

# Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2014

*Edited by*

Brian J. Grim  
Todd M. Johnson  
Vegard Skirbekk  
Gina A. Zurlo



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# Integrity and the Counting of Christians in Thailand

*Dwight Martin*

Whether data are presented in a book, database, map, or website, consumers of Christian demographics need to be mindful of the sources of information. There are significant differences in the count or percentage of Christians within any given geographic area in even a cursory comparison of the various Christian demographics resources available. In order for a consumer to properly use such demographic information they must have several important questions answered to maintain the integrity of the data. Four important questions are (1) what is the definition of who is being counted; (2) why was the data collected; (3) when was the data gathered; and (4) how was the data collected. Unfortunately, many resources providing Christian demographics do not provide answers to these questions and many readers trust them without question, resulting in incorrect conclusions and sometimes costly decisions.

This article expounds on what to look for when interpreting Christian demographics using Thailand as a case study. It explains how the Thai national church attempts to answer these questions when collecting data to provide accurate information for guiding the national outreach and church planting efforts underway in Thailand.

## Definition of 'Christian'

When the word 'Christian' is used most readers will make an assumption of what the word means based upon personal experience; the reader's definition might not be the same as the communicator's. If the reader does not carefully understand what the data provider is counting they are likely to make incorrect conclusions from the information. In Thailand, the term 'Christian' is defined by the government in at least two different ways; Thailand's Department of Provincial Administration and the Department of Religious Affairs each have their own definition.

The Department of Provincial Administration defines who is a Christian by what is printed on the citizenship card. By law persons born in Thailand from Thai parents are required to obtain a citizenship card by the time they are seven years old. To do this their parent must fill out an application form for a citizenship card for their child. One of the fields the parents must fill in is the child's religion, and from that point on the person is tagged with this religion for the rest of her life unless she makes an effort to change her religious affiliation on her citizenship card. As a result, researchers who rely on data from Thailand's Department of Provincial Administration to determine the number of Christians are using information obtained from when the person was a child.

Those who change religion later in life are not counted unless they make the effort of changing their citizenship card; many do not.

The Department of Religious Affairs defines a Christian another way, only including members of churches who are part of one of the five registered church councils: the Catholic Church, Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), Thailand Baptist Convention (TBC), and the Seventh-day Adventists. Unregistered, independent churches are not recognized by the government. Relying on data from this government agency means that unregistered churches, consisting of 11% of the Christians in Thailand, are not counted.<sup>1</sup>

Another consideration when examining Christian demographics is to understand what Christian groups are included in the information. Are Catholics being counted or not? Does the data include Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witness? Are other groups being excluded because of the theological position of the person providing the data? This is important information to know in order to interpret the data properly.

The next question to consider is who or what is being counted as a Christian. Are only baptized members of churches being counted, or are unbaptized attenders also included? Does the count include children, or just adults? If the count includes children, the number of Christians clearly will be much greater.

If the count is based on members of churches the question of 'What is a church?' needs to be answered as well. In Thailand, each of the Protestant church councils has a different definition. For example, to be called a church under the Church of Christ in Thailand it must have at least 30 or more baptized members and a pastor. If they do not, they are not recognized as a church and Christians participating in these churches are not counted. Member organizations of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand hold that to be considered as a church it must have at least five local worship locations and a total membership of at least 150 people among these locations. EFT churches do not require a pastor but must have someone designated as the leader of the church. Using these strict definitions, members of churches of less than 30 members, such as a house church, would not be included in the count of Christians, even though many house churches exist in Thailand.

Tallies of Christians in Thailand can also be found on mission websites that are based on the number of individuals who have raised their hands, stood up, or signed a commitment card. For example, John Smithwick Ministries claims on their website they alone account for '120,708 salvations' in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> They claim that they believe the Bible when it says that hearing and believing in the name of Jesus Christ leads to salvation. However, Thai people by nature are very agreeable and generally willing to do what a public speaker asks them to do. When someone shares a message with them and then asks them to make

1 Dwight Martin, 'State of the Thai Church Presentation,' eSTAR Foundation, June 7, 2013.

2 See <http://johnsmithwick.com/save/>.

a commitment such as raising their hand, most will do it even if they do not completely understand what they are doing. Many long-serving missionaries in Thailand believe the country would have millions of Christians if the definition of 'Christian' was all those who have at some time in their life made a similar public gesture.

### Reasons for Data Collection

It is important to understand the motivations undergirding data collection in order to properly evaluate it. If data were collected by a government agency, for example, it would be reasonable to suspect that their purpose is to help manage the nation in some way. Data collected by researchers outside of a nation might have a different motivation than a researcher within it. An outside researcher, such as a mission organization, might collect data to find ethnic groups that have no Christian presence, while a local researcher might be trying to find areas without a local church. Also, data provided by a Christian ministry might use statistics to make their ministries look good for fundraising purposes. Knowing the motivation behind the data collection helps evaluate its integrity.

### Time Period and Method of Data Collection

Consumers of data generally do not consider the question of when data were collected. Data presented in books and websites on the number of Christians often times are many years old, yet are used to make contemporary decisions. In Thailand, if data on Protestant Christians are ten or even five years old it will likely be inaccurate because the Protestant Church in Thailand is growing at 5.2% per year.<sup>3</sup> When readers rely on old data incorrect and sometimes costly conclusions can be made. It is critical to know the time period of data collection so consumers can make accurate and informed decisions. If data are outdated, consumers need to be aware that that reality might be quite different.

Considering the method of data collection provides consumers with a level of confidence concerning the quality of the information. For example, was the data collected in a methodical manner, such as through a nationwide survey of churches? Was it provided by denominations within the country? Or was it collected by making estimates about what a surveyor observed? The closer a researcher is to the source of information, such as local pastors and congregants, the reader can be more confident in its reliability.

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3 Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand* (Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2008), 88. In 2012 the eSTAR Foundation reported that the 5.2% rate was still accurate.

### Case Study: The Thailand Protestant Coordinating Committee

The Thailand Protestant Coordinating Committee (TPCC) is responsible for overseeing the work of the Protestant Church in Thailand. It has a rotating chairperson from each of the three major Protestant Church Councils: the Church of Christ in Thailand (which has the most Christians), the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (which has the most churches), and the Thailand Baptist Convention (which has 3% of both the Christians and churches).

The Thailand Evangelism and Church Growth Committee (TEC) is a subcommittee of the TPCC established to lead the Thai church's national plan of evangelism, discipleship, and the planting of local churches. The members of the TEC include all three church councils plus many of the independent churches. Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormons are not included as members of the TEC.

In 2011 the TEC established a national goal called 'Vision 2015/2020', the objective of which is to see Thailand have one million Protestant Christians by the year 2015 and three million by the year 2020. In order to track the progress of the vision, the TEC needed to have accurate information on what is the current state of the Protestant church and if the goals of their vision are being reached. To do this, a research department was founded in order to gather accurate facts about the number of Protestant Christians in the country.

#### *Who is being Counted?*

Before data could be gathered a clear definition of 'Who is a Christian?' needed to be established, and the TEC agreed that the definition of a Christian would be a member of a church. The definition of who is a member of a church would be determined by the theological stance of the church itself or its denomination. Ultimately, the membership number comes from the pastor of the church, or in some cases the overseeing denomination.

The TEC agreed on the following definition of a church: 'A church is defined as three or more believers in Christ who meet together on a regular basis to worship and study God's Word and is not a cell group of a mother church.'<sup>4</sup> Members of these bodies are defined as Christians, and might include both baptized and un-baptized individuals as well as children. This definition encompasses everything from small house churches with a dozen members to large mega-churches with thousands of members. Members of cell groups are not counted because they would be double counted as being both a member of a church and their cell group.

#### *Collection Process*

The Thailand Evangelism and Church Growth Committee asked the eSTAR Foundation located in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to be responsible for collecting and maintaining data, as

<sup>4</sup> A 'cell group' is a small group of Christians meeting weekly outside a church building (usually in homes) for mutual support and discipleship.



well as provide regular updates to Thai Christian leaders, missionaries, and the national church as a whole as to the state of the Protestant Church. To do this eSTAR developed, in partnership with GlobalRize, a national church database called 'Harvest'.<sup>5</sup> Harvest is a web application developed using Oracle's database and technology.

To collect and keep information current, the eSTAR Foundation employs several methods for data collection:

1. When there is a large gathering of Thai pastors, a representative of eSTAR will attend the event to gather information from the pastors about new church plants or updates on existing churches.
2. Denominations send eSTAR regular updates on their churches. Since Harvest is a web application, denominations themselves can enter the information directly into the Harvest database if desired.
3. Facebook, Google, and other Internet search engines are used extensively to find new churches that are not already in the database.
4. eSTAR has developed a crowdsourcing app available as a free download so pastors and individuals can assist eSTAR in collecting data. Using their smartphone or tablet, this app allows the user to take a picture of church (with the GPS receiver on) and fill out a form where they can enter data about the church. The app then transmits the picture and associated church data to the eSTAR Foundation for validation and input into the Harvest database.
5. If data for an existing church has not been updated within a two-year period, eSTAR will contact the pastor by phone, email, or letter to get the latest information to keep the data current.
6. In mountainous areas where there is no mail or other means of communication, eSTAR will send a representative to travel to these remote areas to collect data in person.

New churches are added to the Harvest database virtually every day.

In addition to membership information, many other variables are collected. These include the church's denomination, year founded, number of leaders, pastor's name and contact information, GPS coordinates, phone number, email address, average attendance, and worship language. From this data reports about the state of the national church are created. They are disseminated to Thai leaders and missionaries through email updates, PowerPoint presentations at meetings, and maps made available on the Internet.

An example of a report eSTAR creates is the percentage of Christians in the nation for each province, district, and sub-district. Other reports provide information on areas where there are no churches, where the church is growing the fastest, and what worship

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5 GlobalRize is a Chiang Mai-based organization that aims to serve national churches by providing Internet-related products and services that help them to build up local churches.

languages are used in Thailand. Graphs of percentage of worship languages, church start dates, and church per province are also produced (see Figure 7.1).

The eSTAR Foundation website offers two maps on the Thai church.<sup>6</sup> The first map is the Christian presence map (map 7.1) showing the percent Christian for every province, district, and sub-district.

eSTAR's research shows that 63% of the sub-districts in Thailand have no churches, which includes 38 million people from Thailand's total population of 65 million.

The second map is the Church location map (map 7.2) showing the location of every known church in Thailand. This map allows the user to quickly filter results by denomination, location, and worship language. Information about an individual church can be shown by clicking on the 'dot' indicating the church's location.

This map is used for many purposes; such as individuals looking for a church in area they are moving to; by relief agencies to make contact in areas to help people in need; and by church planters considering starting a new church.

These maps are updated every time a new church is added to the Harvest database. Since new churches are added almost every day, the database contains the most up-to-date and extensive information on the state of the Thai church that exists online. In Thailand, as of December 23, 2013, there were 5,049 churches and 399,827 Christians. These numbers are in constant flux; on average, there are 47 new church members added every day and three new churches added every week.

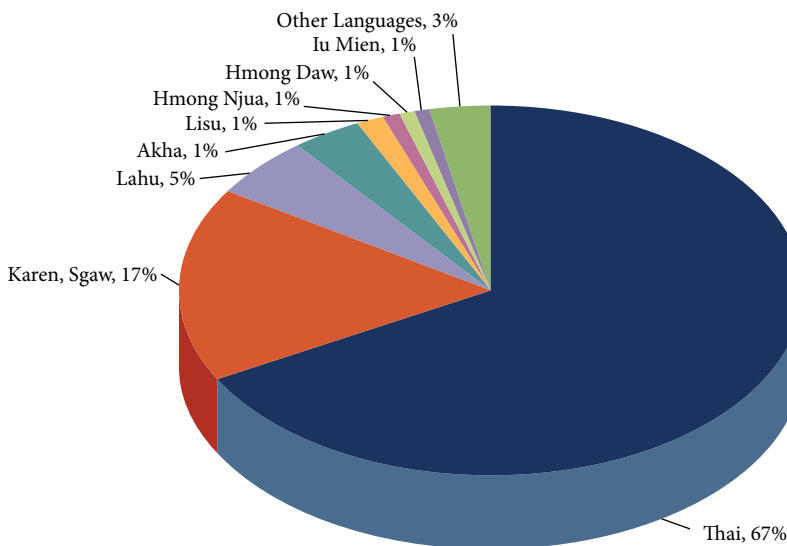
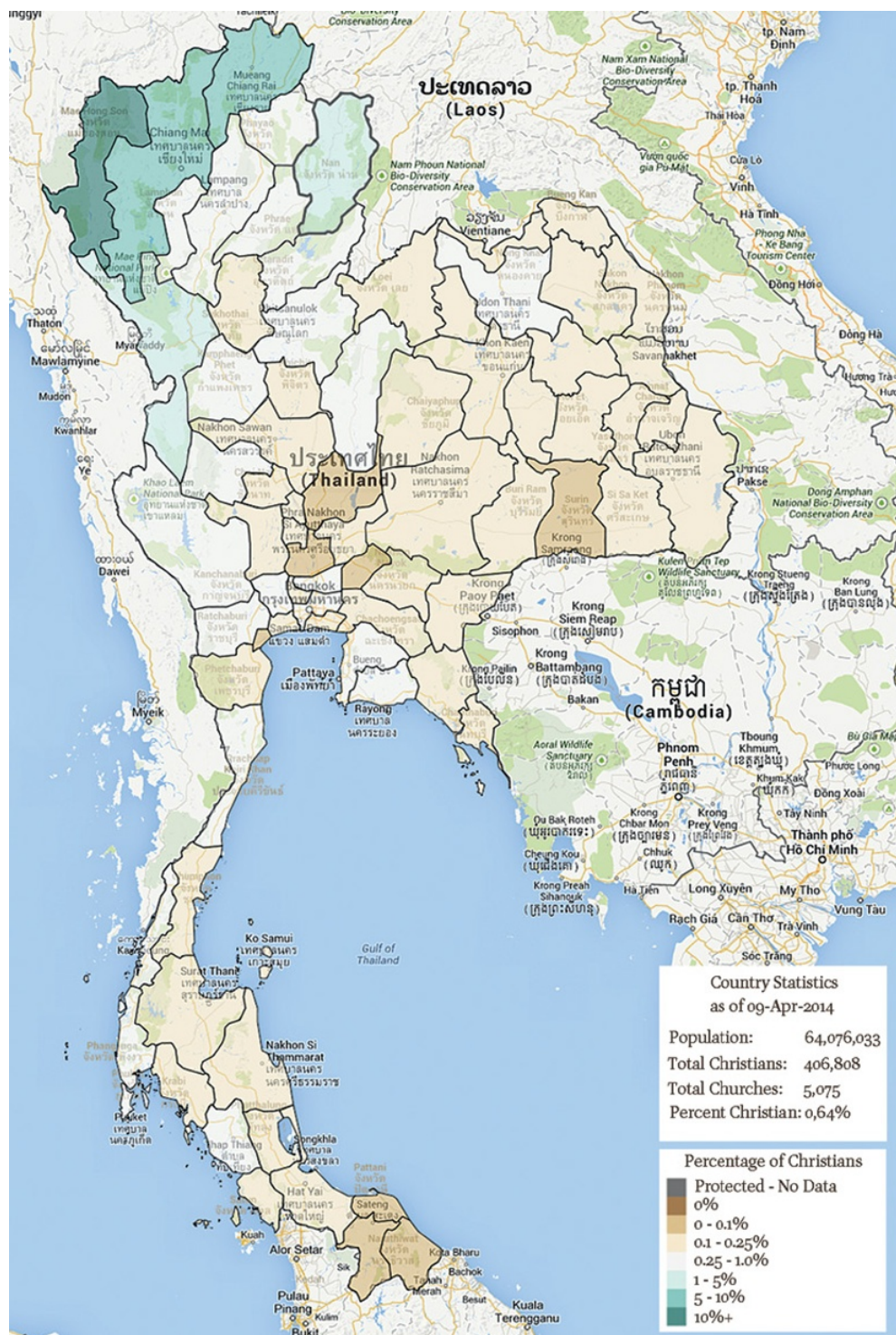


FIGURE 7.1 eSTAR Foundation graph depicting churches per worship language in Thailand, 2013

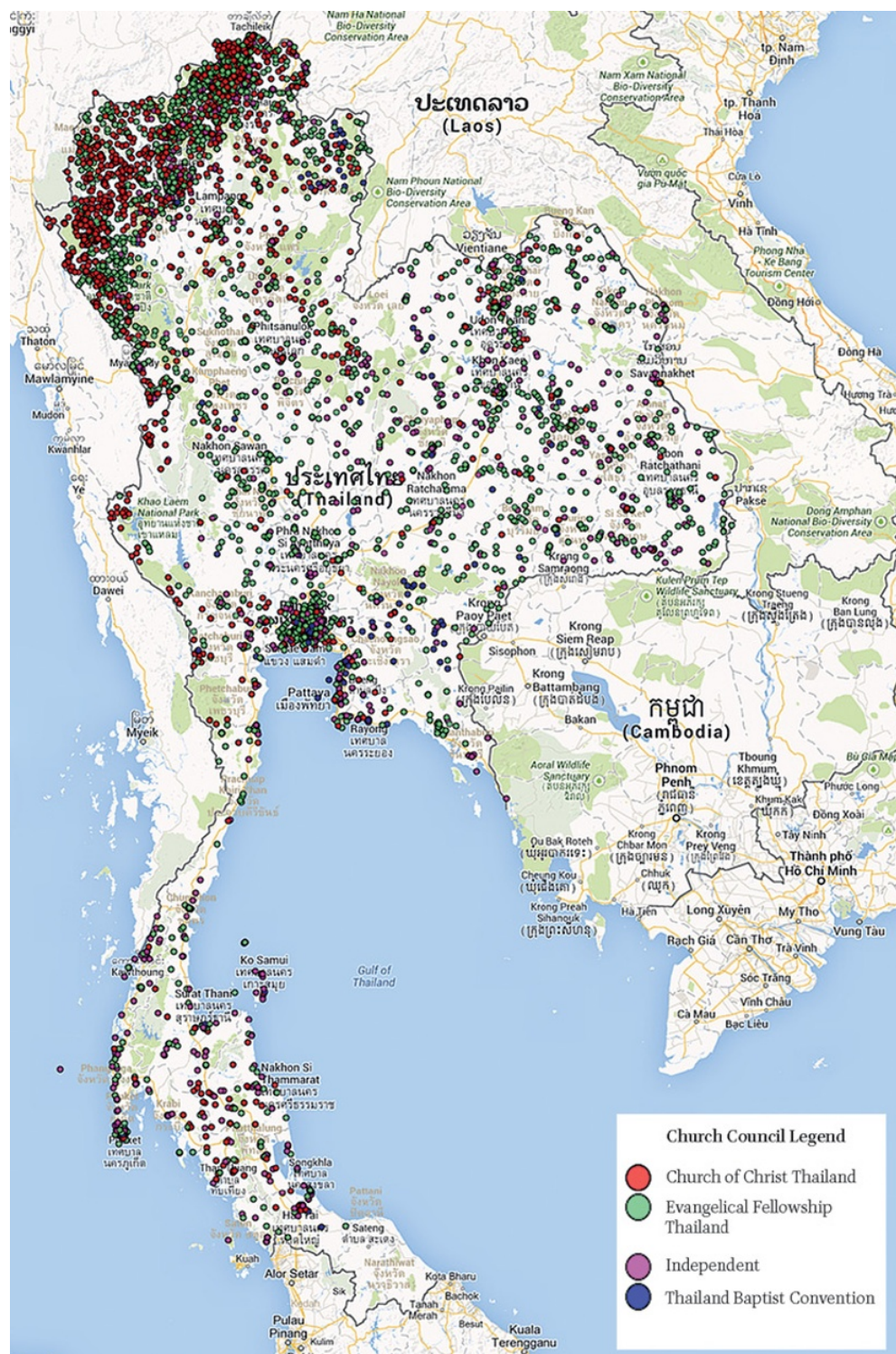
SOURCE: eSTAR FOUNDATION, 2013

<sup>6</sup> These maps can be found at <http://estar.ws>.



MAP 7.1 eSTAR Foundation Christian presence map in Thailand by percentage, 2013





MAP 7.2 eSTAR Foundation church location map in Thailand, 2013