

# **STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING LAOTIANS**

**IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA**

**12/1/04**

## **PROFILE OF LAOTIANS**

### ***General Background***

“Laotian” is the language and nationality of people from Laos. Laos is a tropical country covered with mountains and thick forests, slightly larger than the state of Utah. It is the only nation in the Southeast Asian peninsula that is landlocked and is bordered by Myanmar (Burma) and China on the north, Cambodia to the south, Vietnam to the east, and Thailand to the west. Its capital city is Vientiane.

Despite being landlocked, it does lie in the Mekong Basin, between the Mekong River and the Annamite Range. The Mekong River is the chief means of transportation in Laos and its water enriches the country’s fertile lowland.

Laos, once called “the land of a million elephants” was split up around 1700 into a variety of principalities, but more recently has been French protectorate, an occupied territory of Japan, again came under French dominance, and in 1954 became an independent nation under the Pathet Lao communist party, very much dominated later by Vietnam brand of communism. The current government does not legally allow any missionary work from foreign countries to enter the country, but welcomes any humanitarian aid, such as help concerning technology for agriculture, building schools, bridges, and other economic means.

Almost 6 million people live in Laos. The official language is Lao or “Laotian” Despite where the Lao ancestors came from, the people of Laos belong to two language groups—the Silo-Tibetan from China and the Mon-Khmer from Southeast Asia. The Silo-Tibetan group includes the Lao, Hmong (Meo), and Tai people. The Mon-Khmer includes the Kha peoples. As a result, the people of Laos are made up of more than 60 different ethnic groups. The people of each ethnic group have their own language, beliefs and ways of life. About 60% of the people practice Buddhism and the remaining 40% practice animism, Islam and Christianity.

In 1975, Laos, like Cambodia and Vietnam, were taken over by Communists (the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party). Although there was no genocide like in Cambodia, many Laotian people did not like the communist regime and fled to the neighboring countries, such as Thailand and mainland China. Unfortunately, those who fled to China found their way back to Laos or to Thailand since China is also a communist country. Before coming to the United States, Canada, Australia, or Europe, most Laotians had to spend some time in refugee camps. While in the camps, many people had a chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ through missionaries. Though some were already Christians before leaving the country, most were still Buddhist. Because many Buddhists wanted to come to the United States or other countries, they often passed themselves off as Christian too. Christianity had gone to Laos for many years through the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church and through the Swiss Brethren Evangelical Mission when the country was under the monarchy. But today Christianity is still foreign to many Laotian people.

### ***Immigration Patterns***

By 1979 many refugees were coming to the United States including the Lao Cambodians who escaped from Cambodia but spoke Laotian. Currently, Laotians are scattered all around the United States and Canada, now numbering around one quarter of a million. There is strong representation in cities such as

Fresno, Modesto, Merced, Redding, Sacramento, Santa Rosa, and Visalia in California; Elgin and Chicago in Illinois; Memphis and Nashville in Tennessee; Burlington in North Carolina and Toronto, in Canada.

Laotians are often open, kind, courteous, and friendly. They believe life is to be enjoyed and that patience, modesty, and humility should be pursued. Laotians have close families and it is common for several generations to live in the same house. To have children is considered an honor and parents endeavor to provide for their children throughout their entire life. In return, great respect is shown toward parents and the elderly. While the men are commonly responsible for providing, they say the women have the real power in the home. There are now two Laotian generations in North America. Those who came into North America in the 1970s now have children who are assimilated into the Western society. Many of these children are college graduates.

## ***Nazarene Ties***

Many Laotians have settled in Long Beach, California. In 1979, two young Lao Cambodian girls, through bus ministry, attended Long Beach First Church of the Nazarene. Out of this emerged Lao Cambodian and Khmer Cambodian ministries. In cooperation with French-language and Asia-assigned missionaries, ministries and training opportunities have been opened up to a variety of Laotian ethnic groups, including Lao, Khmer, and Mien cultures.

Currently there are now five Laotian congregations, one in Long Beach, two on the Sacramento district, one in Santa Rosa and the other in Burlington, North Carolina.

# **The Missional Task of Evangelizing Laotians**

## **THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE DISTRICT IS TO**

- Consult with other Laotians leaders within the Church of the Nazarene.
- Develop leadership training materials contextualized for Laotians, with perhaps some curriculum in their languages.

## **THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO**

- Determine the need by locating Laotian students in public schools, Laotian associations/organization, public health assistance, Laotian churches/missions, Laotian Buddhist temples, Laotian businesses.
- Establish simple priorities by asking the following questions: “Are there believers among the people?” “Are there Christian leaders among the people?” “What are the people looking for in a church?” “Would they attend a Bible study? If so, what type?” “What advice should be given to a pastor wanting to start a church in the area?” “Are the youth responsive?” “What are the community’s greatest needs?”
- Develop a partnership with a host congregation that would help the Laotian ministry to “Know how to accept Christ as Lord and Savior;” “Understand what it means to be Nazarene;” “Adjust to the American culture;” “Assist with Laotian classes and services.”
- Be a witness to Laotians in the community.
- Befriend a Laotian family. Seek to involve them in social events, sports, church activities as well as invite them to your home.
- Sponsor a refugee or a refugee family and assist them in participating in the American way of life.
- Provide a Bible study. Obtain Scriptures in their languages. Enlist and/or equip someone to lead the group. Alternate between English and their languages.
- Offer literacy classes. Give the opportunity for their own languages to be taught to their children.

- Create a library of materials in their languages. Translate basic materials that introduce the Church of the Nazarene to Laotians. The Thai and Lao languages have a similarity so that, in the absence of Lao materials, Thai can be useful.
- Offer to Laotian leadership some assistance for their “mission-type” ministries. Pastors will necessarily be bivocational. However, assistance with housing, health insurance, scholarship aid, meeting space, and office assistance could be very helpful.
- Offer translation and translation equipment for multicultural gatherings.
- Commemorate important Laotian holidays or hold cultural events open to the public.
- Welcome Laotian children into the program of the church, youth camps, etc.

