



30 Days of Prayer

for

Isaan



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for  
**Isaan**

Copyright 2016 Isaan Joint Venture

Written by Saeng Fisher, Design by eLife Lubbock TX

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**Note to Readers:** Stories in this booklet are based on first hand interviews and the personal experiences of a team of contributors. Names and places have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals whose stories have been used. Photos were taken randomly across Isaan and have been chosen for illustrative purposes only. Care was taken to present an accurate picture of Isaan culture and life, however, this booklet in no way covers the full depth and breadth of Isaan society, nor does it seek to make social commentary. Rather the authors hope that by sharing these glimpses into Isaan life, Christians around the world may be better equipped to pray for the beautiful people of Isaan.



# 30 Days of Prayer for Isaan

# Introduction

Welcome to Isaan, land of the sticky rice eating people. Where kick boxing, chicken fighting and singing of “Maw Lum” folk music accompanied by a reed instrument are king. Where fiery hot green papaya salad will burn your lips off and plates of fried crickets will challenge your palate. If you arrive during rainy season the red soil will be a thick clay gumbo that sticks to your shoes in large clumps. Arrive in the dry season and the dirt will be a fine powder blown along by the wind covering your vehicle in thick red dust. Welcome to the home of the fun loving Isaan who will open their arms to you, a stranger, with laughter, fermented fish sauce dishes and a shot of rice whiskey. Or two. Or three.

Isaan (sometimes spelled Isan, Esarn, and Esan) is the region of Thailand occupying the northeast quadrant of the country. Historically it's people were part of various Lao kingdoms but some 200 years ago Siam acquired the territory and began working to Thai-ize the people by calling the region Isaan and calling the Lao language spoken by it's people “ the Isaan language.” Reading and writing the Lao script was officially banned in the early part of the 20th century. Today eighteen million people speak Lao-Isaan in the home but are educated in Thai schools where they speak, read and write Central Thai. Another three million Isaan residents speak related dialects or Mon-Khmer non-tonal languages at home but they too attend Thai schools.

Twenty provinces make up Isaan yet 40% of the population live in or nearby one of the “big four” cities- Korat, Udon Thani, Khon Kaen and Ubon Ratchathani. The region is arid in the dry season, flooded during the rainy season and the soil is generally lacking nutrients. All this contributes to Isaan being the poorest region in Thailand, yet agriculture remains the mainstay of life and economics. Cassava, tapioca, sugar cane, and rubber are key cash crops. So is marrying foreign men. An astounding 8.67 billion baht (270 million USD) pours into Isaan annually from money given by foreign husbands to Isaan girls and their families.\*

30 Days of Prayer for Isaan covers topics which are true for Isaan people across the region including social issues and character traits. Ministry approaches which God is using to bring spiritual harvest around the world are also included in the hopes that if we pray for great things to happen in Isaan God will do them. Why not? Ask and you shall receive!

\*Study by Asst professor Kalaprupreuk Piwthongnam, Khon Kaen University, Faculty of Management Science at the Isaan Centre for Business and economic research.





# Isaan Green

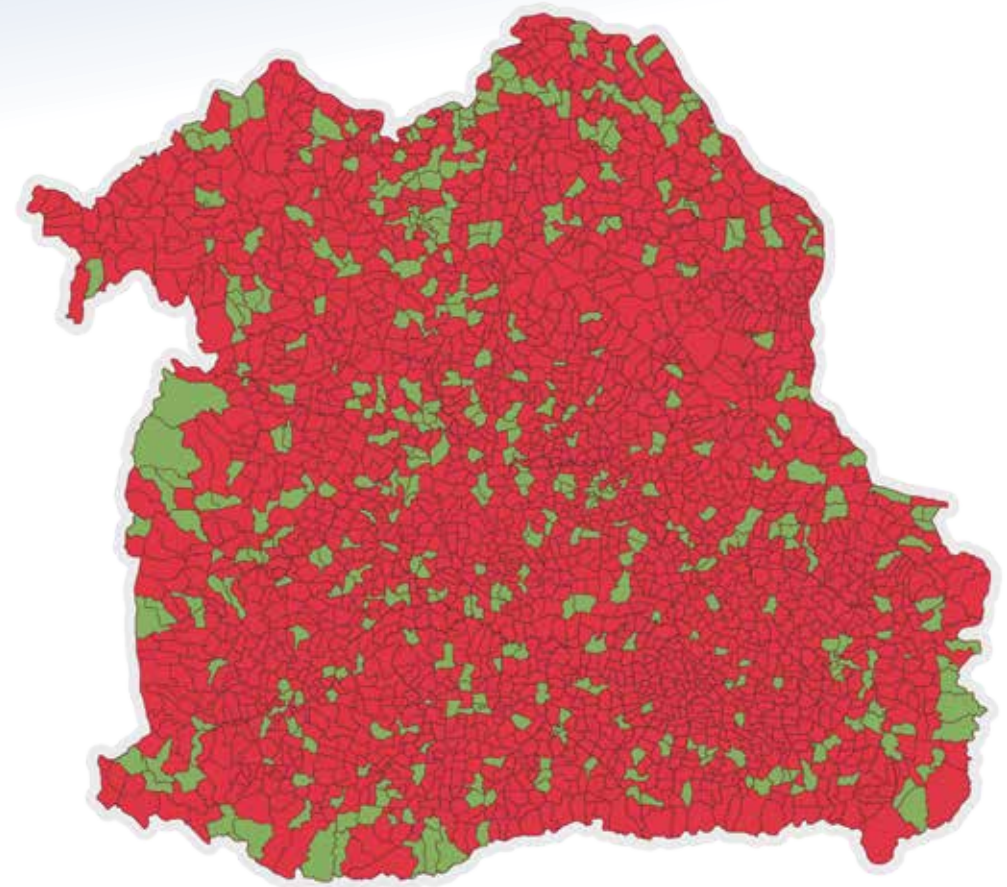
For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."  
Matthew 17:20

In the 1980s, when Isaan was a deforested land with very low agricultural productivity, the Thai government initiated a project called "Isaan Green." The project focused on economic development through improving water resources, planting trees, and introduction of cash crops. The project lasted years and its efforts were highly successful, turning the dry red soils of Isaan into lush, greener fields.

A map of Christian presence in Thailand as of 2016 reveals Isaan is still a dry and thirsty land spiritually. On the map (opposite page) each subdistrict without a church is colored red while subdistricts with churches are green. What the map doesn't show is that congregations are also small, typically with less than thirty people in regular attendance. It's time for a new "Isaan Green" project where praying people ask God to prepare Isaan hearts and send out Isaan laborers who make disciples and plant churches until there is a reproducing church in every subdistrict.



## Christian Presence in Thailand



  
No Church

  
At least one church

## Thirty-two Resident Spirits

If you say, "The Lord is my refuge," and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. Psalm 91:9-10

Nit's taxi in Bangkok was clean and orderly. Like most taxis it had a Buddha image glued to the dashboard and a string of fresh flowers strung over the rearview mirror as an offering. But Nit, a native of Mukdahan province in Isaan, had an additional spiritual item to protect his taxi- dozens of cotton strings tied around the steering wheel column.

From ancient times Isaan people have believed that a "kwan" or spirit, watches over 32 organs in a person's body. However kwan can wander or be frightened away so it's important to keep them firmly tied in place. For this reason when one is worried that some or all of the kwan may not be in place a special string tying ceremony is performed in which a spirit doctor calls them back and ties the kwan security into the person's body using a white cotton string. Strings are tied onto one or both wrists.

String tying ceremonies are performed for newborns and newlyweds, at funerals and housewarmings, when someone has been sick and even when special people visit a remote village. During the ceremony a spirit priest ties the first string then friends and family are invited to speak a blessing of good luck and health over the person while they too tie on strings which have been blessed by the priest.



Do cars have souls like people? Mr. Nit, the taxi driver, explained, "Not usually, but the spirit doctor called a soul into my car first then tied the strings onto that soul." Most Isaan people wouldn't answer this way—they would simply say tying strings on a vehicle brings good luck and protection because of the sacred ceremony and blessed strings.

### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray God will open Isaan people's eyes to see that trusting in sacred strings to protect them keeps them in bondage and does not deliver one's eternal soul from death.
- » Ask God to reveal the beautiful protection He offers Isaan people when they dwell in

the shelter of the most high and rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Pray many thousands will make the Lord their dwelling-finding refuge for their souls and physical protection for their bodies (Psalm 91).

## Families Split Apart

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction. Malachi 4:6

Tip and Maew's mother died when they were young. Their father moved to Bangkok to find work and soon married a new wife who was not interested in raising another woman's children. Tip and Maew were left behind with grandparents. Dad visited once a year bringing gifts of clothing, candy and bicycles but Tip didn't care about the gifts. "I just wish I could live with my father," he said longingly.

"These are my children," Jit proudly told the passenger in his taxi, holding up a picture on his smart phone. But he was also sad, "I can't afford to make the journey back to my village more than twice a year. I miss them."

Grandma was tired. With a sigh she said, "My son works at a resort in Phuket. My daughter in law joined him and left the three grandchildren with us. They send money but I don't have energy to figure out what the kids are doing after school. If they come home before bedtime I don't worry."

For generations Isaan families supported themselves on small family farms but in recent decades higher salaries elsewhere have lured family breadwinners to big cities in Thailand and abroad. Millions of Isaan children are now raised by aunts, uncles, grandparents or single parents. These caretakers love the children but are too old or too busy to do more than provide a roof over their heads. Growing up without parents is leaving a deep emotional hole in the heart of an entire Isaan generation.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask God to turn the hearts of Isaan parents back to their children. Pray parents will find creative ways to support their families while staying at home, or will bring their children to live with them wherever they work.
- » Pray this generation of Isaan children will hear and respond to God's love in Christ, become disciples and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to call their entire biological families to saving faith in Jesus.



## Debt

“You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” Haggai 1:6

Somdee planned a large wedding he couldn't afford. Cousins and uncles were pressed to loan him money they couldn't spare either. Later after two children were born more money was borrowed. A Christian friend saw Somdee's financial need and gave start up capital to buy equipment for making soymilk. Sales went well and Somdee began paying off his debts. But Auntie often asked for some of the profits to play cards. And Somdee's father pestered him daily for 50 or 100 baht to gamble on village cock fights.

One day two men dressed in black drove up on a motorbike. Father quickly hid leaving Somdee to hear the surprising truth, “Your dad owes 20,000 baht and is three months behind. Pay back in two days or we'll harm whomever we find at this house.” The entire family was terrified. “Please sell your motorbike!” Father begged after the men had left. Somdee complied but without the vehicle he could no longer sell soymilk in town. Now the whole family was impoverished. They gathered aluminum cans along the road but even those profits went to gambling. The stress eventually broke up Somdee's marriage.

Debt is rampant across Isaan. Young people borrow money for school and weddings. Dealers offer new cars for as little as 10,000 baht down but enslave buyers with high monthly finance payments, sometimes 25% of the total purchase value. Family wage earners bear a heavy burden as culturally they must support their elders, even if those elders gamble the money away. As a result Isaan people, Christians included, chronically live beyond their means—impoverished, in debt and in fear of debt collectors.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask God to set entire Isaan families free from the cycle of debt and poverty.
- » Pray for sound teaching in Isaan churches about money stewardship and management. Pray God's people would be delivered from gambling and will not enable family members who do so. Ask that Christians who live within their means will share with unbelievers how God helped them get out of debt.

## Surin Province

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. Isaiah 9:2

Gaew was truly horrified when she learned her classmate at Ubon University was moving south to Surin after graduation, “Be careful,” Gaew warned, “Surin is the capital of black magic in Thailand. I even have a cousin who was poisoned down there so watch what you eat!”

On the surface Surin looks much like any other Isaan province. However it shares a border with northern Cambodia and accordingly half of Surin's 1.4 million people are ethnic Khmer. The remaining population includes various Lao speakers and a tribal group called the Kuy (pronounced: gwee). Central Thai speakers account for only a small minority.

Why would Gaew think Surin province is so much darker spiritually than the rest of Thailand? Perhaps the answer lies in this mix of ethnic groups who have lived together on the land for hundreds of years. In Surin lines of language and culture that would normally divide have been blurred from generations of intermarrying. The result is many Surin residents speak two or even three of the local languages. The breaking down of language and cultural barriers has brought three sets of spiritual beliefs and demonic practices together.

The Northern Khmer majority contributed dark magic including curses and spells using potions. The Lao/Isaan have contributed animistic Buddhism including ancestor worship, spirit doctors, fortune telling, and the worship of territorial spirits. The Kuy have added strong animism including the worship of wild elephant spirits. Kuy people offer sacrifices to their lassos and wear different parts of the elephant as jewelry to grant them the elephant spirit's protection from weaker evil spirits. The unity of these three spiritual streams have combined to form a potent mix unlike any other in Isaan.

Gaew was concerned for her classmate's well being in what she considered to be a spiritually dark place. How much more is God concerned for the Khmer, Lao Isaan and Kuy people of Surin who live in spiritual darkness every day.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray God will shine His bright light of salvation, hope, deliverance into the hearts of thousands across Surin. Ask that Jesus will demonstrate His power over spirits, curses and demons to the people of Surin.
- » Ask that God will move specially in the Khmer and Kuy speaking communities, resulting in reproducing churches evenly spread across Surin, led by local believers in these native languages.

## “The things that are not”

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

Jit was invited to work at an international Christian organization in Bangkok. She spoke Central Thai yet much to her surprise other believers began making fun of her slight Isaan “twang”. Jit was shocked and deeply hurt. “Why do they treat me like this?” she lamented, “I am Christian like them and even have a masters degree.” Shompu experienced the same negative attitudes at her factory job in Bangkok. To cope, whenever family members called she answered her mobile in Central Thai saying, “I’m busy now, call back later.” Later meant when others weren’t around to make fun of her speaking Isaan. A survey of Thai TV channels reveals multiple comedy shows featuring Isaan people doing and saying foolish things, some of which include just speaking their mother tongue.

Isaan is a dialect closely related to Central Thai yet it is looked down upon as “countrified”, unsophisticated and silly. Unfortunately Christians sometimes reflect these biases too such as a Central Thai believer who said in all innocence, “When I teach the Bible I always use Central Thai because the Isaan language is so imprecise.” National Christian leaders have used Isaan language from the platform at national meetings to make jokes; jokes which Isaan people in the audience didn’t find funny. After all, there is a difference between having fun and making fun of someone.



Is one language better than another? Is one people group smarter than another? People worldwide think so, but God doesn’t. When the Creator looks at Isaan people he sees men, women and children made in His image, speaking a language He created which is beautiful and fully capable of expressing His praise. In the Scripture the Apostle Paul boldly proclaimed that God uses people whom others consider foolish, weak, and even despised to shame “the wise” so that God gets all the glory. What an amazing truth! There is no need for Isaan people to be ashamed- God is well pleased with their language and culture and wants them out sharing the gospel without apology.

### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask that Christians across Thailand will repent of ungodly attitudes toward Isaan people, their language and culture. Pray there will be public apologies and reconciliation in the Body of Christ.
- » Pray God will raise up thousands of ordinary Isaan people to speak his message of love into every subdistrict of Isaan. Ask that churches will be led by Isaan people in the Isaan language.

## Fear of Spirits

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:8

Mint was visiting her grandparents in the village one day when suddenly a neighbor ran in saying, “My sister just called from Bangkok. An Isaan man in his 30’s died unexpectedly in his sleep yesterday!”

Mint ran to her grandma’s closet and grabbed a red shirt. As she hung it on the fence post to ward off the wicked widow spirit she dialed the number of her parents two subdistricts away, “Mom and Dad, quick, hang out a red shirt! Someone in Bangkok died!” Word spread quickly across the districts such that when Mint drove back to Ubon province town that evening houses all along the route had red shirts hanging in their yards.

Isaan people have a deep fear of evil spirits. They believe evil spirits can cause bad luck, sickness and sudden deaths. The unexplained death of a young man is especially concerning since it means a “widow spirit” is at work. Curses too can incite evil spirits to harm people. Some Isaan even claim they’ve seen nails and needles surgically removed from the bodies of relatives whom they believe have been cursed. While some of this is surely urban myth or exaggeration we do well to remember there is a real enemy at work in the world keeping men and women oppressed and tightly bound in fear.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Just as news of a widow spirit spreads like wildfire, pray that news of deliverance from sin and freedom from evil spirits through faith in Jesus Christ will be shared widely person to person across Isaan.
- » Ask that ordinary Isaan Christians will pray for their neighbors with faith asking God to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy and drive out demons (as Jesus instructed in Matthew 10:8).



## Youth in Crisis

From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. Psalm 88:5

Vatsana was only 14 years old when she began taking drugs. “I was not very popular when I entered middle school so I started hanging out with girls who were friendly to me. They gave me cough medicine. I swallowed all 20 pills, felt a little high, then passed out and slept. Soon I was taking pills every week. I used up all the baht my grandparents gave me for lunch money. I got skinnier and skinnier but I was hooked.”

Fifteen years ago Vatsana’s story would have been unusual but now it’s normal in schools across Isaan. Cough medicine without a prescription is banned but many pharmacies sell it anyway. Along with addiction and loss of family funds, an increasing number of young girls find themselves pregnant because boys who know girls are using drugs follow them around and wait for them to pass out.

Another trend threatens Isaan youth- the rise of internet gaming. Children go straight from school to internet cafes to play online games. Vatsana explained, “My brother plays everyday at a cafe. Sometimes he skips school to play but no one reports it. The shop owner gives them free sodas. My brother thinks the owner put something addictive in the drink because he and his friends really crave it.”

Teachers at Vatsana’s school are concerned but afraid to speak up because gangs of older boys who control the drug trade might harm them. Parents don’t notice as they are busy working long hours or living in other provinces. Grandparents, aunts and uncles are gambling or too tired to ask many questions. Where will Isaan children find a safe haven?



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray that Isaan churches and ministries will not just “do Christian work” with young people, but will train and release young people to be disciplemakers at school and in their community.
- » Ask God to raise up a host of Isaan Christian youth who will start prayer groups on their school campuses, lead Discovery Bible Studies at lunch hour and share Jesus with friends after school. Pray that a vast number of young people across Isaan will hear the gospel from other youth and become committed disciples.

## Prayer Walking

I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Joshua 1:3

Ning spoke enthusiastically about prayer walking, “In the past we handed out tracts and got no response. We thought no one wanted to hear about God but today when we prayer walked our neighborhood we discovered that wasn’t true!”

Ning and 20 other people in their district church had never gone praying walking before. After reading various Scriptures about prayer they were sent out in pairs and given the following instructions:

- 1) Don’t talk to anyone unless you feel prompted by God. Your job today is to pray! 2) Ask that whole families in your neighborhood will become his disciples together. 3) Sing songs of praises aloud to God as you walk together. 4) Thank God for the good things you see- honest businesses, people helping each other, etc. 5) Open your Bible along the way and pray Scripture for your town- such as Psalm 67. 6) Ask God to give you clues for prayer topics- e.g. if you see children playing, pray for youth in your town. 7) Pray for your entire town; ask God to draw people to Himself from every neighborhood. 8) Ask for a big vision- pray God will start a multiplying church in every subdistrict of your province.

The believers in Ning’s training drew a simple map by hand and divided up the town, each pair taking responsibility for several streets. Despite the hot Isaan sun with clouds of dust blowing along the road everyone came back excited. One group sang “Open the Eyes of My Heart” and prayed that families in the village would open their hearts to God. Two young men noticed a woman sitting on a porch. They felt prompted to greet her and asked, “Have you ever heard about Jesus?” The woman replied, “My daughter just received a correspondence course about Him. Can you tell me more?” As the young men talked she listened with interest. Ning and her prayer partner were invited into a home to the bedside of a dying man. They prayed God would take away his pain and shared Jesus with the entire family. God answered their prayers; the man’s pain was visibly eased and the family listened to the gospel.

“This prayer walking is amazing!” Ning concluded. “People here are interested in Jesus. We had no idea God would open doors into homes if we just walked the streets and prayed!”



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray God will equip and send out Isaan people across the region to walk their villages, towns and cities while praying Scripture and asking the Father to draw people to himself from every house they pass.
- » Pray Isaan Christians will excel in the disciplines of fasting and prayer. Ask that churches will actively train believers to pray rather than having them simply listen while a leader up front does the praying.

## Get Rich Quick

Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies will have their fill of poverty. A faithful man will abound with blessings, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished. Proverbs 28:19-20

Villagers just outside of Kalasin province town felt really lucky. “Someone had a dream about a lucky number,” Khamsing said, “then that person told neighbors who believed it was good luck. Soon everyone began buying lottery tickets. Some borrowed money while others used up their monthly cash. Altogether we spent millions of baht in our village on tickets with that number. But it didn’t win. Now we are even poorer than before- some families are still struggling a year later to pay back what they borrowed.”

Gambling and the desire to get rich quick are long-held hopes of Thai and Isaan people. No one is concerned about payout statistics or how fairly the operation is run. Instead they look to dreams or promptings which they believe are revealed by their “duang”, that is, their fortune or luck. Besides, everyone knows someone who has won something from the lottery, just enough to keep hopes up and fuel more ticket sales. Although most people never win big, those who do are no better off. An Isaan farmer in Roi-Et won 66 million baht (1.8 million US) but three years later the money was all gone and the family was poor once again. Proverbs 13:11 explains why, “Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.” Indeed, anyone who doesn’t know how to manage money before winning certainly won’t learn to do so when relatives and friends come calling to borrow. Nor will a winner be able to resist the chance to improve social status by spending big for others to see.

The hope for large sums of cash occurs in the body of Christ as well. Vieng came back very excited from an all-day seminar at an area church. “The speaker from Bangkok told us God wants us all to be rich!” she told her friends excitedly, “Everyone in that pastor’s church has pick-up trucks because they give 10 percent every week! If I will tithe like that I can have a pick-up truck too!”



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray Isaan Christians will put God’s Word into practice by gathering money little by little and using it wisely rather than holding onto aspirations of luck or easy wealth. Ask that believers will be models of true financial stability.
- » Ask that Isaan families will have wisdom and courage to walk away from gambling and will invest their money wisely in food for their family, clothing for school aged children and improvements to their land.

## Traditions

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. Colossians 2:8

On mother’s day children in Isaan and all across Thailand buy hand-strung ropes of fragrant jasmine flowers tied into rings which they present to their mothers. On teacher’s day children sit at the feet of their instructors, place their palms together in a gesture called the “wai” and bow down at their teachers’ feet to thank them for imparting knowledge. At Thai New Year every April Isaan people young and old alike pour cool scented water over the hands of their employers, village elders, and other people whom they wish to honor. Honoring one’s parents, teachers and elders pleases God and brings joy to the hearts of Isaan people.

A different set of traditions called the “Heet sipsong” or “12 traditions” focuses on supporting the institution of Buddhism. Each tradition is associated with the monthly moon and highlights a temple ritual in which every village family is expected to participate. These include: merit making over the rice harvest, provision so that monks can do penance, offering monks special sticky rice treats, listening to Buddha’s greatest sermons, pouring sacred water, supporting monks at the start of Buddhist lent, inviting monks to bless one’s house cleaning, receiving Buddhist sermons, temple offerings at the end of Buddhist lent, appeasing the water spirits, and finally, giving robes to Buddhist monks. Older Isaan people often say, “I can’t follow Jesus—that would mean abandoning the 12 traditions handed down by our elders.” Those who do follow Jesus are ridiculed, such as Somphet whose neighbors derided him saying, “You sinner, how dare you not join in making offerings at the temple!”



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask God to strengthen those traditions in Isaan which please and honor Him.
- » Pray God will deliver multitudes in Isaan from empty practices, enabling them to turn from any tradition which does not bring eternal life to those who practice it.

## Payanak

A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. Acts 19:24

In Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese cosmologies Nagas are snakes or dragons which bring blessing or destruction on entire communities. In Isaan the seven-headed Phaya Naga or Payanak is associated with rivers. Nok, a resident of upper Isaan said, “Payanak came to me in a dream so I know it’s real.” When asked why she wasn’t afraid of a frightful demon creature with seven heads Nok merely looked confused. “It has a lot of power,” was all she could reply.

In Nakhon Phanom, a small economically depressed province along the Mekong river, the governor sought to boost the economy by building a two-story 50 million baht cement Payanak statue complete with water streaming from its middle mouth. What was once a quiet riverfront at the edge of town is now a packed plaza filled with busloads of Thai tourists. On weekends and holidays the offering table is crowded with orchids, marigolds, and banana leaves cleverly crafted into the shape of seven-headed dragons. In front of the table worshippers burn joss sticks which fill the air with thick smoke. Photographers offer framed instant prints for visitors who have come to “the landmark” as it’s now called. Sellers of flowers, incense, t-shirts and snacks also do a brisk business. A plaque at the site reads: “The Phaya Naga is the creator and guardian of the Mekong river.”

In the nearby province of Nong Khai every October large crowds gather on the full moon at the end of Buddhist Lent eager to see the unexplained fireballs which rise from the Mekong river on this single day of the year. Fireballs at this Payanak related festival have been reported over an approximately 250 kilometer long section of Mekong river but seem to concentrate in Phon Phisai, a small district east of the province center. Locals say the fireballs are a natural phenomenon but it’s worth noting far fewer fireballs were seen at Phon Phisai in the years before 2001 when the national tourist authority asked every province to sponsor a yearly festival to boost tourism.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray God will open the eyes of Isaan people to see the snake god they worship as he really is: terrible, fearful and without love. Ask God to reveal His power as supreme.
- » Pray many thousands of Isaan people will break off from bondage to Payanak and run to the loving embrace of their heavenly Father.

## Merit Making

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. Isaiah 64:6

Ninety-nine percent of all Isaan people are Buddhists and every Thai village has a temple yet lay people and monks alike agree that reaching enlightenment is not possible for anyone in this current age. The only thing left is to make merit.

What is merit? An act of doing good in order to gain better karma. What is karma? The sum total of one’s good and bad deeds. For a Thai Buddhist desiring good karma the surest way to make merit is by giving food, clothing, money and medicine to monks and by participating in temple ceremonies.

Merit is made every day across Isaan by people- mostly women -who line up along the road outside their houses around 6am to put food and drink into monks bowls as the monks pass by. Four times each lunar month there is a holy day during called “wan pra” (literally “day of monks”) where people- again, mostly women-go to the temple to make offerings of flowers, incense and gifts to the monks. A Thai sermon will be given along with Pali chanting which no one understands. When Thai people travel they stop at famous temples on the way to make merit. Even on picnics Buddhists will light incense at roadside shrines or near a holy place in a national park.

Many temples have annual fairs. One of the largest in Isaan is “That Phanom” which lasts a week and draws people from all over Thailand and Laos. Individuals and groups of villagers circle the large stupa clockwise three times then present offerings of flowers, robes and pillows to monks. Millions of Baht are also donated. But temple fairs are a mixed bag. One of the Five Precepts of Buddhism is the avoidance of alcohol yet drunkenness and fighting frequently occur at fairs. All proceeds go to the temple however, so it’s still considered merit making. Is one’s merit making ever enough? No one knows, not even monks. They can only hope.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Lord of the Universe, deliver thousands upon thousands of Isaan families from the belief that giving sticky rice to monks or offering flowers to an image will help them escape the consequences of their bad deeds.
- » Father, open blind eyes to see that images have mouths but cannot speak, ears but cannot hear. Return this people to You that they might live the fullness of life You intended for them.



## Oral Bible Storying

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

Somsuk had just finished accurately telling Daan, a new believer, a Bible story. “What did you like?” Somsuk asked. Daan was uncertain how to answer because at school and church you never speak unless you have the “correct” answer. An older Christian sitting nearby called out, “Daan you can’t possibly understand that story unless you go home and study it.”

There is a perception among young and old alike that written knowledge is vastly superior to oral learning. However even though many Isaan young people graduate high school and an increasing number go to college, the vast majority of Isaan people acquire important life information orally through discussion with family and friends. Such people are literate but preferred oral learners.

Oral Bible storying is a technique which has been developed around the world to present the Word of God to those who learn best through listening and group discussion. Evangelists, small group leaders and disciple makers choose a passage 10 to 15 verses long then “craft” a story using everyday words. Care is taken to leave nothing out nor add anything to the Bible text. When a text is memorized it is shared with friends, family and neighbors. If someone shows interest the storyteller asks a standard set of follow-up questions such as: What did you like in the story? What did you dislike, or not understand? What did you learn about God (or Jesus)? What do you notice about the nature

of people? Finally, what would you like to change in your life based on this story?

Most Isaan people will never open a Bible, but they will listen to a friend or family member tell them a Bible story. The good news is anyone can tell a story. One Isaan grannie thought she could never share the gospel, yet in twenty minutes she memorized the story of Jesus calming the wind and waves. Over the course of a week she shared that story with dozens of people in her neighborhood, all of whom listened with interest.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray churches across Isaan will embrace Oral Bible Storytelling and offer training to all their members. Pray efforts to share Scripture through local Isaan song will also be successful and widely used.
- » Ask God to use His word in the form of orally crafted stories to convict many Isaan families of sin, righteousness and judgement. Pray for obedience to His word as stories are told.

## Give and It Will Be Given to You

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke 6:38

“We’re too small to let anyone go; our church needs to be bigger before we send people out,” declared Pastor Nute.

When is a church big enough to send out laborers for the gospel? Many Isaan churches have had fewer than thirty members in weekly attendance for years. Shall we wait another generation hoping such churches will grow before training them to start new groups?

Churches in every culture hang on to people for fear there will be no one left to run their Sunday and mid-week programs. Leaders also worry that funds will drop when people leave to start new ministries. Isaan leaders such as pastor Nute struggle with these fears like everyone else, especially the fear of having too few members to support the pastor’s salary.

Scripture challenges us to think beyond weekly attendance and monthly paychecks. Gideon went to war with nearly 32,000 fighting men but God brought victory after whittling that number down to 300. Jesus had only 12 disciples yet he sent them out in pairs *without Him* to preach the gospel, heal the sick and raise the dead. God does not seem troubled when there are only a few people, nor does it worry him to send people out before they feel ready. Jesus said we will receive in direct proportion to how much we give away. His words are about money, yes, but surely this applies to human resources as well. If we will give our best people away, sending them out to start new groups won’t God will bless us with more new disciples to take their place? With the measure we use it will be measured to us.

Pastor Nok of Bangkok who served on the Thailand Evangelism and Church Growth Committee said before he died, “Don’t build your own kingdom, build God’s kingdom.” Simple but profound. We build God’s Kingdom by giving away not by keeping for ourselves. In doing so we are promised an abundant return.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news. Pray for Isaan feet to be released across the landscape to tell the good news!
- » Ask that Isaan churches will sacrificially send out their best and brightest people to start new discovery groups and new churches in nearby areas. As they do pray God will bring many new people to disciples to the churches.

# Discovery Bible Study

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. John 16:13

A small village church which had been meeting for over ten years was torn asunder when a “Christian” cult teaching heresy enticed members with promises of a new church building and large financial payouts per member upon death. Half the congregation left to follow the money and boasted how rich they would be because of their new allegiance.

A few months later the remaining believers gathered with their elders and godly leaders from other provinces to discuss the situation. Confused they asked, “Those who went with the cult say we should be re-baptized. Is that right? They ask us to attend their meetings to help out. Should we go?”

“What does the Scripture say?” the elders asked. Together the believers and their leaders examined the Bible and talked about various passages related to the cult teaching. As the discussion drew to a close one regional leader gave this exhortation, “Each of you must be able to feed yourself from God’s word so you can discern when false teaching comes. Start with one chapter a day until you finish the whole Bible.

“But teacher, I can’t read, what am I suppose to do?” asked Grandma Kai.

“You can listen to the audio Bible. Better yet, why not ask your close friend Mae Sawn to come over every day. She can read a chapter out loud then you can talk about it and pray together.”

Grandma Kai and Mae Sawn loved the idea, but someone else spoke up, “Can’t we just read a devotional booklet?”

“The devotional booklet is good, but it’s not enough,” the leaders replied. “It’s like eating a snack when you need a full meal; you need to know the *whole* Bible. The more you read the Bible and talk about it with other believers the less chance you have of being deceived.”



## PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray that Isaan believers will hear or read the Bible themselves every single day.
- » Ask that Discovery Bible Study groups led by ordinary believers will be started across

Isaan so that God’s people will be able to discern for themselves false teaching from God’s truth.

# Udon Thani

Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed. Proverbs 11:11

Udon Thani province town was dusty, rural and poor much like other Isaan towns when the US built an air base there in the 1960s to service their regional war effort. The accompanying influx of cash and foreign personnel changed the landscape forever, as did the arrival of 46,000 Vietnamese refugees in the mid 1900’s. The refugees established businesses and grew into what is now the largest Vietnamese ethnic community in Thailand. Many American GIs married Thai girls and settled down in Udon. With a population of 400,000 Udon Thani is now nearly as large as Isaan’s biggest city Korat.

Considering most people still rode bicycles to the market in the late 1990’s Udon has developed rapidly. Central Plaza Mall looks like a copy of upscale malls in Singapore or Hong Kong. Multiple furniture and home goods stores occupy huge plots of land on the outskirts of town drawing on a growing consumer market in home construction from Lao and Thai customers alike. There are even chic stores offering upcycled antiques and a Mercedes Benz dealer which sells over one hundred vehicles per year to locals.

A recently opened international school offers a UK based English curriculum. Blink and you might forget you’re in Isaan entirely. Open your eyes and the traffic clogging the small streets will remind you Udon is growing so fast it can barely keep up with the changes.

Churches in Udon Thani provincial town report there are 3000 believers spread across 29 congregations. Like the rest of Isaan they make up less than half a percent of the population.



## PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray that the Word of God will spread rapidly and God’s name be honored widely in this large city. Ask that churches will reproduce and be planted within walking or biking distance of every resident in the city, including multiple Thai, Vietnamese and English speaking congregations.

» Ask that Udon will become a hub in Upper Isaan not just for commerce but for disciple makers trainings and regional prayer meetings.

## Bang Fai Fertility Festival

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. Colossians 2:8

Saengthong and his village buddies stayed up all night before the parade finishing a float which would represent their village. The large bamboo rocket encased in PVC pipe for safety and greater accuracy was decorated with red and gold paper. They drank a lot of homemade rice whiskey so the next morning everyone was a bit hung over as they hitched the cart to the tractor. Yet by the time they reached town everyone was in high spirits. As the parade started Saengthong climbed atop the float along with two of his friends. They each tossed back a shot of whiskey and started beating a drum in time to music blasting from speakers rigged to their float. As the procession made it's way to the temple grounds they danced and made overtly sexual gestures, sending the watching audience into fits of laughter. Over the next few days there were singing competitions, beauty contests, dancing, more drinking and finally a competition to see whose rocket would travel the highest, go the farthest, or produce the most interesting whistling sound or vapor trail. Saengthong's village took second place overall, favorably enhancing their community prestige.

Bang Fai is an ancient fertility ritual practiced solely by the ethnic Lao/Isaan people every spring for centuries. Off color jokes, lewd sexual movements and phallic symbols are all part of the package as villagers send rockets to "seed the clouds" for the upcoming rice season. A story is told of how Lord Toad helped win a war against the Sky Lord who had kept rain from falling for seven years. The rockets remind the Sky Lord of his loss and his promise to send yearly rain. One reservoir in the

heart of Yasothorn Provincial town has a giant statue of this toad. Not surprisingly, Yasothorn is the site of the largest Bang Fai festival in Isaan.

Bang Fai is a bawdy festival with little to recommend it from God's point of view. It can also be very dangerous. Homemade rockets wound and sometimes kill participants. Houses are occasionally damaged by stray rockets. In 2015 a passenger airplane even had to make evasive maneuvers to avoid collision with a Bang Fai rocket.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray God will open blind eyes during Bang Fai revealing the debased nature of this festival and creating a longing in many hearts for a purity only Jesus can offer.
- » Ask that Christians will take extra time at Bang Fai and other major merit making festivals during the year to gather together and pray for the salvation of many in their villages, districts and provinces.

## Sudden Reversals

Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. Psalm 16:5

Malee sat on a wooden platform outside her small one room hut sorting tiny flowers which she would sell to garland makers in her village. "It takes an hour to pick and another hour to sort them," she reported. "I get just enough cash daily to pay for my children's school lunches." She paused. "It wasn't always like this. My husband owned a construction business. We had three cars, two houses, and multiple crews of workers. But one day when my husband wasn't on site our workers cut the steel instead of wrapping it. The buildings were declared unsafe and had to be torn down at our expense; we lost everything."

In another village Jantawn told his sad story, "My son was studying to be a mechanic but a year before he graduated there was a motorbike accident. We thought he was fine but his arm was wounded deep inside. It got worse until he finally dropped out of school. Now he can't use his left hand at all. He was going to support us. Now we have to support him."

According to Thai law Isaan people are required to have auto insurance yet few have driver's licenses let alone insurance of any kind. Many villagers don't even have a bank account. For this reason when the unexpected happens a family must sell everything to cope. The landscape is littered with houses half built—cement skeletons choked with weeds in their empty doorways and window frames— unfinished because someone got cancer, had an accident or became mentally ill due to stress.

Sudden reversals from riches to rags are so common an experience in Isaan, and all of Thailand, that the Thai language edition of the Monopoly board game has a card not seen in Western sets. It reads: "Lose Everything". The player who picks this card is suddenly, irreversibly out of the game. Much like real life.

"It's fate," Malee concluded with a sigh. "I don't know what we did in our past life but it must have been bad."



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray that Christians who experience sudden reversals will also experience God's provision and care such that they may give strong testimonies to those who don't yet know Him.
- » Pray God will connect Christians to Isaan families who experience sudden reversals. Ask that through biblical witness, love and a demonstration of God's power in answer to prayer families in desperate need will become disciples.



## Korat (Nakhorn Ratchasima)

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Mark 8:36

Thai government maps include the city of Korat and its province as part of Isaan. Historically this city -which is properly called Nakhon Ratchasima- marked the boundary between Siam and Lao territories. Not surprisingly the citizens of Korat developed and continue to speak to this day a dialect that's not Isaan yet not quite Central Thai either. The city is situated on the southwestern edge of the Korat plateau and is an easy drive from Bangkok.

The people of Korat are proud of their long history as a strong city. One particularly famous citizen, Lady Mo, is honored with a statue in the heart of town for having helped free Korat when a Lao king attempted a take over in 1826. A building boom in recent years has added thousands of square feet of shopping centers including a mall with an indoor snow arena where children and adults can make snowmen, ice skate and play in the cold. A cursory drive through the city reveals another prominent industry- automotive supplies, repair and services. Hundreds of shops line the roads for kilometers servicing the endless line of trucks and cars passing through this city on Highway 2 as the vehicles carry goods to all of Isaan, Laos and other countries in the region.



On a completely different note, one of the oldest stable cat breeds in the world, a blue-grey cat with green eyes, is named after this city. Considered a "good luck cat", Korat cats are given in pairs to newlyweds or to those who are highly esteemed in order to bring them good fortune.

In many ways the city of Korat has it all, yet it lacks the most important thing, knowledge of the Holy One. Amidst this boom town's financial success the 500,000 citizen of Korat have a much smaller Christian population than other large Isaan cities - only 1500 believers in 27 churches.

### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray many families in Korat will feel the emptiness of earthly riches and success and will seek the true riches of God's kingdom.
- » Ask God to send Thai and Isaan laborers to the city of Korat. Pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit resulting in many turning to Christ until at least 5% of the city is Christian.

## Leaders in the Harvest

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13

"Isaan people aren't qualified to be leaders in God's church, they aren't educated enough," declared a seminary trained Central Thai pastor serving in a large Isaan town.

Who is qualified to serve? A recent event from north India gives some insight: An illiterate low-caste man named Ravi came to Christ. He began sharing the good news, baptizing and making disciples. One day while Ravi was baptizing new believers a paid pastor named Chand from another denomination came to the water's edge. Chand was deeply offended and disrupted the proceedings. He called out, "Who gave you the right to baptize!? You are not ordained! Get out of the water!"

Ravi replied respectfully, "Pastor, please look at Matthew 28." While Chand looked it up Ravi quoted from memory verses 16- 20 then calmly said, "Brother, Jesus did not suggest, he *commanded* His disciples to baptize, and he did not say they must be ordained. So please leave."

Chand was speechless. An illiterate villager had just instructed him from the Scriptures! Instead of leaving Chand stayed to watch. When the baptism was finished he asked so many questions Ravi took him to meet a fellow lay-leader. Chand told them, "I went to Bible school but this illiterate guy's words from the Bible were so wise." Chand is now a fellow laborer with Ravi, trained to walk in authority as Jesus' disciple and to release others to do the same.

Jesus commanded the eleven and other close followers after His resurrection to be His witnesses. They obeyed. Today God is still sending out ordinary people to testify, lead people to faith and form simple churches. Lay leaders in such a movement are trained to facilitate participatory Bible studies in small groups where members hold one another accountable to obey the Word of God. Many, many gospel workers can be apprenticed when reproducible methods such as these are used.

Praise God for educated Isaan pastors, for quality preaching and seminaries! However there aren't enough seminary trained leaders to reach all of Isaan in our lifetime. Millions will die and go to hell while we wait for more leaders to raise funds, go to school, receive formal education and return. We must see ordinary people equipped to lead a discipleship movement if we hope to reach every village in this generation.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray Isaan Christians will not wait for seminary trained persons to arrive but will step out in faith, obeying Jesus command to be His witnesses.
- » Ask God to bless the equipping of lay leaders in Isaan. Pray He will send out hundreds of Isaan men and women like Ravi, simple people who have been with Jesus, know Him well, and are disciplined to make disciples.

## Drinking

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5:18

Across Isaan government sponsored signs are posted on trees and telephone poles entreating drivers: “Drunk, Don’t drive.” But as villagers often say, “No one ever thinks they’re too drunk to drive!”

The Thai government is attempting to counter an alarming rise in road deaths across the country especially during national festivals and holidays when drunkenness ends in hundreds of fatal crashes. Thai law mandates a required two-hour education seminar when renewing driver’s licenses in which participants watch a heartrending video filled with gruesome accident scenes. Banners sponsored by the royal household are posted in large cities right before holidays entreating people to make their celebrations alcohol free. Sadly however, these efforts have had little effect on behavior.

An excellent study\* by a doctorate student at Khon Kaen University examined the attitudes of drinking among Isaan villagers and found what any taxi driver can tell you, namely that Isaan people feel they cannot properly maintain social relationships or fulfill community obligations without alcohol. One 42-year-old woman in the study said, “If I don’t drink, I think I won’t have any friends to enjoy life with. If we don’t drink, how can we have a good time?” Although most people drink socially in public groups and have a positive view of drinking, consumption of alcohol translates into less money for essential expenses, results in domestic violence, and of course increases road accidents.



If drinking in the village is such an integral part of society what about those who come to Christ? Isaan Christians are told they must never drink—which is understandable since drinking often leads to drunkenness which Scripture clearly forbids. Yet how will Christians make and keep friends in a context where everyone feels they must drink to fit in?

\* DRINKING CULTURE IN THE THAI-ISAAN CONTEXT OF NORTHEAST THAILAND  
Jirawat Moolasart and Siriporn Chirawatkul Khon Kaen University 2012

### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray Christians will present a joyfully attractive model of having fun without alcohol. Ask that Christian communities will engage neighbors in alternative activities during festivals when people are tempted to get drunk.
- » Ask that Christians will become active in alcohol rehab efforts.
- » Ask God to reveal to Isaan civic leaders successful ways to curtail alcohol related road accidents.

## How Isaan People Meet Jesus

You are witnesses of these things. Luke 24:48 [Jesus, to his disciples after the resurrection]

Somjit had a hard time forming words due to an accident which left him mostly paralyzed. Yet he was keen to share his testimony. With difficulty he slowly explained, “After becoming crippled my wife and children left. I was all alone laying on my bed but my neighbor Auntie Win came every day. She told me to have hope and keep living because God loved me. She helped with laundry and talked about Jesus often. Eventually I repented and believed! Afterwards Auntie Win kept talking about Jesus and other Christians came to visit. They kept praying for my healing and God answered their prayers. Now I can walk and even talk a little bit as you see today.”

Janta has not come to Christ yet, but she is watching the Christians in her village closely. “They helped cook and clean up at a village funeral,” Janta reported. “Everyone was sad but the Christians said they were not afraid of dying since they were certain of going to heaven.”

Isaan people come to Christ through regular interactions with ordinary people like Auntie Win, or when families speak words of hope and display love when others are grieving. A recent study on how Thai people come to Christ\* revealed that Thai people countrywide are 700 times more likely to believe in Jesus when they have family or friends who already know God. Literature and media play a part in Thai people coming to faith, but personal face to face witness from someone they know and trust is by far the most important ingredient in salvation along with miracles or casting out of demons.

Christians can be afraid to talk about Jesus because they fear rejection. Uncle Tongdee was hugely relieved when John 6: 44 was brought to his attention: “Jesus answered, ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day.’” “Well that’s a relief!” Tongdee exclaimed. “I thought people weren’t responding to Jesus because I was no good at sharing. Now I know it’s because God isn’t drawing them yet.” Uncle Tongdee was so encouraged he went out that very day and shared his testimony with some former drinking buddies.

(Marten Visser: Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand. 2008)



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask that Isaan Christians will courageously and regularly talk about Jesus. Pray Christians will leave the results of their sharing in God’s hands, resting in the truth that the Father draws people to salvation.
- » Pray simple gospel sharing tools will be widely taught and practiced, such as sharing one’s testimony along with the gospel message in under two minutes and a four-minute-long creation to judgement story.



## Strengthen What is Good

The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it (the holy city, the new Jerusalem).  
Revelation 21:26

Here is an amazing truth: God is so pleased with the ways we express creativity through our cultures here on earth that the glory and honor of these cultures will be brought into heaven.

If you ask the people of Isaan, “What is glorious and honorable in your culture?” you would certainly hear some of the following answers:

- » Dancing the “fawn lam”, where men and women move in a circle and place their hands at 90 degree angles in time to the music.
- » Playing and or listening to a reed instrument called the “khaen” with a “maw lam” singer who tells a story from every day Isaan life in a sing song chant.
- » Sticky rice dipped in “jaew badaeck”, a fiery paste made from hot peppers, salt and fermented fish.
- » Sharing work in the village, especially at planting and harvest time.
- » Caring for family even when it means sacrificing personal goals and dreams.



God loves these things about Isaan culture too, including their fun-loving nature. Isaan people don't need much excuse for a party. Even while sitting around doing something as mundane as making papaya salad if something funny is said two or three Isaan women will break into a high pitched sound of laughter, the tones rising and falling together. Go anywhere in a rural village and you'll see groups of people standing around laughing. It is easy to picture Isaan believers coming into the New Jerusalem in joyful procession with drums slung over their shoulders, “khaen” instruments playing and thousands upon thousands praising their creator with the “fawn lam” dance. May many more join this company!

### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask that good practices such as caring for family, cooperative work, traditional Isaan foods and dances will not be lost as populations become more urban.
- » Pray Isaan Christians will increasingly creatively express their worship to Jesus through Isaan cultural forms.

## Sexual Identity–Ladyboys

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. Psalm 139:13-14

“We really wanted a daughter,” one Isaan couple reported, “So when our son was born we encouraged him to be a kathoey.” (pronounced: ga- ter-i)

“Did you have a boy or a girl?” “Neither, it's kathoey. It has boy anatomy, but cries like a girl.”

Kathoey is the Thai word for “ladyboy”—a male who acts and or dresses like a female. This third gender category has been in Thailand for many years, predating Western concepts of transgender. Evidence of this is seen in photographs of ladyboys taken a 100 years ago.

Thailand is known for its broad acceptance of ladyboys. Some Thai schools teach there are three genders, male, female and kathoey. Men who identify as kathoey are seen throughout society but especially as hair dressers in salons, servers in restaurants, in ladyboy cabaret shows and as prostitutes in big cities. Sex change operations are readily available in reliable hospitals across Thailand. Men who identify as kathoey will often start with hormone replacement and have progressive surgeries as they can afford them. As kathoey boys grow up many seek out male partners although some enter traditional marriages and have children while continuing to dress and behave like women.

For some the choice to be a ladyboy is their own. For others like the children mentioned above, parents or friends push them into a third gender identity from birth. Ladyboys are a normal part of most Isaan villages. Even in rural areas neighbors can name two or three males from their village who behave like women. Most people think nothing of it, openly referring to these men as a women although often with a smile or laughter.



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray that the practice of identifying and calling boys kathoey from a young age would decrease, that boys would not feel pushed into a gender identity that they did not choose.
- » Ask God to help many kathoeyes understand He made them perfect from birth without having to change their sexual identity. Pray God will restore their inner persons to wholeness through relationship with Jesus.



# Ethnic Minorities in Isaan

May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you. Psalm 67:3

Vitoun was busy pounding spicy hot papaya salad in his clay mortar and joking with customers waiting for their lunch. When asked what made his language, Phu Tai, different from Isaan he just laughed saying, “I have no idea, we just talk and everyone understands!” Vitoun’s lighthearted answer gives insight that after decades years of living alongside Lao-Isaan people cultural distinctives which used to exist between ethnic groups have significantly decreased.

Boonthawee expressed a similar view. When asked what made his people group the Nyaw different from the average Isaan person Boonthawee replied, “Honestly nothing. We dress alike and go to the same Thai schools. I’m sure there used to be greater distinction but these days no one can tell the difference, not even me.”

Despite daily language and cultural similarities some ethnic minority villages in Isaan retain aspects of past cultural practices. Traditional Phu Thai dance troupes regularly perform at festivals around the region. Kuy people tame and train elephants in Surin Province. Saek and So people hold annual festivals highlighting their language, food and dance. Khmer speakers eat traditional foods at home like unripe green papaya soup. Yet these differences are small; ethnic minority groups living on the arid plateau of Isaan have mostly integrated with Isaan society.



For those speaking Thai or Lao-Isaan this is good news since those languages can be used across Isaan to communicate the gospel. On the other hand, since minority people groups still live in villages together it would be wonderful to see churches planted in their midst which serve them as a community. For example, among 500,000 Phu Thai of Isaan there are only two or three small churches. Among the 1.4 million Khmer speakers, only one church. As for the 400,000 Kuy and the 500,000 Nyaw peoples there are no known churches exclusive to their communities.

## PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray for laborers who will prayer walk, share Jesus and start multiple reproducing churches among ethnic minorities including the Phu Thai, Ngaw, So, Saek and Bru.
- » Ask that whole families from ethnic minorities will believe together and will maintaining strong bonds of community as they start new village churches.

# Family Evangelism

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. Acts 16:32-33

A well known Thai pastor was introduced to Jesus while studying abroad. He embraced salvation and was disciplined apart from his family. When he finally wrote telling his parents he was Christian they were horrified. “Son, how could you make such an important decision without the family?” his mother lamented. His situation is common. Most Thai come to Christ apart from their families through private conversion followed by a shock announcement sometime later. As one Western author comments, “Individual conversion separates Christians from their social networks and stops church growth.” According to the Thai pastor mentioned above the end result is tragic. He has stated publicly, “We win one weak convert and gain 200 strong enemies from the new convert’s social networks.” Hard words, but spoken by someone who has the right to instruct us.

Can “making 200 enemies of the gospel” be avoided? What if families don’t want to believe together?

Somdee’s coworker June wanted to know more about Jesus. Rather than talk to her alone Somdee instructed June, “Gather your family and I will visit your home.” So June gathered her husband, three children, parents and two uncles. After Somdee shared the the gospel message June’s parent’s replied, “We’re not ready to believe but it’s a good message; if anyone in the family wants to become Jesus’ disciple go ahead.” June and her husband did, and Somdee continued to disciple them in their home where the parents could see what was going on.



Throughout the Bible God works with family units. Noah’s whole family entered the ark. Angels tried to save Lot’s entire family although the son-in-laws rejected that help and died. Rahab’s entire household was spared at Jericho. Jesus too was concerned for families; he instructed his disciples to stay in “homes of peace.” From these home they shared the gospel with the entire family and others in the nearby community. To reach Isaan with the good news we would be wise to follow cultural and biblical patterns of working with entire families.

## PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask God to give Christians across Isaan a deep conviction to include family and friends whenever presenting the gospel and making disciples. Pray gospel sharing and discipleship will be done in the homes of seekers so that extended families have confidence their sons/daughters/grandparents are safe and not part of a cult.
- » Pray that ministries which focus on children, single mothers and students will find creative ways to include extended family into gospel presentations and discipleship.

# Marriage

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Genesis 2:24

Daeng has driven a taxi in Bangkok for 15 years. “Yes, I have two wives,” he admitted, “One back home in Isaan, one here in Bangkok. My wife back there knows, but I send money home regularly so she doesn’t make a fuss.”

Polygamy and minor wives have been part of Thai culture for centuries although in the past only wealthy men could afford such an arrangement. These days men like Daeng who earn a more modest income yet live apart from their wives often have second wives. Many guys write it off as a win-win situation, but their wives feel differently. “When I found out he had a second wife I cried for days,” shared Note. “But what could I do? I’m not educated. I couldn’t support our children without his financial help.”

From advertising, to lewdness at the Bang Fai festival, to public stage shows where young women dance in skimpy costumes, Isaan cultural is sexually charged. Yet despite all this public affection between husbands and wives such as giving a quick kiss or even holding hands in public is strongly frowned upon.

Marriage is often unhappy for Isaan couples. Physical abuse is common, as Ploy explained, “My sister’s husband drank and beat her. After a two month stay in the hospital she left him. She went to Pattaya and found a Swedish man, married him and left the country for good. In fact, all three of my sisters left their Thai husbands and married western men.” Domestic violence is so serious an issue that a foundation with royal family sponsorship is focused on it’s reduction.

Ploy’s sisters married foreign men as a way to escape. Marrying foreigners is also strongly encouraged to help insure the extended family’s economic security. In one village Isaan neighbors nicknamed a Western husband “ATM”. Behind his back of course. To his face everyone was always polite.

The good news is that Isaan Christian marriages are much happier and more stable.



## PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray for a reduction in domestic violence. Pray Hebrews 13:4: “Let marriage be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”
- » Ask God to protect and prosper Christian marriages and families. Pray that love, patience, faithfulness and mutual submission will be increasingly practiced in Christian homes and noticed by those far from God leading to gospel discussions and salvations.

# Khon Kaen

Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. 2 Corinthians 10:17

Chantip was showing off the central lake park of Khon Kaen to his out-of-town friends, “There’s an exercise track all the way round with nice restaurants on the East side. See the big dinosaur statue? The first dinosaur bones discovered in Thailand were found in Khon Kaen. There’s a special exhibit 80 km outside of town if you want me to take you there. There’s so much to do and see here! We are very proud of our city. We’re the center of Isaan you know, geographically and economically.”

Citizens like Chantip have some reason to boast. Khon Kaen University is one of the largest in Isaan with 25,000 students. Three hospitals in town, including a regional teaching hospital, can handle just about any medical need which arises and the airport is built to international standards. In terms of government offices, education, regional silk trade and finance Khon Kaen is the main hub for all of Isaan. Khon Kaen even has Isaan’s only Bible college, Northeastern Bible Seminary.

As a hub city Khon Kaen draws many Thai citizens from around the country to live and work in town. One result of this is far less Isaan language is spoken in the city than in other Isaan towns.

As in other major Isaan province towns there are Christians in Khon Kaen, but the 40 small churches account for only 0.8% of the 410,000 people who live in the city.



## PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Ask that God will raise the profile of Christians in Khon Kaen city by promoting believers to positions of authority in government, schools, hospitals and businesses.
- » Pray churches in Khon Kaen will have a burden to pray regularly for their city and will share Jesus systematically across the city until there is a vibrant Christian house church or small group in every neighborhood.



## Worshippers

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Mark 2:27

Fai had tears in her eyes as she recounted what it was like attending church as a child, "Getting to church cost a lot of money because it was forty kilometers away and there were six of us. We were poor so it took weeks to save money for bus fares. When we got to church the pastor would often say from the pulpit, 'If you don't come to church every week you don't love God very much.' We felt ashamed and eventually stopped going."

Singkam had not been to church in years due to distance and finance when a small village church began meeting near his home. Cautiously he came and listened. Leaders didn't talk about the Sabbath and said nothing about coming every Sunday. Most weeks they didn't even pass an offering bag but simply said, "If you wish to share what God has given you there is a box in the back." After a few weeks Singkam stood up and testified. "I love this church!" he exclaimed. "I want to come every week because the focus isn't on giving money but on loving God and relating to Him!"

Buddhism focuses on performing religious duties which result in personal accumulated merit. As a result believers from a Buddhist background tend to insist on attending Sunday worship services, bible studies, and prayer meetings as indispensable religious duties. Unfortunately spiritual maturity is often judged based on attendance at church events rather than on a close walk with Jesus and inner transformation.



Pastors can reinforce this idea of religious duty by talking repeatedly about attending church and tithing. These practices are indeed aspects of the Christian life but speaking of them continually gives the impression that being a Christian is all about showing up on Sunday and giving money to the church. In fact, the real goal of our faith is to restore us into right relationship with God. Jesus came to earth, died on the cross and rose again not to make religious observers but to reconcile people to the Father. As Jesus said, people were not made for the Sabbath, but rather the Sabbath was made for God's people.

### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Pray God will change the focus across Isaan from religious duty to being worshippers and friends of God. Ask that Christians will value heart transformation and will encourage one another to love God, not just perform duties.
- » Pray that hundreds of churches led by lay leaders will be started across rural Isaan so that no one ever need say "I can't afford to attend a Christian meeting because it's too far away."

## End Vision

"Take away the stone," Jesus said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" John 11:39-40

Jesus challenged Martha to believe that her dead brother could live. The same Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead, and himself rose from the dead, challenges and encourages us to believe for great things, including a fresh movement of people becoming Jesus' disciples across Isaan.

In 1990 a country neighboring Thailand was less than 0.5 percent evangelical Christian. Twenty five years later despite persecution, imprisonments and even martyrdoms evangelical Christians in that nation now make up three percent of the population!

In India, Bihar state was once called the graveyard of missions. In 2009 a retired Indian couple from Australia returned to their birthplace in Bihar to share the gospel and catalyze a church planting movement. They trained villagers to pass on their faith and to start simple reproducing house churches. By 2016 tens of thousands of people in Bihar state, as well as in nearby states in Northern India and Nepal had come to faith. Thousands of new house churches have been planted through this one network of believers alone.

Not far away in New Delhi an Indian pastor was challenged at a training event in 2013 to start Discovery Bible Studies in people's homes, to disciple entire families and to train new leaders to do the same. As of early 2016 over 10,000 people had been baptized, 3000 house churches started and another 1500 discovery Bible groups were meeting.

"That can't happen here in Isaan," some have said. Why not? People didn't think Lazarus could live again, but Jesus called him forth. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. Let's believe and ask our mighty risen Lord for a fresh work of His Spirit across Isaan!



### PRAYER POINTS.....

- » Lord of the Harvest, send out thousands of Isaan laborers into the Isaan harvest until there are biblical, multiplying churches in every subdistrict and the gospel has been presented personally to every Isaan family. Do exceedingly more than we ask or imagine until your name is glorified in every village of Isaan. May we see this accomplished in our lifetime we pray, in Jesus Name.



# Keep Praying.....

Thank you for taking the time to pray for Isaan. Would you like to do more?

The pictures in this prayer guide were taken of random people across Isaan. Go back through the guide and pray over each face. Ask that the person pictured, together with their extended family, would become Jesus' disciples and form the nucleus of a new church in their village or town.

Keep this prayer guide as long as you are using it, but when you're done *don't let it sit on the shelf*. Sign your name on the opposite page and give this booklet to someone else who will commit to praying for another 30 days. Keep passing it on until there are no more spaces left on the signature page or until the booklet falls apart. If you sign on a line with an asterisk please take a photo and send it to [saengfisher@protonmail.com](mailto:saengfisher@protonmail.com). Seeing evidence that people are praying will encourage those who work in Isaan.

We look forward to celebrating with you in Heaven together with all the people who will come to know Jesus as a result of your labors in prayer!



## ... and Pass It On Sign Your Name

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# Ordering Information

Invite others to pray for Isaan by sharing copies of this booklet with your church, Sunday School, or small group. To order send an email to the following address nearest to you:

USA: [isaanprayer@gmail.com](mailto:isaanprayer@gmail.com)

Thailand: [30dayisaan@gmail.com](mailto:30dayisaan@gmail.com)

UK: [prayer4isaan@gmail.com](mailto:prayer4isaan@gmail.com)

Netherlands: [isaangebed@gmail.com](mailto:isaangebed@gmail.com)







“My name  
will be great  
among the  
nations,  
from the  
rising to the  
setting of  
the sun.”

**MALACHI 1:11**

