



Slum gumpt

Thidarat Khamler lives in north central Bangkok. A Thai woman of bold persistency, she has been used by God to reopen a house church in her slum community.

Starting a church in this older Bangkok slum built on the edge of a canal surprised many people. Not only do people there face all the normal challenges of urban poverty, but the community is notorious for being in the shadow of a major gambling den and mafia operation that has dominated it for years.

Fear of these powers has blocked the start of any other community-based organization. The residents are primarily Buddhists who have labor-class jobs, are self-employed street vendors or work in jobs related to the gambling den.

This is where Thidarat grew up and has lived for more than 40 years. Her previous reputation was of “street smarts” and cunning ways by which she tried every imaginable means to get ahead. This lifestyle caught up with her eventually. She found herself divorced, with a daughter in jail and a granddaughter to raise.

Then she came to faith in Christ in 2002 and found hope for a transformed life through the witness of members from Peace Community Church, established by BGC workers Kevin and Cynthia Walton and Steve and Nopaluck Cable.

A FRUITFUL NEW BELIEVER

After attending the PCC main church for about a year, Thidarat had grown in her faith and had led to Christ four other women from her community. Considering that her home is an hour distant, her regular attendance and bringing others was the first sign of her persistent faith.

Around the same time PCC was transitioning to a vision of multiplying holistic

She started a church. Quit. Then started it again. All in a Bangkok slum.

BY TODD INDEHAR AND KEVIN WALTON

house churches among Bangkok’s urban poor communities. This network is currently comprised of five house churches. Each meets in its own community weekly for worship and gathers with all the house churches for a joint worship celebration monthly.

By early 2004 Thidarat was ready to start leading a small group meeting in her own community but faced many challenges starting a new church in her home. Her long-time neighbors ridiculed her for changing her religion. Christians she met elsewhere questioned how she, a woman with no Bible degree, could lead a church in her home. Also, within the group pressures were mounting related to buying a larger house. Hers was just one small room about 3 by 2 meters and already too small for the group of 10 or more who attended. When conflict arose over a house deal that fell through, Thidarat chose to leave the community to live with her new husband. The church was forced to close less than a year after it had started.

A HEARTBREAKING INVESTMENT REDEEMED

The members and the wider PCC network were heartbroken. Kevin Walton recalls, “After investing nearly a year traveling to the community and assisting in its beginning, how could it come to this? It was like entering a dark night with no sign of dawn and grieving the loss of what could have been.”

Despite this setback, God’s work was not finished.

ion



of Ariya's death by helping other needy children. Prior to her death Ariya had received a small gift of money from a relative. Rather than spending it on toys or candy, she said she wanted to buy a backpack so she would be ready to start school in a few months. Sadly, she never had the chance. But the family used this as seed money to start a fund to assist poor children with necessary school costs through the PCC Thai Peace Foundation youth scholarship program.

A NEW HOUSE AND NEW CHURCH

Another obstacle was finding a new place for church gatherings, because the church members' rented rooms are in a part of the community inside the iron walls of the large multiblock gambling den. These rooms couldn't be used as a meeting place because no outsiders are allowed into the walled and guarded enclave. After numerous attempts, the members secured a suitable meeting house outside the walls.

The house is supported by PCC's "Lighthouse Fund," which provides loans to secure houses suitable for house churches in slum communities. The house was in bad condition, so Joe and Thidarat invested many hours restoring it. Finally, in September 2006 they held an open house celebration and the new church was reborn.

Currently the house church is assisted by BGC workers Todd and Karen Indehar. Another Thai leader, Dachaneephorn, assists the church in a coaching role and as the leader of the PCC house church network.

THE FAITHFUL CRIES OF A PERSISTENT WOMAN

Six months after restarting, the church is beginning to attract new members from the community, with attendance near 20. In addition to the church, more than 15 community people participate in the Thai Peace Foundation microenterprise development program. This provides business training and low-interest loans to informal single-family businesses.

Along with worshiping and outreach in their community, Joe and Thidarat have a vision to see new Thai believers reached and new house churches planted in other surrounding low-income communities.

Few would deny the difficulty of starting a church in an old community. Yet even in a predominately Buddhist neighborhood in the grip of dark powers, God has proven faithful in responding to the cries of a persistent woman of faith like the woman in Luke 18. In the course of five years, despite many highs and lows, over many obstacles and tests, God's light now shines through the assembled body of believers in one community previously unreached by the good news of Jesus Christ.

TODD INDEHAR AND KEVIN WALTON AND THEIR WIVES ARE BGC WORKERS IN BANGKOK, THAILAND.



Thidarat Khamler and friends.

Thidarat had not lost her faith or her burden to see her old community know the transforming power of Christ. Over the months that passed she reflected on mistakes made and grew in humility. God was working in the heart of her husband Joe as well.

In November 2005, a year after the close of the house church, Thidarat and Joe met with leaders of the PCC network and expressed a renewed desire to see the church reestablished in her old community. Along with them came Joe's son Max and Thidarat's daughter Ann, both of whom had become believers.

TURNING TRAGEDY INTO URGENCY

On New Year's Day 2006, tragedy struck when a drunk driver killed Ann's 4-year-old daughter Ariya in a motorcycle accident. Just the week before Christmas Day Ariya had sung a solo in the PCC Christmas service. She grew up without a father and was raised by Thidarat. Ariya had a simple but clear faith in God, having come to the conviction that God was her true father.

For the house church family this accident came as a direct attack on their faith and hope in Christ. Leaning wholly on God for comfort and meaning during this time of tragedy, they discovered a new sense of determination and a deeper sense of urgency to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to their slum community.

Thidarat's family is seeking to bring hope and life out

House church?

House Church • Typically a small gathering of believers who meet weekly in a house or other place in which all the functions of a congregational or cell type church take place.

Individual house churches often network to share resources and occasionally gather for larger worship celebrations.

From Houses that Changed the World, by Wolfgang Simpson (OM Publishing, 2001), p. 130.