

Factors Contributing to Thai Buddhists' Adoption of Adventist Beliefs –Part 2

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Abstract

Christian missiological approaches in the Kingdom of Thailand have had little progress in terms of the number of converts since Christianity's first contact over 500 years ago. Currently, the total Christian population in Thailand amounts to little more than 1% of the country's population. In a bid to better understand how Buddhists in Thailand can best relate to Christianity, this qualitative study sought to answer two main questions: a) What factors contributed to the conversion of Thai Buddhists to Adventism (answered in Part 1) and b) What evangelistic methods would be best suited for the Thai context. To answer the latter question, the study continued the findings collated from the responses of 12 former Thai Buddhists who converted to Adventism. Results suggest four main types of missiological approaches including 1) Living out beliefs, 2) Testifying to Buddhists, 3) Having good relationships, and 4) Doing community outreach. It is recommended that these types of evangelism be tested over a larger population to further strengthen the study's findings.

Keywords: *Missiology, Buddhists, Adventists, conversion, reaching out*

Introduction

A Continuation

This article is a continuation of a study entitled "Factors Contributing to Thai Buddhists' Adoption of Adventist Beliefs—Part 1." This section of the article summarizes the methodology, selection criteria, and major results found in Part 1—the purpose of which was to answer two research 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?

To appropriately elicit the answers to these questions, a qualitative approach was utilized on a group of twelve former Theravada Buddhists from Thailand who had chosen to adopt Adventist beliefs. These were selected using purposive sampling, as the primary goal of the research study was to gauge the responses from a select set of respondents. A few respondents were from an ethnic minority group. The research site was a private Christian institution of higher learning in central Thailand. The group was composed of eight students and four faculty and staff members who were interviewed for approximately 20–40 minutes each using semi-structured interviews. An interview guide constructed under the review of experts in the field was also used to safeguard validity and reliability of results. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using open coding to organize the responses into conceptual framework themes until saturation. Member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing were utilized as validation strategies to ensure integrity of the analyses.

In response to the first research question, the major findings of Part 1 indicated that the majority of the respondents first came in contact with Christianity through educational institutions and the sharing of information from friends, families, and acquaintances. Positive impacts through the behavior of Seventh-day Adventists towards others and the respondents were also pivotal. Regarding the second question, three major themes emerged—1) Positive Life Changes, 2) Relationships with Christians, and 3) Spiritual Encounters.

What follows in this article is an extension of the interviews conducted in Part 1 using the same respondents, approach, and methodology in an effort to answer the following research question:

What do Thai-Buddhist converts to Seventh-day Adventism perceive is the best way to witness to Thai Buddhists?

Since this article is a continuation of the study on the conversion factors in Thai Buddhists, only the rationale, results, and discussion are included.

Rationale

Christ's commission commands all Christians to witness to the whole world (Matthew 28:19, 20). In the Kingdom of Thailand, evangelistic efforts have been made, but have seemingly yielded little gain. During the past 500 years since Christianity's introduction to the country, the total number of Christians (both Adventist and non-Adventist denominations) is just under 1% of the total population (Dahlfred, 2014; Leighton & Leighton, 2015; Stiller, 2013). Clearly, something must be done to facilitate evangelistic efforts. From this premise, it seems that one way to do this is to ask former Thai Buddhists what they think may be the best way to witness to their Thai brethren. This is important as it may be that past evangelistic approaches have been mostly from the Western school of thought (focus on philosophical and doctrinal aspects), whereas Buddhists generally may have a more Eastern school of thought (more emphasis on practical matters) (Muck, 2005; Thomas, 2014). These approaches could be one of the reasons why it is difficult to reach Buddhists. Thus, this article is a continuation of the factors of conversion of Thai Buddhists to Adventism and seeks to help Christian evangelistic efforts in Thailand by shedding light on how former Thai Buddhist converts believe would be the best way to approach Buddhists. This study comes from the perspective of a Christian teacher with a missionary background who seeks to aid in the completion of Christ's commission. Being a qualitative study, the results need to be interpreted giving due consideration to the background of the author and possible bias thereof.

Results

The following results are based on the statements made by twelve participants involved in the study who were asked how they thought would be the best way of conducting evangelism in Thailand. Four major themes emerged that were classified in the following way: 1) Living out beliefs, 2) Testifying to Buddhists, 3) Having good relationships, and 4) Doing community outreach. Also included are suggestions from a few respondents on the retention of membership within the Thai context. These themes are seen to be Christ-based and relations-based (see Figure 1).

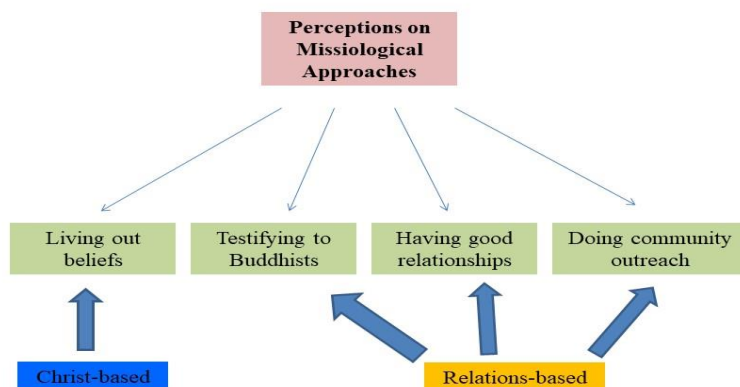


Figure 1. Perceptions on Evangelism Methods

Participant-Recommended Missiological Approaches

Living out Beliefs

The first theme described is that of living out beliefs. Most of the respondents expressed that being able to see Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Christians living out their beliefs was one of the more effective forms of evangelism from their perspective. Displaying positive attributes like being courteous and kind was an attracting point for them. Upon being asked what he thought was the best way to do evangelism, Respondent 02 said, “Put [the] Word of God to practical use in your life” and “Show you are a good person.” The former monk explained that to the Thai mindset, doing good deeds is of the utmost importance. When Christians show that they are good by doing acts that benefit others, especially in light of what the Bible says, Thais are impressed and become more open to listening to what the Christian has to say about Jesus. When Respondent 08 was asked this question, his answer was simple: “Be like Jesus.”

Other respondents mentioned the importance of being an active member in Thai society with regard to evangelism. Coupled with doing good deeds, it sparks interest and could be a strong connecting point that links Christians to them. Respondent 01 mentioned that when foreigners come to Thailand and criticize Thai traditions as somehow being lower to their own, Thais become resistant and may no longer want to associate with them. Being respectful of Thai culture and showing Christ’s love to the Buddhists by being humble and doing good deeds is important in connecting with them.

It is also important to be aware that there is resistance to westernization in Thailand, as Respondent 01 stated, “You know, Thai Buddhist people believe that they are, they are smart. They don’t want to be brainwash (sic.) by the western ... this is the way they do from parents, grandparents. They don’t want to-to change.”

Respondent 11 echoed this sentiment. Her first thoughts of Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) was that it was a “... farang [foreign] religion.” This shows that being able to live out virtuous lives in the Thai context can also mean showing an appreciation of Thai culture. Foreign missionaries must also be aware that Thais may not be inclined to follow Christianity because of the impression that it is foreign. Thus, Christians should show to them that Christ is love not only for the foreigners, but for the Thais too. By doing so the Christian would be sharing the universality of God’s love regardless of race and ethnicity.

Testifying and Challenging Buddhists

Another major theme found regarding recommended evangelism methods is testifying and challenging Buddhists. As noted in Part I, the participants observed the value of positive life changes as being one of the key reasons driving their conversion process. The participants said that hearing the testimonies of how God helped other people can be another strong point in evangelism. This seems to be strongly connected to their experiences, as many of them converted because of how their lives were positively impacted. Some respondents reported that when Buddhists hear of what God has done in the lives of others it encourages them to examine God for themselves. His loving nature given through the testimonies of others instills in them the curiosity to find out what would happen if they tried God for themselves. To Respondent 06 knowing this was a critical factor in evangelism. He said, “I think the power of love is very-very powerful, because God love us first so we ... [inaudible] we love Him.” Christians who share their testimonies on how God answered their prayers are opening doors for Buddhists to come to know the loving nature of the Savior. This became a valuable experience for other respondents too.

Respondent 05 recalled how instrumental it was for her in her conversion process to realize that she could communicate directly with God. She mentioned that this varies greatly from Buddhism where one must go through a mediator. In Christianity, it is different. Being able to commune with God directly and individually was important to her. “Buddhists don’t have that [direct link],” she stated. Respondent 05 also said that Christians are closer to God than Buddhists simply because of this direct communication link.

Having Good Relationships

A principal key that the respondents mentioned was having good relationships with Thais. To many, it could be said that relationships are more important than being members of a church, according to Respondent 08, along with respondents who intimated that it is by maintaining steady, accepting, and inviting relationships with Buddhists that Christians can be best witnesses. These relationships could serve as a platform for witnessing about Christ. It is an accepted view that Thai Buddhists do not respond well to Christian doctrines as they appear to be secondary to the actual way in which a Christian lives. Buddhism is a way of life—it is interspersed throughout all facets of a believer's life. Thus, when an individual claims that he or she is a Christian, but the individual's behavior is not in line with the title "Christian", many Buddhists may be turned away from Christianity.

Perhaps Respondent 08's statements best summarized this. According to him in order to witness well to them, Christians ought to not only befriend Buddhists but be "true friends" with them as Jesus Himself did. In doing this trust will be won. He continued to say that the church should be a "safe" place in the sense that it is welcoming and "non-threatening." When asked to elaborate on how one may earn the trust of Buddhists, this Respondent said:

First, be friends with them...spend time with them, that's the, that's important. Second, um, be intellectually honest with them when, especially when you, when they discuss religion. There are some parts in the Bible that we don't understand. Just say, 'Yeah-yeah, I don't know; maybe I should understand...I'll study more about that.' Admit stuff. (08)

He continued that Christians ought to live out the Bible closely because one of Christianity's defining points is love. This goes hand-in-hand with earning the trust of Buddhists because they are looking for something that is "different." This difference can prove crucial in the evangelistic process.

Just be with them and-and show them that you are different. 'Cause to me Christianity is unique in love. That is something outstanding, yeah. Love wins, to me. Um, you don't get mad when you have all the right and reasons to, you know...when you have all the choices to be bad, to act, to treat others in a bad way, but you choose not to and that's something outstanding when you're kind. And people can open up to you more, and when they open up to you, you can, you're closer to them in the wall...And when they see something in you whatever you see is powerful. (08)

This sentiment was also expressed by Respondent 06 who said that the first thing that must be done is to befriend them first.

Here it can be seen that restraining oneself from reacting in negative ways, especially when this would be a reasonable response, is an attracting point to Buddhists. Christians need to be kind, displaying Christ's character at all times, especially when under pressure in order to win their minds and hearts. Once that is achieved, they would be more likely to listen to the Gospel message. "... in the end it's not about your religiosity. It's about who you are, how you treat others," said Respondent 08. In addition, he said that Christians should make every effort to make the church a place where they can come, share their struggles, and be confident that they will not be looked down on. In this way the church becomes their place of refuge, a place where they know that other members care for their best interests because the members are like Jesus—welcoming, loving, understanding, kind, and open. Having and openly displaying these attributes will aid greatly in having good relationships with Buddhists.

One facet that fosters good relationships with Thai Buddhists is to have many activities in the church and have it open to Christians and non-Christians alike. According to Respondent 11, the minds of many Thais are geared towards continuous activity that leads to good relationships. This can be seen throughout the kingdom as each province often has festivals all throughout the year; many of which are unique. Churches should then be places full of social activities and projects that aim to benefit society.

Things like food drives, community service, and vigorous involvement among church members spurs growth and encourages Buddhists to join the church and, very importantly, stay in the church.

Respondent 11 recounted how she joined the Seventh-day Adventist church in her youth, and why having many activities was central to her story. She was first introduced to Christianity through the opening up of Christmas activities by a Christian church in her Buddhist locale. She lived in northeastern Thailand, and she recounted how much fun she and other Buddhists had during Christmas time by being invited by church members to join. After she was baptized, she went to serve in Bangkok where church-going was an entire day's affair. After the church service, a fellowship lunch would ensue followed by group Bible study. A visit to the sick would happen next and then a trip to a central part of Bangkok to hand out brochures would follow. Then, she and the church members would sing and worship, go back to church, eat supper, join Adventist Youth and separate. Though this scenario might appear intimidating to a few, even to some regular Christian worshippers, it is a core facet in which good relations would be cultivated in the sight of Thais as well as strengthen bonds among members.

To Respondent 11, one of the reasons that Thais who join Christian churches become discouraged and even leave the church is because of the lack of interaction and activity within the church. They become isolated because they are told that the festivals and activities that they used to partake in with their friends and family are not acceptable, and they become lonely. In order to fill the void that is left, the church must take up an active positive role by involving these new members in a network of sincere, highly involved members who enjoy fellowshiping with each other and doing good deeds in society. The following quote from her illustrates this sentiment.

Thai Buddhists. Actually they are very humble people. They are humble. They can open for any religion. But inside, they are still, you know, Buddhists. They think they are Buddhist and very hard to change them. Because if you change, it means that you leave your identity. Something that you are not part in the family (sic.). Yeah, in the society. They are afraid that they are not belong to the society. They are afraid that they will be rejected by society. If we have strong church, strong activities. [It] can inform them that they will be secure. That they also have good activity. They also have something that they also practice for the religion. Not only in the house and waiting for the pastor to visit. But if we always have activities, they can show also other that, 'Oh we also have activities in the church'...show them that, because they are Buddhist, they have so many activities [available in the church]. (11)

She also gave somewhat of a warning if churches are not active when she said, "When you want to be a part of the society, you have to also join activities. But if the church doesn't have activities for them, they will join Buddhist activities ... because Buddhists they always have activities."

In light of all this, having good relationships with Buddhists is important because it opens the way for Christians to share Jesus. However, good relationships should be made first before sharing Jesus openly. This can be done by being genuinely honest, inviting, loving, and kind—all attributes of Jesus which ought to be manifested in every true Christian believer. The church and/or church leaders must also work to create an atmosphere that is accepting and active within itself regarding church members and guests, and active without by actively engaging in loving acts of service to both members and non-members alike. Doing this may show them that Christians stand-out because the life of Jesus is actively illustrated in the lives of church members.

Doing Community Outreach

In connection with having good relationships, is service to the community. When Thais perceive that one has people's best interests at heart it sparks their interest because, in Buddhism, selflessness is a great virtue. Four respondents in the study were affected by community outreach; at least one respondent was introduced to Christianity through this method. Several modes of community outreach were given by these respondents: 1) Medical services, 2) Education, 3) Mission trips, and 4) Branch

Sabbath School. Noticeably, one commonality in these four modes was that each showed goodwill to the community. This is also inter-related with having good relationships with others.

Medical services were suggested by Respondent 01 and Respondent 11 because it shows that Christians are aware of the health needs of the community and are interested in supplying it. Being involved in these medical services as a mode of evangelism can be as simple as giving a massage. But this must be done in a genuinely caring manner, in order to show that the service is not done with an ulterior motive. Respondent 11 said, “Receive them [sick members of society] and, because when they get sick, they really need care. Only receive massage, they feel good already. So they feel that you are part of their family. They need some care.” She went on to say that other ways that medical services could be rendered was through sharing knowledge on caring for the body and how and what to eat, specifically simple foods. All this needs to be driven by the desire to improve the living quality of those in need. Respondent 01 also supported this, as she said medical services through the use of mobile clinics would aid in making Christians relate to Buddhists as a community.

Education was also suggested by one the respondents. Respondent 11 mentioned this as being “very-very-very effective.” This Respondent experienced Christian education and it played a significant role in her conversion story. Other participants mentioned that it was in the educational sphere that they first learned about Jesus. Respondents 01, 03, 04, 05, 06, and 08 all reported that their first experiences with Christianity occurred within the context of a school. This highlights the importance of education as an epicenter of fulfilling mission.

Another form of outreach is Mission Trips. Respondent 10 was first impressed with Christianity when missionary efforts reached her town. She suggested that one way to do outreach was to do missionary work by visiting the hometowns of Buddhists, and sharing about God. The key, once again, is to ensure that the character and deeds of Jesus are manifested in the actions of those participating in the work. For instance, participants in mission trips must be genuinely friendly, treat the locals with respect, and be able to care for their needs. Concerning effective witnessing in Buddhist Thailand, she said:

Mostly I think we can told (sic.) them by our character. We came down more than them, and we listen to them, also even encourage them. I feel this kind of character will make them want to know more about God. Why, what is the reason why we can change and we can be a person like that.
(Respondent 10)

Thus, it is clearly shown from her testimony that the key to success while conducting mission trips is to show kindness in all things and demonstrate the character of Jesus throughout it by looking after the needs of the community and being kind within and without.

The last form of community outreach was branch Sabbath School where many participants go out to the community during one day of the week (usually Saturday) to tell stories and hold activities like drawing, English-learning, for children and adults. This was suggested by Respondents 01 and 11. The former explained that Thais responded well to efforts to assist them. In this case, helping the community learn English is something that assisted in meeting its need. This leads to increased contact with the community, building up of good relations, and sets an optimized condition for the community to hear about Jesus. It was suggested that the Thais should be invited to participate in outreach as well. Involving the community would aid in boosting its perception of Christians—that Christians are caring, loving, accepting, and doing something that benefits all people, not only Christians.

Discussion

Commonalities

It is apparent in the responses that there are two main, inter-related commonalities in the three themes uncovered in this inquiry—genuine care for others and a living demonstration of the character of Christ. The first relates to the second in that the first is a facet of the second. In other words, showing

authentic care to the members of the community, whether it be on mission trips or on a regular trip to the market, is also a facet of the character of Christ. Jesus taught that one is to “... love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39, KJV). Following His words would catch the attention of the population. This then creates a viable climate for Thai Buddhists to be willing to listen to the Gospel story. Taken in a broader way, it could also be said that these two commonalities echo the basis of the Ten Commandments given in Exodus 20 where the first four commandments have to do with the relationship with God and the remaining six commandments with relationships with humans.

Having Good Relationships

Creating and maintaining sincere and relationships came out very strongly in this study. Many of the respondents mentioned that it was being able to see the kindness and sincerity of SDA Christians that sparked their interest in learning more about Christ. Being able to navigate the process may be daunting, however, as English is not largely spoken by the population. But, according to a member who is familiar with outreach efforts in Thailand, simply being friendly to the Thais that one may encounter during everyday life may, in itself, be a big step in building relationships with them. A smile with a *Sawasdee khrap/kha* to the market vendors, for instance, could signal the beginning of a simple, but sincere partnership (E. Kacchap, personal communication, August 31, 2019). Being at the forefront of activities that aim to alleviate the suffering of the less fortunate in society could also be a good place to show respect and sympathy to others. Joining in events for charitable reasons would show Thais that Christians also care for the well-being of others, regardless of their religion. This type of activity would help to build trust of the Thais and, in return, would show that Christians care for all people, just as Jesus did. Thus, joining in events such as charity runs, benefit concerts, food drives, and community service would be solid steps in the right direction. But it must also be kept in mind that these are to be done sincerely for the good of others. Participating in these events with ulterior motives may cause an opposite reaction resulting in distrust and negatively affect missiological efforts. Rather, joining in these activities must take place out of the Christian’s love for Christ; the love for the Buddhists being a by-product of that love (White, 1887). Christian organizations should be more proactive in seeking how they can improve the lives of those around them and do these things out of a sincere love for God, which will result in a love for all other peoples and religions.

Mingling

As already mentioned, although genuine care for others and a living demonstration of the character of Christ are the two main, inter-related commonalities garnered in this study, these would be largely diminished without mingling with the population. Many of the respondents stressed that it was friendship and having relationships that set the stage for witnessing for Christ. Thus, it can be seen why some conventional methods of evangelism (i.e., camp meetings) may not be as effective in the Buddhist context as in others. Without having positive relationships, this study shows, it would be more difficult to win them over to Christ. This is similar to what was found in other sources (Campbell, 2015; Dybdahl, 2006). Therefore it is prudent to state that in order to better win souls to Christ in this territory, making friends with Thai Buddhists is key while showing the true character of Christ.

Many of the respondents mentioned that being able to “mingle” (08) or make friends with the Thai Buddhists was an essential part of the missiological process. When asked how one would be able to effectively mingle, Respondent 02 explained that people such as missionaries should attend some of the local gatherings such as weddings or funerals and bring gifts as appropriate. He also stated that it was important to exhibit respect and courtesy towards their Thai counterparts at all times. Missionaries may often have a tendency to immediately denounce or directly confront the people in their field with things that are not biblically correct. While this might be an important thing to do, it may be a turn off to people in the Buddhist areas, especially at the initial phase of the relationship. These things may be best reserved

for when the relationship has matured and strengthened. Instead, mingling attempts during the first phase should focus on being friendly. Making efforts to communicate with the Thais in their language also signals one's willingness to have a positive relationship even though the linguistic capability of the foreigner may be limited as one missionary familiar with the process stated (E. Kacchap, personal communication, August 31, 2019). Continued behavior on this path would pave the way to being allowed into the circle of friends. The next phase would be to see what possible needs the new friend may have. Taken together with the findings in Part 1 of the study, namely Positive Life Changes and Spiritual Encounters, this would present an opportunity to pray for divine help on the individual's behalf as well as take sincere and personal effort to solve or alleviate any suffering.

The last step would be, when given the opportunity, to gently and non-aggressively introduce the concept of Christ. This approach is counter to what is normally done in other missiological efforts around the world, wherein camp meetings and outreach efforts usually begin with general meetings and end with a call to commitment. Many times there may not be any personal exchanges between the organizers and the attendees. In the Buddhist context, however, this approach may seem impersonal and lack palpable evidence for a reason to believe in Christ. Thus, it may be seen why previous witnessing efforts have often fallen short of their objectives in terms of numbers.

Christ's Method

While research has been conducted and is still on-going on the topic of better evangelism in the Buddhist context, it was surprising that the principle behind successful evangelism had already been given nearly 115 years ago by Ellen White in a passage often entitled "Christ's Method." Here, White (1905) wrote:

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with people as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He invited them, "Follow Me." We need to come close to the people by personal effort. *If we would give less time to sermonizing and more time to personal ministry, greater results would be seen.* The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled. We are to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. *Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit.* (p. 73, emphasis supplied)

This investigation gives evidence that this principle works and is effective even in the 21st century. The respondents in this study said that being friends and showing the character of Christ were the main ways that they see Thai Buddhists being able to come to believe in and love God. According to White (1905) individual efforts would result in greater yields than homilies in a church or in an evangelistic effort and such efforts undertaken with proper components would always give results.

Based on the results of this study it is evident that there is a need for the believer to live out true Christianity in their life. This means that the Christian believer also would be active and sincere in reaching out to the Thai Buddhists, befriending them, gaining their trust sincerely, and through unpretentious effort actively looking out for their best interests. Following these steps may set the stage for a positive and powerful chance to missiologically reach out to them. Missionaries and the like should be prepared for long-term commitments as this process could be protracted. While the results of the study show that authenticity and friendliness are important, mingling and gaining the trust of the population will take considerable time. It could possibly be months or perhaps years before there is a clear opportunity to win their hearts. It may be more effective to focus on individual ministry rather than depending on corporate endeavors when it comes to witnessing in this part of the world.

The Need for Spiritual Growth and an Active Church

Although not part of the research questions for this study, one important discovery was made regarding the further growth and retention of members from the Thai Buddhist community. Respondent 01 mentioned that many Buddhists who have chosen to adopt SDA beliefs may not have been “baptized” by the Holy Spirit, referring to the lack of growth after joining the church. In her story, she stated that it took her many years after baptism to realize that she needed to have a daily walk with the Lord. She felt that although she had already adopted SDA beliefs and had been baptized, she felt as though she had not grown spiritually. It was only after a few elders in the church had visited her that she noticed she was “spiritually sick.” Respondent 01 then asked a respected church elder why it was that the level of spirituality differed greatly from the Thai and international church members. The elder replied, “Oh, maybe it’s because you guys don’t read much.” At this, 01 realized that she had not made it a point to read the Bible and spend time alone with God. Once she realized this, she tried to strengthen her spiritual life by being more intentional in having daily Bible reading and prayer. This helped her grow. This issue is not limited to the Thai context, but is present in many Christian areas as a recent poll indicated (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Another respondent, (Respondent 11) said that an active church was what helped her stay in the church and grow in Christ. Her church was vibrant—many members would arrive at church in the morning and not leave till the evening. After the main church services were over in the morning, there would often be a free meal for all church members and visitors. A bible study would follow, and trips were made to visit patients in the hospital. Then the members would go to Sanam Luang (in Bangkok) to hand out spiritual literature to the people. These activities would last roughly two to three hours. Afterwards, there would be more activities at the church for the youth. Her church members would then return to the church, have supper, and close the Sabbath with worship. It was not until 8:00pm in the evening that they would return home. To her an active church not only encouraged her to join in the activities, but helped her grow spiritually and intellectually. She also mentioned that an active church is an essential part in reaching out and appealing to the Thais. This is because it is a part of the Thai psyche to have *sanuk/sanook* or “fun” (Weiner, 2015).

These discoveries bring additional foci for church leaders. Not only must a church have regular church services, but the church must also have activities that spiritually strengthen members personally and involve the active efforts of church members in outreach and community service for the benefit of all. These aid in meeting the need that is appreciated in this area. Pastors and others in positions of leadership should constantly be training their members, especially newer ones, how to grow and strengthen their spiritual lives and be active outside the church. To meet these, in-depth Bible studies with contemporary themes may be of great benefit to foster further spiritual growth. Bible study groups may be formed that include a mixed group of newer and more experienced church members. Varied and involving activities should also be integrated into the church. Though this may seem like an added burden on leaders, the results of the study suggest that these will pay dividends over time as these have already been proven to be effective in retaining church membership in other studies (Corley, 2018; Ferreira, 2011).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Inquiry into this topic reveals that individual, positive relationships with the community that illustrate the character of Christ is an effective way to reach Thai Buddhists. Such relationships would not be possible without personal effort on the part of Christians. From the experiences of the respondents in this study, it is apparent that the most effective method to reach out to them would be to start making friends, gaining their trust, and doing good to the community, while always being a living representation of Christ among the Buddhists. This would present an opportunity to witness to them. By befriending them, winning their hearts, seeing their needs, and then alleviating them through prayer and sincere

effort, hearts may be won and efforts rewarded. In addition, the results of this study imply that current outreach methods such as small groups or care groups would be effective in the Thai Buddhist context.

At this juncture, it is important for readers to interpret the findings of this study carefully. The findings of the study were viewed from the lens of a Christian believer who seeks to reach out to the Thai Buddhists in fulfillment of Christ's commission and honestly seeks their good and welfare. Thus it is critical that findings be seen from this standpoint.

It would be worthwhile to investigate this topic further by conducting it on a larger population. Since this study was qualitative, more credibility may be gained through a study that involved more participants. Equally worthwhile would be to test the findings of this research in the field and report on the results. This could further strengthen it and be advantageous to evangelistic efforts in the region.

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