

The Transnational Experience

Peace Missions to Karen and Shan Migrants from Myanmar in Southeast Asia

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While actually preparing for the funeral of a 45-year-old Shan woman, the lifelong experiences of refugees and migrants became compelling to me as a researcher. I had asked her family if the government of Thailand should be notified, and her husband replied matter-of-factly that the government never knew she had lived and so would not be interested that she had died.¹ The region where she had lived is one where Myanmar has been an unremitting catalyst for creating refugees, internally displaced peoples (IDP), and migrants for many decades. And the current geopolitical challenges have not abated the crisis.

Southeast Asia is home to “one of the world’s longest-standing and largest refuges of populations who live in the shadow of states but who have not yet been fully incorporated.”² Outreaches to Shan and Karen people from Myanmar have been established to promote trauma healing, enhance assimilation, improve education, and develop stronger interpersonal ties. This article will introduce some of the historic and cultural considerations impacting these social dynamics in Northern Thailand, especially that of family. I also want to emphasize how an extended surrogate family can positively influence development because relationships are significant both for life in general and for effectively addressing specific crisis situations. Finally, in order to discuss a peace mission approach to Karen and Shan refugee ministry, I believe it is imperative to clarify some issues: terms and concepts, underlying causes, the nature of relationships, and the localized linguistic realities. All of these together shape a balanced approach within the context of Scripture. As Christians, it is this biblical worldview which frames our perceptions of the problems as well as our responses to them.

The majority of people fleeing Myanmar into Thailand are from ethnic minority people groups along the border who have endured decades of oppression. These minority people groups have been adversely impacted by the policies and abuses of the Myanmar military. According to the Thailand Migration Report

sponsored by the International Organization for Migration, many migrants come from three states in Myanmar: Shan State, Kayin State, and Mon State. "With no end in sight to the armed conflicts in these areas, many ethnic people have decided to seek asylum in Thailand."³ In Northern Thailand, the majority of migrants are from Shan and Kayin States, while those from Mon State enter Central Thailand. The recent global awareness of the massacre and desperate flight of Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh from Western Myanmar has had the unintended consequence of diminishing the international community's attention to the protracted suffering of the Shan and Karen people who have fled from northeastern Myanmar into Northern Thailand over recent decades.

Worldwide, the number of international migrants has continued to grow annually, according to the United Nations (UN). Over 60 percent of all international migrants, or 80 million people, live in Asia. The availability of data on the age and origin of migrants differs by region, and information is often incomplete.

In Asia, 12 per cent of the countries did not provide recent data on the number of international migrants, while 26 percent were lacking recent data on the age of international migrants, and 32 percent on the origin of international migrants.⁴

In this ambiguous and often fluid environment, a clear understanding of the extent of the problem, and what some of the best solutions might be, can be difficult to reach.

Interconnected Causes and Definitions of Migration

The underlying causes of migration are increasingly interconnected, making determination of the status of individual migrants challenging. "Underdevelopment, impoverishment, poor governance, endemic conflict, and human rights abuse are closely linked." Such circumstances lead to both economically compelled migration

and politically compelled flight. Often unable to make a clear distinction, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) now refers to these migrants as "mixed flows."⁵ Furthermore, in Thailand, refugees are not distinguished from other migrants.

While Thailand has ratified a number of important international human rights instruments, and incorporated these into domestic law, it is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. As such, refugees and asylum seekers are considered illegal immigrants, permitted to remain in Thailand with executive discretion.⁶

Displacement impacts individuals, communities, entire people groups, and neighboring countries. The challenges



facing migrants and their communities are caused by factors ranging from the emotional harm associated with forced removal from their homes and land, to the physical and psychological trauma of witnessing and experiencing violence, to compelling economic challenges. Even the government-monitored *Myanmar Times* newspaper in an article, "Shan refugees on Thailand border urged to request aid" advised the Shan people to seek aid due to limited food availability. The news article reported challenges facing Shan refugees fleeing their state in Myanmar, acknowledging

there are around 300,000 people from over 1400 Shan villages in the whole of the state who fled their

homes, between 1996 and 1998, due to clashes between government forces and the armed ethnic group Shan State Army who sought refuge in these camps.⁷

Many of these people still desire to return to Shan State, but are afraid because conditions have not substantially improved in Myanmar. In the duration, they have learned to communicate effectively in the Thai language, and they and their children, though marginalized, are slowly acclimating to Thai society.

Immediate safety needs compelled many internally displaced persons (IDPs) to flee their homes and many migrants to flee their nation. Migrants then must confront the daily reality of providing food, shelter, and education for their children, and re-establishing a sense of community integrity.

Young people from Burma who are living in Thailand have limited access to education after they complete secondary school in refugee camps or migrant schools.⁸

Migrants face hardships from limited resources, marginal legal status, and from discrimination. Fortunately, there are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which work to provide services, including English language education. These practical services have the potential to empower individuals within migrant communities and assist in integration.⁹

Engaging the Underlying Causes

The first priority is to care for their immediate needs. But it is also crucial to address the causes of the crisis impacting migrants (and their reactions to it). This process will assist individuals in developing effective coping skills without minimizing or denying the grief. It will also reduce the extent of the repercussions of stressful events and ultimately expedite the individual's transition from victim to survivor. Crisis intervention is an attempt to deal quickly with an immediate problem.

This interaction may be thought of as “emotional first aid.”¹⁰ One model for crisis intervention is called the trilogy definition. It is a process that includes helping people address the precipitating events, reflect on their perception of those events in terms of reality, and then respond with more effective coping skills.¹¹ This approach compliments another model called the ABC model. This includes developing and maintaining contact through the building of rapport, identifying the problem and distress, and encouraging the individual to examine coping strategies.¹² The perception of the event is the most crucial of the three aspects of the trilogy. Perception is the part that can be most easily and quickly altered without denying the pain that was incurred. People who receive help before resorting to defense mechanisms and counterproductive coping skills may avoid a more prolonged crisis and the potential for personality disorders.

When looking for the underlying causes, it’s important to keep in mind that the two general types of crises are developmental and situational. Developmental crises are the type which include normal phases expected as people transition from one stage of life to another. Situational crises are uncommon and extraordinary events that a person cannot predict or control.¹³ These events include rape, crime, death, divorce, illness, and community disasters typically experienced by migrants. This generally results in an increase in anxiety that ultimately leads to a crisis in which the individual is unable to function using normal coping skills. The counselor can help the individual through a cognitive restructuring and the development of an alternative based on a more realistic perception of the precipitating event. Changing perceptions can diminish the individual’s stress level and increase functioning levels. These perceptions may then open up the possibility of offering the individual a way to develop alternative coping mechanisms.¹⁴

Where migrant families have been decimated by violence, the indigenous migrant community provides a surrogate family environment.

A transformational approach to conflict and crisis is significant. Helping an individual clarify and change the way they view and respond to conflict or crisis is transformational. This transformation helps people reconcile the tension between what is and what could be, or the way things are and the way things ought to be. This approach incorporates empowerment and recognition of the individual, which restores a person’s sense of value while demonstrating empathy for them and their situation.¹⁵ Critical incident debriefing is used by the Red Cross and other agencies in response to tragedies, and the strategies are similar to the ABC model.¹⁶

Transforming Relationships

Satisfying relationships are universally crucial to a sense of well-being and self-efficacy. A surrogate family relationship can develop trust that has the capacity to deeply impact lives. Migrants usually travel and live in community with others from their people group. In cases where families have been decimated by violence, the indigenous community of migrants provides a surrogate family environment. Outsiders who genuinely engage the migrant community also develop relationships that become part of an extended surrogate family. A surrogate family of people who accept and fulfill the individual’s needs is helpful. During crisis situations, perceptions are often skewed or flawed, resulting in individuals not realizing their own value or fully appreciating the value of others. Everyone who endures pain has “a story, and there was a flaw behind each story that contributed to an irreconcilable disconnect,” while the existence of families and surrogate families contributed to reconciliation and transitional healing.¹⁷ Families and surrogate families are able to help the

individual bridge personal pain and flawed perceptions, and begin to heal.

The need for healing relationships is all the more evident during times of challenges such as those experienced by migrants. In many ways, those who genuinely assist migrants become de facto members of a surrogate family as they develop relationships. An effective surrogate family relationship is not one of dependence nor is it based on authoritarianism, but instead mutually respects and encourages individual and community growth. Authentic personal relationships provide the catalyst for acceptance and accountability within a community, which in turn diminishes the likelihood of anti-social behavior.¹⁸ Aid to migrants may start with meeting tangible needs, but when coupled with the development of meaningful and trusted relationships, it can blossom into the foundation for acceptance of transformative ideas and emotional healing. This truth is all the more evident by comparing their previous situation when they interacted primarily with their own people groups to their situation after developing relationships with those who established peace missions to the migrant group.

Relationships are important to normal human experience—specifically to address a crisis and how a person relates to it. The desire to be accepted, needed and fulfilled is associated with relationships. Jesus came to earth to meet our deepest needs. Christ died to redeem people, bring them back to himself, and restore their relationship with God and with others that had been ruptured by sin in Eden.¹⁹ People are often engulfed in a crisis because they cannot reconcile what they know to be right with the events that confront them. Fortunately, although reconciliation with the enemy

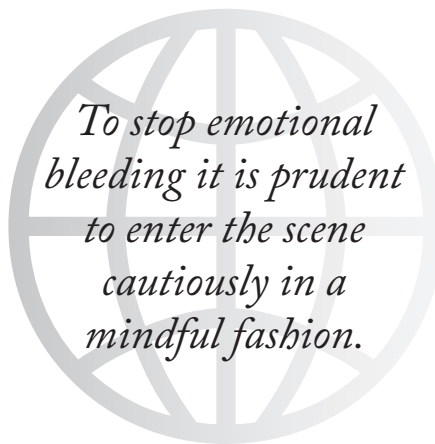
who hurt them may be very difficult if not impossible, healing from trauma and acceptance can be accomplished through Christ. For example, when Jesus interacted with the Samaritan woman, he established a relationship with her—a sense of community and belonging—that was striking and not missed by her. Jesus was willing to even drink from her cup, demonstrating intimacy and acceptance of someone with whom other people from his culture would not normally associate.²⁰ Consequently, we are to base our interactions on the model demonstrated by Christ because Christians have not only been reconciled to God through Christ but have also been given a mission of reconciliation according to 2 Cor. 5:17–21.

These relationships with migrants were not superficial but resembled a surrogate family. As friendship developed, visits were made to each other's homes where dinner was eaten together, games played together, movies watched in Thai, and life was shared. Funerals were attended where people mourned together, and weddings were attended where people rejoiced together. These Shan neighborhoods are in the same community as the local Thai Church, a place where no Shan church currently exists. The new Shan Christians began to attend the Thai Church, where they have even participated on occasions in leading worship with skits and songs. The Shan migrants have been introduced to Shan Christians from an existing Shan church elsewhere in Chiang Mai, but because it is not proximate to their community, the goal was to help these new Shan Christians eventually establish their own church. In the process of transformation, the Shan became change-agents themselves.

A Balanced Approach

Ministering to migrants is most effective when it is a practical application of both theoretical concepts and biblical truths. First, people must be able to see others as Christ sees them, as

eternal, valuable, and redeemable. This perspective is expressed by addressing immediate tangible needs, and then by helping them recognize the reality of life according to the truth of God's Word rather than remaining negatively impacted by a skewed perception created by the trauma event or by false hopes. In the process, the intervener must attempt to stop emotional bleeding by relieving anxiety and limiting additional disorientation. Therefore, it is prudent to enter the scene cautiously in a mindful fashion. Interveners should openly identify themselves and their purpose, be stable and supportive in order to establish structure, and never promise what cannot be delivered.²¹ Ultimately, the



effective intervener recognizes that his or her own hope is only in Christ, and as such will convey that to the person in crisis. As a result, it is expedient to work towards developing a rapport where the individual will feel safe and able to confide. By asking gentle questions that empower the individual and confer respect, the effective interviewer may eventually ease the tension.

The Apostle Paul stated:

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him

all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. (Col. 1:13–17, New King James Version).

God reveals the power of Christ not only to deliver and redeem, but to sustain. Christ is sovereign and the agent that holds things together. He is the creator, sustainer, and deliverer. Crisis intervention is the commitment to address life challenges for short-term management of issues and it can be a catalyst for long-term healing. To effectively help people, this intervention must be approached from a theoretical perspective that is wedded to a practical basis. In the process, the truth that is brought to bear can lead to healing and transformation.

Every life has its share of crises and each person must face challenges that confront his coping skills. Crisis intervention is designed to help people address the precipitating events, reflect on the perception of those events in terms of reality, and develop more effective coping skills in response to the event. Jesus said that in this world a person would have many troubles, but to be of good cheer because he has overcome the world (John 16:33). Christ also came to reconcile people back to God so that the relationship that was ruptured because of sin in the Garden of Eden could be restored (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Crises, challenges, overwhelming troubles: these are the harsh realities of life for the Karen and Shan people who fled to Thailand. But there is genuine, transformative hope to be found in Christ.

Linguistic Limitations and Considerations

Definite advantages generally exist for communicating with people in their mother tongue, the language of their birth, which enhances the interpersonal relationship. In this particular situation, however, there were complexities

to consider. In fact, to a certain extent there was a question about what their mother tongue or heart language actually was. In such Shan communities around Chiang Mai, Thailand, the native language was in fact “bilingualism” as children were raised in the context of both languages, often code-switching, which is defined as alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation. Both the Karen and Shan people in Thailand left their (monolingual) native tongue communities some years or decades ago and have increasingly spoken Thai. Thus, a combination of their mother tongue and Thai has become their “first language.”

Thai is the common local language outside the home, and consequently is the primary language used in public meetings. This was especially true among the Shan migrants living in the Chiang Mai area, more of whom could read Thai than could read Shan. This linguistic reality also reflected the close linguistic relatedness between Shan language dialects and the dialects of Northern Thai spoken around Chiang Mai. Discussions were conducted in a variety of language options to mitigate linguistic challenges. However, the Central Thai language is the common trade language used for communication with the many ethnolinguistic peoples in Chiang Mai. Central Thai, to a great extent, is the primary language of radio, television, advertisement, markets, schools, government, and churches. Central Thai has been taught in area schools to all young people since the 1930s, reflecting Thai government policy, although local people also often code-switch into the Northern Thai dialect, known as Lanna Thai or Kam Mueang, in informal circumstances.

The multi-lingual nature of this part of Thailand and Burma has long been studied by anthropologists. In the 1930s and the 1940s, the eminent anthropologist Sir Edmund Ronald Leach researched the political relations

Leach concluded that ethnic identity and political allegiance is fluid and situational, despite contrary assertions by some within the people groups.

and loyalties of the people groups in highland Burma. Leach challenged the common generalization asserted by some nationalists of “one language, one people, one nation”—the idea that culture and language have a one-to-one correspondence with each other.

Leach instead concluded that ethnic identity and political allegiance is fluid and situational, despite assertions to the contrary by some within the people groups. Leach identified people groups as complex and asserted that multiple identities existed within individuals, families, and clans. The idea that each people group is a separate entity is a faulty invention.

The intermingling of language groups is often too fine grained to be shown on any small scale map. To illustrate, no less than six different dialects were spoken as mother tongue within a community of 130 households.²²

Leach studied just across the border from Northern Thailand, where he noted that the average Kachin or Shan was keenly aware of differences of dialect and accents but attached very different values to those differences than would the typical Westerner.²³ Leach wrote that fluidity in identities between Shan, Kachin, and other groups was often wrongly asserted and assigned as “permanent,” a concept that was sometimes rigidified in the modern world using citizenship laws, police, and courts. He, however, asserted that

this convenient academic doctrine does not relate to the facts on the ground. It can easily be established that most of these supposedly distinct “races” and “tribes” intermarry with one another. Moreover it is evident that substantial bodies of population have transferred themselves from one language group to another

even within the last century. Language groups are not therefore hereditarily established, nor are they stable through time. This makes nonsense of the whole linguistic-historical argument.²⁴

Again, Leach’s conclusion reflects the fact that throughout history the first language for most people is actually multi-lingualism, or bilingualism, as it was with the members of the local church studied here and in the communities of Northern Thailand. The situation of today’s English-speaking world, Chinese speaking world, and Spanish-speaking world, where many people speak only one language, is in fact historically anomalous. In the Chiang Mai area of Southeast Asia, many people in fact code-switch.²⁵

Linguistic realities in Northern Thailand may significantly impact one’s approach to ministry. Dr. Tony Waters, Director of the Institute for Religion, Culture and Peace at Payap University, stated that often the older Shan people in Chiang Mai are illiterate and cannot read Shan for it was never regularly taught in Burma, and any literature is limited. Waters reiterated that the Shan people living around Chiang Mai

typically have a command of the Thai language as a result of the upbringing in Thailand, and a command of the Thai written language as a result of schooling.²⁶

Thus, not surprisingly, two Shan Christian women who accompanied the outreach volunteers into Shan neighborhoods each week would dialogue with Shan people exclusively in Thai, recognizing it is now the common language among this population. Bibles and New Testaments are provided in various languages including both Thai and the languages of

their birth. Interestingly, Thai language books are predominantly self-selected by the Shan people in the Chiang Mai area, owing in great measure to both their illiteracy in Shan language and the integration of the Shan people into Thai school curriculum.

Secondly, it was Henry Yeo, country director for the Methodist Church in Northern Thailand, who noted that congregations which operate exclusively in their own mother tongue

generally become extinct as more and more young people reject their own mother tongue and join congregations that speak the Central Thai [language].

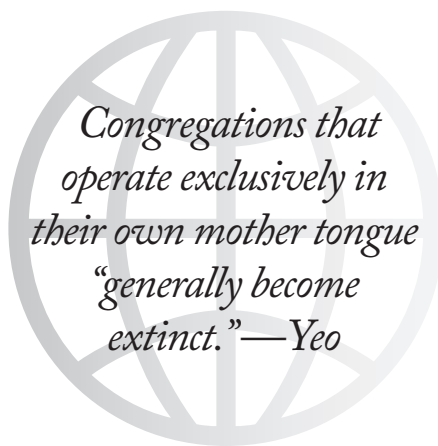
He has suggested that migrants should be encouraged to eventually form their own outreach activities and churches conducted in the common language of the community, be it Lanna Thai or Central Thai, so that they and their congregation can progress. Henry Yeo has also suggested the optimal solution was to use Central Thai as the official language of communication but form groups within the church that speak their mother tongue for small group activities. "This way, their outreach will be more broad-based and at the same time preserve their mother tongue."²⁷

Challenges for the Karen Migrants

There are nine refugee camps clustered near Mae Sot, Thailand along the Myanmar border where nearly 100,000 refugees, mostly Karen people, live after fleeing decades of conflict in Myanmar.²⁸ The first refugees arrived in 1984. Many Karen people have been born in the camps and some older migrants have been there so long they cannot remember their former lives in Myanmar. At least 3 million people have fled Myanmar over the past three decades, and more than 600,000 remain internally displaced within Myanmar. The recent landslide election victory in 2016 provides some hope for peace in Myanmar. Nevertheless, the sobering reality is that the

constitution guarantees the military remains in ultimate power, and the army has continued attacks and human rights violations with impunity in ethnic areas.²⁹

During one visit in January 2016 to the Mae La camp, the largest of nine camps in Mae Sot, we spoke with a group of twenty-six young adults about healing and forgiveness. These Karen people were children when their families escaped Kayin State in Myanmar as the Burmese Army attacked their people group. Most of the people in this particular group were now in their late teens or early twenties, yet had vivid memories of seeing their community devastated. Amid tears, some recounted how they



witnessed fighting, burning of homes, rapes, and summary executions. Even decades later, they and their families struggle to cope with what happened, to reconcile the disparity between the way things ought to be with the injustice they experienced, and to heal from the trauma.³⁰

Over the past three decades, thousands of villages in Kayin State were burned to the ground. The villagers lived in constant fear of the Burmese military,

terrorizing the villagers, stealing their food, forcing villagers to become porters and mine sweepers, raping ethnic women, and torturing and killing anyone suspected of having a connection with the ethnic armed opposition.³¹

Though some villagers endured the abuse by developing warning systems to repeatedly flee into the jungle at the approach of the military, others decided to leave Myanmar and settle in Thailand.

As a result of this flight, it is important for aid workers and missionaries to allow people to express the pain and share the experience, and thus validate their suffering and process it through the stages of grieving. The expression and validation of suffering is an initial step in healing, for any attempt or perceived attempt to either diminish or deny the trauma neglects an important step in the grieving process. We suffer with them as they share their experiences, and we grieve with them as they grieve anew. Paul wrote,

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (Rom. 12:14–16, New International Version).

Speaking for the group of Karen people at one meeting, a man asked how they could genuinely forgive the Burmese soldiers they witnessed raping and murdering their relatives. Clearly, this was not a time for simplistic answers or clichés, nor for diminishing the pain that was experienced. They were forced to bear the unbearable. That fact could not and should not be denied. Unlike Shan people, who were predominantly Buddhist or Animist, many Karen people were Christian, and references to Scripture was not only respected but expected. Applying the truth and power of Scripture greatly enhanced the process of healing and forgiveness.

These Karen people readily acknowledged the universal truth that in life all people have at some point hurt others, and all people have also been hurt by others. Each individual's case is only a matter of degree. They also readily acknowledged that our only hope for

forgiveness and redemption is by the grace and mercy offered through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. These Christians also acknowledged that though they had not done what they witnessed the Burmese Army do, they also still needed unmerited grace and mercy from God for their own sins. As they related the realization of how they went from hopeless to hopeful in Christ, they admitted a general awareness of how that placed all of us in the same category as the Burmese Army. They acknowledged the Scriptural truth, and the difficulty of embracing it.

The necessity and ability to forgive the Burmese Army, which to all present did not seem to desire forgiveness, was not a quick or one-time event. Forgiveness is a process that takes time. Yet, they began to realize the biblical truth that the refusal to forgive was in fact a form of unbelief, for we all need forgiveness which is unmerited and undeserved. Jesus said,

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Matt. 7:1-2, New International Version).

The action of forgiveness in no way minimizes the road to healing or suggests a simplified process, but it does slowly alter the perception of one's self from victim to survivor and introduces gratitude to God and to others who share the journey.

Shan Migrant Neighborhoods in Chiang Mai

Shan State with the capital of Taunggyi is located in Northeast Myanmar and is home to an estimated 2.6 million people. Most Shan people in Chiang Mai, Thailand call themselves Tai Yai, meaning "Great Tai," and are primarily Buddhist/Animist. Shan State is the largest of the fourteen administrative divisions by land area within Myanmar and covers 155,800

T*he Shan migrant workers are often undocumented, marginalized, and without access to health care, making them vulnerable to HIV.—McCay*

square kilometers (60,000 square miles), which represents nearly a quarter of the total area of Myanmar. Shan State is largely rural, and it borders China to the north, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the south.³² Shan people escaping conflict or seeking economic improvement either flee across the border into Thailand by identifying themselves as asylum seekers wanting to stay in shelters, or they seek employment to support themselves and their families.

The Shan displaced persons have faced the worst plight as many of them who escaped from armed conflicts arrived in Thailand and entered into the local labour market without immediately seeking asylum.³³

Many Shan migrant neighborhoods in Chiang Mai, the largest city in Northern Thailand, are marginalized within society. Few outsiders visit these communities or camps. The Shan almost exclusively work in low-paying labor jobs in construction earning about 300 Baht per 10-hour day, or the equivalent of \$1.00 USD per hour.

The Shan migrant workers are often undocumented, marginalized, and without access to health care, making them a vulnerable population to HIV.³⁴

Organizational management of outreaches into the Shan neighborhoods included coordinating and collaborating between NGOs, missionaries, and local church leaders to effectively design an approach that enhanced the promotion of peace within camps and communities. Advanced planning promoted respect for cultural considerations and emphasized a multi-ethnic approach, resembling a snap-shot of heaven as described in Revelations 7:9. Once established, these weekly outreach meetings were sometimes transitioned to the leadership of local

Thai churches, with the goal that they would eventually be led by emerging leadership among the Shan people themselves in communities where no Shan Church had previously existed. This approach is biblical and it is culturally sensitive because it acknowledges that all people are created in God's image and that each people group is respectable; it submits to the supremacy of the Bible concerning this, respects the authority of the local church, and honors the people and cultures involved.

When initially approaching specific neighborhoods together with a local church leader, the neighborhood chief was respectfully asked permission to conduct weekly meetings. Our weekly meetings were conducted in Thai since many could not read Shan but had learned to read Thai. Meetings typically lasted two hours and included time for the following things:

- developing relationships and sharing stories and experiences together
- practicing Thai and learning English
- playing guitar and singing songs in Thai together
- biblical messages and sharing Christ
- playing games together
- eating a meal together which we bring
- meeting tangible needs such as providing shoes, medical care, chickens for breeding, etc.

These activities develop into relationships that go far beyond just the weekly meetings. We visit each other's homes, watch movies in Thai together, eat together, attend weddings and funerals, attend church services together, and develop genuine friendships.

This surrogate family approach develops relationships within the context of genuine caring and accountability.

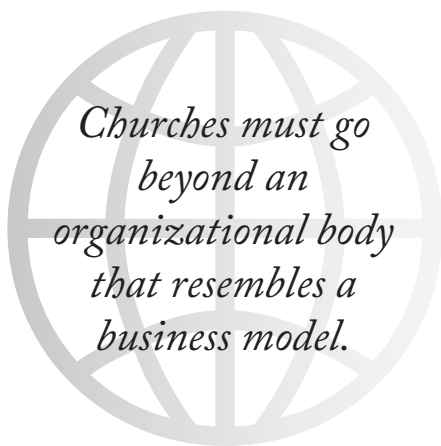
For example, one day we noticed that a young 8-year-old boy named Sengun had a deep cut on his foot and it appeared to be infected. His parents had a newborn girl, born ten days previous in their one room home. Upon questioning, his parents said the boy's injury occurred the previous week but they declined medical attention because of the financial cost. After assuring the parents that we would pay the expense, the boy and his father were taken to the hospital where the wound was treated and a 14-day regimen of antibiotics was provided.

The Role of the Local Church: When the Solution is the Problem

The inability or unwillingness of the local churches to engage non-Christian locals much less migrants is a real problem. Shan migrants have learned to speak and often even write Thai, reducing the linguistic but not the social barriers to evangelism. Some local churches explained that they attempted to evangelize, but had no success. Others admitted they had not engaged their own community but were focused instead internally on their own churches. This honest self-admission of inertia by some local church leaders may explain one contributing factor to why after over 100 years, the percentage of Thai Christians still remains about 1% of the population. The assault today on a Christian worldview is all pervasive, distorting how a person sees the reality of the world. "A Christian worldview can be taught, but it is far more than just providing or passing out information."³⁵ We have seen that when we together step out of our collective comfort zones and call on God to empower us in obedience to the Great Commission, the barriers to evangelism from language, understanding the Buddhist worldview, or trauma can all be overcome by the local Thai church. The local Thai church has proven itself capable of communicating effectively in Thai, the preferred

(written) language among the Shan in Chiang Mai—preferred because the Shan are educated in Thai. The local Thai church is also intimately familiar with the Buddhist worldview and has become sensitive to the trauma experienced by the Shan people.

Complacency and inward focus is not only the case in Thailand, but the trend is evident also in the United States. American Conservative Protestant churches are often seen as more inwardly focused than outwardly focused, and are sometimes perceived as uncaring because they failed to see the value in others.³⁶ Just as many church members want to isolate themselves or mitigate risks, so likewise many missionaries and aid workers have limited



or marginalized relationships with migrants. Yet when implemented, the mentoring effort provided hope and is therefore worth the intense relationship necessary to cultivate it.

Discussions with local church leaders in Thailand revealed that when they were hesitant to visit migrants, it was often because of cultural tendencies that made it socially awkward to directly approach people they did not know, and especially those of different people groups. Yet when shown the biblical mandate, most church leaders immediately conceded the necessity to follow Scripture rather than culture. Many leaders have actually been quick to admit that they don't know how to evangelize and disciple,

and have asked for assistance in learning and applying biblical principles of evangelism into daily life.

The lack of significant evangelism has revealed the need for missionaries and indigenous Christian leaders to help local pastors to equip and prepare the church members for ministry.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Eph. 4:11-12, New International Version).

Churches must go beyond an organizational body that resembles a secular or business model, and instead embrace the biblical example of individual members engaged in outreach and discipleship, "so that the body of Christ may be built up."

Those who engaged migrants were able to share their personal stories, which helped migrants relate and feel a sense of hope. Missionaries were only able to make a connection with migrants when they lived a common life and experienced some of the same challenges within the migrant camp. When working with any hurting community, care givers needed to meet individuals "where they were at, meaning they interacted with them on a personal level. This led to building authentic relationships" where individuals "realized genuine hope because they felt the power of God's love and acceptance from people who actually cared."³⁷ Individuals acquired new behaviors through the vicarious reinforcement mentors provided.³⁸

Jesus said,

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. (Luke 10:2, New International Version)

Currently, regardless of how many people may be physically present, the number of actual workers is few. Many Christians in Thailand admitted to never sharing their faith or Scripture with

anyone, in any language, over a period of five or ten years. As with ministry to inmates in America, the strengths and weakness of the church “are interrelated and represent the presence and the absence of the same characteristics.”³⁹

Failure is often because of the lack of spiritual maturity on the part of many church members, exemplified by indifference to or fear of [people].⁴⁰

Often the church needs the same solutions as the unsaved—genuine faith that transforms individuals and compels people to new life. Until then, too many Christians remain inert and complacent.

Complacency within the local church in Thailand is not the only concern, according to Pastor Chumsaeng Reong from Chiang Mai, who was the founder and first director of Wycliffe Thailand. At the age of 67, Pastor Chumsaeng reports he has met few missionaries who were willing to engage him in deep and meaningful conversations, and few who encouraged him or his church to reach out in cross-cultural evangelism and discipleship as we are now doing together in the migrant neighborhoods.

It is true that we should reach out to our own people, but we shouldn't ignore mission to the rest of the world, especially since they come into our country as migrants now at our door step.

Pastor Chumsaeng goes on to explain,

Though our Lord gives all of us the Great Commission to disciple all nations, some of the foreign missionaries that come to Thailand seem to think it is exclusive for missionaries! This kind of attitude has possibly passed down to the majority of Thai Christians. Yet we too should participate in fulfilling our part in the Great Commission. And mission opportunities are at our door step.⁴¹

Pastor Chumsaeng is a leader now committed to equipping and preparing local churches to do ministry, thus fulfilling the scriptural reference from Ephesians 4:11–12, and realizing the potential for exponential impact in society. He

Few missionaries encourage the Thai church to reach out in cross-cultural evangelism and discipleship in migrant neighborhoods. —Chumsaeng

recognizes what Joseph Allotta understood: “Discipleship must be the core and central purpose, not a secondary focus.”⁴² This discipleship training is now foundational to this outreach.

The Apostle Paul stated in Ephesians 4:11–12 that God has called pastors and leaders to equip all church members for ministry. Clearly, there is a failure in equipped church members engaging a lost world. Until the church members are taught the foundation of salvation, know and embrace the biblical passages this is based upon, and see others as equally valuable, it will be difficult for them to effectively and confidently share the gospel with others. A recent study recognized the problem and specifically recommended that American churches emphasize teaching to equip their members to engage the lost, focusing on the biblical mandate to engage those outside the church.⁴³

Conclusion

Real challenges exist. Migrants struggle to heal from trauma, to meet the basic needs for daily life, and to integrate into new communities as they await solutions in Myanmar that could eventually allow their return. NGOs, missionaries, and local churches try to meet the need, but many migrant communities remain unvisited. Much more can be done.

By meeting weekly, addressing basic needs, and sharing in the challenges of life, meaningful relationships were developed that transcended cultural barriers. Few would argue that a marginalized and ignored population is preferable to one that is lovingly engaged, despite the challenges and limitations of cross-cultural missions. Likewise, biblically immature people (or even unbelievers) who are nonetheless culturally connected to the Karen and Shan people could only provide a false

sense of security and empty spiritual hopes. Often those who engaged the migrants cannot speak either the Karen or Shan language, yet breached the linguistic challenges by speaking in the common second language of Thai. Bibles and New Testaments were offered in various languages, but were predominantly preferred in Thai by a young migrant population which often could not read the language of their homeland but were integrating to their new environment and the Thai language.

The proof was established by the outcomes. Friendships were developed and sustained which transformed lives as migrants were welcomed into homes and churches. The goal was to empower new believers among the migrants and to share life together with them as valued members of a surrogate family. The migrants were included into a broader sense of community, to ultimately enable them to lead the weekly meetings where none had previously existed. Tangible needs were met, relationships established, and a sense of acceptance and compassion conveyed while introducing the love and healing found in Christ. In the process God was glorified, people encouraged, and the family of God which consisted of many specific cultural and ethnic people groups was honored. Furthermore, the churches within Southeast Asia could be empowered through increased participation of individuals, and consequently result in the growth of the church in a country where only about 1% are Christian. Today many Karen people now attend university in Chiang Mai as they are welcomed into community. Dozens of Shan people attend local Thai churches, and as they mature in their new faith there is anticipation of them becoming change-agents themselves and establishing their own Shan churches in communities where none have existed before. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Personal conversation with author James Langteau in 2016.

² James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 325.

³ Jerrold W. Huguet and Aphichat Chamratthirong, eds., *Thailand Migration Report 2011* (Bangkok, Thailand: International Organization for Migration, Thailand Office, 2011), 126.

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *International Migration Report 2017* (New York, NY: UN, 2017), 3.

⁵ Huguet and Chamratthirong, *Thailand Migration Report 2011*, 126.

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Analysis of Gaps in Refugee Protection Capacity Thailand* (2006): 4, <https://www.unhcr.org/457ed0412.pdf>.

⁷ Chan Thar, "Shan Refugees on Thailand Border Urged to Request Aid," *Myanmar Times* (October 26, 2017): 1, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/shan-refugees-thailand-border-urged-request-aid.html>.

⁸ World Education Inc., *Refugee and Migrant Education on the Thailand-Burma Border* (Boston, MA: World Education Inc. & USAID, 2010), 19.

⁹ Shelby C. Pohndorff, *English Language Education as Tool for Empowerment Among Ethnic Burmese Migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand* (Portland, OR: Concordia University, 2015), 1.

¹⁰ James Greenstone, *Elements of Crisis Intervention* (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 2002), 3.

¹¹ The trilogy definition in the field of crisis intervention commonly refers to three distinct parts of a crisis: a precipitating event; the perception of the event; the failure of the usual coping mechanism, and resulting overload.

¹² Kristi Kanel, *A Guide to Crisis Intervention* (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 2007), 1, 24.

¹³ Kanel, *A Guide to Crisis Intervention*, 8.

¹⁴ Kanel, *A Guide to Crisis Intervention*, 11.

¹⁵ Allan Barsky, *Conflict Resolution for the Helping Professions*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 2007), 70.

¹⁶ Kanel, *A Guide to Crisis Intervention*, 23.

¹⁷ James D. Langteau, *Former Mentors' Perceptions of the Faith-based Approach to Reducing Recidivism Implemented by the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach, Inc.* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2014), 65–66.

¹⁸ Langteau, *Former Mentors' Perceptions*, 119.

¹⁹ W. Oscar Thompson, *Concentric Circles of Concern* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 1999), 11.

²⁰ Thompson, *Concentric Circles*, 18.

²¹ Greenstone, *Elements of Crisis Intervention*, 9.

²² Edmund R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London, England: The London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 1964), 46.

²³ Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 47.

²⁴ Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 48–49.

²⁵ Dr. Somboon Panyakom was sponsored as a Compassion International child who grew up to become the Thailand Country Director for Compassion International. He has been known to switch from speaking Karen, Kam Mueang (Lanna Northern Thai), and Central Thai languages all within the same sentence. He acknowledged that while he is from the Karen people group and speaks Karen as his first language, when discussing complex issues he inevitably resorts to speaking Thai (Dr. Somboon Panyakom in a personal conversation with author James Langteau, 2019). I have watched him alternately speak in four languages (including English) on the telephone.

²⁶ Dr. Tony Waters, personal conversation with author James Langteau, 2019.

²⁷ Dr. Chris Wilde, who for two years served as department head of the Linguistics Department at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, reviewed these inherent linguistic challenges and solutions during a meeting in December, 2018, and endorsed this outreach approach to the Shan people (Henry Yeo, personal conversation with author James Langteau, 2019).

²⁸ Burma Link, *Lives on the Line: Voices for Change from the Thailand-Burma Border* (Mae Sot, Thailand: Burma Links, 2016), 7.

²⁹ Burma Link, *Lives on the Line*, 17–18.

³⁰ Personal conversations with author James Langteau, 2016.

³¹ Burma Link, *Lives on the Line*, 3.

³² Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 411–412.

³³ Huguet and Chamratthirong, *Thailand Migration Report 2011*, 126.

³⁴ Megan McCay, *HIV Knowledge and Prevention Education Initiatives for Shan Migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand* (Portland, OR: Concordia University, 2015), 1.

³⁵ Joseph Allotta, *Discipleship in Education: A Plan for Creating True Followers of Christ in Christian Schools* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2013), 115–116.

³⁶ Robert Wuthnow, "Mobilizing Civic Engagement: The Changing Impact of Religious Involvement," in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, edited by Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 346.

³⁷ Langteau, *Former Mentors' Perceptions*, 127.

³⁸ Patricia Miller, *Theories of Developmental Psychology* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2011), 87.

³⁹ Langteau, *Former Mentors' Perceptions*, 91.

⁴⁰ Langteau, *Former Mentors' Perceptions*, 131.

⁴¹ Chumsaeng Reong, personal conversation with the author, 2018.

⁴² Allotta, *Discipleship in Education*, 118.

⁴³ Langteau, *Former Mentors' Perceptions*, 132.

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