

“The Gospel Dawning in Thailand”

Joan Porter Ford and LaRene Porter Gaunt, “The Gospel Dawning in Thailand,” *Ensign*, Sep 1995, 48

The country’s original name, *Sukothai*, means “Dawn of Happiness,” and that is what the Church has brought for a small but growing group of members.

On Tuesday and Thursday nights, twenty to thirty Thai young adults gather at the Asoke chapel in Bangkok for institute choir rehearsal. Their choir director and institute teacher, Suchat Chaichana, passes out copies of the recently translated Church hymnal and choral music that he has translated for Thai singers. Providing a boost to the choir was Sister Joan Ford, formerly a member of the Asoke (English-speaking) Branch with a degree in music, who volunteered to help Brother Suchat (Thais use their first names almost exclusively). She began by warming up the voices of choir members with a short voice lesson. Since their language is tonal, the singers struggled to stay on pitch as they learned to control the rising and falling tones of Thai. Then they practiced singing harmony, a new concept for Thais who traditionally sing only the melody.

After everyone’s voice was warmed up, Joan played the piano to accompany Brother Suchat as he led the choir in singing the songs of Zion. Even today, as they sing, a spirit of love, friendship, and fellowship embraces the entire group. “I wanted to use music to help our members feel the spirit of the gospel,” says Brother Suchat. “They increase in their faith and commitment to the gospel through music and through the institute classes that they attend right before choir rehearsal.”

Mostly returned missionaries, these young singers are a close group, and several temple marriages have taken place between couples who sing in the choir. The choir’s unity and spirit provide a strong example of gospel success in Thailand. Over the last five years, the choir has sung at a university near the church, performed Christmas programs at shopping malls, and provided music for missionary open houses and district conferences. One of the highlights of the choir’s activities was a musical program in 1992 commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. Speaking parts in the program were given by four choir members who dressed up as Joseph Smith Jr. and his wife, Emma, and Joseph Smith Sr. and his wife, Lucy.

“When the choir performed at the mall in downtown Bangkok, I felt a thrill as we sang about the Savior in ‘O Holy Night’ in this, a land of Buddhism,” says Sister Ford. “These angel voices proclaimed Jesus Christ to a people who had rarely heard of the Savior.”

A gospel foundation is present in this land wrapped in timeless beauty and ancient history. Thailand, located directly south of China, shares its borders with Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. This tropical land, where it rains daily for three months and then not at all for nine months, is laced with rivers, rain forests, and wooded mountains. Bangkok, as the capital and largest city in Thailand, is home to more than ten million

people. Its streets are crowded with native Thais, a variety of Asian peoples, and Europeans. Thais wear everything from the traditional *panung*, a colorful piece of cloth wrapped tightly around the body, to jeans and T-shirts. The noise of traffic and tonal languages is endless. Vendors sell spicy foods on every street, and near mealtime, as they toss garlic into hot oil, savory aromas fill the air. Ultramodern high-rise office buildings stand in contrast to old ornate architecture, much of which has been painted with bright colors and trimmed with gold. People in Bangkok live in houses, apartments, and even in boats along the canals.



Most of the sixty million people of Thailand prefer to live in villages where they can grow rice on their own land. Those who reside along the country's many rivers and canals live in houses of wood or thatch built high on stilts, where farm animals take shelter underneath. Bright green rice fields, their waters glistening in the afternoon sun, stretch outward from the villages in orderly squares that add to Thailand's beauty.

The gospel has found its place here. One stake, four districts, eleven chapels, five wards, and twenty-one branches house the more than six thousand Latter-day Saints. Members can read the Bible (translated by the Thai Bible Society in 1971), Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price in Thai. Nearly 20 percent of the one hundred missionaries who serve in Thailand are native Thais. Brother Wairot Wanitwongsaa and Brother Jackrit "Jack" Trikrutpan are examples of active Latter-day Saints who were drawn years ago to a Latter-day Saint chapel or to the missionaries teaching on the streets of Bangkok. Both were baptized, served missions in their native land, and are active members in Bangkok.

Nine-year-old Rujeerawan "Tu" Trawanhongphonrat joined other Thais in 1970 in an English class in Korat taught by the missionaries. "I could feel of their goodness and spirit," says Sister Tu. "I wanted to pray and ask if the gospel was true and if Heavenly Father lived. The missionaries helped me. When I prayed, I felt peaceful inside, and my heart felt warm and growing." Baptized shortly thereafter, Sister Tu has since served a mission and enjoyed watching those to whom she taught the gospel also serve missions.

These experiences are far different from those in 1853 of Elder Elam Luddington, the first missionary to Thailand (then called Siam).

The First Missionary

President Brigham Young called thirteen elders to serve missions in southern Asia, including four to serve in Siam. The thirteen elders boarded the ship *Monsoon* at San Francisco in early 1853 and arrived in Calcutta, India, on 26 April 1853. There two of the four elders called to Siam were reassigned. The remaining two, Elder Elam Luddington and Elder Levi Savage, tried to reach Siam via Rangoon, Burma, but their ship sprang a leak and they had to return to Calcutta. Once repaired, the ship headed again to Burma and arrived in Rangoon on 10 August 1853. According to their report, the missionaries felt “penniless and alone; strangers in a foreign land, [where there was] nothing but war and bloodshed.”¹

Only Elder Luddington went on to Siam, his companion being too ill to continue. He arrived on 6 April 1854, nearly a year after he left America. Three days after the ship landed, Elder Luddington baptized James Trail, the ship’s captain, and Trail’s wife. They would be his only baptisms during the four months and five days he lived in Bangkok. Stoned twice and poisoned once, Elder Luddington remained persistent and faithful. He worked among the Europeans because he could not speak the language of the country.

In a letter to Church leaders dated 1 June 1854, a lonely and discouraged Elder Luddington wrote: “I am situated in a insalubrious clime, among a few friends and surrounded by many foes. ... I visited one of their [native] festivals a few days ago. I was cautioned to go armed. ... It was picturesque; [with] fire works, Burmese dancing, masks and Indian paintings, in true Asiatic style. ... I have delivered one lecture every Sabbath since my arrival in Bangkok; some eight or ten Europeans generally attend. I am trying to learn the native language ... I will keep digging till you all say enough, and then if you see fit to call me home I shall be truly in heaven and happy in the extreme; or if you say ‘Spend your days [here],’ it shall be even so; not my will, but my Heavenly Father’s be done.”²

Shortly thereafter, Elder Luddington was called home. On his return ocean voyage, he experienced a typhoon, a mutiny, a ship’s fire, and a famine. Having survived these and many other dangers during his mission of more than two years, he finally reached San Francisco safely on 27 June 1855. Though his mission was among the most distant and challenging of the early Church, he obediently fulfilled it with courage and faith.

Dedication of Thailand

It would be nearly a century after Elder Luddington’s mission before The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would again have a presence in Thailand. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Latter-day Saint families in Bangkok were authorized to hold services. As the Vietnam War intensified and Latter-day Saint servicemen longed to

worship together, groups were started at some bases of the United States Air Force, such as those at Udorn, Ubon, Thakli, and Korat.

Then, on the morning of 2 November 1966, in Bangkok at 6:30 a.m., Elder Gordon B. Hinckley of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gathered with others in Lumpini Park near the clock tower to dedicate Thailand for the preaching of the gospel. Peace prevailed in the early morning air of this park, a haven amid the congestion of Bangkok. Elder Hinckley prayed that the hearts of the people would be softened and that the missionaries who would come to teach in this land would be able to learn the Thai language. He prayed that there would be many, “yea, thousands and tens of thousands, who will hearken to their message.” 3

The turmoil of the Vietnam War, then near its height, slowed the process of the Church becoming officially recognized in Thailand. Though Thailand itself has been free of war for hundreds of years, border skirmishes, the wars of neighboring countries, and the steady influx of refugees have continued to complicate the political process. Finally the Church was given permission to enter Thailand, and on 2 February 1968, six elders were transferred from Taiwan and Hong Kong to Bangkok. Within a few days, the elders had enrolled at the American University Alumni School and had begun to learn the complex Thai language. Within a week, they had employed a translator to translate the missionary discussions into Thai. On 6 March 1968, the six elders began full-time proselyting among the Thai people, and the first meeting in Thai took place on March 17 of that year.

Toward Christianity

The first challenge the missionaries faced was helping Thais learn about Jesus Christ. Established by centuries of tradition, Buddhism is the state religion of Thailand, and 95 percent of the Thai people are Buddhist. Thus, the decision to follow Jesus Christ brings with it the risk of rejection by friends and family and can bring disgrace upon a family.

However, Thai Latter-day Saints have met this challenge with confidence. Puttiporn Triyasakorn was baptized in 1987. “For Thai people, the Christian religion is very new because we are used to Buddhism,” she says. “It was easier for me because my mother is the one who found the gospel. One day on the bus, she heard the missionaries talking about the law of chastity and the Word of Wisdom. Because she wanted my brothers and me to stay away from alcohol and tobacco, she wanted all of us to listen to the missionaries.” Sister Puttiporn read the Book of Mormon, and through prayer and several dreams she gained a testimony. She and her mother and three brothers were all baptized. Her childhood sweetheart, whom she introduced to the gospel, was also baptized, and they were sealed in the temple in 1989.

Translating the Book of Mormon

Srilaksanaa “Sri” Suntarahut started to help translate the Book of Mormon in 1970 as lead translator of the first Book of Mormon translating committee in Thailand. Sri, who had outstanding language skills because of her years of living in the queen’s palace (see “Raised by a Queen,” p. 55), saw the project completed in 1974. Others helped her prepare the translation for publication, and it was published in 1976.

“Making this translation brought such spiritual strength to me,” says Sister Sri. “I love my Heavenly Father so much for pouring upon me this gift of tongues and language.”

In 1975, while waiting for approval of the Book of Mormon translation, she began translating the Doctrine and Covenants. The other members of the translating committee discontinued their work on the project for various reasons, so Sri was the mainstay of the scripture translations. Though she went to her job during the day, she felt driven to translate when she returned home. Often she worked into the night, completing a rough translation of as many verses as she could do to her satisfaction in order to have them ready for the daily meeting of the translation committee. Once she went with other members to help with a cleaning project. After several hours of hard work, others suggested she go home to rest. She said that she was already resting because if she went home she would feel compelled to translate and could not sleep. The translation was completed in 1979.

“My Sheep Hear My Voice”

Among the many things that have strengthened the gospel in Thailand is the establishment of seminary and institute classes. Thailand’s Church Educational System (CES) country director, Suchat Chaichana, has been interested in teaching the gospel since his baptism on 6 March 1976. As a missionary from 1978 to 1980, Brother Suchat was assigned to translate the seminary manuals into Thai. It was the first time he had heard of seminary. In 1982 he was asked to help start the CES program in Thailand and became a part-time instructor. He traveled throughout Thailand teaching seminary until he could train volunteer seminary teachers in the villages outside of Bangkok.

In 1984 Brother Suchat began carrying a full-time CES teaching load. Invited to a CES convention in Manila, he learned that he would be there one week after the dedication of the Manila Philippines Temple. He decided to take his wife, Udumolk, and daughter so that they could be sealed in the temple. When they arrived in Manila, the family was disappointed to learn that the temple was closed for post-dedication cleaning. However, when the temple president realized that the family had traveled all the way from Thailand, he made special arrangements and asked Brother Suchat and his family to be at the temple at 5:30 a.m. The next morning Sister Udumolk received her endowment and the family was sealed together. “It was not until after we were finished,” says Brother Suchat, “that I realized we were the only patrons on the session and that they had opened the temple especially for us.”

By 1994 there were more than five hundred seminary and institute students throughout the country and a seminary teacher in every branch in Thailand. “I am grateful to help

the work of the Lord in this great land,” says Brother Suchat. “God really does live. Jesus Christ is the Savior of us all. He said, ‘My sheep hear my voice, for I am the good shepherd.’ I am one of the Savior’s sheep, and I heard his voice. I forsook my old beliefs and accepted the gospel, and I am grateful that I did.”

A Remarkable Mission Upcountry

Kumpawapi, Ubon, and Khon Kaen are all part of Thailand’s northeast “upcountry,” which is one of the fastest-growing areas of the Church in the country. “They come to meetings on foot, by bus, or by bicycle—no matter how far they live from the church,” says Kriangkrai Pitakpong, president of the Khon Kaen district. ⁴

“When I received a mission call to my homeland,” says Pramual Tobchan of Kumpawapi, “I was told in a blessing that I would baptize thirty or forty people. In Thailand that is a nearly impossible number, but I worked toward that goal.”

Elder Pramual baptized fifteen people during the first eighteen months of his mission. With only three months left, he was sent to Kumpawapi, and within one month he had baptized all seven members of his family. Twenty days before he was to finish his mission, he met a Christian minister and converted him. The congregation followed. Elder Pramual baptized fifty people before he finished his mission.

First Thai Temple Trip

In June 1990, under the leadership of then mission president Anan Eldredge, more than two hundred members went by plane to the Manila Philippines Temple.

“Being sealed together in the temple brought a special spirit into our family,” says Brother Kriangkrai. “It strengthened our individual testimonies. We had planned for this trip for more than a year. Everyone worked hard to raise the money to go. Even our ten-year-old daughter made some money selling charcoal for cooking. It was a special time for us.” ⁵

Many others also made sacrifices. One man sold his only water buffalo to go to the temple. Later, when members of Bangkok’s Asoke Branch and a few members in Salt Lake City heard of this, they began donating money to buy him another water buffalo. Soon there was enough money to buy a water buffalo and its calf.

This focus on the temple resulted in an unprecedented infusion of strength and dedication into the lives of Church members in Thailand. Since then, leaders have organized regular trips to Manila.

“In spite of past problems and a challenging culture and language, I see great things for the Church in Thailand,” says Larry R. White, former president of the Thailand Bangkok Mission and one of the first six missionaries to serve in Thailand in 1968. “The Lord is

hastening his work here as he is elsewhere throughout the world. ... When I see the progress we have made since that first meeting in 1968, and contemplate some of the difficult circumstances under which we have labored, it confirms to me ever more surely that this is the Lord's work and that his hand is in it."

In June 1995, Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Elder Kwok Yuen Tai of the Seventy organized the Bangkok Thailand Stake—the first stake in Thailand.

"Members in Thailand have talked about a stake for many years," says Troy L. Corriveau, president of the Thailand Bangkok Mission. "This dream has now become a reality. The gospel has dawned in Thailand and is shining brightly."

Raised by a Queen

Srilaksanaa "Sri" Suntarahut was born in Bangkok, Thailand, on 4 July 1924. Her father was doctor for the royal princes. Her mother was a friend of H. M. Queen Intharasaksaji. Sri's family often visited the queen at the royal teak palace. When Sri was six years old, the queen asked to raise her. This arrangement was made on the condition that Sri could freely visit her family.

The queen loved Sri as if she were her own daughter. "I slept in the queen's bedroom on a mattress in front of the queen's bed," says Sister Sri. "Since there were no screens in the windows, the beds were surrounded by a large white silk net. Each morning I got up with the queen, dressed, ate breakfast, and read to her. After breakfast, I went to a school taught by European nuns. I could speak only English while there. After school, I returned to the palace, shared a meal with the queen, and again read to her. This was my routine for eight years. As a result, I developed a better education than many who have earned a degree."

While at school, Sri would look at the English Bible. "In my heart I would say, 'One day I must read this book,' " says Sister Sri. "But my family tradition was that we children should remain faithful to our country's religion."

Until she was seventeen, Sri lived with the queen. Then she went to Chulalongkorn University. After World War II, she became the financial secretary for a group of high-level government officials because of her excellent language skills.

By 1968, when Elders Larry White and Carl Hansen met Sri, she was married and had a family. "I did not like the missionaries very much at first," says Sister Sri, "but they kept coming back. I put the Book of Mormon on the shelf for three months. One night I decided to look at it, so I held it up and prayed, 'If there is something good in here for me, let me know it.' I opened it and read until I couldn't read anymore. Tears came to my eyes. Then I held the book to my chest. Soon I went upstairs to my room and closed the door. It was the first time that I knelt down and prayed. I cried and called out, 'My

Father, my Father.’ I knew he could hear me. I prayed and cried for a long time. When I got up, I began to read again without stopping.” Sri and two of her children were baptized on 4 July 1968, her forty-fourth birthday.

When the queen was dying in May 1974, Sri went to see her in the hospital. All of the ladies-in-waiting sat upon the floor around the queen’s bed in order of their class. “The queen, who was in great pain, raised up to see me when I entered,” says Sister Sri. “She said, ‘Come to me.’ I stood near her. She said, ‘I still love you.’ I will always be grateful to the queen. I know that because of the many things I learned while living with her, I was able to read the Book of Mormon and accept the gospel. Because of her, I learned to write and speak in proper Thai language—the language into which the Book of Mormon is translated.”

Church Milestones in Thailand

1238 A.D. *Sukothai*, first Thai kingdom, established

1782 *Sukothai* renamed Siam

6 Apr. 1854 First missionary, Elder Elam Luddington, arrives in Bangkok.

1939 Siam renamed Thailand, or *Muang Thai* in the Thai language, which means “Land of the Free.”

27 Mar. 1966 Thailand District organized to meet the needs of American servicemen.

2 Nov. 1966 Elder Gordon B. Hinckley of the Quorum of the Twelve dedicates Thailand.

2 Feb. 1968 President Keith E. Garner of the Southern Far East Mission leads the first six missionaries (shown above) to serve in Thailand. Top row: Craig G. Christensen, Larry R. White, Peter W. Basker; bottom row: Alan H. Hess, Robert W. Winegar, L. Carl Hansen.

30 Nov. Elder Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve visits the king of Thailand.

1968

Nov. 1969 Thailand becomes part of the Southeast Asian Mission.

28 June 1973 Thailand Bangkok Mission created.

Aug. 1974 First chapel dedicated in Bangkok

Dec. 1974 Thailand has 300 members and 50 full-time missionaries serving in nine branches.

1976 Book of Mormon published in the Thai language.
170 missionaries serve in more than twenty branches. (A quota on North American missionaries has reduced the number to 100 at present.)

1985 The government rules that missionaries have to leave the country every ninety days to extend their visas.

1988 Anan Eldredge becomes the first Thai mission president of the Thailand Bangkok Mission.

1990 First Thai excursion to the Manila Philippines Temple.

July 1991 Larry R. White, one of the original six missionaries to Thailand, becomes president of the Thailand Bangkok Mission.

7 June 1992 Elders Neal A. Maxwell and Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve bestow apostolic blessings on the country.

Sept. 1992 The requirement that missionaries leave Thailand every ninety days to renew their visas is rescinded.

- July 1994 Troy L. Corriveau, who was the tenth missionary called to Thailand and a member of the first Book of Mormon translating committee, becomes new president of Thailand Bangkok Mission.
- 18 June 1995 Bangkok Thailand Stake organized—the first stake in Thailand.

Notes

1. Quoted in “Beginnings in Thailand,” in Spencer J. Palmer, *The Church Encounters Asia* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1970), pp. 127–38.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

4. Quoted in David Mitchell, “The Saints of Thailand,” *Tambuli*, International Magazines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, May 1993, pp. 42–43.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Notes

Joan Porter Ford, a choir director and youth Sunday School teacher in the Castlewood Canyon Ward, Willow Creek Colorado Stake, lived with her husband in Bangkok for three and a half years while he was assigned to the U.S. Embassy there.