

From Resistance to Revival: The Journey of the Association of Free Churches in Thailand

By Dwight Martin

President of the Association of Free Churches in Thailand
Research Coordinator for the Thai Church

Vision to Reality: The Transformation of Phichit Province

In the year 2016, nestled within the heart of Thailand, the Association of Free Churches (AFT) - a vibrant network of eight churches scattered across three provinces - was under the dedicated stewardship of Pastor Somsak, a local country pastor. It was during this time that a vision was received from God. In a divine revelation, Pastor Somsak was entrusted by the Holy Spirit with a monumental vision that would alter the course of his life. He was to establish 1,000 churches and welcome 10,000 new believers into the fold by the year 2020. This colossal task seemed insurmountable at the time, and Pastor Somsak was unsure of how this vision would materialize into reality.

However, he took a leap of faith and embarked on this spiritual journey, taking one step at a time. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he navigated through this path, each step unveiling a part of the grand plan that was initially shrouded in mystery. This vision also carried with it a hint of mystery, a whisper of an unknown partner who would join him in this grand endeavor.

Meanwhile, Dwight Martin, a missionary born and raised in Thailand to parents of the same calling, held the position of Research Coordinator for the Thai church. With over a decade of experience and comprehensive data on all Thai churches at his disposal, he found himself deeply moved by a verse in Mark 1:38. The verse, where Jesus states “let us go to the next village and preach the gospel there, for that is why I have come,” resonated with him on a profound level. His meticulous research revealed a startling fact - despite two centuries of the Gospel’s presence in Thailand, a staggering 95% of villages do not have a Christian presence and most of the people have never heard of Jesus. This revelation ignited a spark within him, leading him on a quest to find someone who shared his vision of reaching every village with the Gospel's message. In February 2017, his quest led him to Pastor Somsak, and they decided to join forces.

Through a process marked by trial and error, the AFT church planters embarked on a journey of learning and discovery. They learned how to successfully share the gospel with Thai people, how to disciple them effectively, and how to establish house churches that would serve as sanctuaries of faith within their communities. By the end of 2020, their relentless efforts bore fruit in ways they could not have imagined. They exceeded their 2016 vision’s goal and established an impressive total of 1,087 house churches and welcomed 11,883 new members, of which 5,885 people have been baptized, into their growing community. These initial house churches were established in random locations without a strategic overall plan.

At the end of 2020, after succeeding on their 2016 vision, the leaders of AFT established a new vision for the year 2021. This new vision was to establish 800 more house churches. Using the data at his fingertips Dwight suggested a way for the AFT church planters to be strategic, rather than random, and do something that had never been done before, to completely reach every village in a Thai province with the Gospel.

Having data on all the churches in Thailand, he knew that Phichit province had over 800 villages without any Christian presence. He suggested establishing those 800 churches strategically by reaching every village in Phichit province with the Gospel. Once a house church had been formed in every village, they would establish a district church in every district to continue mentoring and growing the village churches. So that is what the AFT leaders decided to do.

Phichit province, was a province steeped in Christian mission's history as being 'hard soil.' This term, a metaphor as rich and layered as the soil itself, represented the formidable challenges they faced in spreading the Gospel in this area. Phichit, with its reputation of resistance to the Gospel, was perceived as a tough nut to crack. But the AFT leaders, armed with faith and determination, were about to unearth a truth that ran contrary to this belief.

As they embarked on their mission, they discovered an unexpected reality. The people of Phichit were not resistant to the Gospel; they were yearning for it. Their hearts were like parched land, desperate for the life-giving rain of the Gospel. They longed for the good news of Jesus Christ, the only God who could liberate them from their endless cycle of karma and sin.

This revelation was more than just an eye-opener; it was a turning point in the AFT mission. It infused them with renewed vigor and determination. It was as if they had found a hidden wellspring in a desert, promising hope, and salvation to those who sought it. This newfound understanding fueled their resolve to bring about a spiritual awakening in Phichit, transforming its 'hard soil' into fertile ground for faith to flourish.

To carry out this mission, the AFT meticulously planned to deploy approximately 40 church planting teams. Each team, a harmonious blend of about four members was entrusted with the noble goal of sharing the gospel in 20 villages each. They would return to these villages each week for 26 weeks, nurturing and discipling the new believers in their newfound faith. These volunteer teams were the backbone of their mission, the unsung heroes working tirelessly week after week.

They embarked on a journey, traversing every road and lane, exploring every secluded nook and unseen cranny, in the pursuit of finding "persons of peace", following the teachings of Jesus as depicted in Luke 10. Their mission was not merely to disseminate the word, but to establish house churches, emulating the apostle Paul's approach in the book of Acts. Each house church they established stood as a living testament to their relentless efforts, serving as a beacon of faith amidst the villages.

However, just as they embarked on their journey to every village, they were met with an unexpected obstacle - the COVID-19 pandemic. This global crisis posed significant challenges to their mission, threatening to halt their progress, and casting a long shadow of uncertainty over their efforts. But these leaders, fortified by their faith, were not deterred by the crisis. Instead, they turned to God in prayer, seeking His guidance amidst the adversity. In response to their unwavering faith, an opportunity was revealed. They decided to provide masks and hand sanitizers to the people as they shared the Gospel. This act of service, a beacon of hope during a time of fear and uncertainty, transformed their mission. It allowed them to connect with the community on a deeper level,

opening doors for meaningful conversations about faith and providing a tangible demonstration of God's love and care in these challenging times.

Over the course of two transformative years, their tireless efforts began to bear fruit in ways that surpassed their wildest dreams. House churches, like seeds of faith sown in fertile soil, sprouted in every village, painting a picture of unity and shared belief. District churches, symbols of resilience and determination, were established in all 12 districts of Phichit province. The seeds of faith they had sown blossomed into a thriving community of believers, their faith as strong and unwavering as the leaders who guided them.

The transformation was nothing short of astounding. Phichit province, once the 70th least reached province with only 477 believers, rose like a phoenix from the ashes to become the 4th most reached province. Now over 19,424 souls have embraced the Gospel in Phichit with more people joining daily.

Inspired by their success in Phichit province, the Association of Free Churches (AFT) in Thailand set a bold vision. They aim to establish house churches in all 84,646 villages of Thailand and district churches in each of the 928 districts across all 77 provinces. These aren't just physical structures - they are sanctuaries for spiritual growth and community building, fostering a sense of unity and faith across the nation.

In 2023, AFT church planters embarked on an ambitious journey in Phetchabun province. Their mission? To establish house churches in all 1,562 villages and district churches in each of the 11 districts. As of October 2023, the AFT stands on the brink of turning the vision for this province into a reality.

In 2024, AFT is set to broaden their horizons to complete Nakorn Sawan and Khon Kaen provinces, aiming to touch the lives of people living in the remaining 2,692 unreached villages and 29 districts. The journey continues from 2025-2026, with plans to reach the 6,612 villages and 65 districts in the provinces of Chaiyapum, Phitsanulok, Loei, Nong Bua Lumphu, Sukhothai, and Kumpae Phet.

Post-2026, the AFT remains open to divine guidance for their next steps. Their journey is about lighting a beacon of hope and creating a supportive community that spans across provinces and villages. This ambitious roadmap stands as a testament to AFT's unwavering dedication to spreading the Gospel across Thailand and fostering transformative faith within communities.

Their mission goes beyond the physical establishment of churches; it's about fostering spiritual growth and nurturing a thriving community of believers. Each house church stands as a symbol of faith and resilience, a testament to the power of belief and the strength of community.

A Visionary, Adaptive, Innovative Gospel Movement

When Dwight first encountered the work of the Association of Free Churches (AFT), he observed several aspects that differed from the conventional evangelism methods he was accustomed to. His first observation was that Pastor Somsak spoke about coming to know Jesus, eschewing the traditional verbiage used by Thai pastors and missionaries, which typically referred to coming to "know God". Upon inquiry, Somsak explained his choice of words. He was aware that Thai people recognized many gods but knowing that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus, he was meticulous in using the name Jesus instead of the generic term 'god'.

Somsak, has a profound comprehension of the Thai people and their worldview. Combine this with his remarkable ability to communicate in a way that resonates deeply with them. This enables him to

share the Gospel in a compelling and effective manner, truly touching the hearts of his fellow citizens.

Indeed, the unfamiliarity of the villagers with the name "Jesus" adds an element of intrigue to their encounters with the AFT church planters. This curiosity opened doors for meaningful conversations about faith, providing the church planters with an opportunity to introduce the villagers to the teachings of Jesus.

Another observation was that initially, Pastor Somsak was the sole evangelist. It seemed like a daunting task for just one church planter to achieve the initial goal of starting 1,000 churches. However, the leaders of the AFT recognized this challenge and embarked on a journey to train and disciple hundreds of other evangelist and church planters who could be just as effective as Somsak in sharing the Gospel. As of 2023, the AFT has successfully trained over 800 volunteer evangelists, a testament to their commitment and adaptability in spreading the Gospel.

In the early years of church planting, the Association of Free Churches (AFT) evangelists would seek permission from the village head to hold an evangelism event to share the "good news". Most of the time, the village head agreed. On the day of the event, the AFT evangelists would bring food, lights, chairs, tables, a loudspeaker, and walk around inviting the villagers to this event. However, they soon realized that while this method was effective, it was also costly and demanded a significant investment of time.

Over time, they discarded all these unnecessary trappings. Now when the church planters from AFT set their sights on a new village, they initiate their mission with a "prayer walk." This spiritual journey takes them down the roads and lanes of the village, their hearts and minds actively seeking "persons of peace." As they encounter these individuals, they share their personal stories of faith, explaining why they are followers of Jesus and how His teachings have helped them overcome their sins and karma.

They extend an invitation to these individuals to pray to Jesus, offering them an opportunity to experience His divine grace. The AFT evangelists are recognized for their heartfelt slogan, "Do you have a problem in life? Jesus can help you." This simple yet powerful message resonates with many, often marking the first step in the new believer's discipleship journey.

This encounter is not just a meeting; it's the spark that ignites a new faith community. It's the beginning of a new house church, a place where believers can gather to worship, learn, and support each other. Each house church stands as a testament to the church planters' dedication and the transformative power of faith.

Before his return to Thailand as a missionary, Dwight was a software developer. When he joined the Association of Free Churches (AFT), he noticed that they were leading hundreds of people to Christ but their method of tracking these new believers was archaic, relying on names scribbled on pieces of paper. Recognizing the inefficiency and limitations of this system, he decided to leverage his expertise in software development.

Dwight developed a software application called "KapTrack", a digital solution designed to bring clarity and efficiency to their mission work. No longer were new believers just names on a piece of paper. KapTrack, a smartphone app, allowed users to keep track of remote data such as new believers in Jesus and track their discipleship progress.

This innovative application allowed AFT church planters to capture vital information such as the believer's name and photograph, the GPS coordinates where they first heard about Jesus, the date

they believed in Jesus, their age, phone number, who led them to Christ, what level of discipleship they have achieved, and if they have been baptized. This wealth of information could be easily accessed and updated, enabling AFT church planters to monitor each believer's discipleship growth and follow up with them effectively.

In addition to tracking individual believers, KapTrack also helped the church planter keep track of the thousands of house and district churches. Every time a new house church was started, that information was recorded. If they returned to visit a church, the pertinent data about that church was updated. This included data such as the current date, picture with GPS coordinates, attendance, date started, name of leader etc.

This "real-time" data provided credibility to AFT's work. When people unfamiliar with AFT's work question their results, they can show them live data on the internet about the work they are doing. This data not only encourages AFT workers but also helps them manage their work and stay informed about the progress they have made.

Kaptrack transformed AFT's approach from a manual and inefficient system to a streamlined and effective digital solution. This software didn't just track numbers; it tells stories of faith and growth. It paints a vivid picture of AFT's mission work, making it tangible and real for everyone involved.

One of the most frequently asked questions that members of the Association of Free Churches (AFT) encounter is whether their work faces opposition from the government or Buddhists. The answer, quite surprisingly, is a resounding no. In fact, local governments have at times expressed support for AFT's work, recognizing the transformative impact it has on Thai villages. They've seen firsthand how faith in Jesus can positively alter lives and have encouraged AFT to continue their mission, acknowledging the immense value of such change.

As for the Buddhists, the AFT's approach is not one of comparative religion or forced conversion. They do not compel new believers to drastically change their way of life. Instead, they place their faith in what the Great Commission says, which is to "Go and make disciples". They believe that as they disciple new believers, the Holy Spirit will guide these individuals in their spiritual journey. As a result of their transformation, they discard their old beliefs and ways of life naturally. The traditional method of evangelism, which often involves forcing individuals to convert, is not part of their strategy.

Interestingly, the Association of Free Churches in Thailand (AFT) encounters its most substantial resistance from a source one might not anticipate – certain leaders within the traditional church. These individuals, deeply rooted in their conventional practices, appear hesitant to recognize the innovative ways the Holy Spirit is manifesting within the AFT. This resistance often leads to the circulation of rumors and unfounded accusations. The AFT is always open to engaging in transparent and honest discussions with these leaders to dispel any misunderstandings, although such dialogues are unfortunately infrequent.

This situation presents a unique challenge for the AFT. On one hand, they are making significant strides in spreading the Gospel and transforming lives in Thai villages. On the other hand, they face opposition from those within their own faith community. However, they remain undeterred. Their focus is on their mission and the positive impact they are making on individuals and communities.

While the AFT's journey is not without its challenges, their unwavering commitment to their mission continues to drive them forward. They navigate through opposition and misconceptions with grace and determination, always guided by their faith and their commitment to spreading the Gospel.

Indeed, the evolution of the Association of Free Churches (AFT) methodologies over the years is a testament to their adaptability and commitment to their mission. From organizing village evangelism events to adopting a more personal and cost-effective approach of "prayer walks", the AFT has shown remarkable flexibility in their methods. This willingness to learn, adapt, and innovate is a key factor in their success in spreading the Gospel across Thailand.

A Journey of Faith: Summary of How the AFT is Transforming Thailand

Over the course of seven transformative years, the Association of Free Churches (AFT) in Thailand has been on a remarkable journey. This journey, however, is not just about the miles traveled but about the lives touched and the communities transformed.

At the heart of this journey is a clear, unified vision that everyone within the AFT supports and works tirelessly towards. This vision is not just a distant dream but a guiding light that illuminates their path and gives purpose to their efforts.

The AFT is powered by hundreds of passionate volunteer church planters. These individuals are not just volunteers; they are torchbearers of faith, driven by a profound passion to reach their fellow Thais with the Gospel. They carry with them not just the message of Jesus but also the hope and promise it brings.

Their approach is methodical and heartfelt. They traverse every village and road, seeking out "persons of peace." These individuals are not just random villagers; they are the key to opening doors and hearts to the Gospel. They are the bridge between the church planters and the community.

Every new believer is meticulously recorded in a database, tracking their contact information and spiritual growth. This database is not just a record; it's a testament to their journey of faith. It's a chronicle of their spiritual growth and transformation.

The AFT evangelists bring a gospel of love, hope, and reconciliation with the Creator, not religion, rules, and regulations. They encourage new believers to immediately develop a relationship with Jesus through prayer.

Instead of sending new believers to an established church, they form house churches where these new believers can grow up in a spiritually safe and comfortable environment.

After forming a house church in every village, they start a district church. The district church continues to work with the house churches to help them grow. When they open a district church, believers from the house churches come. The district church is full from its first Sunday.

Through continued discipleship and additional teaching, these churches continue to grow. This journey is more than just numbers or statistics - it's a story of lives changed, and communities transformed. It's a testament to the power of faith and resilience in the face of adversity.

Indigenous Method: The Key to Reaching Thailand

Dwight, the author of this narrative, was born and raised in Thailand. As a result, he holds dual citizenship in both Thailand and the United States. His upbringing was steeped in missionary work, as his parents were the first Protestant missionaries in the Northeast province of Nakorn Phanom, Thailand. His childhood home was nestled in the Thai countryside on the banks of the Mekong River, overlooking the country of Laos.

After graduating from high school in 1974, he left Thailand. However, Dwight returned in 2006 after receiving a divine calling from God. Soon after he returned, he was asked by the national Thai Church leaders to serve as the Research Coordinator of the Thai church. His unique perspective – shaped by his childhood experiences of being raised in Thailand, knowledge of the Thai language and culture combined with his many years of research on the work of missionaries and Thai pastors, led him to a profound realization.

Dwight used to believe, like most missionaries and Thai Christians, that Thai people are hard to reach, and that Thailand is difficult soil for spreading the Gospel. This belief seemed to be supported by the fact that Thailand is the least reached country in Southeast Asia with a Protestant Christian population of 0.75%ⁱ. However, after being a part of the AFT for the past seven years, his opinion has changed dramatically.

Dwight now believes that the issue does not lie with the Thai people but with the missionary methods that have been used to reach them for the past 200 years. He advocates for a shift away from imported methods and instead use 'tried and true' indigenous methods of evangelism and discipleship that have been developed and proven in 'native soil'.

By going to every village and telling people about Jesus (using the local vernacular rather than “Christianese”) and how He is the God that loves them and can free them from their sin and karma, Thai people will respond in droves. The key is to return and disciple them without imposing "Christian" religion, rules, and regulations on them. Instead, let the Holy Spirit convict them and transform them. This approach is very natural and does not incite opposition from their family or society. As they are transformed by the Holy Spirit, they will give up their old ways of life.

A Visual Journey: How a Dashboard Shows the AFT’s Impact in Thailand

As you delve into this account, envision the faces behind these statistics - individuals who have discovered hope and purpose through their newfound faith. Picture the joyous gatherings in house churches across Phichit, Phetchabun, and all the other provinces. Imagine the sense of community as people come together, united in their worship and their quest to learn about Jesus. Each gathering is a testament to their faith, a celebration of their shared beliefs, and a beacon of hope illuminating their path forward.

Discover the amazing work of the AFT church planters for yourself through this dynamic dashboardⁱⁱ (Please click this link <http://estar.ws/AFT.html>). This dashboard is updated continuously and shows their tireless efforts and extraordinary achievements. It vividly illustrates the growth of the AFT faith community, with new believers joining every day.

Each point on this map signifies a person who has accepted the salvation message of Jesus Christ. The varying colors denote the district where they believed in Jesus. Feel free to utilize the dropdown filters and menus to delve deeper into various facets of this spiritual revival. Witness the power of faith and community in action.

This is more than just a case study; it’s a vivid tapestry of faith, resilience, and community woven together by the shared belief in the Gospel’s transformative power. It’s a testament to what can be achieved when we dare to dream big and remain steadfast in our mission, even in the face of adversity.

ⁱ <http://estar.ws>

ⁱⁱ “Kaptrack” is the application that enables the creation of this “Business Intelligence or BI” dashboard. It is a revolutionary application designed specifically to bring clarity, transparency, and efficiency to mission work. This groundbreaking tool is transforming the world of missions, making it easier for individuals and organizations to track, manage, and bring insight into their mission efforts.

Visit <http://kaptrack.com> to learn more about this innovative application.

