

The Extension of the Gospel in Thailand and the New Wave of Latino Workers in Mission: Cultural Similarities, Differences, Obstacles, and Advances

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INTRODUCTION

The extension of the gospel in Thailand has been a challenging yet significant process over the decades. While the country has experienced a slight opening to Christianity, the Christian faith remains a minority, representing about 1% of the population. In this context, a new wave of Latin American missionary workers has begun to arrive in Thailand with the intention of expanding the message of the gospel. This article will analyze the fundamental aspects of this mission, exploring the cultural similarities and differences, the obstacles faced by missionaries, the progress made to date, and some practical advice for organizations receiving Latino missionaries in their teams, considering the unique characteristics of Latin Americans compared to other Western cultures.

THE MISSIONARY CONTEXT IN THAILAND

Thailand, located in Southeast Asia, is a predominantly Buddhist country with a strong focus on religious and spiritual tradition. Theravada Buddhism, along with animist beliefs and Hindu influences, dominates the cultural and religious life of the nation. In this context, the task of Christian missionaries has been both a significant challenge and a source of unique opportunities. Despite the social and cultural restrictions faced by Christians in Thailand, especially in rural areas, evangelism has had some impact, particularly in urban areas such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

It is worth noting that the first Protestant missionaries arrived in Thailand in 1817, three centuries after the Catholic mission. Thailand's history of Christianity can be divided into six periods influenced by historical events in the country, as mentioned by Dr. Alex G. Smith in his book *Siamese Gold*. (1) The beginning of the Protestant mission (1816-1851); (2) The emerging church (1851-1883); (3) The period of church growth (1884-1914); (4) The delayed growth period of the church (1914-1940); (5) The decline of the church during the war (1941-1945); (6) The revitalization period (1946-2023)

Regarding Latin America at the COMIBAM congress in 1987, it was stated that Latin America is no longer just a mission field, but a missionary force towards the unreached. This declaration challenged, empowered, and directed organizations, churches, and agencies to work towards sending missionaries into the world.

At CLADE V (Latin American Congress on Evangelization) held in Costa Rica in 2012, it was an excellent opportunity to reflect from a Latin

American worldview, inspired by the Lausanne movement. There, it was affirmed: 1- the importance of discipleship, 2- the reality of globalization must be addressed, 3- the care of creation is an important concern that should be a focus of missiology.

The recent Lausanne IV congress also produced reports and reflections from Latin America; the last online meeting for this purpose was on December 3, 2024, under the presentation of Valdir Steuernagel - Allan Matamoros, with coordination and summary by the regional director Daniel Banchi. The current challenge facing Latin America is the massive growth of the gospel while still confronting issues of injustice, corruption, and violence. Amid these regional reflection meetings, Latin workers are going out to various mission fields, taking on the challenge of bringing the gospel where it is not present.

CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LATINOS AND THAIS

Cultural Similarities

One of the most notable similarities between Thai and Latin American cultures is the importance of family and interpersonal relationships. In both cultural contexts, community life is fundamental. Family is seen as the foundation of society, and both Thais and Latinos tend to have a holistic view of life that values social and familial connections. This characteristic can serve as an important bridge in the relationship between Latino missionaries and Thai society, as missionaries can connect with Thais through the significance both cultures place on family unity and community support.

Cultural Differences

However, there are notable differences that Latino missionaries must understand to be effective in their work. One of the main differences is the attitude toward authority and respect. In Thai culture, respect for elders, authority figures, and hierarchies is essential. The concept of "kreng jai," which refers to extreme courtesy and the concern for not bothering others, can create communication barriers. In contrast, Latin culture, while also respectful, tends to be more expressive and open, which can be interpreted as disrespectful or overly intrusive by Thais if not handled with tact.

Additionally, Buddhism, as the predominant religion, profoundly influences the Thai mindset. The concepts of suffering and reincarnation are key elements of the Thai worldview, which can complicate the understanding of the Christian message of

salvation. Latino missionaries must be sensitive to these aspects, adapting their approach without compromising the essence of the gospel.

OBSTACLES IN MISSION

Cultural Obstacles

One of the main obstacles faced by Latino missionaries in Thailand is cultural shock. The way interpersonal relationships are approached, indirect communication, and differences in worldviews can hinder the evangelization process. Respect for traditional beliefs and the fear of being perceived as cultural invaders are significant barriers.

Religious Obstacles

Buddhism also presents a significant challenge. Thais not only follow this religion out of tradition but also because it is a pillar of their cultural identity. Converting to Christianity can be seen not just as a religious change but as an act of betrayal towards family and community. Latino missionaries must be aware of this emotional burden and be prepared to accompany new believers through a slow and delicate process.

Logistical Obstacles

From a logistical standpoint, Latino missionaries must face language barriers. Thai is a tonal language, making it especially challenging to learn for Spanish speakers. Although resources are available, total immersion in the language is essential for establishing authentic communication.

PROGRESS IN MISSION TO THAILAND

Despite the obstacles, notable progress has been made in the Christian mission in Thailand. Latin American missionaries have been a source of renewal in Christian communities, bringing new approaches to evangelization and contributing to the establishment of churches and ministries in less reached areas.

The teamwork between Thai and Latin missionaries has led to initiatives that combine the best of both cultures. Improvements have been seen in the training of local leaders, the use of technology to share the gospel, and the strengthening of the Christian presence in Thai society.

Artistic, sports, and humanitarian resources are tools that the Latin community knows very well, putting them at the service of the national church and communities that need to deepen in these areas.

TIPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS HOSTING LATINO MISSIONARIES

Understanding Latino Culture

Missionary organizations that host Latino missionaries must be aware that Latin Americans have a unique way of relating, characterized by warmth and closeness. It is crucial not to misinterpret their

enthusiasm and expressiveness as a lack of respect or aggression. Additionally, they should value the vibrant and passionate faith that Latino missionaries bring with them.

Cultural Adaptation and Training

It is essential for organizations to provide cultural training programs to prepare Latino missionaries for adapting to Thai norms, such as customs related to respect, deference to elders, and moderation in emotional expressions. Patience should also be emphasized, as the process of conversion and adaptation to Christianity will be much slower and more complex than in Western cultures.

Building Bridges of Trust

Latino missionaries may have the advantage of being seen as outsiders, which allows them a neutral approach in their interactions with Thais. However, this role of "outsiders" can be useful in building bridges between the Thai Christian community and new converts.

CONCLUSION

The Christian mission in Thailand has advanced considerably in recent decades, and the arrival of Latino missionaries adds a new dimension to this work. Although there are cultural and religious challenges, the similarities between Latin American and Thai cultures provide fertile ground for collaboration. Through mutual understanding, respect for local traditions, and a flexible attitude, Latino missionaries can play a crucial role in the expansion of the gospel in Thailand.

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