

SOLIDARITY VISIT TO THAI-MYANMAR BORDER AND BANGKOK

Affirming FTEAP's mission commitment to “Equipping Christian individuals and communities theologically to support competent and creative leadership in response to the challenges and opportunities in their respective contexts” in Asia and the Pacific, Jay and Wati visited four theological colleges in the Thai-Myanmar border and Bangkok. The primary goal of this visit was to identify areas where effective and sustainable leadership development in the Mekong region is underway. These are areas where FTEAP has not been involved directly in the past.

Visit to KHTS and KKBBSC at Mae Sot

It is hard to imagine living a decent life with only Thai Bhat 200 (US \$8) per month in the refugee camps. Even then, only those with refugee certificates from the UN are privileged to receive Thai Bhat 200! After more than seventy years of military rule and the recent civil war in Myanmar between the military and people's resistance groups, thousands of people across all communities have been displaced from their homes. Thousands of refugees live in Thai-Myanmar border refugee camps.

The Kawthoolei Hope Theological Seminary (KHTS) and Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC) are more than just educational institutions. They are beacons of hope for their students, many of whom come from refugee camps and border villages. These schools provide not just education, but a new sense of purpose and direction. The diverse student body, representing various ethnicities from Myanmar and Thailand, is a testament to the schools' inclusive and transformative nature. The majority of the graduates go on to serve as Pastors, teachers, and NGO workers, bringing positive change to their communities.

The Kawthoolei Hope Theological Deminary (KHTS)

Wati at the Workshop at KHTS



Jay at the Workshop at KHTS



Jay and Wati had the privilege of conducting a two-day workshop on Biblical interpretation for Social Transformation for KHTS students on August 3-4 at Mae Sot. While Wati continued with the workshop at KHTS, Jay visited Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC) on July 4 to preach at its Sunday service. KKBBSC is located inside the Mae La Refugee Camp, approximately 40 km north of Mae Sot. The service was attended by about 800 people, about 500 of whom were students. KKBBSC is the largest Bible school and college among the eight schools

in nine refugee camps along the Thailand/Myanmar border. The other Bible schools in the region have student enrollment ranging from 50 to 100.

Students and graduates of KKBBSC and other Bible schools serve as church workers and Christian educators for the over 60,000 (exact statistic is not given due to security reasons) Karen refugees from Myanmar. KKBBSC offers programs such as Bachelor of Theology and Certificate of Theology, with about 600 students, 30 teachers, and 13 staff members, most of whom are graduates of KKBBSC or KHTS. One mission volunteer from the Philippines is currently serving as a teacher at KKBBSC.

The schools in the refugee camps face unique challenges. KKBBSC and KHTS are interdependent in terms of student and teacher cooperation. Despite their limited mobility, some students have had opportunities to participate in broader events, such as the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) held in Chiang Mai, a program supported by FTEAP.

The students and teachers at KKBBSC often experience tension between continuing their routine and the desire to return to their homeland. Jay's visit provided insight into the reality of theological education in Mae La Camp, highlighting not just the educational aspects but also the humanitarian challenges they face.

Most of the students are poor and unable to pay tuition fees. The schools need teaching materials such as projectors, tables, chairs, adequate classrooms, and more dormitories for students.

Fellowship with KHTS Faculty



The school offers three programs: (a) MDiv (44 students – residential), (b) MA in Ministry 32 students – hybrid), MA in Society & Politics (30 students – hybrid). The school was shifted to the Thai-Myanmar border in 2020 for security reasons. Currently, “sixty-six alumni are serving in Myanmar and Thailand as Pastors, Church planters, church leaders, mission school teachers, and in theological seminaries” (report from Academic Dean). The school has six full-time faculty and around ten part-time teachers. The International Association for Theological Accreditation (IATA) accredits the degrees. The schools are planning to seek accreditation from ATEM and ATESEA as

well. To meet the accreditation criteria, the school needs qualified faculty, the appointment of more faculty in different disciplines, library upgradation, student stipends, and other infrastructure development, e.g., faculty residence, dormitory, etc.

The students found the workshop on biblical interpretation in context insightful and relevant to their context. The Academic Dean wrote, “I got much positive feedback from our students on the workshop you and Jay conducted. They said that the contextual reading method is new and relevant even in the village context, as it is the people who have to bring change to society. I wish this becomes a regular program for final year MDiv students. Whenever you come to Thailand, please let us know so we can arrange such workshops in the future.” We were delighted that we could play a motivating role during this solidarity visit.

Both seminaries, KHTS and KKBBS, are sponsored by Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches in Myanmar and Thailand. International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches in the USA have given substantial grants for infrastructure development in the new campus.

Visit to Methodist Theological Seminary and Bangkok Institute of Theology

On July 5-6, Jay and Wati visited two seminaries in Bangkok. On July 5, we made a courtesy visit to the Methodist Theological Seminary in Thailand. The Methodist church in Korea supports the seminary, which offers a B.Th. Currently, the seminary has 27 students from Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar (Karen) representing different denominations. They also have a regular one-month exposure student exchange program with the Methodist Theological Seminary in Medan, Indonesia. The seminary will receive five exchange students from Indonesia in October of this year. Both seminaries in Bangkok and Medan want to make this immersion exchange program a regular academic program since it gives new perspectives on their learning. They request FTEAP to support these exchange programs as many students cannot afford to take care of their air tickets and other expenses.

Methodist Seminary Students Constructing a Church in Bangkok Suburb



FTEAP has signed an MoU with the Bangkok Institute of Theology (BIT) to develop leadership in the Mekong region. This year, BIT has admitted four students, but one student discontinued due to a family problem:

Ms. Lek Vithong (Karen) is a member church of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand.
Mr. Long Siriwong (Lao) is a member of the Lao Evangelical Church, Laos
Mr. Somboun Her (Hmong) is a member of the Lao Evangelical Church, Laos

For more details on the testimony of the scholarship recipients, click (<https://fteap.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/FTEAP-GM-UCC-Scholarship-recipients-2024.pdf>)

FTEAP and GM-UCC Scholarship Recipients



FTEAP and GM-UCC (Discipleship of Christ) jointly support the students. The President expressed the need for visiting professors to start the MDiv program in English.

Jay and Wati conducted workshops on “Contextual Reading of the Bible” in addition to preaching during the chapel on July 6. The President of BIT appreciated the solidarity visit and requested that such workshops be conducted in the coming years.

Jay’s Observations

Compared to other regions in Asia, the Mekong region appears to require a more contextual approach to theological and ecumenical leadership formation. Numerous denominational and conservative Bible schools and seminaries have emerged due to different evangelical missionary activities, often struggling to secure qualified instructors.

For the development of ecumenical and theological leadership in the region, the following considerations look essential to me:

1. Establishing a Center for Ecumenical Theological Formation

A center that can accommodate students from different countries in the region while providing quality ecumenical theological education is crucial. This center could help create a pool of potential theological students for future faculty development.

The Bangkok Institute of Theology (BIT) is a potential center for such an initiative. Established in 1938, BIT has a solid infrastructure and plans for expansion. It currently has 70 B.Th. students with the capacity to accommodate an additional 30 students. Three FTEAP scholarship recipients are currently studying at BIT (two from Laos and one Karen from Myanmar).

However, a significant challenge is obtaining the Thai government's recognition of the school, which impacts its ability to provide visas for international students at the M.Div. level. BIT is working to upgrade its M.Div. program to a Master of Arts in Theology (fully in English) to gain government recognition. Once this is achieved, BIT could become an important center for theological faculty development in the Mekong region. According to Dr. Pongsak Limthongviratn, the MA in Theology will focus on the contextual needs of the Mekong region, including Christian leadership for congregational development, senior ministry, chaplaincy, and NGO administration to attract students from other faith traditions.

2. Fostering Inter-Church and Inter-Theological School Mutual Learning

Thailand, like many other Southeast Asian countries, is experiencing a significant divide in denomination lines. Currently, the country is divided between the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), which comprises 3,000 evangelical churches, parachurch organizations, and foundations recognized by the Thai government. Despite the conflicts and misunderstandings between these groups, the leaders are making efforts to foster exchange and dialogue through a consortium. FTEAP might support these efforts by facilitating the development of an ecumenical-evangelical cooperative theological education program that addresses the most needed theological topics in their context.

Recommendations:

- a) The two theological seminaries in Refugee camps in Mae Sot are in need of support in different areas of development. Faculty feel that in a context like Mae Sot, along with the basic ministerial formation courses, a course on "Christian Social Economic Enterprise for Social Transformation" will motivate students to work for the holistic development of the community. FTEAP might facilitate such initiatives in future.
- b) If there is a balance from 2024 grant (unspent grants) allocations, we would recommend to allocate some grants as follows:
 - i) \$10,000 grant to Kawthoolei Hope Theological Seminary (\$6000 for doctoral studies of Ms. Ashe at Payap University, Chiangmai, and \$4000 for library development)
 - ii) \$ 5000 grant to Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College to purchase a projector, tables, and chairs for classrooms.

Acknowledgement: We thank Roland Fernandes, General Secretary of Global Ministries, UMC for allowing Jay to be part of this solidarity visit and for covering the 50% ticket cost.

Reported by Jay & Wati