CHAPTER 7

Integrity and the Counting of Christians in Thailand

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Whether data are presented in a book, database, map, or website, consumers of Christian demographics need to be mindful of the sources of information. There are significant differences in the count or percentage of Christians within any given geographic area in even a cursory comparison of the various Christian demographics resources available. In order for a consumer to properly use such demographic information they must have several important questions answered to maintain the integrity of the data. Four important questions are (1) what is the definition of who is being counted; (2) why was the data collected; (3) when was the data gathered; and (4) how was the data collected. Unfortunately, many resources providing Christian demographics do not provide answers to these questions and many readers trust them without question, resulting in incorrect conclusions and sometimes costly decisions.

This article expounds on what to look for when interpreting Christian demographics using Thailand as a case study. It explains how the Thai national church attempts to answer these questions when collecting data to provide accurate information for guiding the national outreach and church planting efforts underway in Thailand.

Definition of 'Christian'

When the word 'Christian' is used most readers will make an assumption of what the word means based upon personal experience; the reader's definition might not be the same as the communicator's. If the reader does not carefully understand what the data provider is counting they are likely to make incorrect conclusions from the information. In Thailand, the term 'Christian' is defined by the government in at least two different ways; Thailand's Department of Provincial Administration and the Department of Religious Affairs each have their own definition.

The Department of Provincial Administration defines who is a Christian by what is printed on the citizenship card. By law persons born in Thailand from Thai parents are required to obtain a citizenship card by the time they are seven years old. To do this their parent must fill out an application form for a citizenship card for their child. One of the fields the parents must fill in is the child's religion, and from that point on the person is tagged with this religion for the rest of her life unless she makes an effort to change her religious affiliation on her citizenship card. As a result, researchers who rely on data from Thailand's Department of Provincial Administration to determine the number of Christians are using information obtained from when the person was a child.
Those who change religion later in life are not counted unless they make the effort of changing their citizenship card; many do not.

The Department of Religious Affairs defines a Christian another way, only including members of churches who are part of one of the five registered church councils: the Catholic Church, Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), Thailand Baptist Convention (TBC), and the Seventh-day Adventists. Unregistered, independent churches are not recognized by the government. Relying on data from this government agency means that unregistered churches, consisting of 11% of the Christians in Thailand, are not counted.¹

Another consideration when examining Christian demographics is to understand what Christian groups are included in the information. Are Catholics being counted or not? Does the data include Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witness? Are other groups being excluded because of the theological position of the person providing the data? This is important information to know in order to interpret the data properly.

The next question to consider is who or what is being counted as a Christian. Are only baptized members of churches being counted, or are unbaptized attenders also included? Does the count include children, or just adults? If the count includes children, the number of Christians clearly will be much greater.

If the count is based on members of churches the question of ‘What is a church?’ needs to be answered as well. In Thailand, each of the Protestant church councils has a different definition. For example, to be called a church under the Church of Christ in Thailand it must have at least 30 or more baptized members and a pastor. If they do not, they are not recognized as a church and Christians participating in these churches are not counted. Member organizations of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand hold that to be considered as a church it must have at least five local worship locations and a total membership of at least 150 people among these locations. EFT churches do not require a pastor but must have someone designated as the leader of the church. Using these strict definitions, members of churches of less than 30 members, such as a house church, would not be included in the count of Christians, even though many house churches exist in Thailand.

Tallies of Christians in Thailand can also be found on mission websites that are based on the number of individuals who have raised their hands, stood up, or signed a commitment card. For example, John Smithwick Ministries claims on their website they alone account for ‘120,708 salvations’ in Thailand.² They claim that they believe the Bible when it says that hearing and believing in the name of Jesus Christ leads to salvation. However, Thai people by nature are very agreeable and generally willing to do what a public speaker asks them to do. When someone shares a message with them and then asks them to make

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¹ Dwight Martin, ‘State of the Thai Church Presentation,’ eSTAR Foundation, June 7, 2013.
² See http://johnsmithwick.com/save/.