

Site Visit and Interview: Deeper Life Church

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Site Visit and Interview Background

The focus of this paper is on Deeper Life Church (DLC), a bi-lingual (Thai and English) church in Bangkok, Thailand. It is located in the heart of Bangkok in a neighborhood called Samyan. Because it's been my home church for the past four years, I've visited frequently every Sunday and throughout the week for ministry events and meetings. As for the pastor interviewed, his name is Tou Lee Thao and he's a Hmong-American missionary who planted the church back in 2017.

DLC's Vision & Mission

Tou Lee and his family were first sent to Bangkok in 2011 by the Christian and Missionary Alliance as Envision site coordinators. They started an English Corner to outreach to nearby university students and then launched a Bible study in their home as a way to evangelize, fellowship, and worship God with local Thais. The Bible study eventually outgrew their living room and became an official church plant via a partnership with a Christian cafe called Entrance Coffeehouse & Studio. True to its roots, DLC's core vision and mission is for new and old believers to grow deeper in love with Jesus together, and to develop passionate disciples of Jesus who multiply and make more disciples, thus fulfilling the Great Commission.¹ The church operates as an intimate, warm, and inviting community with deeply missional values – there is a high emphasis on doing life together as a family of Christ (going deep with each other and God) *and* creating non-believer friendly spaces for Thais to encounter Jesus and the gospel (going wide and building Kingdom disciples).

DLC's Social Analysis

To this day, the church gathers in the multi-purpose coffee shop, which serves as a business, music studio, and shared community space. While DLC is uniquely placed in central Bangkok across the street from a large mall, amid small businesses, street vendors, and a Buddhist temple, it is also strategically located near Chulalongkorn University, one of

¹ Matthew 28:18-20, NIV.

the top universities in Thailand. As such, Tou Lee believes God planted DLC in this urban area to reach students and young professionals with the gospel. Overall, 93.5% of the population identifies as Buddhist, while only 1.1% are Christian, so the harvest is plentiful.²

The community surrounding the church is predominantly monoethnic and Thai, however, the social landscape is quite diverse – besides university students in dorms, there are also business owners and low-income families all living in close proximity to each other. Regarding economic issues in the community, both the church and residents are renting property owned by Chulalongkorn University, but rent has become increasingly overpriced. The university has been raising rent year after year due to gentrification and redevelopment plans, causing a steep decline in both job and housing security. For example, small, longtime mom-and-pop shops are involuntarily shut down and pushed out of the neighborhood. Likewise, due to a lack of affordable housing, many low-income families are displaced and forced to search for cheaper housing on the outskirts of the city or move back to rural provinces. What's more, many of these families have young children who struggle academically and have low literacy and limited access to educational opportunities. The children attend a local Buddhist school and are often seen playing in the streets on school days without much supervision as guardians are preoccupied with making ends meet.

DLC's Theological Reflection and Formation

In a gentrifying neighborhood that is relatively transient, with students temporarily staying and leaving after graduation, new businesses moving in, and vulnerable families moving out, Tou Lee's hope is that DLC would stay put, hold space, and remain rooted in the surrounding neighborhood as shalom bearers – bearing God's presence and sharing the gospel amidst the messiness. When asked about core biblical foundations that shape DLC's urban theology, Tou Lee's principles were all deeply missional. He asserts that DLC's biblical

² "Thailand Population 2023," United Nation World Populations Prospects 2022, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.findeasy.in/population-of-thailand/>.

principles are not necessarily unique to an urban context, but they are foundational to him as a person, and thus, the church. Because DLC is planted in an urban area with very specific social realities, the way these principles are applied in ministry has a very unique shape and form compared to a rural or suburban ministry.

The first Scripture that is foundational to DLC's urban theology is Matthew 22:37-39, when Jesus lays out the Greatest Commandment, commanding his followers to love God with all their hearts, minds, and souls, and their neighbors as themselves.³ The theme of love is evident in this command and the resulting principle is straightforward – loving God involves complete surrender, and loving God is inextricably connected to loving other people. We do not get to pick and choose who to love – Jesus commands us simply to love; this includes people we may or may not like, and those who are not easy to love. DLC's location in the densely populated Samyan neighborhood positions the church next to a myriad of neighbors from all strata of society. Whether a wealthy university student or a struggling young widow with two kids walks through the door, Tou Lee asserts that the church will receive them just the same and share the love of Christ no matter their background.

Another key Scripture that has shaped DLC's urban theology is Matthew 28:16-20, which outlines the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."⁴ Key biblical themes are witness, evangelism, and discipleship. The underlying principle is deeply missional – all followers of Christ are called to tell people from all nations about the good news of Jesus and to develop new, faithful disciples for the Kingdom of God. We are not to keep this good news to ourselves. Tou Lee also emphasized Paul's command in Acts 1:8 to emphasize the importance of going wide beyond geographical and cultural borders to share the hope of Christ – we are to be witnesses

³ Matthew 22:37-39, NIV.

⁴ Matthew 28:16-20, NIV.

to the ends of the earth.⁵ In the early years of the church, Tou Lee focused on ministering to Thai university students and primarily evangelized on the Chulalongkorn University campus. However, he soon discovered that God's heart and desire for Kingdom restoration reached far beyond the walls of the college campus to the lesser-known corners of the wider community. As a result, Tou Lee started expanding DLC's focus to outreach to low-income families who live in the alleys right outside the church. Moreover, as Bangkok is a large, cosmopolitan city, there are some ex-pats (i.e. from Singapore, England, India, etc.) who are keen to join DLC, and Tou Lee is mindful of investing in their discipleship and spiritual growth as well.

Lastly, Tou Lee highlighted Mark 10:45 as a final core tenant of the church – “for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”⁶ The prominent biblical theme is service, and the principle is that true greatness is rooted in being like a lowly and humble servant. This is a picture of Christ's upside-down Kingdom, where ministering to the needs of others is what pleases the Lord. When Tou Lee and his family first moved to Bangkok, their home was an open home where they frequently hosted Sunday services, offered meals, and led bible studies. To this day, DLC's partnership with Entrance Coffeehouse & Studio is rooted in a heart to serve. As opposed to a traditional business model that seeks to earn prestige and profit, the ultimate goal of the coffee shop is to be a safe and inviting entry point for non-believers to later organically connect with the church community.

DLC's Theological Implementation Approach and Practice

DLC's theological reflection on loving God and loving neighbor forms the basis of the church's anchor group ministry – these are intimate groups for the church and non-believers to grow deeper in their relationship with each other and Jesus. In a densely populated city like Bangkok, it is not uncommon to be among a crowd and yet feel lonely. These anchor groups are designed to be like a small family where anybody can join, open up,

⁵ Acts 1:8, NIV.

⁶ Mark 10:45, NIV.

and experience a sense of belonging and acceptance. Anchor groups often include sharing a meal in a home to build an atmosphere of love, authenticity, and vulnerability, where the group can rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The goal is to help people become more aware of Jesus' love and care in their everyday stories and experiences.

Moreover, in response to the Great Commission, many of DLC's urban ministries are rooted in relational evangelism. For example, the church hosts Game Nights, English Corners, and interest groups (i.e. running, baking, watercolor, etc.) to build relationships with students and young professionals in a fun and welcoming environment. These events are gateways for non-believers to taste and see what Christian community is like, and eventually plug into anchor or church to encounter Jesus in a deeper way. In fact, one Thai non-believer, who was a regular at Game Night, eventually came to faith! In line with Jesus' command to make disciples, Tou Lee is very intentional about leadership development. This Thai Christian is now a church leader and attending Bible college with support from the church.

Lastly, in connection with the biblical principle of service, DLC started a Sunday School to share the gospel with the neighborhood youth, as well as to provide a safe communal space where they can learn and play. Through DLC's long-standing relationship with the kids, the parents have also developed trust and become comfortable with problem-solving issues around job security, health, and finances with the church leaders. For instance, due to the kids' lack of educational support and parental guidance, DLC partners with an organization that offers after-school homework help, English lessons, and mentoring.

Personal Reflections on DLC's Urban Theology

Compared to the theological framework we've been learning in class, I found Tou Lee's slightly different. Whereas we generally begin the pastoral spiral by analyzing social realities → theological reflection → theological implementation, Tou Lee's starting point for his urban theology was his theological reflection → social realities → theological implementation. He first identified timeless Scriptures that are foundational to his system of

beliefs (i.e. Great Commandment, Great Commission, etc.), and then examined the social realities around DLC to later guide his urban ministry approach. As per our class discussion, I'm learning that following the "doing theology framework" is not necessarily a linear process – rather it is a continuum with multiple entry points. As long as we faithfully reflect on what's going on, what God has to say about it, and what God wants us to do about it, we will have covered all our bases when forming our own urban theology.

Overall, I find DLC's urban theology coherent and relevant to its unique context in central Bangkok. The church's deeply relational ministry approach all boils back down to the original vision and mission to be a family that grows deeper in love with Jesus together and makes disciples of all nations. What's more, the biblical principles of loving God and loving neighbor, sacrificial service, and missions run through the veins of every ministry (i.e. small groups, affinity groups, game nights, etc.).

At the same time, some urban issues around the church remain untackled, namely job insecurity and lack of affordable housing. Tou Lee did mention that DLC, as a small church with minimal manpower and resources, cannot possibly resolve all social issues, so the church has to be strategic in pursuing what God is specifically calling them to do. I believe one way to be even more strategic in DLC's urban ministry approach is to examine what Scripture says about housing, employment, and security. From there, I think the church will be in a better position to develop ministry responses that are both targeted and biblical. For instance, regarding the theme of housing, we know God desires everyone to have a right to home ownership, safety, and flourishing.⁷ To participate in God's vision for housing justice, DLC can potentially engage with policymakers who advocate for secure housing via subsidies and cheap loans for low-income families who can then buy or lease land, and build or upgrade their homes.

⁷ Micah 4:4; 2 Kings 18:31; Is. 36:16; Zech. 3:10, NIV.

Works Cited

“Population of Thailand 2023: Religion in Thailand.” 2023. Find Easy. United Nation World Populations Prospects 2022; Thai Census. January 16.
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