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**A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO SHARING JESUS
WITH BUDDHIST STUDENTS:
THE CASE OF MISSION COLLEGE**

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Introduction

Christian missionaries first came to Thailand several hundred years ago, starting as early as the 1500s. Protestant missionaries had seriously toiled in the then Siam soil since the early 1800s, followed by the Adventists who arrived in 1906. In these 100 years of Adventist work, many Thai people were introduced to Jesus Christ and accepted Him as their personal Savior. Those who have accepted the Adventist faith are now believed to number around 11,000 people.¹ While praising God for the number of people who have joined the church, the number does not do justice to the hard work and investment put into the work in the last 100 years. Out of the 11,000 members, there are very few who have come from Buddhist backgrounds. Most of our members are from ethnic minorities, such as Hmong and Karen tribes. They are also from animistic backgrounds and live in rural areas of Thailand. This should compel us to examine our success and failure and find a new approach; even it means a dramatic change to improve our work in Thailand. Thus, there is a need to find a new way of preaching of the gospel message in Thailand.

Mission College is owned and operated by the Southeast Asia Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. It is situated near Muaklek town, Saraburi province, Thailand. It is located in a cradle of Thailand's best vinery and dairy valley at the foot of the great Khao Yai National Park, about 160 km northeast of Bangkok. According to the 2007 enrollment record, there are a total of 934 students, 707 at the Muaklek campus and 227 at Bangkok campus. Out of these 470 (50.32 percent) are Adventists and 464 (49.68 percent) are non-Adventists.² As a Christian institution Mission College does not intend to shy away from its mission of sharing its faith and lifestyle. Therefore, it actively continues to integrate its faith in all aspects of learning at Mission College, both in and out of classes.

This paper is a product of several years of implementation of a relational approach to sharing the gospel in Thailand. It intends to reveal the importance of relationship in the sharing of the gospel message with Buddhist students at Mission College. It assumes that Buddhist people, especially ethnic Lao Buddhists who are living in Laos and northeast Thailand, are relational, family and community oriented. God's relationship with His people will also be investigated to establish a case that God is a relational God. A brief introduction to Buddhism in Thailand and how Buddhists learn religion will also be explored. Finally, approaches to sharing faith employed at Mission College will be analyzed to determine if this relational approach is really effective in sharing the gospel with Buddhist students.

Buddhists are Relational People

Asians, especially Lao-Thai Buddhists, are very relational. The whole society is based on relationship. Relationships permeate every aspect of life in society, education, work, leisure, and politics. In Laos and Thailand, also in other countries in Southeast Asia, we address each other as brother, sister, uncle, aunty, father, mother, grandfather, or grandmother, according to the age of the one being addressed. Instead of calling a person Mr or Mrs or Ms, we call them uncle, aunty, or sister followed by their first name. This practice gives weight

¹ http://www.adventistdirectory.org/view_AdmField.asp?AdmFieldID=THLM (19 March 2007)

² Office of Admission and Records, Mission College, Thailand, March 2007.

to the respect of the person being addressed. In Laos, it is proper to call leaders of the country “Uncle” followed by their first names. For instance, I would call the Prime Minister “Uncle Bounyang.” Colleagues are called comrades officially, but privately they are called brother or sister, uncle or Aunt, and so on.

Relationship means a lot in a Buddhist context. Respect for seniority is not only a good thing to practice it is a virtue of a good Buddhist. In an educational setting, freshmen would give respect to their senior students: freshmen to sophomores, sophomores to juniors, juniors to seniors. In a work setting, those who are higher in rank or have more years of service also get treated with respect. A policeman who graduated from a police academy in 1990 may only have a rank of Police Major, but still gets respect from his colleague or superior who graduated later, but has a rank of Police Colonel. This tradition of giving respect to seniority is widely accepted and practiced in Buddhist Southeast Asian countries, especially Thailand.

Relationship is also important for success and survival in the Buddhist context. If you are an insignificant person, who you know may help. If that is the case, difficult things are often made easy or serious matters made simple. Getting things done in Thailand relies very much on who you are and who you know. There are guidelines, rules, and regulations to be followed, but if they know who you are, and you know who they are, it often makes things easy and simple. In Thailand and Laos, there is a relational word *krengjai* which does not have an equivalent meaning in English. *Krengjai* takes on a meaning of having an attitude of awe and respect, courtesy, and obligation. In other words, is an attitude that someone has for a superior or senior or someone of respected status. For example, at college I often I feel *krengjai* to my teacher, I will try to do whatever he wishes, and I don’t dare do something against his will. So, *krengjai* commands obedience on the part of the one who exercises the *krengjai* attitude. Those who do not prescribe to this attitude will not do well in a Buddhist society. There are other practices in Laos and Thailand that indicate that relationship is a vital part of their everyday life. I will give some examples of it below.

Pook-Siaw Ceremony

In Laos and among ethnic Lao in northeastern Thailand, a *pook-siaw*³ ceremony is often performed to confirm brotherly relationships between two individuals, usually of similar ages but not necessarily so. This may be similar to a best friend’s relationship in other cultural contexts, but it really means more than best friends in the Lao-Thai context. It is similar to what is described in Proverbs 17:17, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” This friendship means much more than being a brother. Once the two individuals have gone through the ceremony often witnessed by relatives and friends, they have become closest friends. Once they are married, their children will call them mother or father just like their own children. The children of the two families are like brothers and sisters, except that they can get married to each other, which is often the wish of their parents. This ceremony is one of many examples of the importance the Lao-Thai Buddhists place on relationship. To them relationship is first, and everything else comes later.

“Loved” Parents

Like *pook-siaw*, “loved” parents describes a special relationship between people of different ages such as between a person as young as a son or daughter and a person as old as a father or mother. The adults in this special relationship are called *por hak* (loved father) or

³ The word *pook siaw* literally means “tie” and “friend(s).” Note that the word *siaw* also does not have an English equivalent word. So, *pook siaw* means the tying of two individuals together as special friends.

mae hak (loved mother). The young person in this relationship is then called *look hak* (loved son/daughter). Again, it is very important to know that this relationship may have more or less the same strength as an adopted child-parent relationship. Since this relationship is totally voluntary, it is seen as more favorable, but it does not have the same legal standing as that of an adopted relationship. Lao-Thai people may have this relationship with many people. This is another example of how relational the Lao-Thai Buddhist people are.

“Seal the Deal over the Meal”

In Asia, doing business over the meal is very common. Often there is no contract signed, and only a verbal promise is good enough. Transactions amounting to millions of dollars have occurred during meals. Business transactions are based on trust and relationship. This practice reflects on how much Asian people value relationship. To them relationship means business and no relationship means no business.

At a grassroots level, *sapa kafee* (coffee council) is where people go to drink coffee or have breakfast and discuss all kinds of relational, social, and political matters. It is here where people get to know each other. Seeing the importance of this coffee council principle, the government of Thailand has implemented their version of coffee council where district or occasionally, even provincial officials gather together to drink coffee and discuss official matters of common concerns and interest. This practice has gotten many good projects going and completed. For example, a 2.5 km long road at the back of Mission College which was sealed in 2005, was constructed as a direct result of this coffee council attended by a representative from the college. Thus, when doing business in Thailand, one must learn to do it the Thai way. Preaching the gospel and building churches is a serious business. While not discounting the power of the Holy Spirit, without relationship, it is going to be very difficult to even get a place to worship without protest from the neighbors, let alone getting a license to open a church, school, or evangelistic center.

“Golf-Playing” Politicians

Playing sport with each other is a good way of making friends. Many politicians play golf with each other to improve their relationships. Others play soccer, tennis, badminton, and other sports with each other. Apart from eating together, it is playing together, that brings people closer to each other. The notion of *sanuk* in the Thai culture plays a major part in this context. The Thai people like *sanuk*. This means they like to be together at parties, festivals, and other kinds of gatherings. Sports of any kind bring people together; those who watch and those who play.

The Thai government now actively promotes sports to prevent young people from getting involved in illicit drugs. Every year the government spends a lot of money to promote sports as a means to prevent drug taking. As sports bring people together and relationships are built, young people open up and can be given help. It is through relationship that this anti-drug campaign is achieved.

Politicians, because of their affluent lifestyle, often play golf with each other. They also use golf as a means to recruit party members, discuss politics, and nurture their relationships. There is a saying, “I don’t play golf with your father.” This phrase is used to mean that I am not your father’s friend; therefore, I am not going to help you. This implies that if I am your father’s friend, then, I am obligated to help you. Thus, it is important that Christian missionaries learn the Thai way, and their approach to sharing the gospel message will meet with unprecedented success.

Lao-Thai Buddhists and Their Teachers

A teacher-student relationship in the Lao-Thai context is similar to that of a parent-child relationship. Student in the Lao-Thai language is *look-sid*, which means “son/daughter-disciple.” In Laos, students often call their teacher *ai-khoo* (brother teacher) or uncle teacher and aunty teacher. This indicates a close relationship between a teacher and a student.

Traditionally, there is an elaborate ceremony to accept a student. Famous teachers only choose the best students to receive instructions. The important role of teachers in Laos and Thailand is recognized at an annual ceremony in honor of teachers called the *Wai Kru* ceremony. On this day, students will pay respect to their teachers by giving flowers to their teachers, and teachers will in turn give blessings to their students. This kind of respect given to teachers puts teachers in a highly influential position not only in academia, but also in society at large.

In Laos and Thailand, society equates a teacher with a printing mold. What this means is that a teacher is like a typewriter that prints characters on a paper. In principle, teachers can have far greater influence over their students once they show how much they love and care for their students. Students will automatically become attached to teachers who are loving and caring.

Lao-Thai Buddhists and Their Monks

As Hindus devote themselves to their gurus, the Buddhists also devote their lives to their religious leaders, the monks. This means that the object of devotion for Buddhists is not so much the teaching of Buddha, but rather that of the *Sangha* or monk. Buddhists are not truth oriented, but leader oriented. They learn religion from certain religious leaders whom they respect and venerate. The message given from the mouth of their respected monk or guru is taken as the practical truth, and they would practice it without any doubt or question.

The irony is that most Christian approaches to the preaching of the gospel to Buddhists focus on contextualizing the message, which sometimes ignores the need to establish relationships with them first. Paul De Nuei, a missionary who spent several years working among the *Esaan* (ethnic Lao) people of Thailand, stated that the biggest barrier to the preaching of the gospel in Thailand is not religious but social.⁴ By this he means that relationship is an issue. Buddhists are social people. They like to do things together—work together, play together, and worship together. This makes them feel *sanook* which, literally, means fun, but also includes happiness, joy, and satisfaction.

God as a Relational God

Not a single Christian would deny the fact that God is a relational God. God had a personal relationship with Adam and Eve. He had personal relationships with the patriarchs. The fact that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to us also shows that He enjoys having a personal relationship with His people. Thus, the reason we are relational is because we are created in His image.

God and Abraham

The Bible records a very close relationship between God and Abraham. This relationship shows how much God was prepared to do for Abraham, His friend and servant. In many incidents, even when Abraham was in the wrong, God would protect him and

⁴ Paul De Nuei, “Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists,” in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, eds. David Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 134.

threatened to destroy those innocent individuals who did not do any wrong against Abraham. In the case of Pharaoh who took Abraham's wife, Sarah, in good faith and even lavished Abraham with gifts, God inflicted Pharaoh and his household with diseases (Genesis 12:10-20). Furthermore, Abraham made the same mistake a second time, even after God had promised to give him a son through Sarah (Genesis 18:16), by giving away his wife to Abimelech, king of Gera (Genesis 20:2). This time God threatened to kill Abimelech and his household even though Abraham was clearly in the wrong (Genesis 20:4-7). This is clearly something God did for Abraham because of their friendship.

Yet another outstanding example of the relationship between God and Abraham was displayed at God's visit to Abraham before He investigated and destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In that encounter, God even ate with Abraham. While eating together, God and Abraham also went into a serious bargaining discussion over the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, especially Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family. Here again, for the sake of His friend Abraham, God saved Lot and his family from the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. These incidents indicate how much God values His relationship with His people. Whoever thinks of entering into a relationship with God should be serious about that relationship since God, Himself, is serious about it.

God and other patriarchs

God extended his relationship to Abraham's son, Isaac. Similar to the practice of Asian people, who would extend kindness and generosity to the children of their friends, God protected Isaac and his wife from harm and danger. Strangely, Isaac repeated his father's mistake, telling Abimelech king of Gera that Rebecca was his sister. Even then, God still protected Isaac and kept him and his family safe from a pagan king Abimelech and his people (Genesis 26).

God had a good relationship with Jacob. God spent much of His time trying to change Jacob to the point that He had to wrestle with Jacob. Finally, Jacob was given a new name, Israel (Genesis 32:22-32). Giving a new name to a person is done only by a person who is much loved and highly respected. In Asia, the practice of giving a name to a newborn infant is done only by a person of high respect within the family.

Joseph had such a close relationship with God that despite all the hardships and mishaps in his life, he remained faithful, always trusting God. This could only be achieved by a mutual trust and understanding on the part of Joseph toward God. Joseph would not have been so faithful to God unless he had had a good relationship with God. Thus, relationship is surely much more than merely what is known of or about God.

Another close relationship God had with a human being was with Moses. God and Moses saw each other eye-to-eye. No humans ever questioned or suggested to God what to do, but Moses did. When God was angry with the Israelites, He said that He would destroy them and make Moses a new people, but Moses intervened and God relented and did not destroy His people (Exodus 32:10-14). Although He relented, God was still angry and He did not want to go with Moses and His people. Instead, He would send His angel to go with them, but Moses confronted God saying, "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." And God said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name" (Exodus 33:15, 17). No one could challenge God and make Him change His mind like Moses. There has never been anyone on earth who had that kind of relationship with God, being able to speak to Him eyeball-to-eyeball like Moses. But, this teaches us that God is serious about His relationship with His people. He cares about His people, and He is faithful and will deliver His promises to those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

God in Jesus

The most classic example of God displaying His relationship with His people is found in the life of Jesus, the God-made-man. There is no shortage of examples to show that God through Jesus demonstrated how He liked to be a friend with human beings. Jesus ate with sinners, slept in their homes, depended on their hospitality, and made friends with people of all walks of life. In fact, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were to Jesus like a “loved” sister and brother like in the Lao-Thai context. He spent much of His time staying with this family. In brief, one can conclude that God really enjoys having relationships with His human friends.

Implications of God and Human Relationship

Buddhists are humans created in God’s image. Therefore, they yearn for a relationship with God and with their fellow human beings. Deep inside every Buddhist there is a desire to have a relationship with the personal God. Despite many differences between Christianity and Buddhism, they have one thing in common: Buddhists and Christians alike long for a relationship with the Divine Being. It is commonly known that Buddhists, especially Folk Buddhists, have relationships with supernatural beings of some sort. They worship all kinds of unseen powers and even pray to the universal supernatural being for protection and guidance.

The approach to sharing the gospel with Buddhists must take into account that they are relational people and long for relationships with a personal God. Many approaches to preaching the gospel have been utilized in order to present the gospel to various peoples of the world. Until recently, contextualization gained popularity for the fact that it takes into account the recipient’s culture and way of learning. However, in a Thai Buddhist context, I propose a relational-contextual approach to sharing the gospel message in Thailand. The relational-contextual approach takes into account both the need to contextualize the message and the method of delivery as well as the messenger, the missionary.

What Makes Buddhists Embrace Christianity?

Efforts have been made by various groups of missionaries working in Thailand to identify what really works well in helping Buddhists accept Christianity. Unfortunately, until the present time, nobody has found that golden key to open Buddhist hearts. Some methods of approach may work better than others in some areas among some Buddhists, but nothing has been found to be universally effective. I notice, however, that the Hope of Bangkok Church, which was founded in the 1980s, now has a membership of more than 10,000 worshipping in 7 mega-churches in Bangkok. What made this church grow so fast? What did it do differently from the Adventist church that has toiled over 100 years to achieve the same number of members? I personally noticed and learned from the Hope Church of Bangkok that its members are very hospitable and relational people. Their love for each other and their neighbors is really exceptional. Combining Christian love with focus ministry, this church has experienced something the Adventist church has yet to experience. Before we know how to share the gospel with the Buddhists it will make sense that we know who these Buddhists are first. Below is a brief look at the Thai Buddhists.

Who are Thai Buddhists?

Buddhism has two major denominations: the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* traditions. *Mahayana* means the Great Vehicle and *Hinayana*, sometime called Theravada, means the Small Vehicle. The differences between the two are basically based on how they view the teaching of the Lord Buddha. Followers of the *Hinayana* (Small Vehicle) tradition are those

who follow the Buddha's teaching more strictly and their ultimate goal of life is *Nirvana*, the cessation of lifecycle. Followers of the *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) are those who focus on the life-centered virtues of the Buddha: kindness to others, charity and compassion. Their ultimate goal of life is not *Nirvana*, but to become Bodhisattvas, beings who have already attained enlightenment but chosen to help others do so. There are other branches of Buddhism such as the *Vajrayana* (the Diamond Vehicle) or Tantric Buddhism in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia; Zen Buddhism in Japan; and Won Buddhism in Korea. The Thai, like the Lao, Khmer, Myanmar and Sri Lankan, adhere to the *Hinayana* or *Theravada* tradition. However, in Thailand the *Sangha*, the Buddhist organization, is divided into two main *Nikaya* (sects). The first, older and bigger, is the *Mahanikaya* (Great Society). The second is the *Dhammayutika* or *Thammayut Nikaya* founded by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in 1833. The latter was aimed to revive the tradition and follow a stricter code of rules. However, these days the two are hardly distinguishable.⁵ At the turn of the 21st century it is believed that there are 267,300 monks, 10,000 nuns, and 98,000 novices who reside in 30,678 monasteries around Thailand.⁶ These numbers may seem a lot, but the great majority of people who profess to be Buddhists adhere to Folk Buddhism.

Folk Buddhism is the type of Buddhism that is a mixture of animistic and Buddhist beliefs, which is practiced by the great majority of the people. Most Thai Buddhists adhere to this form of religion which includes magico-animistic practices. Amulets, good luck charms, ghost-repellant icons, Buddha images, medallions, and other animistic objects are used widely by these Buddhists. These objects must be awakened to have magical or protecting power in a simple *Pluk Sek*⁷ ceremony or the more elaborated *Phutthaphisek* ritual.⁸ Some Buddhist monks are involved in the sacralization of these objects and images while other monks, but very few, believe that it is against the Buddha's teaching of detachment from desire. This type of Buddhism is practiced by most Thai people. Superstition, magic, fortune telling, spirit worship, tattoo, taboo, voodoo, and all kinds of related activities are parts of Thai Buddhist's lives. Therefore, it is fair to say that it is hard to find a single approach to sharing Jesus with Thai Buddhists that works for all.

Similarities between Buddhists and Christian Beliefs

Buddhists and Christians share some common core beliefs. First, Buddhists and Christians agree that life is full of problems. Although Buddhism and Christianity differ in what caused the suffering on earth, the two agree that there is suffering on earth and there is a need to be liberated from this suffering. Since the two differ in the causes of suffering they also differ in how to solve the suffering problem. Second, Buddhists and Christians share similar concerns for humanity and have love for all creatures. Although they have different reasons for caring for the creation, both share a common need to care for the world. The Buddhists are in fact very conscious about the environment and animals. The underlining reason is more subtle. Some Buddhists believe that animals are incarnated souls of their

⁵ Emmanuel Perve, Ludovic Perve, and Adrien Fontanellaz, *Answers to all your Questions about Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Alligator Service Co. Ltd., 2005), 131-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷ *Pluk Sek* literally means awaken and empower. In this instance, when an object is *pluk sek* it becomes alive with certain power to protect the wearer. I will use the English equivalent word sacralize in place of the Thai word *Pluk Sek* or *Phutthaphisek*. The difference between *pluk sek* and *phutthaphisek* lies on the simplicity or elaboration of the ritual. All are done by Buddhist monks who possess certain magical power.

⁸ B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand, 3rd Revised Ed.*, (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus, 2001), 62-65, 244.

loved ones. However, these days many Buddhists simply adhere to the notion that nature and human beings need each other to survive. Besides, nature helps to promote meditation and life. Therefore, to them it is a common sense that they take care of nature. Third, Buddhists and Christians are moral people. In fact, four of the five Buddhist precepts are included in the Christian Ten Commandments: (1) avoid killing, (2) avoid lying, (3) avoid sexual misconduct, and (4) avoid stealing. The fifth precept is to avoid using intoxicating drink or illicit drugs. Thus, the basic tenet of morality between the Buddhists and Christians are the same. Finally, both Buddhists and Christians are yearning for a peaceful and happy life. Although, ordinary Buddhists may not necessarily understand about the existence of God and heaven they do long for a place called paradise where true happiness and joy exist. However, there are more differences between the two religions than their similarities.

Differences between Buddhist and Christian Beliefs

Despite some similarities in core beliefs between Christianity and Buddhism, there are still several major differences between the two religions. I will mention a few as follows.⁹ The first major difference is the existence of God. Buddhists do not believe in the existence of God. They believe that *karma*¹⁰, not God, determines the fate and destiny of each being. The second major difference is the nature of sin. Since the Buddhists do not believe that there is a God of justice they see sin as karmic consequences, not rebellion against God. These consequences go beyond one cycle of birth. For instance, if you are suffering in this life you are reaping the consequences of your bad *karma* from your last cycle of birth. The third major difference is salvation. The Buddhists see life as suffering, so their ultimate goal of life is the cessation of life or *nirvana*.¹¹ Christians, however, see life as a gift from God and wish to have eternal life. Buddhists also try to achieve *nirvana* by doing good to earn merits and avoid doing evil and practice the eightfold path. Christians try to earn their salvation by accepting Jesus Christ. The core difference between Buddhism and Christianity, however, lies in the view of life. While the Christians see that there is only one life to live and then there is death and judgment, the Buddhists see that life has no ending. There are many cycles of birth and rebirth, which they call *samsara*. The implication is that if you do not make it in this life; it does not matter. There are many chances in your many life-cycles that one day you will make it to *nivarna*. This is like a pat on the back for yourself, saying, "Don't worry. You still have more chances to be good."

What Seems to Make Buddhists Tick?

At least, at Mission College there are things like Christian music, the teaching of the Christian message, the caring prayer, and relevant worship programs that seem to attract Buddhist students. A study conducted at Mission College in March 2007 on Buddhist students shows that most Buddhist students like, in that order of importance, Christian singing, message, prayer, and worship.¹² This correlates with my earlier study conducted in 2004, table 2, which shows a very high percentage of Buddhist students likes Christian

⁹ Alex Smith, "Missiological Implications of the Key Contrasts between Buddhism and Christianity, in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 31-55, gives twelve points of major differences between Buddhism and Christianity. I only point out a few very important differences here.

¹⁰ *Karma* is understood to be the incomprehensible force of cause and effect which determines consequences of actions in the cycles of birth and rebirth.

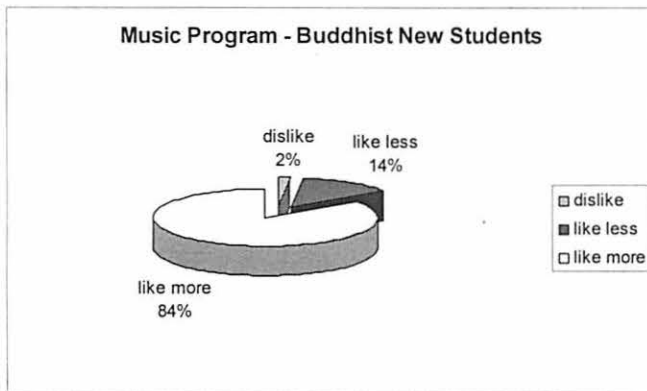
¹¹ *Nirvana*, the Buddhist ultimate goal of life, means the cessation of life or the state of nothingness where there is no soul or life.

¹² Khamsay Phetchareun, Survey conducted at Mission College on Buddhist students, 8 March 2007.

singing. Some students indicated that they like the Christian love and care. My previous survey showed that most Buddhist students like participating in Christian community outreach programs. This shows that Buddhists are relational people, and they like to do something to help their community.

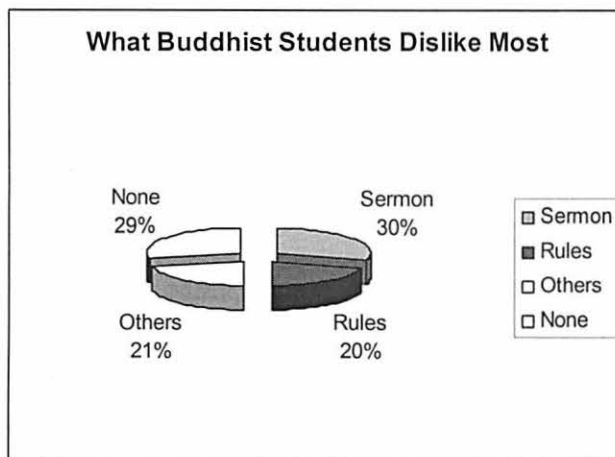
When asked if they were to become a Christian, who or what would be the most influential in their decision, their answers were the Christian message, teacher, family, and friend. It is noticed that message ranks highest, followed by teacher and friend. Thus, it is very clear that relationship is a very influential factor in Buddhist decisions to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

Table 2: Result of a Spiritual Satisfaction Survey at Mission College



What Buddhist students don't like most about Christianity is long sermons and frequent compulsory worship programs. This should serve as a warning to us that more worship or more messages do not necessarily result in more understanding. On the contrary, they discourage them and produce negative feelings towards those programs. Thus, they lessen the opportunity to share the gospel message. Instead, efforts should be made to improve the relationship and music program which they like. They also indicated that they like the Christian message. So, the issue is not that they don't like the message, but they don't like the way the message was presented.

Table 4: What Buddhist Students Dislike Most about Christianity



A Relational Approach: The Case of Mission College

A relational approach to sharing Jesus Christ with Buddhist students at Mission College is not a new approach. This approach takes into consideration that Buddhist students are longing for parental relationships. Students, who come to study at Mission College either by force (sent by their parents) or by choice (they themselves chose to come), are away from their family and social support. For many students, it is the first time they had ever left home. Entering into a new educational, social, and religious environment for the first time is not always a pleasant experience. It is understandable that many of them would feel homesick, anxious, afraid, lonely, or even frustrated. In this situation, there is nothing better than parental care from the Christian teachers and staff. Besides being away from the comfort of home, mother's cooking, a familiar environment and routines, they feel that everything's different and unfamiliar: strange food, strange types of worship programs, and strange languages spoken which they are unable to understand. For some students, the differences at Mission College are simply too much and overwhelming; they can no longer cope and eventually withdraw from the study program.

Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when God simply laid aside all His work and made Himself available for them on the seventh day, our faculty and staff at Mission College need to make an effort to spend quality time with these Buddhist students, especially the new ones. Through genuine relationship and care on the part of the Christian teachers and staff will the love of Christ be real in the eyes of Buddhist students. Many things are at stake for Buddhists when they become Christians. Regardless of what word we use to describe the action of accepting Jesus Christ, the action is about changing religion. It can be called conversion, baptism, or joining a Church, but to the Buddhist, it means changing a religion from Buddhism to Christianity. This does not come without a cost. My students often told me that they would love to become Christians. They know that God exists and He loves them, but their parents would not allow them to change their religion.¹³ So, if they would embrace the Christian religion it is most likely that they would be disowned, disassociated, or isolated from their family, friends, and society. Therefore, unless there is security of a caring Christian family, Christian friends and community, it is unthinkable for a Buddhist to consider such a move to change religion. One may argue that it is possible for God to convict and compel them to make such a brave move. However, this does not excuse Christians from being ignorant of the needs of their Buddhist brothers and sisters. Therefore, preaching the gospel without establishing relationships first is like trying to row a boat without a paddle. The boat may look nice and is made of good material, but without the paddle it cannot get to the intended destination.

Sensing the need to create a caring environment for Buddhist students to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, I implemented several relational projects at Mission College. From 2002 to 2005, as part of my Doctor of Ministry project, a systematic relational approach to sharing the gospel message was developed and implemented in several facets and projects. A Campus Ministry was created and divided into three focused teams: (1) Presenting, (2) Caring, and (3) Sharing teams. The "presenting" team was responsible for the presentation of the spiritual programs on campus. They were in charge of organizing all spiritual programs, from dorm worship to vespers, and chapel. The "caring" team was responsible for the nurturing aspect. They were responsible for organizing small groups, prayers, social programs, visitations, and Bible studies. For social programs, we organized social groups hosted by faculty and staff members. New students were divided to visit faculty homes as part of the orientation program. After that, they could choose to regularly

¹³ In two separate surveys, conducted in 2004 and 2007, students indicated that the major obstacle for Buddhist students to become Christian is family objection.

attend a faculty social group of their choice. These social groups were not strictly Bible study groups, but Bible discussions were often presented in an informal way. The “sharing” team was responsible for community outreach programs. These outreach programs took different forms like hospital visitation teams, community English teaching, and branch Sabbath School groups. Apart from the above projects, faculty and staff were also encouraged to spend time with their students outside classrooms, such as playing sports with them, camping out, personal or group tutoring, and other extra-curriculum activities.

Throughout the above period periodic surveys were conducted to see if the relational approach to sharing Jesus Christ would make a difference. It was found that a number of Buddhist students accepted the Christian faith and the number of baptism was increased. The number of students who participated in spiritual programs also increased. Their attitude towards Christianity was positive. In mid 2005, due to the need of full-time faculty in the theology department, I decided to move from chaplain to full-time teaching and was no longer in a position to implement this approach. As a consequence, this Campus Ministry ceased to exist and other relational programs were discontinued. As a result, the number of baptisms and participation in spiritual programs also dropped accordingly.

As further evidence to the above observations, a study conducted at Mission College in 2004 indicated that 37 percent of students were introduced to Jesus through faculty and staff, 35 percent through Christian parents and relatives, and 20 percent through Christian friends.¹⁴ This means that almost all Buddhists learned to know Jesus through people who were in a close relationship with them. In another separate research study, conducted by Rudi Maier in the Buddhist country of Sri Lanka, it was shown that relationship is the key to the effective sharing of the gospel. Maier commented that “establishing relationships is near the essence of Christian mission and ministry.”¹⁵ Similar to the result of the 2004 survey, another survey among my freshmen Buddhist students in March, 2007, resulted in a very high percentage of Buddhist students indicating that teachers, family members, and friends are the most influential in their decision to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

How does friendship work in winning Buddhist students for Christ? Close friendship allows sharing the message without losing the bonding. In the main, people do not talk about religion, as to avoid unnecessarily creating conflict. Since there are many differences between Buddhism and Christianity there is no way to talk seriously about God without offending a Buddhist. However, once a close friendship has been established before the religious talk takes place it is possible to reason with a friend without losing the friendship. Close friends can hold religious discussion or even arguments without damaging their friendship. This is one reason why it is necessary to build friendship before sharing the message. “Establishing good relationships with students” is a pre-requisite for effective learning to take place.¹⁶ Thus, Christian teachers must first establish good relationships with their Buddhist students before they can help them learn about God, who is unknown in their religion.

Making friends alone will not result in Buddhists accepting Jesus as their personal Savior. There must be regular spiritual activities within which Buddhist students are encouraged to participate. The company of their Christian friends makes these spiritual programs less threatening or boring for Buddhist students. As a result, they tend to appreciate the programs more and learn to know God through those programs.

¹⁴ Khamsay Phetchareun, *Presenting the Gospel Message in Thailand*, Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, USA, 2005, 185.

¹⁵ Rudi Maier, “The Unlikeliest Missionary,” *Ministry*, June 2001, 26.

¹⁶ Erica Hole, “Motivating Students to Achieve their Best” a paper presented at the 35th Integration of Faith and Learning, Hong Kong, March 13, 2007.

The Buddhist students must personally experience God's love or power before they can accept Him as their personal Savior. On the one hand, God's love can be experienced through the unselfish love and care given to them by Christian faculty, staff, and students. On the other hand, answers to prayers for Buddhist students also challenged them to open their hearts to God. Thus, through these experiences Buddhist students would often make a move to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Then, serious Bible studies followed, which culminated in baptism.

Baptismal records (Table 2) show that there were more baptisms during the years when relational projects were implemented. This is evidence that the relational approach to sharing Jesus is effective. Therefore, there is clearly a correlation between the increase in baptism and the implementation of friendship ministry or the relational approach to sharing the gospel message with Buddhist students at Mission College.

Table 2: Statistics of Mission College Church Baptismal Record 1999-2006

Baptism Record 1999-2006	
Year	Muaklek Campus
1999	17
2000	24
2001	10
2002	25
2003	25
2004	37
2005	49
2006	19
Total	206

Further Considerations

Buddhists generally pay attention to whoever they respect and trust. It is not how much or what we know, but it is who we know that makes a difference. It is very common for a Buddhist to travel a long distance to see a monk they respect to pay homage to him and receive advice for important matters in life. Christian missionaries must earn that trust and respect before embarking on sharing the gospel message. Without that, no matter how truthful or attractive the message is, it will be seen as suspicious from the Buddhist audience. Our past experience has shown that without relationship, the message was not attractive to Buddhist people.

The relational approach must continue to be applied after Buddhists have become Christians. Without it, new members will not be able to survive their new found faith. Spiritual friends, preferably the same persons who brought them to Christ, must continue to nurture the new believers to maturity. The church must also continue to be friendly and relational in its entirety.

The relational approach, however, encounters a challenge when believing students graduate from Mission College. Often new believers face incredible challenges when they have to go to work in an area where there is no Adventist church. Pressure from the workplace to work on Sabbath, lack of support from the Adventist family, fear of losing their job, and worldly influences may become too much for new believers to bear. The result may be loss of faith and a return to their former practices. Sensing the need to maintain the relationship with these new members, I would like to suggest some projects that can be implemented with the help modern technology.

There is a need to keep in touch with new members through electronic means. The church should make an effort to keep email addresses, telephone numbers, and work places of new members up-to-date and correspond with them regularly. Sermon notes and encouragements can be sent through email to the recipients. Spiritual friends should continue to maintain contact with new members and encourage them to visit nearby Adventist churches whenever they find it possible.

A virtual church, church online, should also be established. With modern technology, this virtual church can be a reality for those who are far away from the real church, but have access to high speed internet. A virtual church pastor will take care of their virtual church members. Visitation, Bible study, and prayer can be done through the internet. Although this option can never replace the warm atmosphere of a real relationship, it is an alternative that is increasingly becoming popular among the post-modern generation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the relational approach to preaching the gospel in Buddhist countries, especially Indochinese countries, is more effective than other contemporary methods. I have also found that relationship establishment is a prerequisite to all effective human communication. Buddhists are most likely to be disowned by their families and society once they become Christians. Unless there is an alternate Christian family who will take care of them, Buddhists would be reluctant to become Christians. Therefore, it is mandatory that all missionaries, who are working among Buddhists, put more effort into making friends and establishing relationships with Buddhists before sharing the gospel message with them. In the case of Mission College, as teachers and staff have adopted this relational approach, it was found that more Buddhist students have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. It is recommended that bringing Buddhist students to faith and membership in the church is not an end, but rather a beginning. Maintaining and sustaining relationships with the new believers is vital for their long-lasting relationship with Jesus Christ. It is suggested that contacts with the new members and virtual worship programs be implemented for those who are working in areas where there are no Adventist churches.