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THE LAO EVANGELICAL CHURCH: BACKGROUND

The 1975 "Liberation"* of Laos signaled trouble for the Church. Foreign missionary leadership and financial support were entirely withdrawn. Some Church properties were confiscated, Christian literature destroyed, and Christian leaders sent to re-education camps. But gradually the situation has improved for the Church. In line with the policy of pragmatic socialism which Laos has been following, an edict issued in 1979 granted freedom of religion in Laos. While the intent of the edict was to downplay the role of Buddhism so deeply ingrained in Lao life and culture, in effect it upgraded the status of Christianity.

Today Christians may worship freely throughout Laos. Although mass evangelism is not permitted, there are few restrictions on personal witnessing. Approximately 15,000 Christians meet in some 150 churches. These churches are located in 10 of Laos' 17 provinces. Scattered instances of persecution do not seem to be a part of central government policy. The Church of Jesus Christ in Laos continues to experience a fair degree of freedom throughout the country.

Some statements from Mr. Maha Khamtan Thepboualy, Director of Religious Affairs of the National Front for the Reconstruction of Laos, reflect the official Lao government attitude toward Christianity:

Religion is something we all must partake of, even as we must all eat and drink. No matter what kind of regime there is, religion is important. Do not believe that the Government is trying to get rid of religion. You can see for yourselves that the Government respects the Christian religion and that we have religious freedom in this country. In Laos a person can have any religion or no religion at all. Religion, however, must be subordinate to the Government. You cannot make others behave according to your beliefs. That is not good.

* The term used within Laos to denote the change from a U.S. financially backed democratic-type government to a Soviet/Vietnamese financially backed socialist-type government.

As a means of facilitating Church-government relationships, as well as a means of attempting to unify the national Church with representatives from each of the provinces, the leaders of the Lao Evangelical Church in Vientiane have initiated the process to officially register the Church with the National Front for the Reconstruction of Laos. Although no one knows all the implications, this registration will, in the words of one Church leader, make the Church in a sense a "branch" of the government. Church leaders feel the advantages generally outweigh the disadvantages. These advantages include more freedom to travel to visit churches throughout the country, and more recourse in cases of difficulties with the government.

Many causes of encouragement exist regarding the state of the Lao Evangelical Church. In spite of the fact that over half the 1975 Church membership has left Laos, current statistics compiled from throughout the country indicate a Church membership of over 15,000, a number 50% higher than those indicated by 1975 statistics. New believers continue to be baptized and new churches are being built and dedicated. At least one pastor and several laymen have returned to Laos after fleeing to Thailand. A government official under the previous regime who has recently been released from re-education camp is providing new dimensions to Church leadership with his administrative knowledge and expertise. During his incarceration, he led a number of people to Christ, and continues to evidence the same sense of dedication to the Lord in his position as the newly elected Vientiane Province Church president.

The Vientiane leaders encourage village and district leaders to take their shepherding role seriously, leading holy and pure lives and overseeing the spiritual and material needs of their people. Reports of healings are frequently announced in church, and at least one family has believed after Church leaders prayed for their son who was healed. The Church takes a strong stand against drinking and participation in the string-tying ceremonies so prevalent in Lao culture.

While there are many encouragements within the Church in Laos, problems also abound. The most serious problem results from the fact that more than 85% of the Bible school-trained Church leaders in the north fled the country after 1975. Less than ten men with any formal Bible school training remain in the country. Church members bemoan the fact that they are as "sheep without a shepherd". Various leaders of the Church throughout Laos have expressed a sense of their own inadequacies, but thankfully this sense of inadequacy is coupled with an increased reliance on God and His Word.

In response to the leadership crisis, the pastors of the Vientiane Church have established a training program for the elders of churches in Vientiane Province. Every four months the Vientiane Church provides up to ten days of Bible and leadership training for ten to twelve elders from village churches. As the Vientiane

Church can only accommodate this small number each time, each village elder receives this type of training just once a year.

Some of the trained leaders are now trying to initiate an apprenticeship-type program, whereby each of three trained pastors in Vientiane will take one or two apprentices and work with them, providing them with opportunities for supervised experience in ministry. In conjunction with this effort the leaders have expressed a need for an extensive Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program. In order to provide training of this kind, a suitable curriculum needs to be prepared. Don Durling, a former C&MA missionary to Laos, is currently working with Lao refugees in Thailand to produce TEE materials. This concept has been enthusiastically received by the leaders of the Lao Evangelical Church. Lao Church leaders are currently reviewing the first study volume produced by Don. If a new generation of pastors and teachers can be trained and equipped in this way, Church leaders are optimistic about the future of the "shepherdless" Church of Laos.

The Lao Evangelical Church has been through much since the missionaries left in mid-1975. They have seen their Bible School taken over as military barracks; Bibles, hymnbooks and other Christian literature destroyed; pastors arrested (albeit mostly for reasons other than their faith); other pastors and Church leaders fleeing the country; and believing families reverting to spirit worship. Yet the Church is plotting its own course and is coming to a new maturity. While the past has been very difficult, the future looks bright. Though the serious leadership gaps will not be filled overnight, the first steps to meet this need have been taken. Even the gradual provision of partially-trained leaders is an improvement over the attrition of Church leaders which has characterized the past twelve years. The corner has been turned, and we are trusting God to accomplish great things within the Lao Evangelical Church. The Lao Evangelical Church wishes to share 1 Peter 4:7-11 with praying partners around the world:

The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.