

Reflections from Bangkok

Please pray for:

- Our Filipino teammate Resty, who has been unable to get a long-term visa, which has limited the types of work he's able to do here and is requiring frequent trips to the border. Pray for favor with authorities here and for perseverance and peace in the meantime.
- Our Thai church leaders and members who have been struggling financially more than usual with the recent economic slump and inflation spike.

By Sara Stephens

July, 2008

The Gospel is holistic good news to the poor

In early June I finished my final online class through the Chalmers Center for Economic Development, and have been excited to learn about and act on God's desire for the poor to escape poverty.



Yonradee, a noodle-soup vendor and member of PMED

Work was always part of God's intent for us, meant to be fruitful and not a curse. Poverty is a result of the fall, and Jesus came to bring new life to all of the fallen parts of creation. I believe that part of ushering in Christ's kingdom means helping

Jesus came to bring reconciliation most importantly between humanity and God, but also to reconcile

people to each other, people to their environment, and to restore broken self-identity and vocation.

the poor enter into this part of the good news, too.

Almost immediately after finishing the Chalmers classes I began putting what I learned into practice. I replaced my teammate Dave in his role with PMED (Peace Microenterprise Development), working with our Thai foundation staff Khun Kaew. The program is expanding a lot these days, especially in the other slum where our team lives (Samaki Pattana). We're approving an average of 15 business plans and giving low-interest loans to these entrepreneurs each month. In Samaki some of these members are showing new interest in Jesus and attending the house church which meets in the same house where PMED trainings are held.

I'm frequently impressed by the stories of the hard-working business owners we help. To the left is Yonradee, a widow and mother with chronic health problems who has still successfully run her noodle-soup shop for several years. She's now planning on expanding and opening a second branch of her shop. Pray for more successes like this and for more members to turn to Christ!

Construction moves in on our community space, children's back yard

Ever since I moved into the slum community of Phothong in February of 2006 there has been a vacant dirt lot which has been essentially like the community's collective back yard. The sign on the right has also always been there, but never followed up on. I'm guessing land in front of a slum isn't exactly prime property.

But in the last couple of months it has been rented and construction has begun. A massive filling station is being built, the type that will fuel taxis (which run on a different type of fuel than most vehicles here) and where huge barrels of gasoline will be stored. My neighbors, who cook over open flames, are understandably worried.

A multiple-story-high wall will be built around the lot, cutting off much of the circulation for the tightly-packed slum, and limiting the exit to

one narrow pathway. Should a fire happen, my neighbors fear the over 500 residents will not be able to evacuate in time.

I worry about gas fumes, and am sad about the loss of the slum's place for kids activities, community meetings and celebrations.

Pray for God to somehow

use this, and for our house to serve as much-needed communal space.



The "land for rent/sale" sign and construction beginning in front of the slum

July, 2008

Moving forward on dreams for Phothong

I have just over a year left here in Bangkok. Last week Christy and I met with our team leader, Kevin, to dream and plan for what God might do through us in that remaining time in our slum. Some of our dreams include:

- To see neighbors become believers, and especially to see at least two of them grow as leaders
- To have a regular house church meeting in the slum that will continue after we leave
- To see the savings group model used here redeemed from its current exploitative and risky form into one that truly helps the poor manage their money and invest wisely
- To help the community take greater responsibility for its own development, rather than waiting for outside resources and initiative, a mindset fostered partly by a sponsorship program active here

Christy and I get frequent requests to re-start our children's program, but we have hesitated because we lack our former Thai partnership and Christy's main role is language learning. But now we have also received an offer from a Thai neighbor to help, and Kevin will be moving in and working with us for a few months. We are at a kind of peak in terms of good will in the community, so we're making plans to start some more intentional conversations about how to help the slum's children and address other concerns.

We are hoping to mobilize the many natural leaders here to cooperate with us in responding to needs of the kids here. At the same time, we are looking to start a small worship or prayer service with seekers, inviting them to have an experience with and respond to God. We are praying for new believers and community-owned steps toward the kingdom-centered transformation of Phothong!



Some of the key leaders in my slum

Please pray for:

- Our ideas and plans for ministry in Phothong and for moving PMED toward sustainability.

Coming up:

- Retreat with our Thai church leaders, August 10-12
- Community organizing training held in Bangkok for the India team and ours, September 16-20

Team retreat, growth, and changes ahead

At the end of April our team took a retreat with the Servant Partners field director to the island of Koh Chang. That place is genuine paradise. I'd always wondered if those postcards you see with the turquoise ocean and white sands were doctored somehow but no—places like those really do exist. And only five hours away from Bangkok!

We spent time in Scripture and prayer together, resting and playing together, and talking through plans for our team's future. It was also a kind of farewell trip for Dave, who left for his furlough in the States in early June.

In early July Lisa Harris-Hall and Kevin Walton joined us, and our team is now seven members strong! It is

really exciting to be working with such a fun, diverse, passionate group of men and women. We've grown so big that we've expanded into a second room in our office building, and we are now transitioning into a new leadership structure. Michelle and I will lead our two team "sites", in the Samaki Pattana and Phothong slums. Rather than Kevin trying to administrate and set goals for all of us, much of that will now be done by the two of us.

Currently the team is spending time each week to pray for each other and also to begin reviewing our past, discussing our current realities, and planning for the future. This is a kind of orientation for new members as well as healthy reflection and evaluation for all of us as we vision together for our next steps.

New team website!

Check out one of my other recent projects. Profiles of our teammates, prayer updates, photo album (coming soon)... At the old address but with a new makeover.
www.santisukpartners.org

Finances: My personal financial needs are met, but additional donations to my ministry expenses can always be put to good use. If you'd like to give, contact me or refer to the info on giving on my website (see below).

Sara Stephens

*c/o Thai Peace Foundation *3750/9 Soi Lad Phrao 146/1 *Khlung Chan, Bangkok *Bangkok 10240 Thailand
sara@santisukpartners.org <http://www.sarainbangkok.net> <http://www.santisukpartners.org>