

“Don’t Come Over and Help Us!”

“Peggy, I am sick and tired of missionaries telling us what we can and cannot do. Claudia has never understood us or our work, and she has no right to try to control what evangelistic methods we use. You missionaries have been here how long? Twenty-five years? And how many Pwo Karen became Christians before the Bible school group came two years ago? Less than six, right? What those young Bible School students are doing is innovative and effective, and I think we should invite them again in June.”

Peter Chaviwan, the Thai director of the local Baptist association, was responding to an appeal by Peggy Murphy to try to reach a compromise with the church members, the retired pastor, and two of the missionaries who opposed inviting the young people from the Burmese Pwo Karen Bible School to return the following summer and present their evangelistic programs.

Baptist Missionary Work in Sangkhla Buri

Early in the 1960s, the Baptists and the Disciples of Christ entered the area of Sangkhla Buri in a joint effort to bring the gospel to the people there. Sangkhla Buri is adjacent to the Myanmar border where the Dutch railroad crosses from Thailand en route to Moulmein and Rangoon. The area is populated with indigenous Karen—Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen—as well as Karen formerly from Thailand. The entire area in which the Karen live spans Thailand and Myanmar. Though related, each group has its own dialect. Also, the Sgaw Karen tend to look down on the Pwo Karen and often speak of them as “little brothers and sisters.” Nearly all the Karen living in Thailand are either Mon Buddhists (Theraveda) or animists. One of their Buddhist beliefs is that the fifth Buddha will soon return to earth, gather all the faithful, and take them to his heavenly abode. “The faithful,” it is believed, will be those earning merit when the fifth Buddha arrives.

The original Christian mission team in the area was composed of two missionary families, including Frank and Peggy Murphy and a missionary doctor, a Thai evangelist named Peter Chaviwan, and their respective families. A single woman missionary, Claudia Fillmore, joined them a short time later. Of the original group, only the Murphys, Peter Chaviwan—now head of the Baptist association—and Claudia Fillmore are still there.

Shortly after they began their work, they learned that a prestigious Burmese Baptist pastor, Duh Shwe Wa who had been involved in the struggle of the Burmese Karens to gain independence from Burma and had been imprisoned for five years, was released suddenly and forced to leave the country. He and his family entered Thailand and sought political refugee status. The missionaries quickly invited him to come and help them. Being Sgaw Karen, Reverend Wa was able to gather a small number of Sgaw Karen Christians around him, and they became the nucleus of the church that grew from fewer than twelve to more than eighty baptized members in the twenty-plus years. Unfortunately, however, though Pastor Wa was aware of the missionaries’ desire to evangelize the Pwo Karen, he conducted all the church services and other activities in the Sgaw dialect. The Pwo Karen meanwhile remained uninterested and unreached, primarily, the missionaries agreed, because the Pwo Karen dialect was never used.

The Attempt to Evangelize the Pwo Karen

Recently, a new evangelistic approach using the Pwo Karen dialect was introduced by a group of young Karen students from a Baptist Bible School located in the Kyimindaing township in Rangoon, and a number of the Pwo Karen became professing Christians. But one of the missionaries, Claudia Fillmore, along with Pastor Wa, now retired, and nearly all the Sgaw Karen church members are fervently opposed to the approach used by the Bible school students to attract the Pwo Karen.

Peggy describes what happened:

“Two years ago, a group of 40 young people and two teachers from the Karen Bible School in Burma crossed the border and came to our area with a well-developed program of evangelization. It involved Pwo Karen native dances and a series of dramas, the core of which were Pwo Karen folk tales and animist mythology, which the young people skillfully used as a basis for presenting the Christian Gospel.

“One of the dramas enacted the story of a young Pwo Karen couple who lived at the edge of the forest. One morning the husband told his beautiful wife that he was going hunting, and no matter what happened, she was to remain in their house. Shortly after her husband left, however, the young woman heard one of their pigs squealing. Without thinking, she rushed outside to see what was happening. A large python was attacking the pig. The woman tried to wrest the pig from the python, and the snake, seeing his chance to capture the woman, released the pig, seized the woman, and spirited her off to his cave.

“A dove observed what happened, flew to where the husband was hunting, told him that his wife was in distress—that she had been abducted and was now a prisoner of the python—and offered to guide him to the snake’s cave. Frantic, the husband, following the dove, ran as fast as he could until he reached the mouth of the cave. He called out to the python and demanded that he free his wife. The snake, however, said he would release the woman only if the man gave him a liter of his blood.

“The young husband, terrified for his wife, rushed back to his hut, killed a chicken, and returned to the cave with a liter of chicken blood. But the wily python rejected the blood, saying it was not that of the husband. Successively the man tried to deceive the snake with the blood of a pig and a buffalo. Each time the python rejected the offering, saying, ‘This is not your blood. Either you bring me a liter of your blood or you will have no further opportunity to save your wife. This is your last chance.’

“In desperation, the man ran again to his hut, punctured his wrist, drew a liter of his own blood, gave it to the python and succeeded in rescuing his wife. By this time, of course, he was so weak from running back and forth, from the emotional strain, and from the loss of blood that he died.

“The Bible school teachers who accompany the young people always conclude the presentations by adding to the drama a Christian message, saying, for example, that Jesus also shed his blood, that he too died for our sins, that he was resurrected by God and now wants to be our eternal savior.

“The Pwo Karens came from everywhere to see the young people give these performances. They were captivated by the dramas, and working through the Pwo Karen elders and families, the Bible schoolteachers challenged them to make a decision to become Christians. Many of them did.

“The most controversial part of what the Bible school group did was to identify Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the people’s hope for the return of the fifth Buddha. This may be questionable, but even so, many of the Pwo Karen who believe in the return of the Buddha and in life after death evidently saw this as a theological bridge and declared their faith in Christ. Our church could have reaped a great harvest. But the Sgaw Karen Christians were so upset by what happened. They said the gospel was being compromised and that the dances, dramas, and identification of Jesus as the fifth Buddha were syncretism. It was, they insisted, heresy ‘pure and simple.’

“The first time the Bible School group was here for about six weeks, and some of the Sgaw Karen had been asked to be responsible for them only for the first few days and for a day or two before the young people left. After the initial drama presentations, the Sgaw were so angry—saying the young people had not presented the gospel and what they were doing was not evangelism—they would have nothing to do with them. So during the entire time the group was here, except for the first three days, they were cared for by the Pwo Karen, hardly any of who were Christians. By ‘cared for,’ I mean they were given food, a place to sleep, and other necessary amenities.

“The head of our Baptist association, Peter Chaviwan, is from northern Thailand. He was sent to help us as an evangelist soon after we moved here. When the Burmese group left the first time, he invited them to return, and they did last year. The reception among the Pwo Karen was tremendous. Large numbers began to ask for baptism, even though there had not been a half-dozen Pwo Karen converts since we came. But the Sgaw Karen Christians were incensed. Then about a month ago when they heard that Peter wanted to invite the young people a third time, it became a major issue in our church. The debate among the Sgaw Karen Christians was as intense as anything we’ve experienced. Reverend Wa, the retired pastor, now over eighty years of age, objected strenuously, and he was supported by Claudia, one of our elder missionaries, who, incidentally, will retire next year. In effect, they were saying to the Burmese young people, ‘Don’t come over and help us!’

“Peter’s brother, a deacon in the church, however, spoke in favor of the plan, saying this was God’s way of opening the Pwo Karen to the gospel. But of the eighty-five church

members, only three voted in favor of inviting the young people to come back. This has been a very difficult time for Peter as well as for Frank and me.

“Three days ago, trying to be a reconciler, I went to Peter to ask if there were not some way to reach a compromise. He was very upset and said Claudia did not understand the Thai people. ‘She has no idea of how evangelism needs to be done among the Pwo Karen. The Bible School young people are the only Christians I’ve seen,’ Peter said, ‘who know the Pwo Karen culture well enough to put the gospel in words and actions they understand and will accept. They have responded as never before, and as you know several are ready for baptism. Any time the gospel is presented in a different cultural frame, there will be some syncretism. But that does not make it heresy. I believe if we are really serious about wanting the Pwo Karen to become Christians, we will use methods they can identify with and that are appealing to them.’

“ ‘Claudia has been influenced by Pastor Wa, and in turn she is influencing the Sgaw Karen women in the church. Claudia has never understood us or our work, and I don’t think she has a right to try to control what evangelistic methods we use.’

“He concluded by saying, ‘I hope you and Frank will support me in this. I don’t want to go against the whole church, but I am convinced that if we allow the Sgaw Karen and a reactionary North American missionary to determine our future, it will not be a promising one for the Pwo Karen.’ ”

“ ‘Can I count on your help?’ Peter asked.”

“I was stunned, hurt, and bewildered,” Peggy added. “I knew I had to say something, but what?”

Scriptural texts to consider:

I Kings 18:16-21

John 1:1-16

Acts 17:22-24

A case prepared by Alan Neely