicated in Nonthaburi province, north of Bangkok. This was clearly a preparatory move for the creation of the second stake in Thailand. The Bangkok North Stake was organized on June 15, 2014. The stake was organized by Elder Gerrit W. Gong of the Seventy and a member of the Asia Area presidency.

In May 2013, Elder Neil L. Anderson of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles visited Thailand along with members of the Asia Area Presidency. While there, Elder Anderson was asked, “What will it take for Thailand to have a temple?” Elder Anderson responded, “For a temple to be built, there must be four stakes.” That answer provided the impetus for the members and the missionaries to focus their efforts on growing church membership to allow for a temple to be built.

The result was a veritable explosion in the number of baptisms in Thailand during 2013-2014. Seeing the work done by the members and missionaries, the Lord then led people to His church, by opening the hearts of minds of many people. Never before had Thailand seen baptisms of multiple hundreds of converts per month. The baptism rate to this day continues to be remarkable compared to historical averages.

While there were nineteen years between the first and second stakes created in Thailand, there was just one year between the second and third stakes. The Ubon Ratchathani Stake was created on June 14, 2014, by Elder Gong.

On April 5, 2015, at General Conference, President Thomas S. Monson announced that a temple would be built in Bangkok, Thailand. That temple is now in the design and permitting stage. The next public announcement will be a date for groundbreaking and construction of the temple. The probable design theme will be the Thai orchid. The Bangkok Thailand Temple will serve members from Vietnam to Singapore to India, all across South Asia.

Thailand's fourth stake (Bangkok West Stake) was created on November 27, 2016. The new stake was composed of members from the Bangkok West District and parts of the Bangkok and Bangkok North Stakes. Elder Wong, an area authority seventy and member of the Asia Area presidency, presided over the creation of the new stake.