

THAILAND



THE KINGDOM OF THAILAND, FORMERLY SIAM, IS KNOWN FOR ITS TOURIST INDUSTRY, BUDDHIST TEMPLES AND LONG-REIGNING MONARCH. THE COUNTRY HAS SUFFERED RECENTLY FROM UNREST IN THE SOUTH AND THE TSUNAMI OF 2004.

population

- Population: 64.6 million
- Density: 126 per sq km

The population is unevenly distributed, with the greatest concentration of people in the central region.

Ethnic Thai people make up around 80 percent of the population. The remaining 20 percent are Chinese, Malay and from minority ethnic groups, particularly in the north. In South Thailand there is a significant Malay population.

religions

- Buddhist 92.3%
- Muslim 5.2%
- Christian 1.6%
- Chinese 0.4%
- Other 0.4%

There are over 30,000 Buddhist temples and around 250,000 monks in Thailand. Nearly all Buddhist men enter a monastery for a few days or months.

Nearly all Muslims live in South Thailand or metropolitan Bangkok. Islam is the majority religion in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala and Satun provinces.

language

Thai, a member of the Tai language family, is the chief language. Four regional dialects are in use. Lao, Chinese, Malay [in the south] and Mon-Khmer languages are also spoken, including many distinct languages among the hill tribes of the North. English is taught in all schools and colleges and is used in commerce and government.

geography

Thailand measures 319,380 square miles and contains many topographical contrasts. The north and west are mountainous, the northeast is a huge barren plain, the central plain is fertile and exceedingly densely populated and in the south there are narrow coastal plains and high mountains. A high percentage of the country is rural.

climate

Thailand has a moist, tropical climate influenced by monsoon winds. The hot season [February to May] sees temperatures reach 40°C [104°F]. During the wet season [June to November] temperatures reach 26-37°C [79-99°F] with cooler temperatures of 13-33°C [55-92°F] from December to February. Inland areas are the hottest.

history

Thailand is unique in Southeast Asia in that it has never been a dependency of another nation. The word "thai" means "free." Thai women are active in business affairs, professions and the arts. No single culture has ever dominated the entire area.

Thailand emerged as a kingdom in the 13th century and over the next four centuries enlarged its borders through conquest. During the 1800s British influence grew with trade, the country began to modernize, and Thailand kept its independence by ceding land to the colonial powers [Cambodia and Laos to the French; part of Malaysia to the

British].

After holding aloof during the Second World War, other than granting passage to the Japanese, Thailand turned to the Allies in July 1944 and joined the United Nations in 1946.

The present King Bhumibol Adulyade, or Rama IX, ascended the throne in 1946. Rule by benign military dictatorship was stable until 1973, when efforts to develop democracy ushered in two decades of mainly peaceful military coups, political and social unrest and uneasy coalitions until a non-military government was achieved. Through it all, the king has remained a stabilizing influence, being well respected and loved by the people. He is the world's longest-serving head of state.

In recent years, South Thailand has seen unrest, including bombings and a military coup in 2006 which ousted the prime minister who was accused of corruption.

In December 2004 the earthquake in the Indian Ocean and subsequent tsunami caused extensive damage and over 6,000 deaths along the west coast.

christianity

The first missionaries came to Bangkok in 1828, but it was 12 years before the first sustained missionary presence was established. After 19 more years, they baptized their first convert. Official antagonism, persecution, and the short life-span of missionaries hampered the growth of the church. The churches in



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the north of the country remain the strongest in Thailand, with 75 percent of the country's Christians being from this area.

OMF came to Thailand in 1951, relocating from China to other parts of East Asia. They chose several different fields of work.

In the north, OMFers [including the writer Isobel Kuhn] worked among the hill tribes: the Mien [Yao], Hmong [Meo], Akha and Lisu. In 1956 a Bible training center was opened at Phayao for the training of Thai and tribal Christians for the pastoral ministry. OMF also began outreach to the Pwo Karen and Shan. In North Thailand, OMF works to enable Christians from hill tribes to travel across geographical borders with the gospel, as well as church planting in the cities.

In Central Thailand, there was no real Christian witness until OMF arrived in 1952. The first priority was to share

the gospel and most travel was done by boat, as there were no all-weather roads. Mission stations were opened in provincial towns, literature and Scripture portions were distributed, films were shown and during the dry season evangelistic projects were possible.

Medical clinics were first opened in 1954 and Manorom Christian Hospital in 1956. Today OMF remains committed to pioneer evangelism, working in partnership with the emerging church so that it becomes self-propagating. Other priorities are leadership training and discipleship.

Some people have responded readily; others remain totally closed to the gospel.

In Bangkok, OMF set up its national headquarters, a publishing house and other centralized ministries. In 1966

OMF began a student ministry, leading to the founding of the Thai Christian Students [similar to UCCF]. We continue to work with students.

In 1971 OMF helped start the Bangkok Bible College and Theological Seminary. Since the 1970s church work has been a priority.

In the south, there was no sustained Christian work before OMF sent medical personnel in 1952. Saiburi clinic opened in 1956 and village leprosy clinics in 1966. Some Thai and Chinese people embraced the gospel, but the response among the Malay population has been quieter.

The Thai church is slowly growing, but it is still very small. It is now beginning to send some missionaries and short-term teams with OMF as well as receiving them.

how to pray

- Thailand's religious culture is a complex web of spirit appeasement, occult practices and Buddhism, which is closely interwoven with social culture. Pray that Christians may be able to express their faith without losing their cultural identity.
- Thailand is a Buddhist country but there is freedom to belong to other religions.
- The burgeoning economy is changing society. People are drifting to the cities and materialism is growing.
- The growth of the church has been slow. Much of the growth has been among the Thai-speaking Chinese in the cities and the marginalized tribal peoples.
- Leadership training is vital. There are fine evangelical leaders, but there are few who are adequately trained and spiritually mature.
- Of the 76 provinces, 14 have fewer than 1,000 Christians, three have less than 100, and four have no evangelical congregations.
- Students [one million] have largely not heard the gospel. Pray for OMF's work at a Christian center in one university. Pray for Christian students who are a tiny minority among their peers.
- Most of the 3 million Muslims live in South Thailand and Bangkok. Pray for the opportunity to show Christian love to these peoples.
- Bible translation is ongoing. Some people do not have the complete Bible in their mother tongue.
- Christians among the hill tribes in the north have a vision and calling to reach their people groups in the countries surrounding Thailand. Pray for them as they take the gospel into these areas.
- Pray for local churches to take up opportunities for evangelism among their own peoples.
- Pray for rebuilding work after the tsunami of 2004, and for those personally affected.

OMF's strategic priorities

- Training and motivating Thai Christians in evangelism and leadership
- Urban/rural evangelism and church planting
- Media work

opportunities

- Church planting, church nurturing and support
- Teachers and dorm parents
- Guest house hosts
- Administrators
- Student workers
- Medical personnel
- Bible translators
- English teachers
- Literature production