

Introduction

Known as the 'land of smiles', the Kingdom of Thailand, formerly called Siam, is renowned for its friendliness and breathtaking natural beauty. A much-loved tourist hot spot, it draws the largest number of tourists in south east Asia. However, living alongside this is government corruption, high rates of drug addiction, and a well-developed sex industry.



History

Thailand is the only country in south east Asia to never have been under colonial rule. During the 19th century Siam was disputed by both the French and the British but at the end of the century both countries agreed to leave the state independent.

A constitutional monarch governs Thailand. The present monarch, King Bhumibol, came to the throne in 1946 after the assassination of his brother. The royal family is popular and greatly revered by the people.

A powerful government army dominated political and commercial life between the 1930s and 1970s. The two periods of civilian government (1973-1976 and 1988-1991) were noted for corruption. However, after the army violently suppressed pro-democracy protestors in 1992, a civilian government, committed to dealing with corruption, was elected. Subsequent governments have failed to effectively deal with corruption and the previously booming economy has slowed down alarmingly.

Current challenges

- ▶ According to Oxfam 670,000 of Thailand's 62 million population are infected with HIV/Aids. A United Nations reports states that Aids has become the leading cause of natural death in Thailand.

- ▶ Addiction to amphetamines – or ya ba as they are known in Thailand – has become even more of a problem than Aids or heroin abuse.
- ▶ Even though there is openness to the gospel, the response remains small with only one per cent of the population being Christian. Much of the growth of the Church has been among the Thai-speaking Chinese in the cities and the marginalised tribal people.

BMS involvement in Thailand

BMS World Mission is a co-operating board member of the Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship (TBMF) and the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT). BMS personnel and supported partner workers have been involved in work in Bangkok, on the western border with Burma and in the north among the Karen and Akha tribal peoples. Their work has included theological education, pastoral work, school education, church work, social and health projects. There are currently five BMS workers assigned to the country. Some of the projects with which BMS is involved are as follows:

Chiang Rai Christian Service Centre (CRCSC)

The Chiang Rai Christian Service Centre is a small community-based project which works closely with the local Thai church, government and non-government organisations to help the local community, especially those disadvantaged and affected by Aids. Part of this involvement includes visiting schools and the local jail with monthly educational programmes on Aids, drug problems, and other social and health issues. In addition they help Aids orphans stay with family members in the community by supporting them practically, financially and through income generation schemes.

Community health care in remote Akha villages

BMS worker Judy Cook is currently investigating developing community health work amongst the remote Akha villages. One weekend a month she and an American mission worker travel to isolated villages to attend to health needs, encourage the church and promote the women's ministry.

Karen Baptist Convention (KBC)

Together with her co-worker, Yu Ler Bay, Jacqui Wells disciples and encourages nine women leaders. Each woman is from a different association

within the KBC, and all are BMS supported partner workers.

Lizz and Pete Maycock are based in Musikee, north west Thailand, where they are involved in youth work and Pete teaches at the village school.

NightLight

Emily Chalke works with NightLight, a BMS partner, which works with women involved in the sex trade, offering them a way out through income generation, counselling and prayer.

Health Project for Tribal People (HPTP)

BMS supports the HPTP which is responsible for the following projects: housing 30 HIV-positive mothers and their children in the House of Love; providing pre-school education through the House of Blessing, a day-care centre for children from two slums in Chiang Mai; educating tribal people on Aids and drugs; and providing a youth centre for tribal young people.

Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)

Formerly known as the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC), the TBBC is a group of church-affiliated nongovernmental organisations based in Thailand that co-ordinates humanitarian effort on behalf of the refugees on the Thai/Burma border. BMS supports the TBBC which aims to alleviate malnutrition and food insecurity and meet the primary physical needs for survival of women, men and children, in partnership with their community.

Background Information

The land

Thailand is situated in central Indochina. From the mountain ranges in the northern and western regions, the Rivers Meping and Menan flow through the central valley and through extensive delta systems into the Gulf of Siam. The plains are fertile with large rice plantations. In some areas, deforestation has taken place resulting in a decrease in rubber production. Tourism is a major industry in Thailand.

Religion

Just over 92 per cent of the population in Thailand is Buddhist with 140,000 Buddhist priests and 18,000 Buddhist temples. There is a small Muslim presence of 5.24 per cent, and a Christian community of around 700,000, just over one per cent of the population.

For over 400 years the Catholic Church has been present in Thailand with 650 churches and some

350,000 adherents.

Overall, the Christian Church is numerically weak although growth is being seen amongst the tribal groups of the north. Around 75 per cent of the country's Christians are from the north.

The largest Protestant grouping is the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) with around 480 congregations and 119,000 members and adherents, including large numbers of Christians from hill-tribe groups such as the Karen and Akha tribes.

Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the growing number of BMS partners in Thailand trying to make a difference in the sex industry by offering help and advice.
- ▶ Pray for the overall problem with drug addiction in Thailand; for wisdom and leadership from the government and that tangible solutions would be found.
- ▶ Nine out of ten Thai people have not heard of the love of Jesus. The word 'Thai' means free. Pray that Thailand will find true freedom in Jesus Christ and that local Thai Christians and the tribal churches will become more equipped to evangelise amongst their own people.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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