

Gregory P. Whitsett

Proposed Research Instrument for Establishing a Baseline Measurement of Buddhist Background Believers

Introduction

In 1990, the 55th General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted to establish Global Mission as its department for strategic mission engagement in the historically more challenging fields of the 10/40 Window and among thousands of still unreached people groups throughout the world. As part of this initiative, it was understood that merely investing more resources would not be enough. There was also a need for better methods in reaching the people coming from major religious groups; therefore, several religious study centers were established by the General Conference for researching the nature of the challenges that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was having in evangelizing Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus. Later the church added centers focusing on Jewish, Secular/Postmodern, and Urban peoples with the centers renamed as Global Mission Centers.

To accomplish this mission, the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions (CEAR) seeks to research the beliefs and practices of Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Shintos to better understand the people CEAR is trying to reach with the gospel. Ultimately the goal is twofold: (1) to develop better resources and better equip our gospel workers for this work—this is the output—and (2) to see a growing body of Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Shintos who are responding to the gospel by committing their life to Jesus Christ.

As the director of the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions, I am interested in developing an instrument to poll Buddhist Background

Believers (hereafter I will refer to them as “BBBs”) who are part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the five major Theravada Buddhist nations of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. As part of this survey I also hope to identify geographic and ethnic distribution of BBBs, the ratio of BBBs to other converts and members, and other information on their spiritual experience.

This initial research can lead to further research in interviews and panel discussions to learn more about the experiences of the members. Some of the possible lines of research include, determining what has been the most effective methods in reaching Buddhists in the past and the spiritual maturity of BBBs in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I am particularly interested in assessing the spiritual maturity of BBBs.

In my initial research, I came across a study conducted by Fred Hayes Smith published in 1985 titled “Measuring Quality Church Growth.” Smith’s thesis is that “measuring spiritual quality is not only a valid effort, it is a necessary effort and one that can be effectively accomplished” (1985:2). My research is an example of a communication research design as summarized by Elliston (2011:127-133). Smith conducted his research in an era when church growth was an emerging discipline that swept across Christianity in North America and beyond. Smith sought to offer a balance to the emphasis on quantitative growth as a sign of success and to determine ways to measure qualitative growth as well. I posit that there must also be ways to measure qualitative success in discipling BBBs and will necessarily include cognitive (beliefs), affective (feelings), and conative (actions) variables. Smith discusses these three variables for assessing spiritual maturity in his dissertation; however, he opted to only measure the conative variables (1985:185).

In this article I will describe the research objectives, instrument design, sampling procedure, implementation plan, validity, reliability, and analysis of data. At the end of the article are five appendices showing the forms I have developed for this research.

Research Objectives

The objective of this research project is to identify what the relationship of Seventh-day Adventist congregations are to the Buddhist communities that dominate the social landscape in their countries. I seek to assess the following:

- What percentage of current Seventh-day Adventists are BBBs.
- Are BBBs concentrated in geographical areas?
- Are more Buddhists converting to Adventism over the last 20 years since the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions was founded?

- Do BBBs witness to other Buddhists at a higher frequency than other church members?
- Do BBBs have more success in reaching other Buddhists than other church members?
- How do BBB and non-BBB members compare in general?
- Which Buddhist ethnicities are most represented in the Adventist Church?
- What percentage of BBBs were first disciplined by other Christians before becoming Adventists as compared to directly being disciplined by Seventh-day Adventists?
- Do BBBs want more training in how to make disciples of other Buddhists?
- How do the survey results of BBBs in the Adventist Church compare across the five Theravada Buddhist countries?
- Is there any correlation between the percentages of BBB membership in the SDA congregations to the number of baptisms it had in a given year as compared to other congregations?

To my knowledge, no survey of this kind has ever been conducted in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Some surveys have been done in the Evangelical churches in Thailand; however, I do not know of any that have been done across all five Theravada Buddhist countries.

Instrument Design

This kind of survey falls under the category of communication research and is heavily used in marketing. The purpose of communication research is to help manage the decision-making process (Elliston 2011:128). In my context, the decision-making process I am interested in is how local missions form their strategies for investing resources in community outreach, evangelism, and church planting. There are four key components to this type of research as outlined by Elliston. First, *systematic activity*—meaning that this type of research requires researchers who are well versed in the scientific research methods and the research is well planned out. Second, *objective activity*—meaning that this type of research needs to be as objective and unbiased as possible for it to be scientifically valid. Researchers must avoid tampering with the instruments to achieve a desired result. Third, *provision of information*—meaning the research must be related to a specific research situation. Fourth, *research for decision making*—meaning it seeks to focus an organization on the *real task* for its intended audience. The implication for CEAR is that this type of research will aid in raising the awareness of local church administrations regarding their situation in reaching Buddhists.

Content of the Questionnaire

I have developed a questionnaire and have included it in appendix A. The questionnaire is divided into several sections: (1) general demographic information, (2) specific inquiry into the religious history of the members, and (3) the current life experience of church members in relation to outreach to Buddhists. Below is an overview of the types of questions in each section.

General Information

The general information section has 15 questions. The first three questions ask about church membership, gender, and age. There are five questions regarding citizenship status, ethnicity, and language, followed by questions on marital status, education, occupation, and income bracket.

Religious Background

There are nine questions in the religious background section that focus on getting a picture of the member's religion of their childhood, when and where they were baptized into the Adventist Church, whether the respondent was Christian before joining the SDA Church, and whether the respondent has always been Christian or when they first became one.

Respondents' Relationships with Buddhists

The last section is the longest with 21 questions and focuses on the nature of the respondents' relationships. The first three questions ask about the types of relations the respondents have with Buddhists—in the home, in the extended family, or with friends. The last 18 questions ask about the respondents' experience in sharing their faith with Buddhists. I added a couple of questions regarding their outreach to non-Buddhists. The goal was to not merely see how much time they spend in outreach but how outreach to Buddhists and non-Buddhists compare, and whether there is any difference.

Sampling Procedure

As I think about how to conduct a survey of the Adventist Church in the five countries where Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion, I am greatly challenged with how to go about forming a scientific sampling.

Just to get surveys filled out tells me nothing. I have to ensure that my sampling base is scientifically sound or my research is of little use.

The challenge I am faced with is that in the majority of these five countries, the BBBs are few in number compared with the total membership. For example, in Myanmar, it is estimated that there are only 50 Burmese Buddhist background Adventists. Of that number, it is possible that only half became Adventist directly while the other half belonged to other Christian denominations before becoming Adventists. Another challenge is that a significant minority of Karen people (likely the largest ethnicity in the Adventist Church in Myanmar) grew up as Buddhists. Many Karen are Christian and Adventist; and these populations are not geographically isolated or clustered into convenient homogenous churches.

It would be difficult to form a scientific sampling with a small sample population. The Adventist population in many of these regions and ethnicities is statistically either so small or so limited geographically that statistically one could easily miss them and they would show up as non-existent in the study or if not enough congregations were surveyed, some of these homogenous minority churches would skew the picture significantly. In conclusion, it seems that the sampling size would have to be quite large. Bernard writes, "The biggest problem in conducting a science of human behavior is not selecting the right sample size or making the right measurement" (2006:25). Further along he writes, "If the population you are trying to study is rare and hard to find, and if you have to rely on a simple random sample of the entire population, you'll need a very large initial sample" (168). Applying this to Myanmar, if there are 28,000 Adventist members but only 50 Burmese BBBs (the dominant Buddhist people group in the country), it would require a very large sample to get to those 50. If, on the other hand, there were 14,000 Burmese BBBs in the country, the sample size could be much smaller. In some of these countries it might be easiest to get a reliable representation of reality by simply taking a census of all the members, although this would still be quite challenging.

The picture is very different in Cambodia. The majority of Adventists in Cambodia come from a Buddhist background. A much smaller sample size would be required in Cambodia. However, the question I have yet to determine is what the implications would be if I use different methods for gathering data from each country. My concern is that I want to be able to compare the countries not only in a narrow window of time but also using a similar method so that the comparisons between the countries are not invalid due to different sampling methods.

The discussion on sampling does not stop here, however. To conduct a census a person will actually have to track down each person on a mem-

bership list, which is especially difficult when taking into account that the church is notoriously lax on keeping its membership records current. In many local church fields one-third or even as many as two thirds of the church members are not attending or are simply missing. To conduct a survey over a period of three Sabbaths would only cover those in attendance. It may be possible that BBBs are over represented or underrepresented by the people who are actually attending regularly or semiregularly. This could greatly skew the results of the survey.

Another challenge is that the church membership records are full of errors with some members remaining on the membership books in more than one church concurrently. This weakens the reliability of the sample pool as well.

All churches are required to not only keep membership records but also attendance records. Every quarter the church records attendance at the beginning of the quarter and at the end. It may be possible that a systematic random sampling based on the attendance record could be done and that a sampling of each congregation would be possible; however, we come back to the problem of how many members should be sampled in each church? It becomes a logistical nightmare—there are several hundred churches across these five countries.

Ultimately, I am of the opinion that the most straightforward way to conduct this survey would be to poll all people in attendance over three Sabbaths with the belief that most members who are in good standing will show up in at least one of those three Sabbaths. While a nonprobability sampling is not preferred Bernard suggests there are three cases when this is the proper method:

1. *For labor-intensive in-depth studies of a few cases.* A prime example would be Kelvin Onongha's research of dual allegiances of Yoruba Seventh-day Adventists who seek out diviners for assistance (2014).
2. *When collecting cultural data from key informants rather than data about individuals.* Here the researcher is not trying to find trends or patterns in a population but is simply trying to learn about culture in general.
3. *In conducting large surveys when, despite our best efforts, we just cannot get a probability sample.* In these cases one simply must document the bias and move on (2006:186-187).

There are a number of types of nonprobability sampling. In this study, the method followed will be convenience or haphazard sampling with the sample based on those who are present and willing to fill out a survey at church.

Implementation Plan

My plan for this survey is to create a self-administered questionnaire. What makes this a preferred method of research is that it can be conducted quickly using a drop-and-collect technique by national church leaders sending the survey packets to local church leaders to then distribute to willing participants. Self-administered questionnaires are relatively inexpensive and respondents are not influenced by the interviewer or her bias. Another advantage is that this type of survey allows longer batteries of questions than you could ask in person as well as giving the respondent anonymity.

The disadvantages include that there is no control over how the people will interpret the questions, one must take steps to ensure high involvement rates, and one cannot be sure that the respondent who received the survey is the one who filled it out (Bernard 2006:258-261). Under the research requirements, however, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Phase One

The first phase of this survey will be to ask the SDA Church administration in each country to create a list of all congregations, the name and contact information for each leader, and the language the worship service is conducted in. Based on this data I will have some idea of how many languages the survey will need to be translated into. Some churches may be bi-lingual with an older or less educated portion of the church speaking one language and the rest another.

Phase Two

From experience traveling in the five countries I know that the survey will need to be translated from English into at least the following ten languages:

- Tamil
- Sinhalese
- Karen
- Chin
- Burmese
- Thai
- Hmong
- Mien
- Lao
- Khmer

To ensure the instruments are accurately translated, there will be a two-step process for the translation. First, a native language speaker of the target language will translate the tract. Then a second translator who is either a native English speaker or a person highly fluent in both languages will back translate the translated survey. This person will not communicate with the first translator to ensure that it is the instrument and not the intent of the translator that is being translated. If the translation is not identical, something was lost in translation and needs to be rectified (Bernard 2006:277-278).

For oral languages, the illiterate, or the blind, a system will be created to ensure they can participate in the survey and with an acceptable degree of reliability. The system will need to include clear instruction on how to conduct the interview. It may be preferable that the illiterate respondent would select a family member in the church to help in completing the form in order to keep the process objective and anonymous. However, it can only be assumed that some will choose not to participate. Wikipedia's entry on "List of Countries by Literacy Rate" gives these literacy rates for the five countries included in this research:

- Thailand – 96.7%
- Myanmar – 93.1%
- Sri Lanka – 92.6%
- Laos – 79.9%
- Cambodia – 77.2%

In three of the five countries it appears that the number of people unable to fill out the survey is minimal. Two countries will be problematic but it is beyond the scope of this article to develop a satisfactory methodology to fully address this issue.

Phase Three

Pilot testing will be essential to ensure that the survey works in each language. This enhances reliability. Pilot tests will need to examine the complexity of the survey. For example, is the proposed survey made overly complex by using different types of questions—fill in the blank, yes/no, checking all that apply, Likert scale, etc.? Additional concerns are whether local church leaders can understand how to carry out the surveys and do them well, how well do the respondents understand the questions, and are there any difficulties with how they answer the survey? The pilot testing will inform me on how to revise the surveys before moving forward with the research.

Phase Four

The surveys will be shipped to the local churches or delivered at a workers meeting with the following components:

1. A survey pack will include an unsealed manila envelope containing a Member Questionnaire (appendix A), a Cover Letter (appendix B), and a Participant's Report Card (appendix C).
2. A letter to the church leader explaining the purpose and procedures for carrying out the survey (appendix D).
3. A report form for the church leader to fill out regarding the number of church members and the number in regular attendance. The survey will also include questions about the dates the surveys were distributed and the dates they were collected (appendix E).

The church leader will read the instructions and work with the church board or pastor to plan three Sabbaths during which the survey will be announced and distributed to the members. Respondents will be encouraged to complete the survey at the church but they may also take them home as well.

The church leader will give the survey packs to all members in attendance on those three consecutive Sabbaths. Members will return the survey in the sealed manila envelope with the Participant Report Card returned separately. The church leader will record how many respondents completed the survey on the report form and send everything back to the mission office.

Phase Five

A paid worker at the mission office will translate the data from the member surveys and the church leader reports and will enter the responses into a spreadsheet template designed for this survey. The postcards will also be translated and entered into a second spreadsheet designed for that purpose. The hard copy forms and the digital spreadsheets will be sent to the researcher who will spot check the data to ensure that there were no transcribing errors.

Validity

The validity of the survey depends on how well the sampling works. While I would have preferred a probability sample of the membership, there are so few BBBs in some fields and there are so many different ethnic groups with some barely represented in the church population, it seems that anything less and sampling each congregation would be invalid.

Therefore, I have decided to survey a nonprobability sample of the attending members over three Sabbaths. The bias is that there may be a greater percentage of non-attending Buddhists to attending Buddhists than non-attending other believers; however, this is a risk I have chosen to accept.

Because I am trying to research how many members are BBBs and specifically what their religious experience is as compared to other members, I am not able to conduct a snowball sampling—this survey has a quantitative approach that requires looking at the wider population.

Content validity will be established by assessing the model against the goals of the study. The goals this study are meant to assess include: (1) the percentage of BBBs in the church, (2) how many church members have relationships with Buddhists and is there a significant difference between BBBs and other members, and (3) how active are church members in sharing their faith with Buddhists and if there is a significant difference between BBBs and other members.

Reliability

As mentioned above, the biggest issues related to reliability have to do with the accuracy of translation into each language, the ability to adequately sample oral respondents in an unbiased way, ensuring the church leaders are able to follow the instructions without difficulty, and ensuring that the data collectors/transcribers are translating and entering data without error. I have already outlined steps I will take to ensure these are as free from error as possible.

Analyzing Data

The first type of analysis is to create simple summaries of the number and percentages of BBBs in the Adventist Church as well as their activity levels in sharing their faith. A much more complex process of looking for identifying correlations will require consultation with experts in the field.

Appendix A Member Questionnaire

Directions

Please do your best to honestly answer each question. Sometimes you will need to write an answer—please write neatly. Other times you can simply check or circle the response. Please be as truthful as possible in order to not distort the results. Please do not write your name on this questionnaire form.

When you are finished, please fill out the form at the bottom of the last page. Then tear it off and give this to your church leadership separately from the survey. Finally, take the survey form and seal it in the envelope enclosed with this survey and also give this to your church leader.

General Information

1. What is the name of the church where you are a member? _____

2. What is your gender? Male Female

3. How old are you?

12 – 19 years old

20 – 34 years old

35 – 49 years old

50 – 64 years old

65 years or older

4. Please check your status in the country of Thailand:

Thai Citizen Permanent Resident Temporary Resident

Refugee/Asylum Seeker Other _____

5. What is your first language? _____

6. What language do you speak at work/school? _____

7. What language you worship in at church? _____

8. What is your ethnicity? Check all that apply. You may check more than one:

Central Thai Northern Thai Isaan Thai Hmong

Lahu Karen Indian Chinese

Filipina White Korean Black

Other _____

9. What is your marital status? Single Married

IF YOU ANSWERED “MARRIED” TO QUESTION 9, SKIP TO QUESTION 11.

10. If you are single, which of the following describes your situation?

- Never married Separated
 Divorced Widowed

IF YOU ANSWERED “SINGLE” TO QUESTION 9, SKIP QUESTIONS 11 AND 12.

11. If married, what ethnicity is your spouse? _____

12. If married, what religion is your spouse? _____

13. Please check for each level of education that you have completed

- Primary School (6 years)
 High School (6 years)
 Vocational Training
 University
 Post University Studies (Masters/Doctorate)

14. What is your occupation? _____

15. On average, what is the household income for your immediate family?

- 15,000 THB or less
 15,001 – 30,000 THB
 30,001 – 50,000 THB
 50,001 – 100,000 THB
 100,001 or more

Your Religious Background

16. When I was born, my mother was a...

- Seventh-day Adventist Catholic Other Christian Buddhist
 Hindu Muslim Animist Taoist
 No Religion Other: _____ Unknown

17. When I was born, my father was a...

- Seventh-day Adventist Catholic Other Christian Buddhist
 Hindu Muslim Animist Taoist
 No Religion Other: _____ Unknown

18. When I was a child, my home practiced the following religion(s):

- Seventh-day Adventist Catholic Other Christian Buddhist
 Hindu Muslim Animist Taoist
 No Religion Other: _____ Unknown

19. Are you a baptized member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Yes No

20. If yes, how old were you when you became a baptized member of the SDA Church?

- Younger than 20 years old
 20 – 34 years old
 35 – 49 years old
 50 – 64 years old
 65+ years

21. What local SDA Church did you first have membership?

22. Were you a member of another Christian or Catholic denomination before you joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Yes No

23. If you began life in a non-Christian home, did you join another Christian or Catholic church before becoming Seventh-day Adventist?

- Yes, I first became Christian or Catholic before I became Seventh-day Adventist.
 No, I became Seventh-day Adventist first.
 This question does not apply to me.

24. If you have not always been a follower of Jesus, please check which of the following experiences played an important part in your becoming a believer and follower of Jesus Christ? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY TO YOUR EXPERIENCE)

- My parents became believers and followers in Jesus Christ
 The influence of Christian relatives (not immediate family)
 Studying at a Christian school
 Friendship with Christians in my community (not at school)
 Receiving some type of help from Christians with my personal or family needs
 Buying or being given Christian literature or the Bible to read
 Attending Christian meetings that taught about the end of the world and the second coming of Jesus

- Attending Christian church services
- Receiving an influential dream
- God answering my prayers
- God breaking the power of demons/spirits in my life
- God healing me
- Conflict in my family caused me to look for answers in a Christian religion
- Serious doubts or dissatisfaction about the teachings of my own non-Christian religion
- Conflict with religious leaders in my non-Christian religion
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Your Relationships with Buddhists

25. Do you live in a home that includes Buddhists? Yes No
26. Do you have any relatives that are Buddhist? Yes No
27. If yes, which of the following family members are now Buddhists?
- Spouse Children Father Mother
 - Father-in law Mother-in law Grandchildren
 - Maternal Grandparents Paternal Grandparents Other Relatives
 - No Relatives
28. How often do you spend time with Buddhist people?
- Daily 2-5 times per week Weekly
 - Monthly Less than monthly Never
29. How frequently do you pray *for* Buddhist friends or family members?
- Daily 2-5 times per week Weekly
 - Monthly Less than monthly Never
30. How frequently do you show God's love to Buddhists through purposeful acts of kindness and service to them?
- Weekly Monthly 2-6 times per year
 - Almost never Never

31. How frequently do you share your personal testimony about God's working in your life with Buddhists?

- Weekly Monthly 2-6 times per year
 Almost never Never

32. Have you ever led a friend to have faith in Jesus Christ? Yes No

33. Have you ever led a Buddhist friend to have faith in Jesus Christ? Yes No

34. Have you led any of your friends to become baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church due to the work of the Holy Spirit and your influence? Yes No

35. Have you led any of your Buddhist friends to become baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church due to the work of the Holy Spirit and your influence?
 Yes No

PLEASE RATE YOUR AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS (1 = very strongly disagree and 5 = very strongly agree)



36. My Buddhist friends admire my beliefs and religious experience. 1 2 3 4 5

37. I enjoy sharing my faith and religious experience with others. 1 2 3 4 5

38. I enjoy sharing my faith and religious experience with Buddhists. 1 2 3 4 5

39. Buddhists understand me when I witness to them. 1 2 3 4 5

40. I am satisfied with my outreach and witness to Buddhists. 1 2 3 4 5

41. My local church is very welcoming to Buddhist visitors. 1 2 3 4 5

42. I am comfortable bringing Buddhists to my local church. 1 2 3 4 5

43. I would like help in knowing how to share my faith with Buddhists. 1 2 3 4 5

44. The majority of the members in my church come from a Buddhist background. 1 2 3 4 5

45. My church trains its members in how best to share the Gospel with Buddhist people. 1 2 3 4 5

Write the date you completed this survey: _____

➤ Please write down any comments that you have about this survey.....

Appendix B
Cover Letter for Respondent

Gregory Whitsett
c/o Thailand Adventist Mission
PO Box 234
Prakanong, Wattana, Bangkok 10110

[Date]

Dear Seventh-day Adventist Member:

Peace and grace to each of you.

I am writing to request your help by participating in this nation-wide survey that I am conducting with the blessing of the Thailand Adventist Mission. The purpose of this survey is to learn more about who we are as the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Thailand. I am wanting to learn about what types of people are in our churches, about your religious backgrounds, how you became a Seventh-day Adventist church member or if you grew up in an Adventist home. In addition, I would like to know what it is like for you to live as a religious minority—a Seventh-day Adventist—in a Buddhist context and what types of relations you have with Buddhist people.

Please understand that we are not wanting to identify you individually and therefore we are not asking you to tell us your name or how to contact us. We ask that you fill out the enclosed card and give it to your church leadership so that they can make sure that every member has had a chance to fill out the survey.

You are not required to do this survey but we request your support. We hope that we can use the information to better understand our church.

Please complete this survey as soon as possible and return it to your church leadership.

May God richly bless you,
Gregory Whitsett

Appendix C Participant Postcard

SURVEY COMPLETION CARD

After you have completed the survey, please seal it in the enclosed envelop. Then take this card, fill it out, and also give this card to your church leadership with your survey envelop. Thank you!

NAME _____

Church Name _____

I would like to receive summary of the results from this survey. Yes No

E-mail _____

Mailing Address _____

Appendix D
Church Leader Cover Letter

Gregory Whitsett
c/o Thailand Adventist Mission
PO Box 234
Prakanong, Wattana, Bangkok 10110

[Date]

Dear Church Leaders:

Greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ!

This survey is being conducted to identify the religious background of our members and to see how frequently we are sharing our faith with Buddhists. Thank you for your help!

In your package you will find the following materials:

1. Church Leader's Report
2. Survey envelopes containing a Cover Letter, Member Questionnaire, and a Participant Report Card

If you did not receive everything, please contact the mission office right away to request what is missing.

Please conduct this survey on three consecutive Sabbaths to ensure all members have a chance of completing the survey. All attending members are asked to participate but they may opt to not participate if they prefer. All members are asked to participate in the survey whether they are members in good standing or not. Please do not filter out people.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Make sure you have enough copies of the survey in the language you need.
2. During your announcement period, explain the purpose of this survey and explain our desire for all to participate but that they are not required to.
3. Give the instructions on how to complete the survey.
4. Handout the survey packs to each member who is willing to participate in the survey.

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Gregory Whitsett is the Director of the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions (CEAR) in Thailand and a Doctor of Missiology student at Andrews University.