

# Reflections from Bangkok

By Sara Stephens

September 2009

## Please pray for:

- The new believers in Phothong and the testing of their faith that they are currently enduring
- Our church network leaders, that they would receive with humble hearts the opportunity to deal openly with sin and idolatry in the area of money
- My good-byes, packing, and planning as I prepare to move back to the States on October 21
- My teammates who are also preparing for their furloughs beginning in November

## Freedom from karma, songs of praise in my slum

When Yut came with Christy and me to a nearby house church that Sunday at the end of June, her life was full of pain. Her family was at the brink of falling apart and a fortune teller had just told her she would leave her husband and die by age 30, a lie she fully believed. Her Buddhist worldview told her that all of this pain and poverty was due to her bad karma which can never be removed. Her merit-making and giving alms at the temple since childhood had not been able to save her, her idols had betrayed her.

But on that Sunday Yut was able to hear from Thai believers what we have been sharing with her about God's love, and the Spirit had made her heart soft to receive from him. The promise of freedom from the slavery to karma, of a God close by and in fact at home in her slum, of adoption as his spotless daughter, was good news that she finally deeply received, with tears

and rejoicing. A church in my slum was born.

In the following week Yut led another neighbor, June, to Christ, whose husband followed soon after. As we began to worship in our house, along with other Thais from our church network and team members, three youth from Phothong also joined in and God is transforming their lives. Six from our slum now follow Jesus.

Praise God for these hearts that have received him, for this new church that he has planted!



*Phothong house church*

## A season of turning from idols to worship the living God

This has been a season of extremes: joy and mourning, celebration and repentance, purity and deception. While the songs of praise over God's new work in Phothong are still ringing in our ears, many of us are also now asking for mercy for the brokenness that has come to light in some of our church leaders and members.

Yut and others have recently given up their physical idols in the image of Buddha and

animist gods, but other false gods still have reign in people's lives. Gambling addictions and deep indebtedness are plaguing many. Leaders have been misusing offering money and have lied to themselves, the church and the Lord. People are trying to serve God and money and are failing.

The Lord in his mercy is exposing sin that has gone hidden for many months and giving our leaders a new opportunity to repent and to together commit to honoring him. In Phothong he is gently calling his children to trust him completely even with their finances, and to find true contentment in him. It has been painful to see the brokenness, and we've been having tough conversations, but I am hopeful for how God will bring healing.



*Yut, June and daughter image of New worshipping Buddha and*

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## Fruit that will outlast my presence here

The last few months for me have been about trying to invest what I've learned here into those who will remain after I leave. It can be tempting near the end to kind of check out, to think "what effect can I really have in only a couple months?" But I've been challenged to think beyond the time I have left and about how I can help the fruit I'm seeing last beyond me.

I've had a number of opportunities to pass on what I've been learning about community organizing—unlocking the strengths of slum-dwellers and encouraging them to work together toward their dreams for their communities. I've headed up the planning and leading of three day-long leaders' trainings around these topics. While it's a paradigm shift for many, it's been exciting to see our leaders begin to dream and engage their neighbors in new ways.

This has also been a season of God's grace to me in getting to see some of the fruit that will outlast me. A clear example is in the church that now meets in my slum. Another is seeing the woman I invested the most in as a leader in Phothong, Gop, become the president of that community. From her experience with us she has gained confidence in pursuing her hopes for the slum, and a value for including the whole community in bringing about its development. She has already shared with me some of her dreams—for the kids, for the physical safety of the slum—and I am really hopeful for Phothong's future.



*Me leading a training on community organizing with our church leaders*

### Please pray for:

- A short-term service project and youth camp that many of our church members will be attending in October
- An opportunity to visit Yut's sister upcountry who she led to Christ, that we could pray for her and baptize her!

### Coming up:

- Personal retreat Sept. 22-26
- Baptism service for new believers in Phothong, September 27
- First of many goodbye parties Oct. 3
- Church service project (Oct. 7-14) and youth camp (Oct. 15-18)
- My flight back to the US! October 21

## From one home to another

I remember using this same title when I wrote about leaving on furlough in 2006, and I feel this even more now. There is no easy way to move away from friends and a community that has become like family, and a city that is more familiar to me now than any in the States. And yet, I'm itching to be back in the Northwest, sleeping in a real bed, back with friends and family I have seen only on the Internet for too long, ready for an extended time of rest and reconnecting.

I will arrive in Portland, OR on October 21st at 9:13 p.m. on United 0544 (hint hint to anyone who wants to welcome me!). I will stay with my parents in McMinnville until the beginning of March, with trips to Eugene and Seattle most likely in January. Then I will move to LA where I will start a new life and a new ministry, but still with Servant Partners, still making my life about bringing God's holistic good news to the poor both in the States and abroad.

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