

Wave of hope sweeps Thailand in months after tsunami

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Children
play in their
"front
yards" after
the tide
comes in to
a "Sea
Gypsy"
village in
southern
Thailand.
Already
poor, the
village
faced
starvation
when the
tsunami of
2004
destroyed
their
fishing
boats.
Missionary
Mark
Caldwell
and local
Christians
brought
help and
the love of
Christ.
(Photo
courtesy of
IMB)

By Erich Bridges

International Mission Board

Sunset paints a glorious reddish glow across the placid water lapping the beach at Khao Lak, Thailand. The view calms the mind, quiets the heart and and packs in the tourists at posh resorts.

At least it used to pack them in, before the tsunami roared ashore last December.

"It's hard to believe an ocean that beautiful could cause so much destruction," missionary Mark Caldwell said, gazing wistfully toward the horizon.

Caldwell stood within walking distance of the places where at least 1,000 bodies were recovered after the Indian Ocean tsunami thundered north into the Andaman Sea and laid waste to this stretch of Thailand's southern coastline.

Rebuilding continues to move ahead in the beach resort areas. But in the coastal town of Khao Lak, where the torrent destroyed eight of every 10 buildings, recovery proceeds more slowly. Half-buried in the mud surrounding buildings in various stages of collapse or reconstruction, a child's flip-flop pokes out here, a dress there, a lonely mattress lies just beyond. A 40-foot fishing boat perches inside the ruins of one house-200 yards from shore.



This "Sea Gypsy" child on one of southern Thailand's countless islands shows a sure sign of malnutrition with her reddish brown hair. She's also hungry to know the love of Jesus.

Caldwell serves as a Southern Baptist missionary strategy coordinator "on loan" from his work among the 18 million Isaan people of northeastern Thailand. Earlier this year, he and his wife, Helen, had just returned from United States assignment when an urgent call came for them to coordinate tsunami relief ministry in Thailand's southern region for up to six months.

They hadn't even unpacked. The Isaan work demanded attention. The Caldwells hesitated briefly, then accepted the temporary job.

"I've always rooted for the underdog," he said. "I've always been interested in helping folks who are down and out, and I like to bring people together."

“Underdog” applies to the Isaan, a historically oppressed people the Caldwells first encountered in their previous assignment planting churches in Bangkok. It definitely applies to many of southern Thailand's tsunami survivors.

In the Khao Lak area, some 5,000 people still live in temporary camps. Most lost their homes—and their livelihoods—to the tsunami. Caldwell and several missionary colleagues have coordinated Baptist volunteer groups delivering food to camp residents. They've provided aid for Thais to rebuild homes and build new fishing boats so they can get back to work. They've committed to rebuild two schools in the region.

But Caldwell also asks: What will it take to see church-planting movements, led by Thai believers, spread across southern Thailand?

When the tsunami hit, one Southern Baptist missionary couple lived in the region—home to 5 million people. Only one Baptist church exists in the six coastal provinces most affected by the tsunami. As in the rest of Thailand, less than 1 percent of the population is Christian. The vast majority of the people see Christianity as a Western religion.



Missionary Mark Caldwell helps deliver fresh meat in one of many camps built for Thais who lost their homes to last year's tsunami.

American volunteers have put a compassionate Christian face on relief efforts.

“But the real goal is to get Thai Christians involved and out front,” Caldwell said. “That breaks down the barrier that to be a Thai, you are a Buddhist.”

Or a Muslim, or an animist, like many of the fishermen who live along the Thai coast.

To that end, Caldwell looks for Thai Christians to aid and encourage, such as Sian Buaket, a pastor in the coastal city of Ranong. Sian had longed for years to reach out to the Mogen people—commonly known as “Sea Gypsies”—living on nearby islands dotting the coastline. But he lacked the opportunity and the resources.

The tsunami provided both.



Volunteers from the
Bangkla Baptist Clinic teach
Mogen ("Sea Gypsy")
children about Jesus while
medical workers hold an
open-air clinic nearby.

Some of Sian's church youth went out fishing not long after the tsunami. They came upon a Mogen fishing village on an island not far from Ranong and learned of the villagers' plight.

The Mogen people—who are citizens of neither Thailand nor neighboring Myanmar (Burma)—are accustomed to poverty, discrimination and exploitation by criminal “godfathers” in the fishing industry.

When the tsunami came, the Mogen villagers ran to higher ground. They returned to find their long fishing boats on the shore—battered to kindling wood. Local authorities provided a few bags of rice. When villagers appealed for more aid, they were denied. “You're not Thai citizens,” they were told. Without fishing boats or the money to buy new ones, they faced starvation. Some of the villagers went to coastal cities to look for work or beg.

Sian and his people began taking food to the village. Young people began visiting to tell the Mogen children about Jesus. Church members started an open-air school to teach Mogen adults to read. With Caldwell's help—and tsunami aid funds from Baptists in the United States—Sian has helped the villagers buy boats.

“We're better fishermen than the Thai,” a village leader proudly claimed. “We'll survive. We just needed our boats back.”

But they needed something more—Jesus Christ.

The Mogen villagers had long lived with no faith besides animism and a fear of evil spirits. When family members died, they were taken to another island for burial. Loved ones grieved without hope.

That's all changing.



Physician Larry Rodgers examines a child at a medical clinic in an island village off the coast of southern Thailand. It was the first time a doctor had set foot in the village.

“We were like an empty glass; now it is full,” a village leader said. “The tsunami was a tragedy, but for us it brought new hope. If it had never come, we wouldn't know about Jesus.”

On a recent visit, a team of missionaries and Thais from the Bangkla Baptist Clinic—joined by Tennessee Baptist volunteers—arrived in boats packed with medical supplies. It was the first time a doctor had entered the village. The team treated the sick, vaccinated children against diseases, installed a pump to give the village running water and helped Sian's church members share the gospel. Twenty-eight villagers became followers of Christ.

As the team left, tin roofs of village huts glinted like trash can lids in the sun. Sadly, the Mogen people have been cast aside like human refuse for so long. Not anymore.

“They want hope,” Caldwell said. “Who's going to share it with them?”

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