

## **Factors Contributing to Thai Buddhists' Adoption of Adventist Beliefs — Part 1**

**Gabby Jed C. Galgao, Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand**

### **Abstract**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has experienced little growth since its inception in the Kingdom of Thailand over 100 years ago, signifying a need to know more about the process through which Thai Buddhists adopt Adventist practices and beliefs. In an effort to answer this challenge, this qualitative study aims to help fill this knowledge gap by identifying factors contributing to choices of Thai Buddhists to adopt Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Former Buddhists were interviewed and several factors were identified. Results from this study revealed that converts adopted Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and practices due to three main factors: 1) Positive Life Changes, 2) Relationships with Christians, and 3) Spiritual Encounters. Further, the healthy lifestyle of many Seventh-day Adventist played a key role in this process. In light of these factors, tailored and suitable outreach efforts are needed. Highlighting the tangible over the theoretical in SDA evangelism could also be an instrumental shift within Buddhist contexts. It is suggested that further research be conducted on a wider scale to confirm and further solidify the findings of this study.

**Keywords:** Buddhists, Seventh-day Adventist, conversion factors

### **Introduction**

Since the introduction of Christianity to Thailand in the 1500s, little headway has been made in growing the number of adherents, who amount to barely 1% of the Thai population (Dahlfred, 2014; Leighton and Leighton, 2015; Stiller, 2013). This figure strikes a disconcerting note in regards to evangelism, especially when money and time are factored into the equation. Perhaps even more striking is the number of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) members in Thailand compared to those of other Christian denominations. According to the SDA Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (SDAOASR), church membership in 2017 was comprised of 15,385 members in a country of 69 million (SDAOASR, 2017). With such statistics in mind, it stands to reason that action must be taken to help spur the growth of church membership within this nation.

One source (Stiller, 2013) questions why, after so many years of Christianity's presence in Thailand, there are so few converts to Christianity. Clearly, such a situation warrants an investigation to identify what common factors come into play with the few people who have converted to Christianity. Once those factors have been identified, they can then be applied to reaching other Thai Buddhists through evangelistic efforts or personal Christian ministries. Such application will aid both professionals and laymen in following Christ's Divine Commission to reach the Buddhist people of Thailand: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...." (Matthew 28:19, 20 KJV).

This commission also applies to outreach among Buddhists. Evangelists should be aware that they have different mindsets, and thus require a different method when witnessing for Christ to them (Campbell, 2015; Dybdahl, 2006). In the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) mindset, evangelism is integral though many think it to be optional, and have left it to others instead of dutifully completing it (Skeete, 2010; White, 1909). This study seeks to help fill the gap of knowledge on how to reach Thai Buddhists with the Adventist message more effectively by identifying key themes in their conversion process. Being aware of these themes may consequently aid in evangelistic efforts by catering to them according to these themes rather than continuing past approaches.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***The Beginning of Christianity in Thailand***

According to Dahlfred (2014), Christian evangelists reached Thailand in 1567 when Catholic missionaries arrived in Ayutthaya. Since that date to the present, Christianity has been in Thailand for

450 years, and yet it has made little impact on the country based on the membership of Christians, who make up barely 1% of the Thai population (Leighton & Leighton, 2015; Stiller, 2013).

### ***Factors of Conversion***

From previous studies concerning the conversion of Thai Buddhists to Christianity, three key themes emerge: 1) Relationships with Christians, 2) Spiritual Encounters, and 3) Evidence of Change. Hilderbrand (2016) identified three key themes that contributed to the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity – dissatisfaction/incongruence, contact with Christians, and an encounter with the supernatural. Thus, it is possible to ascertain that disillusionment from the former Buddhists' lives carried some weight in their conversion to Christianity, as did contact with Christians.

The second common theme explains how a relationship with a Christian played a key role in the conversion of Thai Buddhists to Christianity (de Bruijne, 2010; Griswold, 2012; Koning, 2015; Sprengel, 2004). The third common theme – evidence of change – deals with how they were attracted to Christianity because of the presence of happiness and the display of love in action (de Bruijne, 2010; Griswold, 2012; Koning, 2015). Thus, the study focused on these three themes and sought to determine whether the same three themes emerged from a different pool of Buddhists, and whether other themes were present. Knowing these themes could prove to be valuable for Christian witnessing in Thailand.

It is also useful to consider what methods to employ when witnessing to Thai Buddhists. Ubolwan Mejudhon, a Thai researcher, strongly recommended that Christian witnessing in Thailand include true relationships between Buddhists and Christians, and be buttressed with a distinct flavor of meekness – one of the keys to understanding the Thai Buddhist psyche (Mejudhon, 1997). Within this vein, the idea of contextualizing key SDA beliefs becomes a powerful concept to employ. Kuhn (2016) described how he and others (SDAs) were able to have palpable success in witnessing to Buddhists by contextualizing certain cultural practices. One example is a funeral, where instead of completely replacing the traditional way with a more western style funeral, some key elements were edited to reflect SDA fundamental beliefs, but still contained the essence of the home culture. This is important to understand, since one of the impediments to Christian witnessing in Thailand is the Thai perception that once individuals accept Christianity, they are – in fact – surrendering their national identity (Mejudhon, 1997). In addition, Thai researcher Suntaree Komin indicated that Buddhism is deeply rooted within the psyches of the Thai people (Komin, 1991), and this may be one reason why it is difficult to conduct outreach within the region. Furthermore, Dybdahl (2006) highlighted that when approaching Buddhists, evangelists are in need of being able to “...show Christianity as an experience, not simply as a philosophical statement” (p. 20).

This research project's main purpose is to confirm whether the common themes identified in previous research are also found in this study, as well as to identify whether other different themes are present. The confirmation of the common themes will help both laymen and professionals seeking to fulfill Christ's Divine Commission in knowing how to witness to Thai Buddhists. Identification of other themes will also be useful in adding to the body of knowledge in this field.

### **Research Methodology**

This section describes the main research questions of the study, the conceptual framework of the study, its participants and research setting, data collection, and analysis. While the main objective of this study was to identify factors of conversion to Seventh-day Adventism among Thai Buddhists and confirm whether these factors are common to previous research in this area, other questions were set as well.

Much consideration was given as to how the data would be collected and analyzed. It was decided that qualitative approach was more appropriate to help answer the main research questions of this study, based on its human element and nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted at a Seventh-day Adventist university in rural Thailand. According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), 12 respondents are a sufficient number to extrapolate valid themes in a qualitative study of this nature.

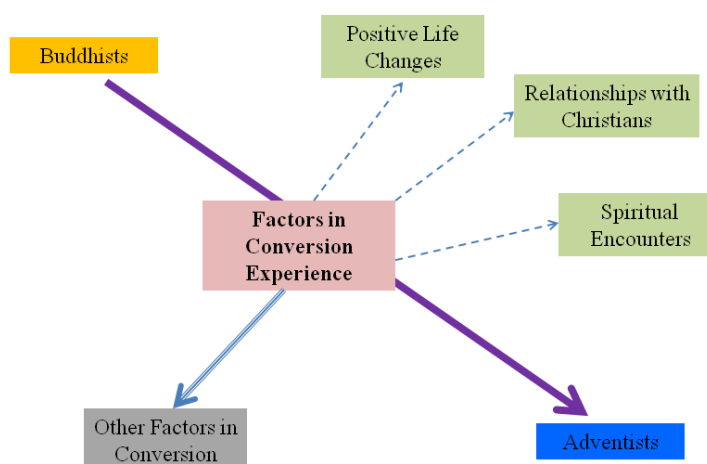
## Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What was the first contact that Thai Buddhists had with Christianity?
2. What are the main factors in the conversion of Thai Buddhists to Seventh-day Adventism?

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research used the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach, defining a conceptual framework as a reference point in research that, “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, concepts, or variables – and the presumed relationships among them” (p. 18). In seeking to answer the aforementioned research questions, the study drew on the main themes previously identified by other researchers (Bruijne, 2012; Griswold, 2012; Hilderbrand, 2016; Koning, 2015; Sprengel, 2004). By distilling the factors in conversion mentioned by these sources three main themes emerged, namely 1) Positive Life Changes, 2) Relationships with Christians, and 3) Spiritual Encounters (See Figure 1). The exact wordings of these themes have been changed, but are based on the works of the aforementioned authors.



**Figure 1.** Factors in Conversion of Thai Buddhists

(Adapted from de Bruijne, 2010; Griswold, 2012; Hilderbrand, 2016; Koning, 2015; Sprengel, 2004.)

## Participants and Research Setting

Twelve participants were selected using purposive sampling, since the principal aim of the study was to elicit responses from a select group. This type of sampling is expected in qualitative research in order to add credence to the framework and contribute relevant results (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). All the participants were Thais who were former Theravada Buddhists but had been baptized into Seventh-day Adventism. However, a minority of the participants were members of an ethnic tribal group in Thailand.

The research setting was at a Seventh-day Adventist university in Thailand. Of the 12 participants, three were faculty members at the university. One was a staff member, while the rest were students at the university. The majority of students (7) were English majors from the Thai program, while one student was a Theology major.

## Data Collection and Analysis

An interview guide was constructed and reviewed by experts familiar with the topic to ensure validity and effectiveness in the study. Once selected, participants were asked to sign a consent form authorizing permission to record the interviews in order to facilitate analysis of the data. The respondents were informed of the study's purpose. Semi-structured in-depth interviews ranging from

approximately 25-40 minutes each were conducted in the English language. The interviews were recorded using an HD camera. The recordings were then reformatted from a video file to an audio file to protect respondents' identities before being transcribed from sound files into written documents. Open coding was then used to organize the interviews into conceptual framework themes until saturation occurred.

Allowance was made that themes other than those previously identified might be present. Validation was achieved through triangulation of data by showing the resulting themes generated from the interviews to study participants to confirm accuracy (member checking). Furthermore, the main points of each interview were summarized at the end of each interview session so that their accuracy could be confirmed by the respondents. Triangulation of methodology was carried out using peer debriefing, which is a process whereby an investigator asks other qualified researchers to evaluate data collection techniques or findings. Creswell (2009) describes it as a procedure that "...involves locating a person (a peer debriefer) who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher" (p. 192). Further corroboration of the findings was achieved by showing the data and themes that emerged to colleagues who were familiar with this topic, and asking them if the results coincided with previous enquiries. All the validation strategies involved in this study (member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing) are acceptable and expected in qualitative research according to the same source.

## **Results**

The responses from the interviews were used to answer the study's main research questions. Answers to the first encounter that the participants had with Christianity were also answered through this medium and are detailed below. The responses of the participants are given according to each participant's assigned number. There appeared to be no relationship between the gender, age, or marital status of participants and their responses.

### ***Demographics***

Twelve participants were involved in the study. Of these, eight were female and four were male; four of the research participants were 41 or older in age; six were between the ages of 21-40 and two of the participants were below 21 years old. The participants represented 7 of Thailand's 76 provinces namely, Bangkok (1), Chaiyaphum (2), Chiang Mai (2), Nakhon Sawan (1), Phitsanulok (1), Tak (3), and Ubon Ratchathani (1). One respondent was half Thai and was born in Laos. Two of the participants were married, nine were single, and one was divorced.

### ***First Encounter with Christianity***

In response to the first research question of the study, four channels were discovered – Schools (41.7%), Word-of-Mouth (25.0%), Non-SDA Churches (16.7%), and missionary outreach encounters (16.7%). It should be mentioned that the first encounter with Christianity included non-SDA encounters. These findings are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Channels of First Encounter with Christianity

Participant No.	Channel of Encounter	Location/Description of Encounter
01	School	Invited to evening worship at an SDA Nursing School
02	Word-of-Mouth	Friend who was formerly a monk
03	School	SDA university
04	School	SDA university
05	School	SDA high school/elementary school
06	Word-of-Mouth	Dated an SDA lady
07	Non-SDA Church	Catholic Church
08	School	Public school, Catholic school
09	Word-of-Mouth	Invited to join a Christmas party
10	Non-SDA Church	Protestant church (Sunday-keeping)
11	Missionary Outreach	English Camp/Evangelism Outreach
12	Missionary Outreach	Missionaries visited village, showed a movie about Jesus
TOTALS (n=12)	School = 5	
	Word-of-Mouth = 3	
	Non-SDA Church = 2	
	Missionary Outreach = 2	
	12	

### ***Factors in Conversion***

Regarding the study's second question – factors in conversion – responses may be categorized into three themes: Positive Life Changes, Relationships with Christians, and Spiritual Encounters. Some of these responses coincided but still maintained a certain degree of distinctness. Many of the respondents cited several of these factors in their own conversion stories, so some of these factors may have been simultaneously at play.

#### ***Positive Life Changes***

When asked questions regarding their conversion experiences to Seventh-day Adventism, many of the participants expressed that it was their observation of positive change in the behaviors of their friends and family members that led them to conversion. For instance, Respondent 02 was a former senior monk when he first saw a strong positive change in his friend who had previously served as a monk together with him. Respondent 02's friend visited him at the monastery, and he noted that a big change in behavior had come over his friend. He recalled:

My monk friend left the monastery and came back to visit me. When he came back, I saw he had changed. He was humble, gentle, and good. I think (sic), "What is it can make my friend change?"

Thus, one major theme that revealed itself in the study was the positive changes that the respondents witnessed in their family, friends, and themselves. The observance of these positive changes played a key role in their conversion process. These responses reflect how deeply Thai Buddhists value tangible change.

I noticed that my family changed when I told them about Christianity. They became warm and inviting, especially grandfather. (03)

My family members changed in a positive way. When I saw my sister convert to SDA, I saw that she changed. My grandfather especially supported us. I had...warm feelings. (04)

At the time, I was heartbroken. And then, um, my friend told me that, "If you feel not really good, you can go to church with everything." And then, tomorrow I just woke up, and then dress, and then go, just go with them (sic). And I feel like (pause) it has something to touch my heart and I want to go more and more..." (10)

### *Relationships with Christians*

A major theme that came out in the responses of the participants was the relationships they had with Christians. These relationships allowed them to see new viewpoints and perspectives, and became one of the deciding factors of conversion. In particular, the participants' observed that the lifestyles, characters, music, and diet of Seventh-day Adventists differed from those of Thai Buddhists.

I remember that it was impressive [music] by the music, by the Christian culture. I impressed with the music they sang...It touch my heart (sic)...I didn't believe in God, but I somehow liked to join – to merge with the Christian people since, like, they are so nice, so good, and reasonable. (01)

I saw different, Buddhist like was my family like this. Yeah. Sometime (sic) they drank and drank wine like this and they tend to fight. But on the other hand, like, um, Christian they don't really, ah, drink and they just have peace family...Nobody do bad thing, nobody drugs, yeah, drugs. (07)

Maybe I feel warm and also Adventist people very tight, and they make me feel like we are family...I feel like everyone kind to me and help each other, even you know or you don't know them, yeah. At the first time I came here I didn't have even one friends, but all the staff and teacher also help me then, yeah... Even at that time I didn't be, ah, Adventist or even be, ah, haven't baptize, but they make me feel like they open for me to come to them, come to God, and be God family (sic)... (10)

Lifestyle. We can improve our own life like especially our health. So we can get better health. We can keep – we can learn how to keep your body clean. (11)

The dietary habits of Seventh-day Adventists also played a role in the conversion process of the respondents. Some respondents had had contact with other non-SDA denominations before their conversion, but still noted the dietary restriction of pork in the diet.

Mm. Adventist different from, ah, Catholic (sic) a lot...like for example pork, right? But Catholic...even though they believe God, but they still eat pork, yeah pork. (07)

"No pork? Come on!" (laughs) That was my first impression. And this is what Thai people think. (08)

### *Spiritual Encounters*

One striking theme that appeared during the analysis of the interviews was the theme of spiritual encounters. Many of the respondents reported that their experience with the supernatural, particularly in the form of answered prayers, was instrumental in their conversion process. For instance, Respondent 06's mother was rendered an invalid because of a fall that she had. He never thought that his mother would ever walk again. However, his girlfriend at the time (an SDA lady) and her mother witnessed to him and urged him to pray for the recovery of his mother. Because of the urging of his girlfriend and her mother, he prayed a simple, short prayer, and his mother was healed. This became one of the biggest reasons for his conversion.

I think it's impossible for my mom to be able to walk again, because like the whole village said my mom will not be able to walk again...I pray (sic) to God, "If you want me to study in your institution, so please help my mom to be recover." So, after that one year later...then my mom can walk. (06)

For Respondent 07, answered prayer was also pivotal in her story. She was out shopping one day with her friend. Tired from the activities, she wanted to rest. Her friend and her friend's brother brought her to a room and locked her inside. Respondent 07's supposed friend then proceeded to physically attack her. In fear, she prayed, "Please help me!" and the Lord protected her, and she safely got out of the locked room. This was one of the biggest experiences she had that helped her decide to become a Seventh-day Adventist. Furthermore, she experienced more answered prayers when she decided to begin tertiary education. She only had 7,000 Baht with her when she came to an SDA university. She prayed about it, and was able to complete her studies through self-supporting efforts. Respondent 07 attributes being able to graduate from university to her experience with God.

God help (sic) a lot. That's why I decided to baptize...Yeah, I just want to study and that in my mind already think that God will help me and will find the way for me...I got help my study a lot...But

when I pray to God, yeah, like the power, confident (sic), come to me and we, I can do it, yeah... (07)

In Thailand, Buddhists believe in demons or spirits (Formoso, 2016; Kirsch, 1977). It could be said that the two beliefs have become intertwined over time and the occurrence is not limited to Thailand but extends to other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia and Tibet (Sutherland, 2013). For Respondent 08, believing in God did not come as a result of public evangelism, but as a need to free himself from demons. He was a pop music dancer/entertainer from Nakhon Sawan Province who found himself being targeted by demonic spirit forces. At first, the demons manifested their presence by a “snoring” sound inside his apartment which was at the very top floor of the building where no other tenant was staying.

According to him, the demons would levitate objects in his room or bother him on his way to a performance appointment as a lady softly laughing in a sinister way. This would happen as he walked alone in dark alleys to his work place. Other times, he would be practicing his dances in another room and the same sinister laugh would be heard. More seriously, the demons would “paralyze” him in his room – he wouldn’t be able to move at all from the bed, no matter how hard he tried. In an effort to free himself from the demons, the respondent would attend all the Buddhists rites and rituals he could think of. Even becoming ordained as a monk did not relieve him from these spirits. Going to the temple for weeks on end generated no protection or mitigation to his suffering. Tired and frustrated that nothing helped, he started talking with his girlfriend’s mother, who was an SDA. This woman encouraged him by saying, “Eh, just try and pray.” Seeing nothing to lose, he tried praying for small things at first – the bus to come on time, a seat at the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS), Wi-Fi signal on his smart phone – all of which were answered. Then, the respondent started playing an audio Bible in his room throughout the night. The spirits did not bother him at all.

This happened for some time, until one morning a demon manifested itself in the form of an old woman standing at the foot of his bed. Upon waking, he realized that he was once again paralyzed. Realizing his plight, the respondent began praying to God. The demon began mocking his prayers and cursing at him for mentioning God. Nothing was working until he cried out, “In the Name of God, go away.” Instantly, the demon left him – freed from his paralysis. This pivotal point of his spiritual encounters marked the beginning of Respondent 08’s belief in God.

At that moment, God really exists for me. That’s when I knew that God really exists and at least He is powerful. He is that safe place that I was looking for. (08)

Other stories of answered prayers began to surface as the interviews progressed. Some respondents shared stories where money was involved, and their prayers were answered. Respondent 10 was a female English major from Phitsanulok Province. She applied to an SDA university, but realized she would not be able to enroll for her first regular semester because of financial troubles. Wanting to continue her studies, she prayed that money would come. Shortly thereafter, her brother was able raise nearly 30,000 Baht – enough for her enrollment the following semester.

In Thailand, it is common for students to apply for a government loan for their studies. This respondent had done the same, but had a problem with her father’s signature. Warned that she only had three days remaining to obtain that signature, she became desperate – it would normally take a week or two to process. So she prayed, “Please help me if You are really beside me.” She received her father’s needed signature in time for the government loan. It was at that moment that Respondent 10 expressed her desire to be baptized.

So, I really thank God and then, after that I really, um, say to the teacher --- want to...be baptized and want to be God’s children (sic). (10)

Respondent 10’s story resonates with those of other interviewees. Their experiences echo the sentiment that the reason they decided to convert to Adventism was because of what they saw as God’s answer to their prayers. Respondent 12 is an English major from Tak Province whose first experience to Christianity occurred when a group of missionaries came to his village and showed a

movie about Jesus. Later, he witnessed a man who had been dismissed as “crazy” by the village. Within a few months of baptism, the “crazy” man was made whole again. This started a curiosity within him, and when he came to an Adventist university in Thailand, he had the opportunity to experience Christ for himself. According to Respondent 12, the God’s answer to his prayers was the biggest reason for his conversion.

The reason, uh, God answered my prayer...before I went to the clinic to take my wisdom tooth. And then the price may be very high. Like 2 or 3,000 Baht. And then the dentist said it depends on the tooth. And then I prayed to God that, uh, it’s so expensive, so please help me to be 1,500 Baht (sic). And then, the result is exactly 1,500 Baht. I was so shocked. (12)

Another story that illustrated the power of answered prayer even after conversion was Respondent 01’s story. She had already converted to Adventism, but had not informed her parents about her decision. Upon the urging of her friends, the respondent gently told her mother that she had converted to Adventism. Furious, her mother changed dramatically; threats to the school and to the church were made, and the respondent suffered due to the amount of alienation she experienced. “It’s like tug-of-war between Satan which is my own life and Jesus in my heart,” she recalled during the interview. Feeling the pressure from the strained relationship, she prayed:

God, I want to go back to Buddhist (sic). And when I finish my university, then I will become Yours again. God, I cannot. I cannot. This is the maximum already. I really cannot be patient anymore. (01)

The next day, the respondent hurt her arms in an accident. She needed someone to care for her. Knowing this, her mother “softened” her approach. Respondent 01 meekly submitted herself to the care of her mother, and began to serve her parents by doing chores around the house and respecting her parents. Sometimes, she would not even go out on Sundays as many teenagers would rather do. Instead she would help her parents. All this was endured so that she would be able to go back to worshipping God.

I really have to humble my heart to the floor, you know, do whatever they say. You know, whatever I can sacrifice, but let me go to church to worship God. (01)

Gradually, Respondent 01’s mother’s stance on her decision to become Adventist changed, and she was able to continue worshipping God. In this story, it was recounted that God helped her continue to be an Adventist by allowing the accident to occur, therefore resulting in her mother’s acceptance of her decision to be baptized after seeing humble, patient behavior in her daughter.

## **Discussion**

### ***First Encounter with Christianity***

It may be somewhat interesting that the majority of the respondents first learned about Christianity through schools and word-of-mouth, rather than through direct missionary outreach – although 16.7% of the respondents were reached through it. Though this may not seem important, it demonstrates that schools are and ought to be a useful means of outreach in this field (White, 1903). In addition, it appeared that the biggest factor present in schools that piqued respondents’ interest in Adventism was the quality of behavior among SDA Christians towards them and towards other SDA members – kindness, tactfulness, and eating habits, in particular. Of equal interest is the fact that word-of-mouth, a traditional form of communication, is still effective in the Information Age. These findings could indicate that schools are strong potential areas of influence for Christian witnessing. Moreover, respondents’ statements bolstered the idea that former Buddhists witnessing to other Buddhists by what they say about Christianity or their simple invitation to attend church may be all that is needed. This finding was in line with those of other researchers (Koning, 2015; Sprengel, 2004).



### ***Factors in Conversion***

Based on the findings of this study, three major themes emerged - 1) Positive Life Changes, 2) Relationships with Christians, and 3) Spiritual Encounters. These themes are consistent with the findings of previous research (de Bruijne, 2012; Griswold, 2012; Hilderbrand, 2016; Koning, 2015; Sprengel, 2004) and are therefore seen to be further evidence of the reasons behind the conversion of Thai Buddhists to Christianity. Regarding the first theme (Positive Life Changes), several respondents explained that they observed changes in how family members or friends related to them after they converted. These changes were positive, and profoundly intriguing in the case of Respondent 02, a former Buddhist monk. So curious was he that though he was an active ordained monk at the time, he sought to know how and why his former monk colleague had become “humble”, “gentle”, and “good.” Similar to this was the case of Respondent 04, who observed her sister’s change of demeanor after her conversion. These positive changes aroused the curiosity of these respondents, and eventually led them through the conversion process.

The second theme (Relationships with Christians) revealed itself in many participants’ experiences. They noted marked differences in SDAs’ lifestyles in regards to health and eating habits; their observations also extended to Adventists’ daily interactions with one another, a theme that repeatedly emerged in the interviews. The relationships that SDAs have with each other was attractive to some of this study’s respondents, and is a strong confirmation of Mejudhon’s (1997) strong intimation that relationships are of great importance.

This is intriguing, as many Christians may not be aware that some mundane things – which are often taken for granted – may have a tremendous impact on how Thai Buddhists see them, and how their behavior reflects on Christ. Several participants in the study took special note that the SDAs they observed did not drink alcohol, did not smoke, did not use vulgar language, and were not quarrelsome. This research study gave added meaning to Christ’s utterance, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35 KJV). To think that the respondents in this study were able to say that the food that SDAs eat or do not eat (pork, for instance) had a role to play in their conversion reinforces Ellen White’s statement that health reform is an integral part of evangelism (White, 1933). It is easily taken for granted that pork is not acceptable for food, as stated in Leviticus 11. But perhaps the fact that pork is widely consumed by many Thais and much of the world makes this dietary peculiarity more pronounced. Even being a vegetarian may be enough to raise awareness of the distinct eating habits of Adventists. These healthful dietary guidelines played a singular role in the conversion process of Respondents 09 and 10, who asserted that their observation that the SDA lifestyle was healthier and the interactions of SDAs with other people and among themselves were critical points in their conversion stories. These sentiments of health factors relating to conversion differ from those of other studies (Bruijne, 2012; Hilderbrand, 2016).

This may be because Buddhism is split into two main groups – Theravada and Mahayana. The latter group is found mostly in China and Tibet, while the former is found in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia (Barstow, 2013; Davidson, 2003). Regarding diet, Theravada Buddhists appear to be more open to meat-eating, while those of the Mahayana persuasion are less open. However, it seems that Buddhism in principle is opposed to the eating of meat because of the harm it brings to animals (Stewart, 2014). Vegetarianism thus could be seen as a possible factor in their conversions because it is deeply lodged in the mindset of many Buddhists.

Of these three themes, it strongly appears that the third theme – Spiritual Encounters – may be the most pivotal factor in conversion due to the number of respondents who cited it in their experiences leading up to Christian conversion. This may be due to the complexity of Buddhism, where belief in the supernatural, especially in Thailand, comes into play (Formoso, 2016; Kirsch, 1977; Sutherland, 2013). The respondents’ answered prayers were fascinating in that they had so much to do with God Himself actively working to help them learn of His existence. Simple prayers like asking for the bus to come on time, for good Wi-Fi on phones, to pleading for freedom from long-term demonic hauntings, as in the case of Respondent 08, illustrate how much God cares for people, even

those who are not openly committed to or know Him. Prayers relating to finances were promptly answered as well. Many participants plainly stated that having their prayers answered made all the difference when it came to their decisions to convert. Perhaps it is because Buddhism may be rather distant in contrast to the concept of a loving, caring, personal Being. Overall, the findings that were expressed further reinforced Dybdahl's (2006) sentiment that Buddhists need to experience Christ for themselves, rather than be convinced of doctrinal truths.

Several respondents (01, 03, 04, 05, 10, and 12) made comments regarding Buddhism that revealed negative sentiments toward Buddhism. This was similar to the findings of Hilderbrand (2016). Their responses showed that the concept of God as expressed in the Bible and their former religion were markedly different. Specific issues included how God could be reached (directly rather than through a medium, as in the case of Respondent 05), how God cares for each person individually (some paid large amounts of money – over a million Baht, in the case of Respondent 03 – to temples for merit, but their lives did not improve). Respondent 01 said that she probably would not have stayed as a Buddhist for much of her life because it is not clear how to get to heaven, as no way had been clearly spelled out for her to get there. Respondent 12 also echoed this when he expressed the following:

Uh, actually I am from Buddhist family, but actually the Buddhist people, they don't have strong beliefs with their religion. They don't usually go to temple. Just only the, uh, important day like Macha Bucha. Something like that. And they don't have strong beliefs. And if you ask them about their Bible or anything, they don't know how to tell you. (12)

Furthermore, at least two respondents (03 and 04) stated that it was not hard to let Buddhists know about Christ. "Not difficult to change the Buddhists;" it (evangelism) is not difficult because "God is with us" were statements that they made. This may be true; what might be needed is the right approach and method. One difference that this study found was that Kuhn's (2016) suggestion on contextualization – that SDA missionaries should adapt Biblical concepts to foreign cultures in order to communicate Jesus' teaching more clearly without compromising principle – was not overtly found to be present in the responses of the participants when it came to conversion. That is, the methods used to reach them did not seem to be adapted to the Thai psyche or culture. The participants seemed to have responded to the more Western approach of witnessing.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study underscored the importance of Adventist schools and the testimonies of former Thai Buddhists to their peers, as these were the most cited ways that the respondents first learned about Christianity. Also of importance were the missionary and outreach efforts conducted by other Christian churches.

Critical to participants' conversion process were positive changes in their relationships with family members and friends after conversion. Other crucial factors were observation of Adventists' good behavior among themselves and toward others, and an emerging belief that God existed because of His answers to their prayers and problems. Therefore, it may be said that some of the best ways that Buddhists may be reached is through Christian schools and the statements of their friends. It is also apparent that positive relationships, Christian behavior, and answered prayers are crucial factors in the conversion process. Adventists' adherence to biblical health and life principles are some other important reasons for conversion to Seventh-day Adventism.

One clear commonality in this study is that all of the participants responded to Christ's call because of practical – rather than theoretical or doctrinal – matters. This indicates that approaches to Buddhists should focus on helping them encounter tangible and palpable evidence of Christ's existence. This is not to say that doctrinal matters should be disregarded. Rather, practical matters should be highlighted, because within Buddhist contexts they seem to display a stronger appeal. Thus, it is recommended that witnesses for Christ take these factors in conversion into account, keeping them in mind when laboring for Jesus in Thailand. They were influential in the lives of these respondents, and they may well be effective in the experiences of others, too.

Although it was clear in this study that these three themes were apparent, the findings would be further strengthened if carried out with a larger sample. This was a qualitative study, and the findings may not be applicable to all Thai converts. Continuing research into this subject with a larger number of respondents may provide additional understanding and insights regarding this topic. A follow-up article based on this study will explain how evangelistic efforts might be better adapted to attract Thai Buddhists based on the perceptions of the participants in this article.

## Acknowledgements

This research study would not have been possible without the assistance and support of the Research Office at Asia-Pacific International University, and the researcher is grateful for assistance – both technical and financial – given. Appreciation is also expressed to Mr. Roger O’Conner for transcribing many of the interviews, and to colleagues and family members who provided feedback, constructive comments, and the encouragement needed to see this article through to fruition.

## References

- Barstow, G. (2013). Buddhism between abstinence and indulgence: Vegetarianism in the life and works of Jigmé Lingpa. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 20, 75–104.
- Campbell, M. (2015). Reaching Buddhists in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. *Adventist Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.adventistreview.org/reaching-buddhists-in-laos-cambodia-and-vietnam>
- Creswell, J. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dahlfred, K. (2014). Timeline: Thai church history in global context. *Thai Church History*. Retrieved from <http://thaichurchhistory.com/index.php/en/>
- Davidson, J. (2003). World religions and the vegetarian diet. *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 14(2), 114–130.
- de Bruijne, J. (2010). *Discovering the conversion of Thai Buddhists towards Christianity*. Christelijke Hogeschool Ede, Ede, Netherlands. OMF Thailand. Retrieved from <http://www.thaicrc.com/gsd/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D7400.dir/7400.pdf>
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Dybdahl, J. (2006). Doing theology in mission—part 2. *Mission*, 79(1), 19–23. Retrieved from [https:// www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2006/01/doing-theology-in-mission.html](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2006/01/doing-theology-in-mission.html)
- Etikan, I., Musa, S., & Alkassim, R. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4.
- Formoso, B. (2016). Thai Buddhism as the promoter of spirit cults. *South East Asia Research*, 24(1), 119–133.
- Griswold, S. (2012). Sharing Jesus with Buddhists. *Ministry*, 84(6), 6–9.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Family Health International*, 18(1), 59–82.
- Hilderbrand, K. (2016). What led Thai Buddhist background believers to become Christians: A study of one church in Bangkok. *Missiology*, 44(4), 400–415.
- Kirsch, A. (1977). Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An interpretation. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 36(2), 241–266.
- Komin, S. (1991). *Psychology of the Thai people: Value and behavioral patterns*. Bangkok: NIDA.
- Koning, D. (2015). Social pressure and conversion of Thai Buddhists. *Adventist Frontiers*, 31(10), 8–9.
- Kuhn, W. (2016). Adventist theological-missiology: Contextualization in mission and ministry. *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 27(1–2), 175–208.
- Leighton, M., & Leighton, B. (2015). Fast growth of the church in Thailand. *OMF Thailand*. Retrieved from <https://omf.org/thailand/2015/03/09/fast-growth-of-the-church-in-thailand/>
- Mejudhon, N. (1997). *Meekness: A new approach to Christian Witness to Thai people* (Doctoral thesis). Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KE, USA.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded source book* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Seventh-day Adventist Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research. (2017). Thailand Mission. Retrieved from <http://www.adventistdirectory.org/ViewAdmField.aspx?AdmFieldID=THLM>
- Skeete, R. (2010). Evangelism: Favor or duty? *Adventists Affirm*, 24(2). Retrieved from [http:// www.adventistsaffirm.org/article/259/previous-issues/volume-24-number-2/evangelism-favor-or-duty](http://www.adventistsaffirm.org/article/259/previous-issues/volume-24-number-2/evangelism-favor-or-duty)

- Sutherland, G. (2013). Demons and the demonic in Buddhism. *Oxford Bibliographies*. From <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0171.xml>
- Sprengel, H. (2004). *Fleeing the spirits: Then they met Jesus*. Greg Solie, Altamont Graphics
- Stewart, J. (2014). Violence and nonviolence in Buddhist animal ethics. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 21, 623–655.
- Stiller, B. (2013, August 5). The difficulty of evangelizing in Thailand. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-c-stiller/the-difficulty-of-evangelizing-in-thailand\\_b\\_3237160.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-c-stiller/the-difficulty-of-evangelizing-in-thailand_b_3237160.html)
- White, E. (1909). *Testimonies to the church* (Vol. 9). Retrieved from <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/115.51>
- White, E. (1933). *A call to medical evangelism and health education*. Ellen G. White Estate, Inc. Retrieved from <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/1.2#9>
- White, E. (1903). *Education*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.