

Mission Trip to Southeast Asia March 1-27, 2009

By Dr. Norman J. Threinen

My mission trip in 2009 was my fourth to Southeast Asia, my third as a faculty member for the theological program conducted under the auspices of the Bangkok-based Luther Institute for South-East



Asia (LISA) which Dr. Leonard Harms serves as volunteer director. The curriculum calls for faculty to be brought in six times a year to teach one week-long course each time in Thailand and one in Cambodia. The course which I taught in March 2009 was entitled Pastoral Theology and Church Polity, a very timely course inasmuch as the formation of an indigenous Lutheran Church is on the horizon in each country. The course was, however, a very difficult one because, with virtually no exceptions, the participants were all first generation believers who are serving people whom they themselves have gathered in locations where they are otherwise employed. This is particularly true in Cambodia where no Lutheran Church has existed to this point and where any minimal Bible School training has been Reformed or Charismatic in nature. (The pastors and deaconesses in the program were introduced to the Lutheran Church only four years ago through the distribution of Luther's *Small Catechism* by the Lutheran Hour Ministries representative in Cambodia.) It does not take a great deal of imagination to realize that some questions normally dealt with in a seminary course on Pastoral Theology will have to await consideration at a later time.

Following the conclusion of my second week of teaching, I devoted a week to the visitation of eight of the nine deaconesses in the program in Cambodia. I was impressed with the dedication of these women as

they worked with hundreds of children and scores of women in their communities. In contrast with Buddhism in Thailand where a concerted effort has been made to integrate all of life into the Buddhist experience, Buddhism in Cambodia seems to be largely formal and is reserved for the few who elect to take it more seriously and become monks. As a result, where deaconesses have taken the initiative of teaching children in their normal community contexts, they are welcomed and essentially have an open door. For example, two deaconesses who work together in one location have seven places where they work with children. One place which we visited had 60 children and I surmise that the other groups of children were similar in size. The deaconesses also gather women weekly with the result that women probably constitute the bulk of the congregations. Of the conversations which I had in which I asked who in the family was the first to become a believer, the answer invariably was that it was the mother. Where a man was a believer, he had usually becoming a believer through his wife.

Following the additional week in Cambodia, I flew to Chiang Mai in the northwest part of Thailand where Thai silk is produced. There I spent several days with Satit, one of our Bangkok students. I had spent time with him in Surin northeast of Bangkok in 2008 and was impressed with the efforts he was making to reach out to street children and young girls in two villages where his wife had grown up. He has been supporting this mission almost entirely from the proceeds of a family food-packaging business. My



intention in 2009 was to observe another aspect of his work which was centered in the small city of Prao, 100 km north of Chiang Mai. It was in Prao that Satit was providing for the education and Christian care of the girls from Surin who would otherwise be drawn into early failed marriages by their parents and inevitably a life of prostitution.

In Prao, Satit was serving as the *de facto* pastor of a congregation which had uncertain Protestant origins. The denomination which started the



congregation had built an attractive church building on an adequate piece of land in the middle of the city but had not been able to provide it with a pastor. It has continued to exist through dedicated but theologically untrained lay leadership and at some point turned to Satit who had some Lutheran seminary training for Biblical teaching and pastoral care. Although not ordained or formally called by the congregation, Satit has been given a relatively free hand in the congregation. As a result, he had been able to turn the congregation's parish hall into a boarding house for the girls from Surin, in addition to 28 Christian girls and 14 boys from the hill country tribes nearby who need living accommodations while they attended school in Prao. In addition to providing a place for the children to sleep and food for them to eat, Satit and his staff provide Christian training for them. To oversee the operation, Satit personally employs a manager, housemother and cook. He does not receive remuneration from the Prao congregation for his pastoral services. Nor does he charge room and board from the children, except for donations of rice or other food by their parents.

The success which Satit and his staff has had in shaping the children to have the proper Christian attitude to life and their own future is evident in that Satit has about 35-40 children on the waiting list. He has begun to construct another dormitory building on the church property which he hopes will become the boys' dormitory. After he has finished his LISA course, he hopes to be ordained and called to this congregation which has taken on a Lutheran character since Satit has been serving it. He wants to enroll a couple of leaders in the congregation and among the hill people in the next round of courses which LISA will offer. He wants to give up his business and serve in the ministry full-time. He would also like have someone come to Prao from North America to teach English as a second language for a year. Because of the people with whom Satit has a positive relationship, this person would also have an open door to teach Christianity in a couple of public schools in the city.

My additional time in Cambodia and North Thailand was a time of growing in understanding the projects which the Concordia Lutheran Mission Society has supported. Perhaps above all, it has led me to marvel at the willingness of those in these countries who bring the Gospel to their fellowmen to underwrite personally the cost of their own work of Gospel outreach. In Canada, we pastors and church workers so often function largely with the Scriptural principle



that "the laborer is worthy of his hire." In Cambodia and Thailand my observation it is that they follow much more the example of the early Christians in Acts 8:4: "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word."