



Muana with his wife Villy and their three daughters



Fellowship group (Photo: Muana)

FROM INDIVIDUALS TO A MOVEMENT

Muana and his wife Villy have been part of the Global Interaction team in Thailand for a number of years. As they look back at the past six years, they are amazed at all that has happened: from friendships with a few individuals who came to know Jesus, to the birth of a small fellowship group of believers. Now this group is eager to “go out” themselves and share Jesus with those around them. Muana reflects with wonder at all God has done, and is excited about what is ahead.

Sometimes it seems as if we’re not doing anything really profound – it’s really just making friends with those around us. **It has been exciting to see God use simple conversations and friendships with a few individuals for the growth of his kingdom in rural Thailand.** From a few individuals who decided to follow Jesus, we’ve seen the development of a small faith community of believers discovering their own distinctive ways of following Jesus. And now this fellowship group, like groups of believers throughout time, naturally want to share Jesus with those around them and see the kingdom of God grow and flourish.

A few individuals

Kwi

It seems like a life-time ago when back in 2005 we moved into a small home in rural Thailand. Just like when you move into any new neighbourhood we began getting to know our neighbours, Nok and his wife Kwi. Villy is a hairdresser, so she would often cut Kwi’s hair. As happens in hairdressing salons all around the world, the women’s conversations didn’t take long to progress from the weather to deeper issues, including ideas of spirituality.

One day Villy and Kwi watched a movie about Jesus together. The next time Villy was cutting Kwi’s hair, she asked, “Tell me, what did you find most interesting about Jesus?” Kwi responded, “Jesus rose from the dead – I have never heard of anyone doing that before!”

Kwi started to think seriously about Jesus. After the wet season, Kwi remarked with amazement, “This is the first wet season in my life that the water has not come into our house.” Her friends were also surprised and said to one another, “See, Muana and Villy’s God even looks after their friends.” It was at this time that Kwi started to believe – when she realised that God was helping her.

Nok

God was also revealing himself to Kwi’s husband, Nok. After a terrible fall out of a tamarind tree, doctors suspected broken ribs and internal bleeding, but Nok’s test results came back clear. It was then that Nok remembered that he had met Jesus in a dream. While his family and friends were sure that his accident was caused by the spirits, Nok was convinced that Jesus had protected him.

Inh

Meanwhile, God had also been using dreams to speak to another person in the community, Inh. Our Global Interaction team members, Larry and Jan, had recently met Inh and she told them about her dream where a holy man lifted her in his arms and prayed for her. She woke from that dream with a wonderful sense of wellbeing and peace. It was days later that Inh saw a picture of Jesus in a children’s book. “That’s him – he’s the one who lifted me!” she exclaimed.

Forming a fellowship group

It was exciting times to see God opening the hearts and minds of each of these and other individuals. It was even more exciting to see them drawing together to support and encourage one another and to worship and learn together.

We started a weekly gathering in our home with these new believers. **It was a joy to see the believers grow in their understanding of and faith in Jesus.** The gathering times were fairly unstructured. We just wanted to be facilitators, helping them discover their own ways of worshipping Jesus. Usually we would meet for an hour, but sometimes people got really into it so it would go for two hours or more. We would pray and read the bible together and it was also a time to discuss issues and share testimonies.

We spent a lot of time encouraging one another, as many were feeling pressure from family and friends to not follow Jesus. The Thai people see Christianity as a Western religion. People think they



Villy cutting Inh's hair (Photo: Muana)



The village in northern Thailand where the fellowship group meet (Photo: Muana)

would betray their own culture and family if they became Christians. **We wanted to help them figure out how they could still be a part of their society and family, and also come into a new family: the family of Jesus.**

The day that the group no longer met in our home, but in the home of Nok and Kwi, was very momentous. For us, this was a big step in empowering these believers to take on ownership and leadership of the faith movement.

We started running a few leadership training courses. We wanted to develop their capacity to understand the scripture and apply it to their local situation. But it was important to start from where they were at and slowly develop the potential they have in them. The first training was for a whole day on biblical knowledge, qualities of leaders and teaching skills. We even had a practice session where they all got up to teach a lesson.

While there was some initial hesitation, a few members of the group have really stepped up and taken on more responsibility. Different people now prepare and lead short segments of the gatherings. Inh started by doing some bible readings and quickly progressed to helping teach the weekly lessons. It's wonderful when they teach, as they know how to relate the gospel to the local culture in ways we, as outsiders, never could.

You can imagine how thrilled we were in mid 2009 when we celebrated the first baptisms of the fellowship group. We'd chosen an outside venue in a national park a short distance from where we usually met. The storm clouds gathered and the thunder rolled – an exciting setting for an exciting occasion! Two people had planned to take this step of declaration of their faith. But on the day two more came prepared with dry clothing to also be baptised.

As we looked back on the past three years, we could see God working in these people, changing them, growing them and using them.

Going out

The fellowship group has grown because of the passion of the new believers and their desire to share Jesus with those around them.

For them, their experience of Jesus has been life-changing. No longer are they bound by a fear of the spirits that is so predominant in the Thai culture. They now know the freedom brought by Jesus. They want to make sure their family, neighbours and friends know it too!

In many of their conversations with other people in the neighbourhood, Inh and the others often talk about Jesus and the difference he has made in their life. We constantly have new people come to the fellowship group wanting to know more about Jesus.

One of the believers, Lamud, travels from a neighbouring village to attend the fellowship group. One day I casually mentioned that since he lived in another village, perhaps we could start a second fellowship group in his house. The following Sunday he called me, saying, "Where are you? We're all here, we've got snacks and we're ready to go. We're just waiting for you to come teach."

He'd gathered many of his friends who were curious about Jesus. Since that first Sunday, a number of new seekers have come along to this second group. What is even more exciting is that believers from the first group have led a number of the sessions for them.

It reminds me of the early church from the beginning of Acts. Jesus promised those first believers: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." **They realised, as do Inh, Neuk, Kwi and the others in the Thai fellowship group, that Jesus isn't just about transforming them as individuals. He's about transforming whole communities.**

They don't see themselves as the final destination of the gospel. They are not the end of the story. They are the beginning of the story of Jesus for many other people in their community.

And so what started with just a few small conversations, with just a few individuals, has now grown into a group of believers who are passionately spreading the love and grace of Jesus.

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