

Case Studies Involving Money and Mission in the Buddhist World

Case # 1. The Van that Became a Rubber Plantation

Missionaries Karl and Darlene Nordland* work with a local church planting ministry in southeast Asia. For years the Nordlands have offered their personal mission vehicle (a van) to transport national staff and church members to training programs, denominational meetings and other ministry and personal events. The national leadership has always desired a van that belonged to the local ministry. With this understanding, the Nordlands, while on a year's home assignment, worked hard to raise the amount needed for the purchase of a van for the ministry. Their supporters very generously gave to this much needed project and the total amount was raised within six months. The full amount of the van was transferred to the national organization's bank account in the country of service. The national leaders were notified that this transfer was specifically for the new van and were instructed to purchase the new vehicle in the name of the local organization.

Six months later, when the Nordlands returned back to the mission field, they were expecting to be picked up at the airport in the new van by the national leaders to whom they had sent the funds. Instead, they were met with their old personal van. After inquiring about the purchase there was an awkward silence followed by promises to talk about recent changes in plans when the missionary family had gotten settled. Eventually, the story was explained. The opportunity to purchase a rubber tree plantation had come up just at the time when the funds had arrived in the bank account. This was viewed by the national team as a very beneficial long term opportunity to support local ministry without having to always rely upon outside funds. The price of rubber being very high, it was a certainty that within the next two or possibly three years the same amount of money could be raised by the organization to buy the much needed van. The land offer had a time limitation so a decision had been quickly made by those on the field at the time (without missionary involvement) to "borrow" the van funds to buy the rubber plantation and eventually repay it.

Of course, this was extremely upsetting to the Nordlands who had to go about explaining to their supporters what had become of the generous donation. They were not convinced that the sale of raw rubber would bring income to the organization nor whether it was even a good direction for the ministry to take. What would you do if you were the Nordlands?

End results:

1. First off, the Nordlands' personal van was immediately made unavailable to the organization for ministry. Their explanation was that van money had been made available and if the organization wanted transportation they should resell the land and buy a van. Soon the Nordlands actually sold their van to others outside the area (instead of donating their used vehicle to the organization as had been done in the past several times). Instead, they bought a small car just for their family's personal use.
2. With the increase in rubber plantings nationwide, the following year there was a huge glut on the market and the price of raw rubber was about one-quarter of the previous year's harvest price. The "van fund" was never repaid by the harvest sales of rubber.
3. The broken trust of communication between the national team and the missionaries never healed. Increasingly divergent views of long-term goals and sustainability projects continued to

plague the relationship. The Nordlands left the organization and the mission field five years later, only partially due to this situation.

4. The local church planting ministry continues to bring in some annual income to support ministry through the sale of rubber and other self-supporting projects. Each of the leadership team now own their own vehicles and uses them generously for ministry.

* Source: Situation well known to the author. Names and locations have been changed to protect anonymity of those involved.

Case #2 "Dancing to the Temple, Dancing in the Church"

"Like other Thai Protestant churches, the Suwanduangrit Church in northern Thailand, has generally stood apart from the communal life of its village in spite of the facts that there were several inter-faith nuclear families and that most of the Christians have Buddhist relatives. Christians took no part in *wat* (Buddhist temple) activities other than to help with cooking at temple festivities when called upon to do so. Christians would attend those festivals and other events, such as funerals, but strictly as visitors. In this atmosphere of mutual distrust, the church lived largely for itself and took no thought as to how it might act as a witness to the love of God in Christ or carry out peacemaking activities. Its neighbors, in any event, would have treated any form of community involvement with suspicion, based on their general perception of Christians as being soul winning "head hunters" "(2002:61).

When the local Buddhist temple built a new *phraviharn* (main ritual building in any Thai Buddhist *wat*), representatives from the temple committee contacted the church to find out how it would participate in the dedication festivities. "They made it clear that the usual policy of silence by the church was unacceptable to the larger community" (Swanson 2002:62). The resulting crisis that faced the church caused the members to struggle with the reality of the cultural chasm between themselves and their community that had existed for over one hundred years. Should they participate or not? What should they do when the parade of the *tonkuatan*, (the banana stem money tree upon which currency and other donations are hung) is danced throughout the village with music and singing? Should they donate? Should they dance in the parade? How should they interact with this event and still remain faithful to their religious convictions?

End Results:

1. In spite of the conflict that ensued, the church eventually followed the temple's suggestion and participated in the *wat* festivities by donating a *tonkuatan*, (a money tree), and paraded it along with others through the streets and into the temple with loud music, drums and gongs, cheering and "well-oiled" dancing. Although this is a very typical sight in much of Thailand, "what was new was the Christians, straggling along at the back—but *in* the procession" (Swanson 2002:7). This was seen as a major breakthrough by the community (2002:75).

2. This one-time event set in motion a new relationship between the Christians and their Buddhist community that was not forgotten. Five years later when the Suwanduangrit Church was close to completing its new multipurpose hall, members of the temple committee asked if they could donate a money tree to the church and sparked a second processional celebration. This time the church invited a Christian music group that contextualizes local music in worship to

provide the music and during the procession of the money trees church members were seen dancing as well. “Being a Christian or with Christians, for once, was fun” (Swanson 2002:68).

3. The final event recorded by Swanson in this on-going transition occurred the following year, 2001, when the Buddhist temple was going to dedicate its own multipurpose building. At this point the church not only donated a money tree but also set up a booth at the temple festival, brought their own drums and gongs, and were seen as part of the community. It was agreed by the members and “even the leading elder of the ‘separatist’ group (that) the ceremony was ‘really’ only a traditional Thai one and not essentially religious” (2002:72).
4. Through this process the local church was able to engage in a “redefinition of religious boundaries, a key issue for Thai local theology” (2002:72). Future involvement led to other forms of contextualized giving for the community.

Source: Swanson, Herbert R. 2002. “Dancing to the Temple, Dancing in the Church: Reflections on Thai Local Theology.” *Journal of Theologies and Cultures in Asia*. 1(Feb 2002):59-78.