

Laos Region

KHAMSAY PHETCHAREUN

Khamsay Phetchareun, a native Lao and naturalized Australian citizen, was the first Lao to be ordained an Adventist minister. Ordained in 1996, he has served as a church pastor in the Greater Sydney Conference and Northern Australian Conference, and as theology lecturer at Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand. He is also the former head of the theology department at Fulton College, Fiji Islands, and a former ADRA associate director in Myanmar. Since 2011, he has served the Laos Region as a supervisor and trainer.

Laos Region is a part of Southeast Asia Union Mission in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Its headquarters is in Say Vientiane, Laos.

Territory: Lao People's Democratic Republic.

As of June 2019, the Laos Region (formerly the Lao Attached Field) had four ordained ministers, four organized churches, ten companies, and twenty-nine worship groups with a total of 1,373 members scattered throughout thirteen Laos's eighteen provinces.¹

Overview of Country

Laos is a landlocked, mountainous Southeast Asian country with a land size of 230,800 square kilometers (89,112 square miles). It is bordered by China in the north, Cambodia in the south, Myanmar in the northwest, Thailand in the west, and Vietnam in the east. As of June 2019, Laos had a population of 7,167,721.² Buddhism is the main religion in Laos (64.7 percent of the population) and is practiced mostly by the low-landers in Laos. Christianity remains the minority, with 1.7 percent, and is practiced mainly by a few groups of tribal people. According to the Joshua Project study, over 83 percent of 134 people groups in Laos are still unreached.³ The mid-landers and high-landers are mainly animists. The exact number of ethnic groups in Laos cannot be said here since there are discrepancies in many researches and reports. Some researches put the number of tribal groups in Laos to over 240. However, the Laos government prefers grouping those who speak similar dialects together, thus reducing the tribal group number significantly to 49.⁴ Nevertheless, whether there are 49 or 240 tribes, one thing is for sure, there are still too many unreached groups of people in Laos.

Origins

The Adventist message came to Laos through two methods. First, a pastoral missionary couple, Richard and Jean Hall, who entered Laos in 1957, worked in northern Laos in the province of Luang Namtha. Second, a Chinese couple, Cai Xin and Liang Yuezhen, moved from Cambodia to resettle in Vientiane in 1964. While working at a

Crocodile shirt factory in Vietnam, Cai Xin accepted the Adventist message from his boss. He later moved to Cambodia and then to Laos, carrying with him the Adventist message. After settling in Vientiane, he started sharing his faith with his fellow Chinese community in the city. Soon a small group of believers was formed and worshiped at his house until the arrival of Pastor Angel G. Biton in 1968.⁵

Foreign Missionary Era (1957-1975)

Although the Christian message was introduced to Laos much earlier, Catholicism in 1885 and Evangelicalism in 1890, the Adventist message was introduced to Laos much later by Richard C. Hall and his wife, who began their work in Luang Namtha Province, Northern Laos, in 1957. They brought along a young Thai man, Mun Lansri, who would later become one of the most faithful and successful pastors in Thailand. When Richard Hall went for a furlough, a Filipino pastor, Abel Pangan, was called to join them in 1959.

Mun Lansri once spoke about his early experience in Laos. Upon leaving his hometown, Ubol Ratchathani, Thailand, by train, he travelled to Nakhon Ratchasima and Nong Khai before joining the Halls in Vientiane. Together, Mun Lansri and the Halls flew bi-plane, which could only hold three passengers, to Luang Prabang where they stayed overnight before continuing to Luang Namtha. After arriving in Luang Namtha, a very small town, they quickly looked for a place to stay. They rented a small traditional house and began looking for opportunities to share the gospel. It just so happened that there was a large festival in Luang Namtha in which many tribes had come together to celebrate. Mun Lansri particularly noticed one group of people who were dressed up in colorful clothes. These were the Hmong people. He approached and asked them where they lived. When they told him that they lived over the mountains, he asked if he could go back to their village with them. They said that he could if he wanted to, so Mun Lansri and Dick Hall decided to accompany them to the village, which was a three day walk through the mountains. Once they were in the village, they spoke to the elders, mentioning that they would like to offer their children education. They were allowed to choose twelve young boys to take back with them to Luang Namtha where they built a small classroom and hired Seng Nuane, a female Lao teacher, to teach the children.

Not long after, rumors spread in the village where the boys came from, that the foreigners had taken the boys to eat them. The rumors said that the wife of the foreigner would use oil extracted from humans to cook. Supposedly, the human oil would be yellow in color, quite different from coconut oil, which is white in color. Suspicious, the elders sent some people to observe Mrs. Hall while she cooked. They saw that she used yellow oil. Concluding the rumors must be true, representatives from the village showed up to take the boys back to their village. Only two older boys decided to stay. One of them was Hou Seng Yang, who would later become the first Hmong pastor in Thailand, to whom he brought the gospel. Hou Seng Yang told the representatives that Adventists did not even eat animal meat, but only vegetables, how could they possibly eat humans? But the Hmong did not listen to him; nevertheless, he and another friend decided to stay.

After the Hmong boys were removed from their school, Mun Lansri and Dick Hall went back to the village in hopes of explaining the truth to the children and persuading the elders to allow their children to return to school. They considered it one of God's providences that the day they arrived at the village was a day of sacrifice; the majority of Hmong people are Animist and would periodically offer sacrifices to the spirits. The specific festival on the day of their visit honored a sky god. Mun Lansri asked how they found this sky god, and they told him that one day a villager went hunting in the forest. As he looked up to shoot a bird, he saw a sky god which descended from heaven and rested on a tree. He invited the sky god to the village and placed it in a jar, and each year they would offer sacrifices to the sky god. Mun Lansri spoke to the people, saying that he wanted to open the jar and see the sky god. The elders said that if he would guarantee their safety, then he could open it. Praying to God, Mun Lansri decided to open the jar. People were afraid and some even ran away at the moment he opened the jar. He put his hand inside the jar and brought out the object that they had been worshipping for several years. It was just colorful pieces of paper, remnants of a hot-air balloon released by the Buddhists during their hot-air balloon festival. A piece of writing still attached to it, read "whoever finds this balloon and takes it back to the temple will receive an award." Mun Lansri then stood up and told the people that they had been worshipping a piece of paper all this time. Their so-called "sky god" was no god, but just a piece of paper. He then began telling them about the true God, the Creator and Savior of mankind. The whole village gave their lives to Jesus, and the boys were allowed to return to school.⁶

The early pioneers used both medicine and education to reach the people of Luang Namtha. Among the many tribes in Luang Namtha, the Hmongs were the most receptive to the message. By 1961, a church was organized with some forty-four members, who were mostly from the Hmong tribe with a few members from the Tai Dam tribe. Adventist missionaries were able to work for just four years before they had to be evacuated to Thailand when the Indochina war, which started in 1946 and ended in 1989, reached their town. Their church building was overrun by the military and later destroyed by the war.⁷

Some of the twelve school boys also escaped to Thailand with the missionaries and settled in the bordering town of Chiang Khong district, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. The missionaries built a little bamboo school at Chiang Khong District and educated the boys there.⁸ Other members from Luang Namtha also escaped from the war and went to resettle at the Laos side of the River at Nam Yawn Village (now called Lao Luang Village), in Bokeo Province about twenty miles north of Houay Say City. In 1969, they built a church in the village. Hou Seng Yang, a young Hmong man and one of the twelve who were educated at that little school in Thailand, later returned to minister to this group until the war again reached the village in 1973, which resulted in the change of government in 1975.⁹ After 1975, the country of Laos fell under Communist government and no foreign missionaries were allowed into Laos. The young church at Nam Yawn was left to fend for itself without outside assistance until 1997, when the Southeast Asia Union Mission made connection with the Lao Adventist church in Laos again. Twenty-four years without spiritual leadership took its toll on the remaining members at Nam Yawn.

When the work resumed in 1997, only a few members—about four or five families—were found worshipping there in the old church building.

Work Began in Vientiane (1964-1975)

While the war raged in the north, the capital city of Vientiane remained relatively safe. It was at this time that the Chinese couple, Cai Xin and his wife, Liang Yuezhen, moved from Cambodia and resettled in Vientiane, sharing the Adventist message with friends and colleagues. A few years later, a company of Chinese believers was formed. Hearing that there were some Adventists in Vientiane, the Church sent Angel G. Biton from the Philippines to Vientiane in 1968. With the financial support of the Far Eastern Division and Cai Xin, Biton managed to build a church in Vientiane in 1973, which opened with fourteen members who were mainly Chinese migrants.¹⁰ It was providential that the Laos royal government also gave permission to Biton to legally form and operate the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Laos. It was because of that certificate of permission, that the new government also recognized the Seventh-day Adventist Church as one of the three Christian denominations in Laos. The other denominations were the Catholic and Evangelical churches.

Around 1973, Sophol Chaikuea and his wife from Thailand were sent to assist Biton in Vientiane. They were able to work for only two years before the country fell completely to the Communist government in 1975. Both Biton and Sophol had to be evacuated from Laos, leaving behind Adventist members in Vientiane to fend for themselves.¹¹ Thus, after 1975, there were only two small Adventist congregations and two church buildings in Laos, left without pastors and external support of any kind. They were completely cut off from the outside world.

Post-Foreign Missionary Era (1975-1992)

After 1975, religious freedom was severely restricted and support from outside of Laos was barred. Many church buildings and institutions from other denominations were appropriated by the government. However, through miraculous interventions, the two Seventh-day Adventist churches were not seized by the government and very limited religious activities were allowed. The core group of Chinese migrant church members kept the faith alive. Later, they were joined by a young man from the Miso tribe of Northern Myanmar, who also took up a Lao name, Boonsi Sailo. He resided behind the Vientiane church and became its guardian until his death in 2012. In 1990, Mr. Bounma also joined the church and became a leader.

Although the Southeast Asia Union Mission was unable to make contact with Adventists in Laos until 1997, after 1975 the work in Laos was, at least in name, supervised by the Thailand Adventist Mission (TAM). TAM sent Mun Lansri, a former pioneer missionary to Laos, back to Laos in 1992 to serve as an ADRA worker and to work in other capacities. However, due to political restrictions he had very limited influence over the work of the Church in Laos. He returned to Thailand.

Before returning to Thailand, Mun Lansri managed to plant seeds of the gospel in southern Laos. However, that was done ten years after his arrival in Laos. It happened that when he went to southern Laos for an ADRA project, he passed by a village and saw a sign "Christian Village." He was curious about how there came to be a Christian village in the midst of persecution, so he drove his car into the village to see. As his car was approaching on Sunday morning, he found a group of worshippers and stopped his car. The Christians started to run away in all directions, but he shouted to them that he was also a Christian and just wanted to worship with them. They established a connection, and from then on he would go and join their worship services whenever he went to the south. Once, while he was riding with Bouasone Volachit, he shared with him about the Sabbath truth. Bouasone and his wife, Souksavath Volachit, gladly accepted the Sabbath and became the first Adventists in southern Laos. Later, Bouasone introduced Khampasong Khammuenlook, who was from the Yahern tribe and a church leader, to Mun Lansri. After hearing Mun Lansri's teaching, Khampasong and his wife also joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church along with his family members and members of his group at Jiang Say Village. A few years later, he and his wife donated a piece of land to build a church. In 2012, a church building finally began to take shape in his village. Later that year, Khampasong passed away, followed by his wife in the same year. The death of the pastor and his wife shocked the members and the work in that area faced a setback. The church building was completed in 2018 with a new young pastor, freshly graduated from Asia-Pacific International University, Souliphone King-Anong.

In September 1991, Houmphanh Kongsengphengphet, a Lao refugee who resettled in France, felt the call of God to repatriate to Laos with his family of four children. Houmphanh had served as a pastor of a non-denominational church in the Napho Refugee Camp, Nakhon Phanon, Thailand, since 1981 until he resettled in France in 1986. Before going to France, he had accepted the Adventist message through the work of Judy Aitken, of the Adventist Southeast Asia Projects (ASAP), and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church alongside his associates in the Napho Refugee Camp, Khamsay Phetchareun and Thongsouay Sakdarak. In the same year, 1986, Khamsay Phetchareun moved to Australia and Thongsouay to the United States. Khamsay Phetchareun then worked at the Greater Sydney Conference, pioneering the work among the refugees and by July 1987 an Indochinese church at Cabramatta, New South Wales, was established with a majority of the members being Lao and Khmer. He later earned a Bachelor of Theology degree at Avondale College, while still serving at Cabramatta. He graduated in 1993 and continued to pastor the Cabramatta church. He was ordained to the ministry in 1996, making him the first Lao pastor to be ordained to the ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. From 1998 to 2000, he served as the ADRA Myanmar associate country director. In 2001, he served at the Darwin church, Northern Territory. He was then chaplain, church pastor, and lecturer at Mission College, Thailand, from 2002 to 2007. In 2008, he was the head of the Theology Department in Fulton College, Fiji Islands. From 2009-2011 he returned to Australia where he again served the Darwin church, Northern Territory, until he was called back to the Asia-Pacific International University (formerly known as Mission College) in Thailand in 2011. During this time, however, he frequently travelled to Laos to supervise the work there. By June of 2017, he

finally moved to Laos to be with his people and remained there at the time of writing in June 2019. Thonsouay settled in San Diego, California, in the United States and continued serving as a Lao church leader in this area, coordinating the Lao Adventist work in the United States.

After returning from France in 1991, Houmphanh began his ministry as the pastor of the Vientiane Adventist church in which only a few members remained at the time of his arrival. With some financial support from ASAP, Houmphanh worked tirelessly to retain church members and bring in new believers. During this period of time, he suffered many hardships including imprisonment for one year. Through his ministry, more members from the lowland Lao ethnic group were added to the church. Houmphanh also tried to plant a church in his village where he resettled after returning from France. It was a long and difficult process to gain the acceptance of the authorities in his village. Gradually, he was able to hold worship services in his home with his family members and some close friends and relatives. His efforts were gradually rewarded when a church was built on the land that his family donated in March 2015, which became the second church to be built in Vientiane City. This church would also become the first Lao church that contained air-conditioners. The two-story brick church, which cost just over \$30,000, was built mainly with funds given by the Darwin Adventist church, Northern Territory, Australia, which Khamsay Phetchareun had pastored twice. Houmphanh and his family also donated another piece of land adjacent to the church on which a hostel, Roy Fietz Hostel, was built for the sum of \$30,000 given by Gordon and Yvonne Fietz, members of the Darwin church in honor of Gordon's late father, Roy Fietz. By his retirement in 2016, Houmphanh had brought the Lao Adventist Church from a few members to a church that produced seven college-trained young pastors, five college-trained teachers, and a number of workers ready to bring the work of God in Laos to the next level.¹²

During Houmphanh's ministry, a young teacher was also converted, Singkham Vichit, who later was taken to be baptized in Bangkok, Thailand. He was appointed by the Southeast Asia Union Mission to become the first chairman of the Lao Adventist church board with a few members. During this time, the gospel work in Laos was limited to Vientiane. Whereas in other provinces, including Bokeo, where the first Lao Adventist church was built in Nam Yawn Village, conditions were still difficult and persecution continued to be widespread. However, some Hmong believers from other denominations found the Sabbath truth and decided to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. One of those was Sadua Lee, who joined the church in 1992 and later became the most successful evangelist in Laos, introducing many Hmong people to Jesus. His son, Bounthan Lee, was also sent to study theology at Mountain View College, and returned to join the ranks of the new generation pastors in Laos in 2014. His daughter, Khammy Lee, also graduated from Asia-Pacific International University with a degree in English. At the time of writing she was teaching English at one of the church-run language schools in Xieng Khouang Province. Sadua Lee worked in his village in Luang Prabang and converted many of the Hmong tribe. However, persecution there was severe and he was arrested and imprisoned a number of times. Zealous to share the gospel message, he continued to spread the good news of Jesus despite warnings and threats of

imprisonment. In total, he was imprisoned five times and his total time in prison was seven years. His latest detainment was as recent as 2012 when he went to conduct a funeral service for a deceased member at Na Ouan Village, thirteen kilometers south of Luang Prabang City. The Church sent a delegation, including Houmphanh, to negotiate the release of Sadua Lee. It was providential that the director of the religious affairs in Luang Prabang Province was a former classmate of Houmphanh. The negotiation went extremely amicable and Sadua Lee was released. The negotiation was sealed with a meal of friendship and a new understanding was established.¹³ Since then, the work in Luang Prabang has been given special focus by the Lao Attached Field. As of June 2019, six churches have been built, five for the Hmong and one for the Khmu, and more than 250 members have been added to the church in the Luang Prabang Province. A center of influence in the form of an English language school has been established in the city of Luang Prabang, and the work is hoped to become stronger and spread further in that province.

Resumption of Work in Laos (1992-2006)

In Vientiane, during Houmphanh Kongsengphengphet's ministry in the 1990s, another young man by the name of Bounpany Vannady, a former teacher, was converted and received training from Houmphanh. His commitment and faithfulness was recognized, and in 1996 he was sent to study Theology at Mission College (now known as Asia-Pacific International University), Thailand, alongside another young man, a Chinese migrant's son, Phoumsaming Keovanna, who studied a Bachelor of Education. They graduated in 2000, and Bounpany spent the next two years at an internship in Thailand. Bounpany was ordained a few years following his graduation. He later returned to Laos and became the first college trained native church pastor in Vientiane, and in 2006 he was appointed director of the Lao Attached Field (LAF) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church while also continuing to pastor the Vientiane City church. Phoumsaming Keovanna served as an associate secretary. While the two went to study, beginning in 1996, Saisana Oudomsap, son of the first pioneer Chinese migrant Cai Xin, served as the part-time honorary secretary-treasurer and the Lao Adventist Church administration beginning to take shape. Saisana had been serving as a part-time honorary secretary-treasurer while working for a Chinese motor industry. By 2005, through divine calling and revelations, he decided to quit his business and entered into full-time church employment.¹⁴ Thus, the administration began to function somewhat as a church organization.

As time went by, the Laos government began to seek membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community. It also began to relax its persecution of Christians and freedom of worship was granted in some areas where local authorities were more open. Official recognition was given to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and an official seal from the government was also given to the Church. In December 2015, Laos joined ASEAN and a revised law on the management and protection of religious affairs in the Lao PDR was published on March 1, 2017, which appeared to give greater freedom to Christianity and other religions.

The Dawn of Day (2006-2011)

The Lao Seventh-day Adventist church did not organize until Bounpany became president in 2006. However, at that time he was the only college-trained pastor in Laos. During this period, Brian Wilson was appointed by Southeast Asia Union Mission to oversee the work in Laos. However, he was based at Mission College, Thailand, where he worked part time as the translation center director and spent the other half of the time supervising the work in Laos. He focused on training local missionaries and also sent a few young men to study at Mountain View College, Philippines, and Mission College, Thailand. Later, these students would return to serve as pastors and teachers in Laos. Internally, Laos was still very restrictive and the gospel work was only limited to Vientiane, with the exception of southern Laos as mentioned above.

The New Era (2011-Present)

In July 2011, Khamsay Phetchareun was called from Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, where he then served as a pastor, to oversee the work in Laos as supervisor and trainer of the Lao Attached Field. He began focussing on two fundamental areas of work: infrastructure and capacity building. Because of the prohibition on foreign religious workers, Khamsay settled at Asia-Pacific International University (AIU), Thailand, where he worked as a lecturer, but would travel to Laos on a regular basis. On June 15, 2017, he, his wife, and daughter decided to move into Laos and work more closely with the church.

After the arrival of Khamsay Phetchareun, the Adventist Church in Laos took a quantum leap in administration and organization. In administration, a few more workers were gradually added to the workforce and many native students were sent to study at Adventist universities abroad in the Philippines, Thailand, and India. By June 2019, the Laos Region administration had twenty-six regular workers, including nine college-trained native pastors and six college-trained teachers. With the financial help of Southeast Asia Union Mission, supporting ministries organizations, such as ASAP, Crocodile Foundation, the Darwin Seventh-day Adventist church, and many private donors, Laos Region has been able to advance the gospel message into fourteen Laos's eighteen provinces and built permanent church buildings in many of these provinces.

In 2013, the original Lao Luang church building in Bokeo Province that was built in 1969 was renovated and completed. Furthermore, Tongu Lee donated his land, and a church at Huay Din Chi Village, Bokeo Province, was built. Tongu Lee was appointed a district pastor for Bokeo. Later, another church building was also built at Namphed Village under the leadership of Tongu Lee. In 2019, the first church building at Thongnamee Village, Borikhamxay Province, was built for the Khmu tribe, bringing the total number of church building constructed in 2013 to four.

In 2014, the Laos Region's focus shifted to other provinces. A church was built at Vernkham Village, near Vientiane. In southern Laos, at Salavan Province, a church was built for the Ngae tribe. Additionally, a church

was built at Thongnamee, Borikhamxay Province, for the Hmong tribe, making a total number of three churches built in 2014. In 2019, the Laos Region also purchased property in Xieng Khouang Province and sent a pastoral couple, Chi Her and his wife, Sreay Leap Pen, a teacher, to start the work there. The Laos Region's first English language center was organized there and a worship group was formed. As of June 2019, there were over 200 members in Xieng Khouang worshipping in five different groups of house churches.

Luang Prabang Province was finally entered by Adventists in 2015. For many years the Laos Region's attempts to enter Luang Prabang were severely hampered because of persecution. In 2012, Sadua Lee was arrested there when he went to conduct a funeral service for a Christian. However, in 2014 Tong Thor, a Hmong young man who graduated from Mountain View College, Philippines, returned to his hometown in Luang Prabang. He fell in love with a young Christian woman whose father was a village chief of Khok Vah Village. After his marriage, Tong Thor was able to hold worship services in his house. In 2015, a house on a sizable property became available for sale at a very low price in Khok Vah Village only a few steps from Tong Thor's house. The house owner felt that his house was haunted and inauspicious. The house was bought for \$45,000 and used as a place of worship and a language center. In 2018, a two-story building was built next to the pre-existing building; the new building had three classrooms and one teacher's apartment. The pre-existing building was used as the school office and had two teacher's apartments.

In 2016, a plan to build a multipurpose church headquarters building in Vientiane was set in motion. A second Vientiane city church at Dongkhamxang suburb was built and completed at the cost of \$30,000, mostly funded by the help of Khamsay's former church Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia.

In 2017, several churches were built and completed. In Luang Prabang, the Namthouam and Na Ouan churches for the Hmong were completed. The Na Ang church for the Khmu tribe was also completed with a donation from James Lee, a Korean-American pharmacist. Most important of all was the completion of the multipurpose church headquarters building in Vientiane, which was completed and dedicated on December 9, 2017. This \$1.3 million building houses a church with seating capacity for 400, Laos Region offices, five classrooms, a bookstore, and more.

In 2018, a church for the Hmong at Mok Jong Village, Luang Prabang, was completed. Also, the church for the Yahern (Nya Hon) tribe at Jiang Say, Champasak, which began construction in 2012, was finally completed. In 2019, another school building at Khok Vah, Luang Prabang, was also built and completed.

In 2019, Pha Luang church in Luang Prabang was built and completed. A church in Oudomxay Province, at Phou Kor Village, was also built and completed. Early in 2019, the second language school in Pakse City, Champasak, and a third language school in Luang Prabang were completed and opened.

As of June 2019, the Adventist message has been preached and groups of believers are worshipping in fourteen out of the eighteen provinces of Laos, nineteen church buildings were complete: three in Bokeo Province, six in Luang Prabang, four in Vientiane, two in Borikhamxay, one in Xieng Khouang, two in Pakse, and one in

Saravanh. The Church also operated three language centers and one more center was expected to be opened by the end of 2019. Twenty-four hectares of land had also been purchased for the first Lao Adventist Academy, two cemeteries established, a youth hostel opened, and a multi-functional and multi-storied headquarters and church in Vientiane—a testimony of strength and stability of the Seventh-day Adventist church organization in Laos. The Lao Region had twenty-six regular workers. These included eight college-trained pastors, five non-pastoral departmental workers, two janitors, and five English language teachers. It also had six students studying at Mountain View College, Philippines, two studying at Adventist University of the Philippines (AUP), two at Spicer University, India, and eight at Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand—all future workers of the Lao Adventist Mission.

The Lao Seventh-day Adventist Church is still facing many challenges such as lack of infrastructure and human resources. The diversity of the population of Laos remains a big challenge. Many of the tribes do not speak, read, or write Lao, which is the national language. Communicating the gospel message to these different tribes is difficult. Besides restrictions from the authorities, many of these tribes do not have a written language. So far, the Lao Adventist Church has reached only nine out of forty-nine officially recognized ethnicities: Lao, Tai Dam, Tai Nyor, Hmong, Khmu, Ta Oi, Laven, Nya Ngon (Ya Hern), Ngae, and Chinese migrants.

With limited religious freedom, the Adventist Church in Laos focuses on education, health, community development, and media for evangelism. It is committed to use Jesus's method alone to reach out and win souls for the Kingdom. By 2019, it operates three language centers in three major cities of Laos: Xieng Khouang, Luang Prabang, and Pakse, and the 4th center in Vientiane is pending on permit. It will operate a bookstore in Vientiane to support the literature evangelist work. And by 2025, it hopes to establish the first Adventist Academy in Laos on the 24-hectare land it has purchased in 2017. Sensing the urgency of finishing the work to hasten the coming of the Lord, the Lao SDA Church aims to reach all 18 provinces of Laos with the gospel message by 2025. As of June 2019, there are still 4 provinces remaining to be reached. The Laos Region staff are praying for the latter rain to be poured upon the Lao young men and women to carry out the work of preaching the gospel entrusted to all Adventists by the Lord Himself.

Institutions

As the Adventist work in Laos only recently became organized, it supports very few institutions. The multipurpose Laos Region headquarters in Vientiane dedicated on December 9, 2017, is the region's most important building. This multipurpose building houses a church with seating capacity of 400, Laos Region offices, language school, and Adventist Book Center. The \$1.3 million three story building stands in the middle of the city only a few minute walk from the center of the city, the Victory Monument. Twenty more church buildings have also been built in various places throughout the country. At the same time, Laos Region operates three language schools, with a fourth one about open.

Church Administrative Units

The Lao Seventh-day Adventist church did not take shape until the year 2000 when the first native Lao, Bounpany Vannady, was sent to study Theology at the then Mission College, now Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand, and came back as its first college trained pastor and became president (director) of the Lao Attached Field (LAF) in 2006, later changed into Lao Region in 2017. He has continued to serve in that capacity until now, June 2019.

Important Points in Membership

The membership of the Lao Seventh-day Adventist Church has fluctuated throughout the years due to membership audits, false reports, and political and social forces. Below is the official report of membership from Phoumsaming Keovanna, Laos Region associate secretary.¹⁵

In 1961, there were forty-four members when Dick Hall built the first church in Luang Namtha. When the war reached them, the church was destroyed and members scattered. In 1968, the refugees from Luang Namthat who settled at Nam Yawn Village (now Lao Luang Village), near Huay Say, Bokeo Province, built a church, but there is no record of how many members were there. During the Indochina War, no record kept and how many Adventists were left in the country was unknown until 1996 when membership was recorded again.

In 1996, there were 25 church members.

In 1997, there were 85 church members.

In 1998, there were 96 church members.

In 1999, there were 151 church members.

In 2000, there were 470 church members.

Year 2001, church members 510 persons.

Year 2002, church members 594 persons.

Year 2003, church members 649 persons.

Year 2004, church members 407 persons.

Year 2005, church members 898 persons.

Year 2006, church members 510 persons.

Year 2007, church members (no report).

Year 2008, church members 1865 persons.

Year 2009, church members 1742 persons.

Year 2010, church members 1931 persons.

Year 2011, church members 1938 persons.

Year 2012, church members 2052 persons.

Year 2013, church members 2139 persons.

Year 2014, church members 899 persons.

Year 2016, church members 875 persons.

Year 2017, church members 1443 persons.

Year 2018, church members 1429 persons.

Year 2019, church members 1373 persons.

Effects of Political Developments on Adventist work

Although the Laos government officially recognizes the Seventh-day Adventist Church as one of the three Christian denominations in Laos and gave the church an official seal, the church does not have a legal status and cannot legally own properties or vehicles. The government also requires all churches to be registered, but has made the process of registration almost impossible. Church leaders visiting and preaching at churches in other provinces must have a letter of permission from the religious affairs department of the central government. House churches are harassed and told to stop worshipping in various places. Former Aminists or Buddhists who become Christians are discriminated against, or even told to leave the villages or denied citizenship rights. Arrests of Christians are common. Three American Christians were detained in Luang Namtha in April 2019 for distributing Christian materials.¹⁶ These restrictions and persecutions have severely hampered the work of the gospel in Laos. Nevertheless, the Lord has empowered the native workers to do all they can to advance the work. Wherever there are good relationships between the church and the local authorities, the church work rapidly spreads. At the same time, where restrictions and persecutions are severe, the church work is very limited.

Challenges to Mission and What Remains to be Done

The Adventist Church in Laos faces many challenges. With very limited religious freedom and restricted movement, it is extremely difficult to spread the good news to all people groups of Laos. Finding dedicated native young men and women, and training them to become faithful workers for the Lord is a significant challenge. Another challenge is that most church members are poor and live in rural areas scattered around the

country. This makes ministering to them very difficult and costly; thus, placing a huge financial burden on the Church.

List of the Lao Church Leaders

Dick Hall (1957-1960), Angel Biton (1968-1975), Sophol Chaikuea (1973-1975), Singkham Vichit (1996-2006), Bounpany Vanndy (2006-present).

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 12. Khamsay Phetchareun's recollection, June 4, 2019.
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