

## **Thailand Assemblies of God's Leadership Development Program: A Way Forward in Ministerial Training**

By Mark Rodli

### **INTRODUCTION**

With over 94 percent of its people adhering to Buddhism,<sup>1</sup> Thailand perceives itself as a custodian of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Whether in rural life or urban life, the grip of Buddhism is clearly visible. Visitors will be awestruck with the nation's 30,000 temples; 200,000 Buddhist monks making daily rounds; millions of 'spirit houses,' popular shrines, and meditation centers, plus ubiquitous Buddhist iconography. On the other hand, Thai Christians number only 490,000 or roughly 0.75 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup> This comparatively small number of adherents coupled with just a 4 percent Christian conversion growth in Thailand<sup>3</sup> challenge Thai Christian denominations and churches to reflect on their current educational institutions and ministerial training.

Serving the Thailand Assemblies of God (TAG) as its Christian education center is the Thailand Assemblies of God Seminary (TAGS),<sup>4</sup> which provides training programs ranging from a diploma to a master's degree. Admittedly, TAGS' history has been marked by low enrollment numbers, occasional closures, and various issues inhibiting growth. However, a church-based ministry curriculum, such as TAGS' new diploma-level Leadership Development Program (LDP), holds promise of helping propel the TAG into future growth.

To explore how such a church-based ministry curriculum will transform the TAG, this paper sets out to do the following—(1) examine the current educational approach in Thailand and the cultural factors that drive it, (2) outline a brief history of TAGS' development, (3) discuss the way(s) that the LDP fits well for the TAG, and (4) spell out its implications for the TAG.

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<sup>1</sup>Central Intelligence Agency, last modified March 29, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/thailand>, (accessed April 7, 2023).

<sup>2</sup>eStar Foundation, last modified April 13, 2022, <https://estar.ws>, (accessed April 7, 2023).

<sup>3</sup>Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand* (Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2008), 102-03.

<sup>4</sup>Formerly named the Thailand Assemblies of God Bible Institute (TAGBI).

## PRESENT EDUCATIONAL APPROACH AND ITS CULTURAL DRIVERS

Thai history and culture simultaneously have shaped the current educational approach. History reveals several factors as to how that approach developed. Culture reveals the values that mold and contour education. This section will explore the current primary Thai approach to teaching and how culture shapes it.

### Thai Teacher-Centric Approach and Cultural Values Behind It

Thailand, as a new nation-state, developed its national education system in the late 19th century. The pressures of potential colonization by Britain or France motivated its attempt to “promote the economic, educational, social, and cultural sovereignty through the modernization of the Thai state elite, specifically the aristocracy.”<sup>5</sup> Then-King Mongkut even employed Western missionaries for educational purposes.

In 1898, King Chulalongkorn tasked his half-brother, Vachirayan, to develop primary education by expanding the traditional system of schooling carried out in the Thai temples.<sup>6</sup> The Sangha Act of 1902 further unified the educational system within Buddhist structures where temples still served as the primary teachers of boys. The nation also employed some Western educational models. In 1917, Thailand established its first institution of higher education—Chulalongkorn University—based on French and German models and emphasizing the humanities, law, and economics.<sup>7</sup>

Although it may appear to have been bathed in a mixture of Buddhist and Western models, Thailand’s educational system in reality reflects a blend more predisposed to an Asian model. It is an approach that attempts to maintain Thai identity while also borrowing from the West certain educational values deemed beneficial. The result is the teacher-centric approach.

### Cultural Components Behind the Teacher-Centric Approach

Culture consists of putative norms among people groups that influence and shape how they behave, how they represent themselves, and their communication, emotion, values and worldview. James

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<sup>5</sup>Douglas Rhein, “Westernisation and the Thai Higher Education System: Past and Present,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 48, no. 3 (2016): 262.

<sup>6</sup>Christopher John Baker, and Phongpaichit Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 2nd ed (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66.

<sup>7</sup>Rhein, “Westernization,” 264.

Plueddemann notes, "Cultural values powerfully influence expected educational objectives."<sup>8</sup> For the Thai educational system, two culture dimensions play integral parts in its teacher-centric approach—power-distance and collectivism.

### Power-Distance

Geert & Gert Hofstede and Michael Minkov's influential work, *Cultures and Organizations*, explains the power-distance dimension as being "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally."<sup>9</sup> With a score of sixty-four on a scale of 1-100, with 100 being the highest, Thailand is regarded as a high power-distance nation where the people expect inequalities;<sup>10</sup> in essence, equality does not truly exist.

In high power-distance cultures, teachers command respect, honor, status, and are considered authoritative due to their knowledge, which means students must acknowledge their teachers' seniority and experience.<sup>11</sup> This indicates a strong hierarchical system common in high power-distance cultures. Accordingly, in the Thai context, power is created by position and the status associated with position and rank.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the Thai teacher commands the classroom, taking control and making decisions regarding the class. However, since the students often need the teacher to tell them what to do plus must show respect, honor, and appreciation, very little interaction takes place between teacher and students, the expectation being that the students remain quiet and learn from the teacher.<sup>13</sup>

Thai psychologist Sunatree Komin identified nine core values (in order of importance) in the nation's culture and refers to the first and most important as *ego-orientation*. She explains:

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<sup>8</sup>James E. Plueddemann, *Teaching Across Cultures: Contextualizing Education for Global Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 86.

<sup>9</sup>Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, 3 ed. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2010), 61.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>11</sup>Joko Gunawan, "Understanding Culture in Higher Education," *Education for Health* 29, no. 2 (2016): 160.

<sup>12</sup>Theerasak and Brian Corbitt Thanasankit, "Understanding Thai Culture and Its Impact on Requirements Engineering Process Management During Information Systems Development," *Asian Academy of Management Journal* 7, no. 1 (2002): 108.

<sup>13</sup>J. Kaya and Rachavarn Kanjanapanyakom Prpic, "The Impact of Cultural Values and Norms on Higher Education in Thailand," (The HERDSA Conference, Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia, 2004) 7-8.

The Thai people have big egos and a deep sense of independence, pride and dignity. Violation of this ‘ego’ self, even a slight one, can provoke strong emotional reactions. . . . Preserving one another’s ‘ego’ is the basic rule of all Thai social interactions both on the continuum of familiarity—unfamiliarity in relationships, and the continuum of superior—inferior/subordinate in relationships, with differences occurring only in degree.<sup>14</sup>

Particular Thai cultural values—‘face’ and ‘criticism-avoidance’—within the ego-orientation core value explain how it is played out in the teacher-centric model.

Regarding ‘face,’ which “is identical with the sensitive ‘ego’”<sup>15</sup> or “a metaphor representing a type of interpersonal social honor and identity projection,”<sup>16</sup> face-saving is the first principle to consider in any kind of evaluative or judgmental action. One must avoid making a person ‘lose face’ (regardless of rank) at nearly all cost. Long-time missionary to Thailand Jim Hosack relates a story illustrating this. When a university student asked a question of a professor that he could not answer, the result was the professor losing face in front of the whole class and the student receiving a failing grade for the course.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the value of ‘face’ in the Thai culture makes it risky for students to ask questions, which is why they tend not to ask questions in the classroom.

Similarly, ‘criticism-avoidance,’ suggests that separating ideas and opinions from the person holding them is likewise very difficult in Thai society. This means that “criticism, particularly strong criticism, is usually taken personally. Criticism of whatever type is a social affront, an insult to the person. When necessary, indirect means are used.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, criticism is a way in which someone loses face. Thai culture involves avoiding conflict so as to attain social harmony of the group. However, this too creates difficulties for the education system because change will likely create conflict; and if conflict must be avoided at all cost, then chance of change is stymied.

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<sup>14</sup>Suntaree Komin, "Culture and Work-Related Values in Thai Organizations," *International Journal of Psychology* 24 (1990): 691.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 691.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher L. Flanders, *About Face: Rethinking Face for 21st-Century Missions*, vol. 9 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 1.

<sup>17</sup>James Hosack, "The Challenge of Contextualizing Global University Curriculum," (unpublished paper, 2005), 5.

<sup>18</sup>Komin, "Culture and Work-Related Values in Thai Organizations," 691.

## Collectivism

Collectivist societies are those in which the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual.<sup>19</sup> They value harmony, family honor, and communal success over individual success. In fact, such societies often hamper individuals who do not conform to the societal norms. Since Thailand is characterized as being a strong collective culture,<sup>20</sup> Thai students must conform to a collectivist ideal and change their perspective or face social ostracism. This implies that dissenting opinions will travel quickly, and an immediate response will occur to eliminate dissent. The consequence leads to the strengthening of top-down power culminating in a reduction and avoidance of accountability.<sup>21</sup> Lack of accountability perpetrated by collectivist cultural values articulates another reason why education in Thailand changes slowly.

Collectivism affects students in much the same way as high power-distance, via continued stress on a group, which trumps any action that might make a student stand out in the classroom. Consequently, students who may disagree with the decision of the group will thus remain silent so as not to bring discord. Therefore, collective cultures often limit the students' ability to think critically and debate issues, which remains a major challenge to the Thai education system.<sup>22</sup>

The synergy that often breeds collaboration in collectivism breeds much-needed positiveness in Thai education, as well. Cooperation among learners creates a collaboration of minds to discover, learn, invent, or create. This collaboration leads to achievement by the collective, which brings 'face' to the group. Relatedly, the group helps the struggling students. While social pressure can also come into play in this situation, often teachers will pair stronger students with weaker ones so that the weaker receive help from the stronger. This aids in the learning of both the stronger students (as teaching reinforces learning) and for the weaker students (as they receive more attention and help).

### Key Methods to the Teacher-Centric Approach

Driven by historical and cultural factors, teaching to pass exams and rote learning are two key teacher-centric methods of learning utilized, which produces passive learners. Regarding the first, part of the issue originates from pressure the Ministry of Education puts on schools and

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<sup>19</sup>Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, 74.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>21</sup>Rhein, "The Workplace Challenge," 46.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

teachers for students to pass examinations. This, in turn, strengthens and intensifies the teacher-centric approach by forcing the teacher's lessons to focus on passing the exam. Additionally, the community expects teachers to teach via the traditional lecture method. This causes teachers to plan and manage all learning activities. Therefore, the students' participation in sharing control will be manifested in their doing only what the teacher asks.<sup>23</sup>

Rote learning, the other prevalent method in Thailand, seems to suit teachers well in preparing students to pass examinations. However, many Western educators tend to discard this mode of learning. Lingenfelter & Lingenfelter mention that "Modern educators have commonly rejected imitation and rote learning techniques. They have argued that these strategies limit creativity and innovation in learning."<sup>24</sup>

The teacher-centric mode of teaching, with its passive learning techniques based on passing exams and using rote learning, uncovers a very Thai style of learning. Even when the curriculum and structure of schools fit more Western styles, the modes of learning still tend to come from the broader Asian teaching methodology birthed from Confucianism and hierarchy. Lingenfelter & Lingenfelter express the difficulty in this, averring, "In a class that uses only 'out of context' instruction [meaning largely classroom instruction], students...may fail to transfer the principles and skills learned in the school context to real life."<sup>25</sup>

Anthropologist Neils Mulder observed that in the Thai education system, "It seems as if school knowledge occupies a separate segment of reality that needs to be mastered in order to acquire diplomas rather than that it functions to get an intellectual grip on the world, or to be able to evaluate what is happening there."<sup>26</sup> A by-product of this system is that education becomes "a 'means' to climb up the social ladder, rather than as an end-value in itself (as in knowledge-for-knowledge's sake)."<sup>27</sup> Consequently, getting an education in Thai society becomes more about moving up in status than learning for the sake of learning and growing.

With regard to Christian education in Bible schools, a real problem may be that some who enter these Bible schools in Thailand likely do not enroll for the purpose of learning to help them minister better, but

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<sup>23</sup>Panomporn Puacharearn, "The Effectiveness of Constructivist Teaching on Improving Learning Environments in Thai Secondary School Science Classrooms / Panomporn Puacharearn" (PhD diss., Curtin University of Technology, Sarawak, Malaysia, 2004), 106.

<sup>24</sup>Judith Lingenfelter and Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Learning and Teaching* (Baker Academic, 2003), 39.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>26</sup>Mulder, Niels, *Thai Images: The Culture of the Public World*. (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1997), 61.

<sup>27</sup>Komin, "Culture and Work-Related Values in Thai Organizations," 693.

rather to move up in status (especially at the graduate level). Consequently, a push-pull effect occurs in which the mode of education influences cultural values, which, in turn, continue to influence the educational approach.

## THE HISTORY OF TAG BIBLE SCHOOL

The Thailand Assemblies of God (TAG) was founded in December 1969 by Wirachai Kowae. Shortly thereafter, he established a ministry-training center at the Ban Chang Law Church, which served as headquarters for most TAG activities. One of the center's first efforts—the Discipleship Training Program—began at the church less than a year after the TAG's creation,<sup>28</sup> with four students enrolled. Although the program was under the oversight of missionary Loren McCrae,<sup>29</sup> it was Kowae who trained (and actually lived with) these future ministers.

All four students, who had left their jobs and committed to serving the Lord in full-time ministry,<sup>30</sup> directly connected with Ban Chang Law Church. They benefited greatly from their involvement in the church, from Kowae's hands-on training, and from their experiences in church planting. Even though this program proved valuable in the establishment of new churches in Thailand,<sup>31</sup> the TAG executive committee nonetheless considered it as only a stop-gap measure and resolved to establish a full-fledged Bible school within four years.<sup>32</sup>

By 1975, the four Discipleship Training Program students had completed their training and successfully developed their own ministries. That year, as pledged, the TAG launched the Bible school, which they named the Center for Theological Studies, with seven students enrolled and Kowae as its director. However, his role in training decreased.<sup>33</sup> This turned out to be a harbinger of the decline of TAG's education program as it began moving away from the connection it previously had with the local church.

A year later, in 1976, the TAG relocated the Center for Theological Studies to a facility previously used by the Thai military<sup>34</sup> and changed the name to Bangkok Theological Center—an action that further separated the Bible school from Ban Chang Law Church. Interestingly,

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<sup>28</sup>James Hosack, "A Survey of the History of the Thailand Assemblies of God, 1968-1998," (unpublished paper, 1998) 4.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>30</sup>Sam Bowdoin, "Church Planting in the Thailand Assemblies of God from 1969-2009" (DMiss diss., Biola University, La Marida, CA, 2013), 40.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>32</sup>Hosack, "A Survey of the History of the Thailand Assemblies of God, 1968-1998," 1.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>34</sup>Bowdoin, "Church Planting in the Thailand Assemblies of God from 1969-2009," 53.

Kowae moved to the same location shortly thereafter to start a new church, subsequently reattaching his influence on the students. This was short-lived, however, as the pressures of shepherding the growing church limited the time he could dedicate to the students. In addition, lack of space was rendering the school's property inadequate.

In 1977, due to the need for more space, the TAG purchased land in the Bung Kum District of Bangkok which would be dedicated exclusively for the Bangkok Theological Center. The TAG Bible school remains there today, but now sharing land with the TAG headquarters which moved to the Bible school property in 1991. While this solved the space problem, such a move came at a price. Missionary James Hosack notes that, with the school now even more disconnected (by distance) from a specific church, the difficulty of providing full-rounded ministerial training grew. Furthermore, the focus on an academic three-year curriculum decreased the time and attention that could be given to practical ministry concerns.<sup>35</sup> This new focus on academics (primarily lectures) without the practical ministry opportunities became the catalyst for a growing discontentment and an etiolated sense of ownership of the school amongst many of the TAG churches it was meant to serve. Missionary Sam Bowdoin believes the move in 1977 of the Bible school away from the local church meant the Bible school students no longer had a model for practical ministry skills. As a consequence, the number of church plants directly connected with the Bible School fell significantly.<sup>36</sup>

In the mid 1980s, the Bangkok Theological Center changed its name to Thailand Assemblies of God Bible Institute (TAGBI).<sup>37</sup> Dissatisfaction, however, with the direction of the Bible school, due primarily to this perceived lack of practical training and 'great expense with little to show for it,' continued to build throughout the 1980s and 1990s. New data produced in 1996 painted this bleak picture—Of the Bible school's fifteen total graduating classes with eighty-two graduates,

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<sup>35</sup>Hosack, "A Survey of the History of the Thailand Assemblies of God, 1968-1998," 4.

<sup>36</sup>Bowdoin, "Church Planting in the Thailand Assemblies of God from 1969-2009," 118. James Hosack does point out that in 1981, the TAG Bible school director, Pradit Akraphram, encouraged the students to plant a church near the campus. Happy Land Church, located just a few miles from campus became the result of several of these students efforts. Hosack, "A Survey of the History of the Thailand Assemblies of God, 1968-1998," 11. To this date, Happy Land Church is the only church plant started by students near the Bible school campus, and there has been little to no connection with TAG Bible school students since the original students started the church decades ago.

<sup>37</sup>Hosack, "A Survey of the History of the Thailand Assemblies of God, 1968-1998," 7. The TAG Bible school name change was facilitated by missionary Dan Grubbs during his time as director of the Bible School from 1984-1986.



only thirty-one were ministering in TAG churches; that's an average of two from every graduating class.<sup>38</sup>

Sadly, the 2000s onward produced only more dissatisfaction toward the Bible school's track record of large expenditures and limited results. Sam Bowdoin's DMiss research reveals that many in the TAG executive leadership had little confidence in the TAGBI, feeling it lacked direction and that it faced geographical challenges as long as Bangkok remained its sole location.<sup>39</sup> This led to the school's closure in 2004. Although it was reopened in 2006, the TAG never actually addressed the underlining issues, leading to two subsequent closures, the first coming in 2015-16. In 2017, with the addition of the Bible school's first Master of Ministry cohort in connection with Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, which successfully graduated over 30 students in 2019, TAGBI changed its name to Thailand Assemblies of God Seminary (TAGS).<sup>40</sup> However, low enrolment continued to plague TAGS with the exception of the graduate degree, and that year TAGS fell prey to TAG structural disagreements, prompting the second closure in ten years in 2019. It was closed for nearly a year.

In summary, history shows that the TAG Bible school had successfully trained students in the early years through its focus on academic instruction coupled with practical learning because of its proximity to a local church. Once the school was moved, it lost much of its connection to that church and thus the direct link to the practical learning provided by ministry opportunities under the tutelage of experienced ministers. Disconnection with the local church and a focus solely on academic training left the Bible school etiolated, and it militated against any real growth.

Returning to a church-based ministry curriculum within local TAG churches, similar to what occurred in its infancy, may provide both the TAG and its training institution a panacea to a long-standing disconnection with local churches and to the low numbers of ministers trained.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 7, 20-21. Most of the graduates who did not minister in TAG went back to their local churches and served as lay leaders. Some went to other denominations or started their own ministry group.

<sup>39</sup>Bowdoin, "Church Planting in the Thailand Assemblies of God from 1969-2009," 117.

<sup>40</sup>Thai government educational accreditation rules and requirements created problematic issues with the term "institute" for religious institutions of learning. On the other hand, the term "seminary" proved unproblematic. Also, many TAG leaders believed it described the school's addition of a graduate degree more accurately and sounded better than the previous name. It did not, however, change its mission away from training and undergraduate degrees.

## CHURCH-BASED MINISTRY CURRICULUM AS A SOLUTION

History reveals the backdrop that birthed TAG ministerial education, and cultural values illustrate challenges to educating the church's future pastoral and lay leaders. However, an educational methodology that utilizes both cultural norms and new forms of learning will inject new life into outdated models of education. This section focuses on how a church-based ministry curriculum that is shaped by an overarching educational approach of *spiritual formation* (being), *cognitive learning* (knowing), and *experiential/practical learning* (doing) will bring the TAG a fuller approach to learning.

In order to develop a learning platform that works in Thailand, that platform must build off current Thai approaches of learning methodology and culture within the TAG education system while also utilizing other approaches to learning. The new church-based ministry curriculum—called the Leadership Development Program (LDP)—that focuses on 12-course diploma-level lay leader and new pastor training, seeks to blend the old approaches with newer ones. In doing so, it incorporates cognitive learning techniques like rote and lecture with experiential learning through both practical ministry opportunities and with personal spiritual growth learning through a spiritual formation focus.

By employing the different approaches, the LDP invigorates students' learning. Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory seeks to recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences.<sup>41</sup> It consists of the following eight generally agreed-upon intelligences—linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. These intelligences have more to do with “the capacity for (1) solving problems and (2) fashioning products in culturally-supported, context-rich, and naturalist setting”.<sup>42</sup> Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter explain further that these eight confer “problem-solving and performance abilities, the combination of which varies from person to person and each person exercises intelligence in distinct ways.”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, those who want to utilize Multiple Intelligence Theory in the classroom desire to incorporate many of the intelligences into the learning process because, while people possess all eight, they function

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<sup>41</sup>Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2018), Loc. 83.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, Loc. 98.

<sup>43</sup>Lingenfelter, and Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally*, 65.

together in ways that are unique to each person.<sup>44</sup> Thailand's educational system focuses on the linguistic and the logical-mathematical intelligences. Although both are essential to learning, focusing on just these two will severely limit a student's ability to learn from other intelligences, regardless if they rank higher in those intelligences or not.

The LDP incorporates the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences primarily in the cognitive-learning component. However, it integrates other intelligences through practical learning and also spiritual formation. The practical-learning component provides each student with hands-on, experiential learning by doing ministry with a pastor, with a group, or by themselves. Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter advocate that "The power of experiential learning lies in experience, having learners reflect on the experience and through that reflection make decisions about changing their thinking and behavior."<sup>45</sup> The experience solidifies what cognitive learning impresses on them to embrace a more concrete learning experience. As a result, the students begin to get the 'full picture;' and the principles, skills, and knowledge they learned in the classroom begins making more sense in real life.

Borrowing from Kolb, Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter explain learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. They hold that

"Learning begins with concrete experience. . . . Reflective observations should lead to the formation of abstract generalizations . . . The last phase of the circle Kolb called active experimentation. After experiencing, reflecting, and abstracting, one tries again with new insights."<sup>46</sup> Fundamental to the whole process, experiential learning encompasses a wide variety of teaching and learning methods and incorporates several multiple intelligences.

Ministerial training (or any learning experience) should incorporate spiritual formation. Abiding in God serves as a catalyst that allows the Holy Spirit to shape a person's heart, mind, and body. It also speaks to several other multiple intelligences. Spiritual formation allows one to focus on God through music, body movement, nature, meditation in prayer or on God's Word, etc. Scripture memorization incorporates traditional modes of learning. Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter write that "Understanding occurs when a student suddenly finds memorized data

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<sup>44</sup>Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, Loc. 318.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 90-91.

relevant in a living context.<sup>47</sup> This is exactly why we are told repeatedly in scripture to memorize, hide the words in our heart, and meditate on them.” Learning should be a dynamic experience through the Holy Spirit; and spiritual formation becomes that third encompassing mode of learning, helping one to navigate the processes through the Holy Spirit.

It is important that spiritual formation, cognitive learning, and experiential learning as modes become an intertwined learning approach. Minus one of them, the whole severely suffers. Much like a DNA strand, these three go together to create a learning experience that works on the heart, mind, and body. Similar to what James Plueddeman describes as holistic human development consisting of mental, physical, spiritual, and social components, the LDP seeks to build each student into the man or woman God intended through a holistic learning experience.<sup>48</sup> The LDP looks to integrate between ideas and practice, between truth and life, and between the biblical content and cultural context.<sup>49</sup>

Not seen since the TAG’s first few years, the LDP’s intertwined approach seeks real solutions to training for the TAG. The program pursues real-life learning activities and offers content-specific learning activities. Understanding that God wires each brain differently, it desires to help students discover their potential. This potential can be fulfilled through an intertwining mode that incorporates spiritual formation (being), cognitive (knowing), and experiential-practical (doing) in each student’s learning experience.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF CHURCH-CENTER TRAINING**

The development (or redevelopment) of a church-centered ministry approach based on the intertwining of being, knowing, and doing methodology, such as TAGS’ Leadership Development Program, has major implications for the TAG. The program seeks to apply real-life learning to influence a new generation of learners. Not based purely on old patterns, it attempts to incorporate different modes of learning—modes that will influence each individual and church in numerous ways. The LDP allows for students to remain in their local churches, utilizing what they learn through ministry opportunities.

### **Power as an Overarching Implication**

All organizational cultures, including Christian institutions, deal with the power issue. Anita Koeshall notes, “The distribution of power

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>48</sup>Plueddeman, *Teaching Across Cultures*, 2.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 25.

lies at the heart of any human social organization and shapes all interactions and relationships.”<sup>50</sup> Since its inception, the Church and its educational institutions have struggled with this issue. For example, the twelve disciples fought over who was the greatest (Luke 22:24-30). Koeshall avers that, “Church structures can rightly mimic the culturally-accepted hierarchy or egalitarian society, if they serve the church’s mission well.”<sup>51</sup> The TAG also retains much of its own culture and the power struggles that come from a culture of high power-distance and hierarchy.

Koeshall encourages the Church to develop (and follow) a ‘theology of power,’ which begins with recognizing God’s omnipotence and humanity’s lack of omnipotence. God’s plan for humanity was that, at creation, He “entrusted humans with the power to make decisions (to eat or not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil), the ability to make a difference in their environments and to act ‘otherwise,’ or outside of a predetermined pattern.”<sup>52</sup> Unlike robots, God created human beings to think and make decisions. However, with sin came the manipulation of power, which meant the desire to have dominion over other people (Genesis 3). Jesus, however, taught differently. Koeshall writes,

The call to His followers consists of a life where the power that one possesses is to be expended that others can live. Employing power in a redeemed way is a true measure of the transformation of the heart and the submission of the will to Christ, whether by an individual or an organization. The church exists in this tension: as an earthly community, the church must structure, organize, and control; as a spiritual community, she is created to follow Christ, mirror His character, and live for the sake of the world.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, Jesus wants his followers not to allow power to corrupt their hearts but rather to build up people in a redeeming way. Christians must not strive for power but instead be ‘power givers’ who seek to use their power for the glory of God, not self. This unselfish (or redeemed) power goes against the wisdom of social power in this world. Instead, Koeshall advocates,

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<sup>50</sup>Anita Koeshall, "Navigating Power: Liquid Power Structures for Molten Times," in *Devoted to Christ: Missiological Reflections in Honor of Sherwood G. Lingenfelter*, ed. Christopher L. Flanders (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 66.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

Redeemed power is (1) the capacity and ability to act (dynamis) made possible by Spirit baptism, physical strength, talents, and intellectual and material resources that have been developed through discipline and maturity; and (2) the freedom (exousia) made possible when the community recognizes the Spirit's gifts in individual members and creates space for them to develop their gifts and to function in service to others. Redeemed power is embodied in redeemed agents invested in a lifestyle of self-empowering for the sake of others.<sup>54</sup>

In my opinion, the TAG and its Bible school (TAGS) would benefit by seeking such redeemed power in its own operational structure; and one way to do that comes through the LDP.

### **The Importance of Power-Sharing**

The LDP takes much of the power from TAGS and puts it back into the hands of the local pastors and the students. This way, change ensues not from the top down but from the grassroots again. By locating it back in the churches, the program eliminates the disconnect that previously ensnared TAGS, where students received very little practical training. Now, TAGS serves as a covering and a structure for only part of the learning (cognitive understanding), with pastors and the students serving for the other two parts—experiential/practical and spiritual formation. At the outset, tensions are apt to occur; but if all parties seek a redeemed power embodied in redeemed agents through the biblical use of power to empower others, then the TAG will see change in its educational center (TAGS), its pastors, and its lay leaders. The result will be stronger existing churches and new church plants.

### **Conclusion**

Despite a history awash with disappointment in its educational center, the TAG would do well to thrust forward with its new church-based ministry curriculum—TAGS' Leadership Development Program. With its emphasis on spiritual formation, cognitive understanding, and experiential/practical learning, the program serves as a part of the solution to TAG's educational and training woes. The LDP will help propel the TAG into future growth as it seeks new leaders to journey together through redeemed power to learn and impact the country of Thailand for Christ.

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 73.

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