



# EXTENDING BEYOND

## Working together for the cause of Christ

A message from Stanley W. Green



**T**ucked away in the mountains of northern Thailand is a town called Pakouay. In that town is a small Mennonite church we worshiped with on a recent visit. The rural church, mainly comprised of farm-

ers, is one of 23 in the Hmong District 20 church conference. The leadership, given by Thawee Saeya and Chanisara Saeya, has strengthened the church and community with its ministry of hospitality and reconciliation.

Mennonite Mission Network supports the training of church leaders around the world. In Thailand, it's no different. Mission Network supported the Saeya couple in seminary, as well as others in the region.

**We aim to listen to [a partner's] call and to discern together how we might encourage and support their vision to advance God's healing and hope through Jesus Christ.**

When we visited the Hmong District 20 offices on the outskirts of Chiang Mai, the leadership shared their vision to develop an Anabaptist training center for Hmong church leaders in the region. It's still being formed, but already, they have a curriculum written. In the absence of facilities, they used church buildings to bring pastor-farmers together for intensive training between planting and harvest seasons.

We plan to support Hmong District 20 as they build a facility and train Anabaptist leaders. We are pleased that we can partner in this way with the Hmong churches. We believe that this is a key strategy to advance God's mission alongside our global partners.

On our way back to Chiang Mai, Rev. Ponchai Banchasawan, president of Hmong District 20,

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The Mennonite Mission Network learning tour group and church members in the sanctuary of the Khun Klang church. Photo by Silavit Trakantrakul.

"Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding."

—Romans 14:19



Photo by Travis Duerksen

The women's singing group of the Khun Klang church performs during a church service.

## Finding a spiritual home

**T**hirty minutes outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand, is the town of Khung Klang. When the sun goes down, the mountainside is aglow from rows of greenhouses that scale its slopes. Tucked inside are rows and rows of bright green bushes, their white and yellow blossoms ready to burst.



Photo by Travis Duerksen

Ponsri and Silavit Trakantrakul (left) speak with a gardener about purchasing flower plants from her greenhouse.

Nearly 80 percent of Bangkok's flowers come from this region, many grown by Hmong Mennonites. With the earnings from the profitable flower market, they support three things that are important to them: their families, their community, and their church.

The church in Khung Klang is as vibrant as the flowers that are grown nearby. The congregation has 200 members and supports a nearby church plant. And like many of the Hmong Mennonites scattered across the mountains of northern Thailand, they meet weekly for worship and prayer. They love the Lord. They live out Jesus' teachings to the best of their ability. For the most part, they have a comfortable and stable life.

But it wasn't always this way.

For nearly 200 years, the Hmong people have been scarred with persecution. The minority ethnic group first lived in southern China. Throughout history, they were pushed to parts of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. Always rebuilding. Always hoping.

It wasn't until in the last 10 years that some Hmong Christians in northern Thailand found a spiritual and theological home.

One day, a missionary couple with Mennonite Mission Network arrived in southeast Asia.\* Their continual

friendship and consistent modeling of Jesus' life spoke to Hmong Christians who lived in northern Thailand. Over time, Hmong Christians began to own Anabaptist values as well as the story of Anabaptists, who themselves were persecuted in Europe 500 years ago.

"They are a peaceful people, and the Anabaptist way of being Christians really captured their hearts," said Mike Sherrill, Mission Network director for Asia. "They are taking every step to learn more about how to be an Anabaptist Christian."

And so, on Apr. 20, 2017, the Hmong District 20 began. The Mennonite conference has 23 churches. Though scattered in different districts across the mountains of northern Thailand, they share the same language and culture. They share the same love of Jesus, and passion to live out his teachings of peace, reconciliation and community.

The conference is only 1 year old. But that doesn't stop them from acting on their dreams. They waste no time waiting to plant Mennonite churches. When the Hmong Mennonites plant churches, said Sherrill, "it's not just soul saving, but healing the whole person and creating community."

And because of the nine church plants, they need a place to train their pastors.

Their vision is to create an Anabaptist theological training center in Thailand. This school would train pastors and lay leaders to follow Jesus' example of peace and community. The school would train Hmong Mennonites both near and far.

"We realized that we have so many Hmong communities in neighboring countries. We can be a door and a place for them to receive training since it's more open here," said Ponchai Banchasawan, president of Hmong District 20, referring to other southeast Asian countries where Christians are persecuted. Banchasawan wants the school to be a place where they can bring their experiences, receive training, and return to their countries to share the good news. ■

*\*The couple is not named to protect those who are still persecuted.*



Worship leaders lead congregational singing at the Banana Forest church.

Photo by Travis Dueksen

## Creatively overcoming challenges

**H**mong District 20 has an expansive vision. Thanks to the newfound unity in the district, they have the people. But how do you fund theological training and church plants? That is a continual challenge.

Yet, there's something you need to know about Hmong District 20: When faced with a challenge, they don't give up. They get creative.

A few business owners decided to go together to buy land overlooking a beautiful waterfall. They've developed the land as a rustic resort, called *Doi Sureya*. Just 45 minutes outside of Chiang Mai, some tourists stay in tents. Others stay in bungalows. But people from all over visit to unplug and rejuvenate amidst the rustling of banana trees, misty mountain air, and the sound of water falling.

In Thailand, tourism is a booming industry. It served 35 million people last year. Hmong District 20 aims to capitalize on the opportunity and provide lodging to those who want to get off the beaten path. The proceeds from the rustic resort go to support the church conference.

But more important than finances is the relationship. "By working together, they feel encouraged and empowered because we're standing together in the Spirit of Christ. They have brothers and sisters throughout the whole world. And we at Mennonite Mission Network feel encouraged that we get to partner with this kind of work," said Mike Sherrill, Mission Network director for Asia. ■



Photo by Travis Duerksen



Photo by Slavik Trakantrakuil

Above: Rev. Ponchai Banchasawan leads a presentation on the history of Hmong District 20.  
 Below: Rev. Ponchai Banchasawan sits with the Mennonite Mission Network learning tour group outside the Hmong District 20 offices.

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drove us by the church offices to take a photo in front of the signs at the campus gate. The signs proudly displayed Hmong District 20 and Mennonite Mission Network side-by-side in partnership. By virtue of their membership in Mennonite World Conference, Hmong District 20 considers themselves a Mennonite conference of churches. In addition, the government of Thailand requires all church conferences to be registered as a district of the Christian Church of Thailand. They were eager for us to understand that while their affiliation is with the CCT for bureaucratic purposes, their connection and spiritual identity is with the global Anabaptist community and the Mennonite Church. We feel privileged to be a partner with this church and its vibrant witness for God’s reign in the world.

As we reflected on their vision and energy for God’s mission, I felt a deep sense of confirmation in my spirit about the approach in mission that we have been growing into at Mission Network. We have come to believe that our special call is to come alongside our global partners. We aim to listen to their call and to discern together how we might encourage and support their vision to advance God’s healing and hope through Jesus Christ. This reminded me of Paul’s words in Romans 14:19: “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.” ■

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