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Is Thailand turning tide on prostitution trade?

Summary: Long before vacationing American GIs from Vietnam made Bangkok's sex trade famous, prostitution was ingrained in Thailand's culture. Now humanitarian efforts by Baptists and others are making a difference for some of those most vulnerable.

By Greg Warner

BANGKOK, Thailand (ABP) -- The exotic charms of Thailand have been tarnished in recent years by the country's notorious prostitution industry, but there are subtle signs that its free-wheeling sex culture is losing some of its appeal.

Prostitution is still tolerated, highly visible and deeply ingrained in Thai culture. But in the battle against "sexploitation" -- particularly child prostitution -- Thais are making some progress. "The tide is turning," the Bangkok Post reported in August.

Thai officials credit the shift to the fear of AIDS, tough new laws targeting child prostitution, and the humanitarian efforts of government, private and religious organizations.

Among those making a difference are Baptist missionaries and aid groups, who are fighting the culture of prostitution on three fronts -- compassion for its victims, intervention for those at risk, and prevention for those most vulnerable.

-- In a hospice in Chiang Mai and a hospital in Bangkok, Baptist missionaries care for prostitutes and others dying of AIDS.

-- In northern Thailand, where prostitute buyers have preyed on the country's poor tribal peoples by luring their teenage girls into the sex trade, Baptists operate four shelters for tribal girls who are at risk, giving them an education, job skills and a chance to hear the gospel.

-- In the northern mountains, which Thailand's tribes call home, Baptist missionaries from several conventions are teaming up to improve living conditions and agricultural techniques in an attempt to break the cycle of poverty that renders the tribes vulnerable to prostitution and other social snares.

Coupled with government efforts to keep Thai children in school and a growing awareness of prostitution's dangers, the efforts of Baptists and others are making a difference.

According to a recent study, fewer girls from northern Thailand are going into prostitution. At least 16,000 girls in eight northern provinces have benefitted from a government scholarship program and stayed in school. And a 1996 study of 40 brothels in 18 provinces found no underage girls at work.

But signs of progress are not yet visible in Pat Pong, downtown Bangkok's infamous red-light district.

Hawkers still beckon gawking tourists to venture through the open doors of more than a dozen go-go bars. Inside they can select a sex partner from among 15 or 20 young women vaguely dancing onstage, each wearing a number on her bathing suit to make the process simple.

When night falls, virtually every cab driver in this city of 8 million becomes a recruiter for one of Bangkok's many massage parlors, which have turned traditional Thai massage into a front for sex on demand. Laminated full-color brochures describe the options and eliminate the language barrier.

"Sex is such a commodity for them," said Imtila Ao, a Baptist volunteer from India who works among Bangkok's prostitutes and drug addicts. Ao, a recent seminary graduate from the Indian state of Nagaland, works in a drug halfway house and at Rahab, a Christian beauty shop in Pat Pong that ministers and witnesses to bar girls.

By any measure, prostitution is still big business in Thailand, whether in Pat Pong, which since the Vietnam War has catered to "sex tourism" from abroad, or in the lesser-known prostitution districts frequented by Thai men for years. Estimates of the number of Thai prostitutes range from 64,886, the official government figure, to unrealistic estimates of 2 million. Longtime aid workers say a more realistic estimate is 200,000 to 300,000.

Fueling this industry are several factors: a traditionally low view of women, cultural acceptance of prostitution, desperation among Thailand's poor, deceptive practices by prostitute buyers, and an aggressive sex-tourism trade, which flourishes on business from Japan and Taiwan, as well as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Western Europe.

According to Sanitsuda Ekachai, a Bangkok newspaper columnist, the majority of Thai men view women "primarily as sex objects." As a result, spouse abuse is often trivialized. Infidelity in marriage and casual sex are widely accepted. There is no prevailing ideal of one man for one woman.

The morality taught by Buddhism, the official state religion claimed by 90 percent of Thais, offers little hedge against easy sex. Buddhism's goal of total sexual abstinence is considered realistic only for the monks, and therefore is irrelevant to most Thais.

"Thais have a saying: 'To follow your own heart is to be truly Thai,'" said Doug Derbyshire, a Southern Baptist missionary doctor. "It is a social norm to follow your own cravings. So this makes it very hard to change [sexual customs], even though they know the consequences and know it's morally wrong."

Although Thailand's economy has mushroomed in recent decades, still about a fourth of its 60 million people live below the country's poverty line. Most prostitutes come from families with incomes under 50,000 baht a year, or \$1,600 US.

The tribes -- many of them refugee farmers with little or no land -- are among the poorest Thais, making tribal women easy targets for the prostitute buyers who roam the mountains. A father can receive up to a year's wages by selling a daughter into prostitution. Sometimes the transaction is as simple as "one pig, a box of cigarettes and one liter of whiskey," said Ascanio Peguero, a medical missionary with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Other girls are tricked into prostitution by the promise of a good job. In July police rescued 37 Thai girls from forced labor in a brothel in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which borders Thailand to the south. Many of the girls, ages 15-26, said they were told they were going to be working as maids.

But other girls go into the sex trade willingly, often to send money back home.

"They're doing it to help their families," explained Lauran Bethell, director of the New Life Center, a Baptist-sponsored shelter for at-risk tribal girls. "Somebody has to come down to work."

Early this century, the tribes began immigrating into Thailand from the north -- China, Laos, Burma (also called Myanmar). Most live in villages in or near the mountains around Chiang Mai, the country's second largest city. But many have moved into the cities seeking employment.

Among most tribes, where family responsibility runs high, going to work to help the family -- even in the sex trade -- is considered a virtue.

Complicating the economic lure is widespread opium use in the mountains. About half the girls at the New Life Center have parents addicted to the drug for which the region is renowned.

Not all of Thailand's nine tribes have suffered equally. The strict sexual morality practiced by the Karen (pronounced ka-REN) have made them bad prospects for the prostitute merchants. But the Akha, with a promiscuous tradition, have been the most vulnerable. They became prime targets of the sex trade, and as a result have felt its consequences most fiercely.

"The Akha are in real danger of being wiped out by AIDS," said Bethell, an American Baptist missionary.

Southern Baptist missionary doctors operate a mobile medical clinic in the Nan province, about 100 miles east of Chiang Mai, and have seen an influx of Akha with AIDS. They have also found them responsive to the gospel. Of the 20 AIDS patients recently treated at one site, all 20 professed faith in Christ, reported Doug Derbyshire, a family-practice physician. "We haven't seen numbers like that ever."

Fifty percent of Thais with AIDS come from the north. Because illness is often blamed on evil spirits, AIDS patients are often shunned by their families, leaving no one to care for them. Often, eventually, they end up in a hospice or hospital.

"A lot of people come to us looking for a miracle," said Derbyshire, who is based at Bangkok Baptist Hospital, 50 miles east of Bangkok. "The first thing I tell them is that we're going to love them and keep on taking care of them."

The hospital, located in a rural, farming area, is seeing a significant increase in HIV infection, Derbyshire said, including about 3 percent of all pregnant women. "When I got here in 1992, we were getting one or two [cases] a month. Now it's one or two new cases a day."

Virtually all the men with AIDS contract the disease from prostitutes, Derbyshire said, and the women get it when their husbands bring it home.

In Chiang Mai, many AIDS patients end up at the House of Love hospice. But they don't come simply to die. Many of them rally. One young woman who was on oxygen when she arrived has recovered enough strength that she is now caring for the other residents and recently made a visit to her village.

"These girls have an incredible will to live because they have someone caring for them," said Bethell.

Funded by Samaritan's Purse, a U.S. Christian charity, and directed by Kim Brown, an American Baptist missionary nurse, the House of Love is home to 14 people -- 12 residents and two attendants. All six adult residents are HIV positive, as are three of their six children.

About half the adults are former prostitutes from the New Life Center, which is funded by American Baptists, Swedish Baptists, Samaritan's Purse and private donors.

The New Life Center houses 170 tribal girls in four residences, three in Chiang Mai and one in nearby Chiang Rai. Earlier this year, about 100 were turned away for lack of space, so only those applicants most at risk to prostitution were selected. "That's the worst time of year for me," said Bethell, who has to make the hard choices.

The residents -- ages 11 to 30 -- attend public school at night. During the day they are taught Thai, their tribal language, and sometimes English. They also do chores, learn vocational skills and receive spiritual training. "They know they are going to be introduced to Christianity if they are going to live here." Bethell explained.

Tribal religious practice, which is often described as animistic because of the focus on spirits, is usually a blend of spiritism, traditional Chinese religion and Taoism. Unlike Thailand's Buddhist majority, the tribal people and the large Chinese minority have been more responsive to Christianity, which claims about 1 percent of the population. Baptist missionaries over the last century have had success among the tribes in Thailand and Burma, particularly the Karen.

Not all New Life Center residents complete the program. Some return to their villages for various reasons. But in its 10 years the center has produced about 150 graduates. And there are other successes. "We don't know of any who have been here at least a year who have gone back into prostitution," Bethell said.

With the drop in child prostitution, the work of the New Life Center now focuses more on prevention -- or at least on intervening earlier. Whereas up to 20 percent of the residents previously came out of prostitution, now only 5 percent do. However, most are at risk, either because of poverty, abuse, or a family history of prostitution or opium use.

Baptists are active in other prevention efforts, such as providing AIDS education to the tribes in their own languages, overcoming language and cultural barriers that have hindered AIDS awareness.

The Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship, a cooperative of six international mission organizations, also conducts development projects in the tribal villages. Those projects make drinking water safe and readily available, provide effective sanitation, improve agricultural methods, and assist in marketing of tribal crops and handcrafts. The TBMF represents about 53 missionaries from the American Baptist Churches, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist unions in Australia, Japan, Sweden and England.

One of the newest TBMF projects, completed this spring, brought the first fresh water supply into a 13-year-old refugee village in the mountains near the Thai-Burmese border. The project was led by Rick Burnette, an agricultural missionary of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, using a technique employed by American Baptists in other villages.

Such cooperation is typical in northern Thailand. "I don't know how any development program can do it alone," said Mike Mann, whose successful water and irrigation project among the Lahu people became a model for Burnette.

By improving the tribes' living conditions and reducing economic pressures, the missionaries hope to open a door for the gospel message and reduce the tribes' vulnerability to prostitution and opium use.

But curbing the sex trade will also require a change in deep-rooted cultural attitudes, both among the tribes and throughout Thai culture. To survive the onslaught on AIDS, the Akha may have to "change their entire sexual ethical practice," said Luran Bethell. Changing the culture of the Thais will be even harder.

Even on that front, however, there are hopeful signs. A bumper sticker showing up in Thailand says: "The new Thai man doesn't visit prostitutes." A TV commercial promoting the family makes the same pitch.

Attitudes also must change in those countries that fuel Thailand's sex tourism, noted one Thai Christian.

"Our country is very beautiful, and so are the people," Banjob Kusavadee told a worldwide gathering of Lutherans in Bangkok in July. "Please tell tourists who come to Thailand that they should come to visit our country but not to visit women."

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Thailand at a glance:

Population: 60 million

Size: 198,456 square miles, about the size of Texas

Religion: 90-plus percent Buddhist, the state religion; 1 percent Christian, mostly Chinese immigrants and tribal peoples

Government: Constitutional monarchy with democratic government

Baptist center plucks girls from trap of prostitution

By Greg Warner

CHIANG MAI, Thailand (ABP) -- What does the world look like through the eyes of a 5 year old? For Muay -- orphaned, abused and enslaved, all before her sixth birthday -- the world was made up of only enemies.

"I could not trust," she says simply. Now 18, she smiles through gentle eyes that show little trace of the hard life she has known.

Muay is from the Akha people, one of nine tribes now living in Thailand and Burma (also called Myanmar), Thailand's neighbor to the north and west. The two countries share a border running through the mountains that have been home to the tribes for hundreds of years.

Muay was born across the mountains in Burma. Her parents -- one Chinese and the other Akha -- both died when she was young. After her mother's death, she lived in Thailand with her stepfather, whom she says beat her. In Thai culture, orphans are considered an underclass and treated as servants -- or worse.

By the time she was five, Muay's stepfather began selling her as a laborer in various mountain villages. When she was 10, he sold her as a laborer to a Bangkok brothel, with the obvious expectation she would later become a prostitute. But police raided the brothel and took Muay into custody.

Eventually she was placed in the care of the New Life Center in Chiang Mai, a Baptist- sponsored shelter for tribal girls who are at risk to prostitution.

Five years later, Muay is now finishing high school and working as an assistant housemother at the center. She has become a Christian. She wants to go to college and study engineering, or go to Bible school and become a pastor.

Although raised without a family's love, and despite years of abuse, Muay says she is finally learning to trust. "The best thing that I felt [at the New Life Center] was love and warmth, because I never felt that from my family," she said through an interpreter. "... Now I trust in God and the people God leads me to. I have God to guide me. But if I did not have God, I could not trust."

Without the New Life Center, Muay said, "I would not have had the opportunity for an education and would not have known God or become a Christian and probably would have ended up as a prostitute."

The New Life Center was started in 1987, when American Baptist missionaries realized the tribal people were being victimized by the prostitution business, which exploits the desperate poverty of the tribes by enticing their young girls -- sometimes tricking them -- into the sex trade. It's not uncommon for teenage girls to be sold by their fathers to prostitute buyers from Bangkok and other cities.

"We opened our center to keep that from happening," explained Lauran Bethell, director of the New Life Center.

The idea for the center came from Paul and Elaine Lewis, American Baptist missionaries who had worked among the Akha and Lahu tribes for more than 40 years. They turned to Bethell, then a new missionary in language school in Bangkok, who was struggling to find her place in her adopted country.

"I hated Thailand with a passion," Bethell recalled. To overcome her depression and frustration, she began studying women's issues in Thailand and teaching English to the prostitutes in Pat Pong, Bangkok's infamous red-light district.

When the Lewises told her about plans for a shelter for tribal girls, it seemed like the perfect fit. "This ministry just came from God, just came down from heaven," said Bethell, who is from Fresno, Calif.

The center, now funded by American Baptists, Swedish Baptists, Samaritan's Purse and private donors, houses 170 tribal girls in four residences -- three in Chiang Mai and one in nearby Chiang Rai. The girls range in age from 11 to 30. Some come out of prostitution, others from family situations that put them at risk to prostitute buyers.

Residents attend public school at night. During the day they do chores, learn vocational skills, and study Thai, their tribal language, and sometimes English.

"Literacy is very, very important for women," explained Bethell. "A woman who can read and write is likely to have fewer and healthier children and her economic value to the community increases."

The girls also receive spiritual training. There are regular Bible studies. Each girl is encouraged to have daily devotions and required to attend church, usually the local Christian church of her tribe. "They know they are going to be introduced to Christianity if they are going to live here," Bethell said.

The girls usually stay at the center three to five years, "so this is not a quick fix," Bethell said. They are considered graduates when they complete ninth grade, and so far there are about 150 graduates. Some stay through high school and a few go on to college, usually with financial help from the center. "We'll pay for whatever education they can qualify for," Bethell said.

Even for those who don't stay for the duration, the program has been a success, she said. "We don't know of any who have been here at least a year who have gone back into prostitution."

Most staff members of the center are graduates. The administrative staff includes a social worker and chaplain in addition to Bethell.

To help make an income for themselves while living at the center, the residents make and sell dolls dressed in authentic tribal costumes.

The center, which has an annual budget of \$165,000 US, maintains a reserve fund as a revolving loan account for graduates to start their own small businesses. They can borrow up to 20,000 baht -- or about \$650 -- for 2 years.

The New Life Center has attracted international attention, including a feature on CBS' "60 Minutes" last October and a November visit from Hillary Clinton, who used her trip to Thailand to focus attention on the exploitation of women and children. That kind of notoriety "opens all kinds of doors," Bethell said, particularly with the Thai government.

Each year about 150 girls apply for admission to the center. Only about 50 can be accepted because of space limitations, so only those applicants most at risk to prostitution are selected. Listening to their stories of poverty, abuse, prostitution and opium use in their families makes for hard choices, Bethell said. "That's the worst time of year for me."

Sixty-five percent of the residents come from Muay's tribe, the Akha, whose promiscuous sexual tradition makes them prime targets of the sex traders.

Sometimes new residents are referred by police or social workers. Such was the case recently for one 12-year-old Lahu girl, who was sold by her father to a prostitute buyer for 5000 baht, or about \$160 US. The middleman sold her for three times that much to a Japanese tourist, who sexually abused her.

But in a rare break with convention, the owner of the tourist's guest house in Chiang Mai reported the situation to police. The girl was sent to the New Life Center and the Japanese man was sent to prison for five years.

That celebrated case demonstrates a changing attitude toward prostitution in Thailand. Strict new laws make it illegal for brothels to hire girls under 18, and there are even stiffer penalties for those under 15. As a result, child prostitution is beginning to drop in Thailand.

Likewise, the work of the New Life Center has shifted. In previous years, as many as 70 former prostitutes came through its doors each year, most as short-term emergency cases. Now only 5 percent of the residents have ever been prostitutes. The center sees fewer emergency cases, and the focus is less on intervention and more on prevention.

Prevention has proven more successful, Bethell said. "It's very difficult to rehabilitate someone from the sex industry."

Some prostitutes develop a psychological addiction to sex, she said. Others are addicted to the money. Prostitutes make more than most other unskilled workers, and that still buys them esteem in most villages. The easier prostitutes to rehabilitate are the ones who were mistreated by brothels and buyers. The successful ones are not so easy.

Yet despite years of degrading sexual relations and abuse, many Thai women can leave the life of a prostitute without deep psychological scars, perhaps because their culture lacks some of the sexual taboos so familiar to the West.

"They just want to get on with their lives," Bethell said. Many former prostitutes marry, and the tribal girls usually wed a male from their tribe.

But tribal people who have moved away seldom return to their villages. "There is nothing for them there," Bethell explained.

Muay may be an exception. She said she feels a responsibility to her Akha tribe. "I'd like to go back to the hills and help them, because there are so many risks of them being deceived."

Muay has an advantage over most tribal girls in that she now has a high school education. Most Thai girls have to choose at a young age between education and marriage.

Asked if she might one day marry, Muay smiles shyly. "I don't think about that," she says pensively, adjusting the Mickey Mouse watch on her wrist. "Now I study."

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Bringing water to remote tribal village gives CBF foothold for 'holistic' witness

By Greg Warner

HUAY MAKLIAM, Thailand (ABP) -- The rainy season is over in the mountains of northern Thailand. That means most tribal villagers will soon be walking farther each day to find a source of fresh drinking water. They can spend an hour or more walking to the nearest stream to collect the water they need to survive.

But the residents of Huay Makliam have quit making that trek each day since Baptist missionaries installed a water system in the village. Now, they fill jugs from several water spigots scattered about the remote village near the Burmese border, which leaves the villagers more time to spend with their families and tend their crops.

The water project was spearheaded by Rick and Ellen Burnette, missionaries of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Rick, an agriculturalist, designed the project, which involved digging a two-mile trench from the nearest stream and burying plastic pipe to carry water into the village.

The water is filtered and stored in two huge tanks, then distributed throughout the village by a network of pipes. The water not used for drinking goes into an overflow pond, which can be used to irrigate crops. Burnette hopes to use the pond to teach the villagers to raise fish as another source of food.

Burnette said the water project is the first step in a long-term plan to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the Rock people, the most remote of Thailand's nine tribes. The Burnettes are the first CBF missionaries -- perhaps the first missionaries of any kind -- assigned to the tribe. They recently were joined by a medical specialist and an evangelist/church starter, rounding out the CBF's "holistic" strategy.

Already the missionaries have established a presence in four villages of the Rock people, a tribe of refugees who are some of Thailand's poorest people.

The Rock people are so called because of the distinctive craggy rock formations that jut out from the mountaintops around their villages. The group's traditional tribal name is not used by missionaries because of political persecution in neighboring countries where other Rock people reside.

There may be as many as 5,000 members of the tribe in about 10 villages in northern Thailand, but perhaps a million live in neighboring China, Laos and Burma, Burnette said. Since missionary activity is limited in those countries, Burnette hopes to establish a "beachhead" among the Rock people in Thailand that eventually will provide access to the tribe throughout Southeast Asia.

For now the Rock people seem glad to have him. The people of Huay Makliam were so enthused about the water project they dug the two-mile trench in two days, Burnette said. "I showed up to see how far they had gotten and they were almost done," he said.

World-hunger funds from the Baptist General Convention of Texas paid for the project.

Villagers did most of the work themselves -- digging the foot-and-a-half-deep trench, carrying gravel and other supplies up the mountain. Afterward, the village held a dedication ceremony, celebrated in full tribal costume, which gave the missionaries a chance to declare the Christian purpose behind the project.

Water, the most basic physical need, is a good place to start in ministering to tribal people, Burnette said. "There's a water need in almost every village," he explained.

Life is hard for the tribes of northern Thailand.

Huay Makliam was established 13 years ago but receives new refugees all the time -- about 70 in one recent month. The village now includes about 80 homes -- mostly one- or two- room stilted shacks built of bamboo and thatch.

The village sits atop a hill and is surrounded by orchards of litchi nuts and bananas. But none of that land belongs to the Rock people. Although the Thai government accepts them -- the Thai royal family even built a school in the village -- refugees like the Rock people are not allowed to own land because they don't hold citizenship.

Many of the villages existed before the orchards arrived. But the tribes had no legal claim to the land, so as the orchards moved in the Rock people were left to farm small patches of unused land. They grow chilies, corn and other vegetables wherever they can find room. Rows of corn spring up even between the rows of litchi trees, as the Rock people and orchard-growers work out an uneasy coexistence.

Although many of the Rock people survive as subsistence farmers, around Huay Makliam not enough usable land is available to sustain the village. So most residents must look for work as day laborers on nearby farms, earning about \$3 a day when jobs are available. The average household income in the village is about \$400 a year, most of which is spent on rice, Burnette said.

The Rock people are considered an "unreached people group" because most have never heard the Christian gospel. Their isolation is compounded by the fact few outsiders speak the tribal language, and few Rock people know Thai.

The Rock people are one of the unreached people groups that are the focus of the mission strategy of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an Atlanta-based organization.

Most Rock people practice an eclectic religion that blends animism, spiritism, Buddhism and traditional Chinese religion, all of which abound in Southeast Asia.

At the center of the village in Huay Makliam is a crude spirit house, a 15-foot bamboo tower to which villagers bring food or other small offerings to ward off evil spirits.

Spirit houses are common in Thailand, even among the majority Buddhists, who have incorporated some spiritist practices into their own religion. When a new house or other building is constructed, a small spirit house is usually erected on the property to appease the spirits believed to be displaced by the new construction.

Typically one or two feet high and placed on a waist-high pedestal near the house, they might look like elaborate birdhouses to Westerners. For middle-class Thais, spirit houses are often ornate porcelain or painted plaster structures that resemble miniature temples. In the poor tribal villages like Huay Makliam, they are made of simple sticks.

As with the spirit houses, the presence of Buddhism in Huay Makliam is scaled down considerably from the gold-encrusted temples of Bangkok. A simple bamboo "wat," or temple, sits at the village's edge. A lone saffron-robed monk stands in the shadow of the building's tin roof -- a subtle reminder that the Burnettes are not the only missionaries working among the Rock people.

Christian missionaries have found Thailand's tribes, particularly the Karen, more responsive to the gospel than the Buddhist majority. The Karen (pronounced ka-REN) are now mostly Christians. But some tribes have been slower to respond. And the Rock people -- perhaps because they are the most remote of the tribes -- have drawn little attention from missionaries.

"Someone decided the Rock people are not going to respond," said Burnette.

Burnette is not convinced the Rock people will be hard to reach -- there already is one Christian in Huay Makliam, he reported. But neither is Burnette assuming quick success. The approach of the CBF missionaries is one of long-term investment.

"It could be we work here for the rest of our lives without seeing a whole lot happening," Burnette said matter-of-factly. "I don't think we should look for results in a couple of decades."

The Burnettes, who are both 37 and have two young children, began their work among the Rock people in 1995. They will be joined later this year by two other couples, completing the Rock people team.

Marc Wyatt, 38, an evangelist and church starter, and his wife, Kim, 33, have two children. They are from North Carolina.

Ascanio Peguero, who was a doctor in the Dominican Republic before emigrating to the United States. Peguero and his wife, Yanira, both 36, have three young children.

Both couples have been in language school in Chiang Mai and will move to Fang soon. Already they have been involved in the ministry in limited ways, such as a recent medical screening for villagers.

Marc Wyatt said reaching the Rock people, like any other group, is a matter of overcoming spiritual barriers -- in this case the "layers and layers of fear" that characterize their religious practice.

"They have hopes and dreams like everyone else," Wyatt said. "They have hearts that want to know the truth. We have to take the patience to work through all the layers."

That means the CBF missionaries won't employ an aggressive, evangelistic style of witness anytime soon. Instead, they hope to earn the right to share their faith by meeting physical and emotional needs.

"We're very comfortable being servants in the work until a more direct presence is possible," explained Wyatt.

In the team approach employed by the CBF, Burnette said, all three parts of the holistic strategy -- agricultural development, medical assistance and evangelism -- work together to present the complete picture of the gospel message. Evangelism without ministry is as unstable as "a two-legged stool," he said.

For instance, Ascanio Peguero said, one of the barriers to belief is the opium addiction so rampant among the Rock people. While Burnette's agricultural projects will help the tribe find other cash crops, Peguero is starting a drug-treatment program to help villagers kick the ancient habit.

"The only way they can fill the emptiness the opium leaves is with the spiritual part," said Peguero, who graduated from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Evidence that the CBF team is investing for the long haul includes the demonstration farm the missionaries have built a few miles away near the town of Fang. Burnette is experimenting with farming techniques to help the Rock people make the best use of the limited land they have available. Huts have been built to house farmers who can come to learn the techniques, then return to their villages to put them to use.

Traditionally, tribes use slash-and-burn farming techniques, in which forest land is cleared and cultivated until the land becomes unusable. Then the farmers move on to clear more forest, leaving the land depleted of nutrients and nude of vegetation, which causes flooding and other problems.

Burnette and other agricultural missionaries are teaching conservation farming, which promotes crop rotation, composting and other techniques to improve on traditional tribal farming methods and make the most of what land the tribes have. Many of the methods Burnette is teaching were developed by agricultural missionaries in the Philippines.

Burnette is assisted by Jamlong Pawkham, a Karen tribesman with agricultural training. Jamlong's tribal background provides a connection with the Rock people, but he credits Burnette for the vision. "If I didn't have Rick I couldn't do anything, because all the dreams are in his head," said Jamlong, who became a Christian through the work of American Baptist missionaries.

Villagers from Huay Makliam, grateful for their new water system, helped build the demonstration farm, which is staffed by two full-time Rock workers and eventually will expand from the current 10 acres to 15.

The farm will also offer medical screening, a drug rehabilitation center, vocational training and a tribal craft workshop. "We want to help them preserve their traditional handicrafts and learn how to market them," explained Ellen Burnette.

Improving the tribe's economic condition will make the Rock people less vulnerable to the social ills that have attacked Thailand's other tribes in recent years, particularly the sex trade.

So far the Rock people have not started selling their teenage girls into prostitution, as some tribes have. "There hasn't been a market for their daughters yet," Burnette said, in part because the tribe's presence in the northern hills, far from the countries urban centers, is not well known.

But economic pressures, made worse by widespread opium addiction, could change all of that. "If their economic situation doesn't improve, they can be just as vulnerable as the other tribes," predicted Peguero.

By giving the Rock people economic choices, the missionaries hope also to give them a safe future in their new homeland.

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Patience, teamwork typify work among Thailand's tribes

By Greg Warner

CHIANG MAI, Thailand (ABP) -- Improving the living conditions of Thailand's tribal farmers doesn't mean "coming in with tractors" and other modern agricultural methods, says missionary Mike Mann. The solutions have to be adapted to the culture and circumstances of the tribal people, he says.

"If you come in with a Western approach, it turns everybody off. You've got to have patience," said Mann, a second-generation American Baptist agricultural missionary in Thailand.

Mann, 40, pioneered a system of providing safe drinking water for villages of the Lahu tribe in 1991. Those techniques were recently used by Rick Burnette, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary, to provide running water to a village of the Rock people, another tribe living in Thailand's mountains.

That kind of cooperation is typical in northern Thailand, where missionaries from six international mission agencies participate in the Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship, based in Chiang Mai.

The TBMF includes about 75 missionaries from the American Baptist Churches, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist unions in Australia, Japan, Sweden and England. Most of the TBMF's work is with Thailand's hill tribes, which have proven more responsive to the gospel than the country's Buddhist majority.

Burnette and Mann, both agriculturalists, work primarily in village development. In addition to providing safe water for drinking and irrigation, TBMF's development efforts promote sanitation, better agricultural techniques and marketing of crops.

For the Burnettes, who have been working in Thailand only three years, the TBMF offers advice and serves as liaison with denominational and governmental agencies.

"We're proud of our co-workers at the Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship," Rick Burnette said. "We've got a lot to learn from them. They model a wonderful holistic ministry."

Mann, a California native, said he welcomes the cooperation with the Burnettes, who are the first missionaries to focus on the Rock people. In a time of tight mission budgets, pooling resources is must, said Mann, who works mostly with the Akha, Karen and Lahu tribes.

"I can't think of any development project that can do it alone. It's a waste of money and time," said Mann, whose father, Dick, became an agricultural missionary in Thailand in 1958 and later led a 20-year United Nations project to replace opium with other cash crops.

Water projects -- like the ones Mann and Burnette spearheaded -- make a difference, the pair agreed.

"The people don't get sick," Mann said. "They have more time with their families or in the field because they don't have to cut their day short to go get water."

The approach adopted by the missionaries requires the villages to pay 25 percent of the cost of the project and provide all the labor. "They have to want it," Mann said. Still the tribes prefer that approach to more expensive projects paid for by the government but rife with corruption, he noted. "They would rather pay 25 percent and have a quality project."

The Burnettes are only getting started with their work among the Rock people. But what they are learning they plan to share with other Christian missionaries in Thailand and with CBF missionaries elsewhere.

"They don't have to reinvent the wheel," said Ellen Burnette, "because many of the things the Rock people are dealing with are faced by other unreached people groups."

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Volunteer overcomes fears to bring compassion to Bangkok's outcasts

By Greg Warner

BANGKOK, Thailand (ABP) -- More than a year of ministering to Bangkok's outcasts has tested the courage of Baptist volunteer Imtila Ao, but it has not dulled her determination to share Christ's love with the drug addicts, prostitutes, lepers and AIDS patients who are her clientele.

Imtila, a 25-year-old volunteer missionary from India, has been working in the slums of Bangkok since July 1996. At times both the strange culture and the staggering human needs have overwhelmed her, she said. But she and other aid workers press on, she said, "compelled by Christ's compassion" to make a difference in the lives of even a few.

Imtila is from Nagaland, a state in northeast India which by race and culture has more in common with the ethnic groups of China and Thailand than those of India. That added a strangeness to her Thailand assignment. "Everyone around speaks to me in Thai, since I look like them. Unfortunately, I could not reply even a single word to what they were saying."

Slowly she is learning to speak some Thai, which is helping her relate to the residents of the House of Life, a drug halfway house in Prabradaeng, a slum on Bangkok's south side. House of Life is a ministry of Servants to Asia's Urban Poor, an aid group.

Imtila first heard of the House of Life while a student at the Oriental Theological Seminary in Dimapur, Nagaland, operated by the Nagaland Baptist Convention. Australian Baptist World Aid, which supports the halfway house by funding volunteers like Imtila, came to the seminary looking for workers. A month after receiving her master of divinity degree, Imtila was on a plane to Bangkok to begin a one-year stint. That term now complete, she recently committed to stay another six months.

When she is not working at the House of Life, she spends time with prostitutes through a Christian ministry in Bangkok's red-light district. And she teaches English in a Prabradaeng kindergarten, where most of the children's parents are lepers. "All the students are from Buddhist and Muslim backgrounds," she said. "It's an opportunity to live out Christlike [character] to non-believers."

At the House of Life, her time is spent counseling and attending to the needs of the residents. There are only a handful now but room for about 10. Residents are taught job skills, often as simple as making and selling handicrafts.

Although the House of Life is primarily a drug halfway house, most of the residents have AIDS -- a byproduct of drug habits and the promiscuous Thai culture. So in addition to helping addicts rebuild their lives, Imtila has had to help others prepare for death.

People with AIDS are usually shunned by Thai culture, including their own families, so the love they receive from the House of Life is often the only encouraging word they hear. At first Imtila was apprehensive about working with AIDS patients. "I was afraid to touch them," she said in her uneasy English. Now she is an intimate part of their lives, which may mean getting up in the middle of the night to help someone too weak to walk to the bathroom.

"With my limited Thai language, I'm trying my best to interact and walk with them in their life journey. I find it very difficult but still persist."

One resident with AIDS, a woman named Jim, taught Imtila much about perseverance and compassion.

"Over many years of casual relationships and drug addiction, life became meaningless for her," Imtila said. "As she experienced love and acceptance from others at the House of Life, things began to change within her. She realized that in spite of her past, God was willing to accept her and set her free."

During the year she lived at the House of Life, Jim grew progressively sick and frail, Imtila recalled. "While physically she was not strong enough to do very much, she was bright and animated. There were times when she was fed up with the constant pain and weakness of her body. She often asked why she was suffering and surviving so long. She wanted to die and didn't want to trouble others who were looking after her."

As death approached and the pain increased, Jim's faith deepened, Imtila said. "She came to look at life beyond this. ... I could see she had peace and contentment in her heart."

"Just three days before she died, I noticed she was different, wanting to go home to the Father." The next day Jim was taken to a hospice. "After two days the news came that she had passed away peacefully."

There are "two faces" to the Thai people, Imtila said. Although Thais are warm and accepting, many live with deep pains borne of the struggle to survive in a developing country. "It's a smiling land, but inside -- I don't think so."

Imtila sees that pain when she befriends some of Bangkok's prostitutes. Once a week she works at Rahab, a Christian beauty shop in Pat Pong, the downtown prostitution district. Named for the biblical prostitute who gave aid to the Israelites invading Jericho, Rahab "is a little light in the darkness," Imtila said. "The purpose is to share the gospel and give a new hope through Christ."

Staffed mostly by former prostitutes, Rahab offers Christian worship in the afternoons and helps the girls with their hair and makeup before they go to work in the brothels and bars.

"Most are teenagers," Imtila explained. "They think prostitution is the only source to get enough money for their livelihood. Money becomes more important than their lives."

Some take amphetamines to escape the indignity of the job, she said. Some use condoms, but others don't, so many contract AIDS. "It makes me sad to see them wasting their lives in that way. The only way to give them hope is to lead them to Christ."

Imtila ventures into the red-light district mostly during the day, and at night only with a companion. "I feel scared if I work at night. They think I'm a prostitute." When approached by a potential "customer," she always explains she is not interested "because God is with me."

Imtila is a tiny woman, even among the diminutive Thais. Her childlike features make her look younger than her 25 years, and her face portrays a haunting blend of vulnerability and serenity. As an outsider in a sometimes harsh culture, she knows there are risks in the task she has undertaken. Yet she exhudes the quiet confidence of someone on a divine mission. "I trust God. And I ask God to give me wisdom."

Imtila's strength of faith comes from the nurture of a Christian family, which includes three brothers and one sister living in her hometown of Diphupar, Nagaland. It was her mother's determined faith that influenced her most, Imtila said. "In the middle of the night, I would get up and she would be praying for us."

Born Imtimenla Pongen -- now she usually goes by her tribe's name, Ao -- Imtila was 18 when she first felt God's call on her life. That calling has since turned her toward missions. Her family at first resisted that new vocational direction. Her mother urged her to get married and begin a family.

But, Imtila said, God revealed to her in a dream that she should not marry at that time. Eventually, her mother accepted Imtila's decision, even though it likely will take her daughter far from home. "She said, 'If God wants your life, we can't hold you back,'" Imtila recalled.

In the year Imtila has been away, she has grown troubled for her homeland. Ethnic fighting between Nagas and the ruling Hindus has intensified. Family members have told her stories of rape and torture of nearby villagers at the hands of Indian government troops. "I don't know how many lives have been lost in the year I've been gone," she said.

A spokesman for the U.S. State Department said such accounts are "completely believable" but hard to verify. "There have been horrible human-rights violations on both sides" of the long-standing conflict, he said.

Hostility between the Naga people and the Indian government has simmered and boiled for decades, ever since India gained its independence from Great Britain but refused to grant independence to the state of Nagaland. The unrest reflects both racial and religious differences.

Although part of India, Nagaland is sandwiched between China, Burma and Bangladesh. In culture and race, Nagas are more Southeast Asian than Indian. And unlike the Hindu majority in India, most Nagas are Christians, largely because of a massive revival that swept through the state in the 1970s.

"When I see an Indian, it hurts," Imtila confessed. "I think of the political injustice they have shown towards my people. ... I really hate Indians."

"But since I am a follower of Christ, I should not hate my enemies. I ask God to give me his love, because I can't make myself love my enemy."

Trouble in Nagaland has made adjusting to Thailand even harder, Imtila said, but she knows there is little she could do at home and much to do where she is. "It will take its own time to work out," she said of the strife.

Meanwhile, she knows her calling to missions likely will keep home in the distance. Her work with people with AIDS and ex-drug addicts has convinced her to pursue a ministry in counseling, but it also has shown her she needs more training. "Now I see things they need, and I don't feel confident enough."

She would like to study counseling, perhaps in a U.S. seminary, she said. When she looks at the future, there are more questions than answers now. But that's no discouragement either.

"I don't know what is in front of me, but in faith and hope I trust."

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