
Marten Visser is a Protestant missionary, who has been involved in church planting in Thailand since 2000. Unlike South Korea, but similar to Japan, Christianity has been unsuccessful in Thailand: only 0.8 percent of the population self-identified as Christians, compared to 93.8 percent Buddhists, in the latest National Census of 2000 (p. 25). The book’s central question is thus ‘immediately relevant to the daily life and ministry of the author’ (p. 1): what makes Protestant churches grow, or not grow, in Thailand? In other words: which factors are conducive to conversion church growth in Protestant Thai churches?

The author is admirably explicit about the book’s limitations (pp. 2-4). The focus is not on individual motives for conversion, but on the religious organization: the church. The book uses, I trust, reliable statistical methods to analyze ‘conversion growth’ in churches, by subtracting ‘biological growth’ (children born to church members who remain faithful to their parental religion) and ‘transfer growth’: Christians moving from one Protestant church to the next. Moreover, the analysis addresses only ethnically Thai churches, even though ‘among several ethnic minorities 10 to 50 percent of the population is Christian, while among the ethnic Thai it is less than 0.5 percent’ (p. 3). Finally, the study is limited to Protestant churches in Thailand, meaning that no information is given on Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or Adventists.

This PhD study fills a knowledge vacuum, because there are few studies of Protestantism in Thailand and no reliable church statistics available. The book critically evaluates the main international sources, the *World Christian Encyclopedia* and *Operation World,* and finds both heavily flawed in their data on Thailand (pp. 69-75). Hence, Visser develops his own innovative methodology (pp. 6-11). With the help of various local evangelical service organizations, Protestant churches were located, visited, called by phone, or contacted by mail. This yielded membership data for 3,263 from a total of 4,061 Protestant churches found in Thailand.

The 80 percent covered churches included 2,635 ethnically Thai churches, which were categorized by history and theology in three main groups: the Church of Christ in Thailand (the oldest and biggest mainline Protestant church), Pentecostal churches, and all other denominations. A geographical distinction was made between the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, provincial capital cities (‘muang’), and other districts. This resulted in nine different combinations. For each combination, ten churches were selected at random to conduct a short survey (Table 1, p. 8). All their members and leaders received a standardized questionnaire, which could be filled out in ten to fifteen minutes (p. 172). A second round of surveys was sent to churches that were strongly underrepresented. In the end, 3,197 usable questionnaires were provided by 94 different churches, meaning that 84 percent of the

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worshippers had filled out a questionnaire. ‘This high rate was achieved because a) the survey was handed out before church services, with an accompanying pencil, b) there was an official announcement made during the church services; and c) the questionnaires were collected immediately after the services’ (p. 9). This is a very impressive achievement.

The book stays very close to the standard dissertation format. After the Introduction, there is a chapter on the geography and history of Thailand, a chapter on church growth theories in sociology and missiology, and a descriptive chapter on Protestantism in Thailand, which is very general and mostly deals with statistics from different sources (pp. 61-104). The heart of the book is formed by the chapters on Conversion (5) and Church Growth (6), based on the survey research.

What do we learn from this book? I liked Visser’s own conversion model, which identified six relevant factors: context, personal background, the distance to a local congregation, the church factor, communication, and the work of God (pp. 57-58). Some factors that Visser or the literature predicted would be important to church growth proved to be irrelevant at best, like practicing infant baptism or having warm relationships between church members, pastors with a degree in theology, a smaller size of the church, and social projects. People were more likely to convert if there was a nearby local church and if they already had Christian friends or relatives — once again confirming the role of social networks in conversion. Some surprising results were that old people were more likely to convert than young people (p. 124) and that printed media were more important to draw converts in than radio and TV (p. 135).

According to the survey, the most important factors to produce church growth were the age of the church and its theology. The youngest churches always achieved the highest growth rates. This effect was stronger for ‘non-traditional’ — i.e., charismatic or Pentecostal — churches than for mainline churches. Together, these two factors explained 80 percent of the variance in church growth (p. 161). Minor factors limiting church growth were the presence of the founding pastor and the presence of women on the church board. Visser wisely refrained from speculating on the reasons for the latter.

This reviewer is left with mixed feelings. The book is essential reading for Thailand experts, by providing an excellent big picture of Protestant churches in Thailand. I recommend Visser’s conversion model and some of his creative operationalizations of church growth factors even to readers who are not interested in Thailand. By basing the entire book on sophisticated statistical analyses of his impressive survey, however, great parts of it read like a statistics manual with little consideration for the reader. Visser’s writing style is sometimes rather informal — he likes the expression ‘a lot’ — and his English requires strict editing, by correcting phrases like ‘This is not to be wondered at’ (p. 56) or grammatical errors like ‘low educated’ and ‘high educated’ (pp. 120-121). The methodology of the book is impressive, but its results are somewhat disappointing. The reader learns surprisingly little of the day to day operations of Thai churches and church leaders, or the involvement of Thai Christians in their churches. After living in Thailand for eight years, surely Visser could have added some vivid descriptions, vignettes, or life history interviews with members and leaders? This would have strengthened his final argument about the prospects of future growth for Protestantism in Thailand (p. 167). Since Visser is back in Thailand once again, there is still hope one may see these more qualitative research data in his future publications. — HENRI GOOREN, Oakland University, Rochester MI, USA.