

Theological Paper: Youth in Bangkok's Largest Slum, Khlong Toey

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Description of Chosen Urban Community and Focal Group

The focus of this paper is on the low-income community living in Bangkok's largest slum, Khlong Toey – which translates to “pandanus tree canal.” This particular slum is very densely populated, housing about 100,000 people within one square kilometer, and built on low-lying swamp land. As this plot of land officially belongs to the Port Authority of Thailand, very few residents are legal homeowners even if multi-generational families have lived in the same home for decades. For some historical context, poor rural migrants relocated from all over Thailand to Khlong Toey back in the 1950s, in search of construction work because cheap labor was needed in the capital at the time.¹ As an incentive, the city established a low-rental system so laborers could afford to live and work on the land. Even after the low-cost rental program ceased and projects were completed, many living in the makeshift communities decided to stay and take on manual labor at the port, the wet market, or nearby oil refineries. Past eviction efforts have failed, as landowners and employers enjoy having cheap labor at their fingertips (i.e. maids, sanitation workers, etc.), and workers benefit from affordable accommodation near their work – today, this illegal squatter settlement has grown to become the largest slum in the city.²

The lack of affordable housing is one blatant economic issue faced by the vulnerable and marginalized in Khlong Toey. Another economic issue is the wide disparity between the wealthy and poor in Thailand – the slum's close proximity to luxury malls, high-rise condos, and five-star hotels is a microcosm of the major wealth gap that exists at a national level. To understand the extent of urban poverty, many take up residence in “tin-roofed homes...on stilts over stagnant, polluted water [over an] area that is especially prone to flooding during the monsoon season.”³ Today, many homes have access to resources like running water and electricity; however, in the early days of the slums, due to the residents' illegal status, they

¹ “The Story Behind Bangkok's Biggest Slum, Khlong Toey,” Culture Trip, last modified July 14, 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/thailand/articles/the-story-behind-bangkoks-biggest-slum-khlong-toey/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

were not given access to standard utilities, like clean running water, a proper drainage system, or refuse collection. To this day, Khlong Toey is in dire need of development – even though some improvements have been made by the residents, such as upgrading walkways from wood to concrete, the pathways are still narrow and uneven, and the slums continue to suffer from an inadequate sewage and waste management system.⁴

In addition to urban poverty, there are a plethora of social issues that plague the slums. For instance, drug and alcohol addiction is quite rampant – 35% of residents are drug users, with methamphetamine and crystal methamphetamine as the two most common illegal drugs.⁵ There are also issues of petty crime, domestic abuse, high unemployment rates, lack of health insurance and other social benefits, and lack of access to quality education for children.⁶ On top of roadblocks to developing marketable skills for employment and upward social mobility, there is widespread discrimination, so many residents end up working in illicit sectors, such as human trafficking and the sex industry.

The specific focal group I'll be focusing on is children and teens living in Khlong Toey. As the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, many youth have their odds stacked against them from the moment they're born – at no choice of their own. As for social issues faced explicitly by youth in the slums, “issues of housing, drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, HIV-AIDS, gambling, orphaned children, teenage pregnancy or suicide” form the backdrop against which many kids grow up.⁷ Some children do not even have proper birth certificates, which often disqualifies them from enrolling in state schools. Moreover, there are minimal well-maintained public spaces for children to play, so it's not uncommon to see kids playing on train tracks among litter.⁸ Regarding adolescents, researcher Sorcha Mahony conducted an

⁴ “Bangkok’s Klong Toey Slum,” Borgen Magazine, last modified April 28, 2014, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/bangkoks-klong-toey-slum/>.

⁵ “Australian family that's bringing hope to the slums,” Bangkok Post, last modified March 31, 2013, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/343213/australian-family-that-bringing-hope-to-the-slum>

⁶ Borgen Magazine, “Bangkok’s Klong Toey Slum.”

⁷ Sorcha Mahony, *Searching for a Better Life: Growing Up in the Slums of Bangkok* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 23.

⁸ *Ibid*, 10.

ethnography that offers further insight into the everyday lives and issues faced by young slum dwellers in Khlong Toey. Here is an anecdote about a teenager named Ganya who was born and bred in the slum:

She grew up in a context of severe housing insecurity and moved frequently, leaving a trail of rental debt behind her. She had been homeless for a couple of years, sleeping intermittently on friends' floors and in a stock cupboard at a local church, went hungry, sometimes for protracted periods, and supported her father who had come and gone from her life... She had dropped out of school to look after her paternal grandmother who was in ill health and who died after a protracted illness, leaving behind a web of intrafamilial disputes.⁹

Ganya's account of survival in this oppressive environment reflects what many other teens have endured. Glue sniffing, begging, and gambling among youth are not hidden vices but can be seen in plain view. Young people often have trouble identifying who their primary caregivers are, many children suffer from malnutrition and resort to stealing food as a necessity, others work alongside their parents before and after school to earn money, and still, others are forced to fend for themselves and young siblings when their parents are imprisoned for dealing drugs.¹⁰ What's more – it is not uncommon for children to have witnessed death at a very tender, young age. Sadly, many children and teens in the slums are caught in this vicious cycle of urban poverty with little to no means of breaking out – it's a broken system where the poor stay poor and the rich get richer.

Theological Framework in Response to Social Analysis

The following theological reflection will address these key issues faced by vulnerable youth in the slums: [1] poverty, [2] inadequate care from guardians, [3] family dysfunction, and [4] lack of educational opportunities.

Poverty

When examining the biblical theme of poverty throughout the Old and New Testaments, it is evident from Scripture that the poor are near and dear to the Father's heart.

⁹ Ibid, 120.

¹⁰ Ibid, 46.

For instance, countless verses in the Old Testament command the Israelites to give generously to the poor. In Leviticus 25:35-38, Moses asserted that if any family members or relatives fell into poverty, they should be hospitable, lend money without interest, and offer food without seeking anything in return. Beyond immediate kin, the Lord later confirms in Deuteronomy 15:7-8 that the Israelites should extend their care and generosity to anyone in need: “If *anyone is poor* among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need.”¹¹ There are plenty of other verses that affirm God’s desire to provide for the impoverished and to defend the weak, fatherless, poor, and oppressed.¹² The resulting principle from these verses is quite straightforward – our responsibility as believers is to stretch out our hands to meet the needs of those in poverty, whether they are known or unknown to us.

This is a novel concept for those in Khlong Toey who have accumulated insurmountable interest and ever-growing debts they can never hope to pay off. Moreover, this biblical response greatly contrasts with the prominent Buddhist belief that “poverty [is] karmic retribution.”¹³ According to Matthew 5:1-12, Jesus considers the poor in spirit, the hungry, and the sorrowful *blessed* in the Kingdom of God, whereas Thai society tends to see the poor as personally responsible for their socio-economic circumstances: “If [a man] happened to be poor and powerless in this existence, he somehow deserved it... To question the social order or one’s place within it was to doubt the justice of Karma.”¹⁴ Sadly, many young slum dwellers operate from this cultural-religious framework. Jesus, however, shows us another way.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 15:7-8, NIV.

¹² Proverbs 31:9; Psalm 34:6; Psalm 82:3; Zechariah 7:9-10; NIV.

¹³ Erica M. Larson, “Giuseppe Bolotta, Belittled Citizens: The Cultural Politics of Childhood on Bangkok’s Margins,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 200, (Dec 2022): 178, <https://journals.openedition.org/assr/68333>.

¹⁴ Mahony, *Searching for a Better Life: Growing Up in the Slums of Bangkok*, 261.

Jesus, through his life and ministry, modeled for us the importance of caring for the poor. Early on in Jesus' ministry, he proclaims his mission is to proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to the captives, bring healing, and free the oppressed.¹⁵ Jesus makes it known from the very beginning that he is here to usher in an upside-down Kingdom and a countercultural economy where the rich are challenged to sell all of their possessions and sacrificially give to the poor.¹⁶ In fact, at the time of judgment, Jesus affirms that the Father will recognize His children based on how they cared for the poor – unassumingly offering food, clothes, drink, shelter, and care to those in need.¹⁷ As followers of Jesus, we are to adopt a similar posture of self-sacrifice and partner with him in caring tangibly for the marginalized and those on the underside of power. This means stewarding our finances well, opening up our homes, or sacrificing time, energy, and resources to serve the least of these.

Inadequate Care for Children

God also has a lot to say about how we are to love and care for children. Starting in the Old Testament, God makes it very clear that children are gifts meant to be treasured. Psalm 127:3 asserts that “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.”¹⁸ As such, we should take special care to nurture, guide, and discipline them in the ways of the Lord. For instance, Proverbs 22:6 upholds how training a child will have long-lasting effects on their lives.¹⁹ Proverbs 29:17 also highlights the importance of disciplining children as a way toward peace and delight. At the end of the day, discipline is an act of love designed to draw young wayward hearts back to the Father, shaping and refining their character in the process. Particularly for vulnerable youth with no social or financial safety net, such as orphans, refugees, or children facing poverty and violence, God is adamant about protecting them. Psalm 68:5 beautifully illustrates God's mercy and tender love for the

¹⁵ Luke 4:18-19, NIV.

¹⁶ Luke 18:22, NIV.

¹⁷ Matthew 25:31-46, NIV.

¹⁸ Psalm 127:3, NIV.

¹⁹ Proverbs 22:6, NIV.

most vulnerable of the vulnerable: “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.”²⁰

Jesus’ compassionate words and interactions with children in the New Testament further underline God’s unfailing love and care for children. When the disciples tried to prevent people from bringing little children to Jesus, he was quick to reprimand them, saying “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”²¹ What’s more, when the disciples asked Jesus who the greatest is in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus did not hesitate to bring forth a child in their midst and assert that “whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”²² Again, how countercultural! That Jesus considered children the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is unthinkable when compared to how children are typically viewed in the Thai Buddhist social order. Children are seen as low-rank “small people” who effectively must obey and respect adults who are “big people” – as such, “children occupy the lowest position of the hierarchy.”²³ Not surprisingly, many children in the slum do not adhere to the larger society’s norms around seniority, often neglecting to respectfully greet elders or use formal speech to address an adult. This often places them in an even more disadvantaged position, because others develop a social stigma, viewing them as “dangerous, immoral, spiritually incomplete, lacking on an intellectual level, dirty and undisciplined.”²⁴

Where the world tells us to lord it over them, Jesus tells us to uphold a theology where children, who typically come last, are valued, seen as precious, and treated with dignity. In fact, according to Scripture, it’s not the wealthy and powerful who will receive all the glory, but the weak and powerless. The resulting principle is quite plain – we are to lead by example and care for the overall well-being of children, including their physical, mental, emotional,

²⁰ Psalm 68:5, NIV.

²¹ Matthew 19:14, NIV.

²² Matthew 18:1-5, NIV.

²³ Giuseppe Bolotta, “‘God’s Beloved Sons’: Religion, Attachment, and Children’s Self-Formation in the Slums of Bangkok,” *Anthropologia* 4, no. 2 (Oct 2017): 104.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 106.

and spiritual health and growth, especially when they disobey. As parents, guardians, and leaders, we are to fight for their best interests, welcome them, protect them from harm, teach them, and discipline them as necessary. And finally, even as adults, we are to exercise humility, continually adopting the humble posture of a child.

Family Dysfunction

Family dysfunction is a prevalent issue in the slums, with children and teens as the most vulnerable. To recap some of the social issues and trends mentioned earlier, “domestic violence, the lack of formative opportunities, and exploitation are the main issues underage children are subjected to.”²⁵ One grandmother, a lifelong resident of the slum, shares:

Children have nothing to do. Many have family problems: the father finds a new woman and leaves the family; the mother leaves the children to the grandmother to go to work. Some children don’t have anybody. Many of them don’t go to school. Even if the government says that schools are for free, then you have to buy uniforms, books, and bus tickets. Many people can’t make it. Those who don’t go to school take drugs, some also sell them.²⁶

Children are often placed under the care of relatives, such as grandmothers or aunts, but for the most part, they are left to fend for themselves. Some are even forced to be caregivers themselves – “taking care of younger siblings, collecting and recycling waste, selling food, even drug dealing.”²⁷ Research also shows that teens from the slums were more likely to use drugs and alcohol if a family member, particularly a parent, had a history of drug use.²⁸

Scripture, however, contains multiple messages of hope for dysfunctional families. For one, Galatians 3:13 affirms that Christ can break any genealogical curse – he “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” and dying on the cross for our sins.²⁹ Through Christ, young slum dwellers can know with certainty that their spiritual bondage to generations of curses and dysfunction can be broken. In terms of how a family should relate

²⁵ Giuseppe Bolotta, “Moving within Urban Hierarchical Spaces: Children’s Trajectories in the Urban Scenario of Bangkok, Thailand,” *Anthropologia* 1, no. 1 (June 2014): 111, <https://hal.science/hal-03744698>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁷ Giuseppe Bolotta, “God’s Beloved Sons,” 101.

²⁸ Patrapan Laoniramai et al., “Factors Affecting the Experiences of Drug Use by Adolescents in a Bangkok Slum,” *The Southeast Asian Journal of Tropical Medicine and Public Health* 36, no. 4 (July 2005): 1017.

²⁹ Galatians 3:13, NIV.

to each other, Scripture upholds that we should love one another. Children are to honor their father and mother, wives are to submit to their husbands, likewise, husbands are to love their wives and refrain from being harsh to them, and fathers should manage their households well and raise obedient children.³⁰ Genesis 47:11-12 powerfully illustrates one instance of forgiveness and provision in the life of Joseph – he upheld God’s commandment to honor his parents and generously provided property and food to his father – Jacob, his brothers, and their children, despite years of strife and animosity.³¹ The resulting principle from these commands is to pursue family unity, peace, and flourishing, and reflect God’s love in and through our families, no matter our station in life.

Lastly, it is important to note that broken family systems were a common issue in biblical history. For instance, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob struggled with favoritism, deception, jealousy, violence, immorality, and revenge, which continued down their family line. And yet, God chose Abraham as the one through whom He would bless all the peoples of the earth.³² If we examine Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1, not all were heroes of the faith – there were some unseemly characters with shady reputations, such as Rahab and Tamar. From this reflection, it is clear that God’s good purposes are not limited by human failure or sin; He can redeem all things, empowering ordinary people with dysfunctional backgrounds to accomplish His Kingdom plans. Many are quick to disapprove of people in the slums, but we, too, are sinners and must recognize our fallenness and need for grace.

Lack of Access to Education

The value of passing down wisdom and knowledge to those who are younger or less mature is a prominent one throughout Scripture. For example, Paul mentored Timothy, Moses taught Joshua, and Elijah taught Elisha. However, Scripture is especially supportive of parents directly instructing their children. For instance, Ephesians 6:4 commands parents to

³⁰ Exodus 20:2; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Timothy 3:4, NIV.

³¹ Genesis 47:11-12, NIV.

³² Genesis 12:1-3, NIV.

nurture their children in the way of the Lord – this includes instruction, training, and discipline.³³ Moreover, in Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Moses instructs Israel to follow God’s decrees and laws and to “teach them diligently to [their] children.”³⁴ These commands affirm God’s desire for parents to instill knowledge and wisdom in their children so that they will grow up revering and obeying Him.

What’s more, special emphasis is placed on imparting spiritual wisdom. According to Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”³⁵ The ultimate foundation of all knowledge must be awe and reverence of the Lord. It is not enough to accumulate knowledge; we must know how to use it in a godly way that honors the Father. The education principle is that adults must not only invest in young people’s secular education but also dedicate time and effort to point them to Jesus for their spiritual growth. More specifically, parents should play an active role in the education, guidance, and development of their children.

Social Compassion, Ethical, or Justice Issues Considered for Developing Theology

As alluded to earlier, Thailand has the widest gap between the rich and poor in all of Southeast Asia, largely due to income inequality.³⁶ Scripture addresses this issue of vast disparity between the wealthy and poor by asserting the roles rich people should play in caring for the vulnerable and marginalized. Multiple verses in Leviticus and Deuteronomy offer some of the first glimpses of economic justice – the Israelites were to leave the edges of their field unharvested for the poor and sojourners, give their hired workers wages on time, loan money without interest, conduct business honestly, and advocate for justice among orphans and foreigners.³⁷ It is not a sin to be rich, but the wealthy do have a special responsibility to the poor as Jesus points out in the Parable of the Rich Fool – the rich man

³³ Ephesians 6:4, NIV.

³⁴ Deuteronomy 6:6-7, NIV.

³⁵ Proverbs 1:7, NIV.

³⁶ “Growing gap between richest and poorest Thais,” The ASEAN Post, last modified May 1, 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/growing-gap-between-richest-and-poorest-thais>

³⁷ Leviticus 19:9-13, 35-36; Leviticus 25:35-37, Deuteronomy 24:12-15, 17-18, NIV.

foolishly accumulated wealth to selfishly enjoy and ended up dying as a punishment because he stored up treasures for himself instead of being generous towards God, and therefore others.³⁸ Overall, the economic justice principle is that every person, especially the poor and needy, should have access to adequate resources that empower them to grow, develop, and thrive in society. We, who have an abundance, need to adopt a serving mindset that is others-focused and dedicated to improving the quality of life for the least of these – in the case of this paper, the children and teens of Khlong Toey.

Description of Urban Ministry Response

Education Ministry

One concrete application in response to the social reality and theological reflection above is to start a Christian organization that is focused on enabling access to education for youth. This includes both formal and informal education access. For instance, one priority would be to identify children and teens from the slums who are not currently enrolled in school, pinpoint the roadblocks, and find solutions to plug them into the existing school system in their neighborhood. Even though compulsory education is free for all Thai children, even the cost of school supplies, books, and uniforms can be cost-prohibitive. To help alleviate some of the financial burden, the education organization would offer academic sponsorships for youth and families who commit to keeping their kids in school through to graduation.

When it comes to play and recreation, many of the youth in Khlong Toey are accustomed to a life of autonomy – they will use the railroad tracks to practice acrobatics or jump in the canal to swim. One 10-year-old proudly exclaims, “Here there aren’t the rules we are given at school. We are free to dress as we like, free to run and play.”³⁹ These kids’ creative and adventurous spirits are very much alive; however, they are often left to their own

³⁸ Luke 12:13-21, NIV.

³⁹ Giuseppe Bolotta, “Moving within Urban Hierarchical Spaces,” 111.

devices without guidance or investment from adults. Beyond access to formal education, the Christian organization would offer free after-school programs with services that range from academic help to leisure activities. Each day of the week might offer a different service: homework support, sports practice (i.e. badminton lessons, football club, etc.), S.T.E.M. projects, reading club, free play, or music class. One existing faith-based organization in Khlong Toey called Mercy Centre already has a robust music program where youth play instruments and dance not only as therapy but also as an outlet for boosting their confidence and self-esteem.⁴⁰ As such, I'd make efforts to partner and share resources in some way. The goal behind the after-school programs is holistic – it's a safe and nurturing place for youth to grow, experiment, and learn, as well as experience the love of Christ both in word and deed. As a faith-based organization, we will also prioritize weekly Kids Clubs where the kids can hear the gospel, learn about Jesus, engage with Bible stories, and participate in games and crafts.

Family-Strengthening Ministry

In response to rampant issues of family dysfunction and child neglect in Khlong Toey, another approach is to start a Christian organization focused on family-based care. Under the umbrella of family-strengthening are many services, but all are designed to empower parents/guardians to provide and care for themselves and their children. There are times when handouts are an appropriate response, such as during a crisis or environmental disaster, but once the bleeding has stopped, I think it's crucial to come alongside the vulnerable and marginalized to usher in long-term change and renewal. Many people who are facing issues of urban poverty are not in crisis – they need development.

One service the family-based organization would offer is job and vocational training so that residents from Khlong Toey can gain marketable skills that qualify them for

⁴⁰ Terry E. Miller, "Thai Music and Dance in the Heart of Bangkok's Slums: The Forgotten Children of the Mercy Centre Become Beautiful," *Contributions to Music Education* 45 (2020): 127-146.

meaningful employment, and eventually financial independence. To combat tendencies to borrow money from loan sharks (thereby accumulating more debt) or overspend, we'd also offer economic training on financial planning, saving money, and managing budgets. Furthermore, we'd support physical, emotional, and mental needs by offering counseling services, providing childcare support, and working with the government to ensure residents have access to basic healthcare. A major focus of the ministry would be spiritual development as well, through which residents can receive prayer, participate in worship, go through soul care, explore different topics in the Bible with other seekers in a small group, or even plug into house churches in their neighborhood. There are a whole host of other needs that one organization cannot possibly tackle on its own, so I'd network with like-minded churches, NGOs, and government organizations to expand the reach of our services. For instance, if there is an existing NGO that specializes in drug awareness/prevention for youth as well as drug and alcohol rehab, I could direct slum dwellers to their services instead of starting something from scratch.

To close, I want to share a success story of family strengthening I've heard about from my team at Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH). A few years ago, they offered financial assistance (as a leg-up versus a handout) to a woman named Poo, who spent years as a street food vendor working from dawn to sunset only to make the equivalent of \$6. Recognizing her interest and gifting in cooking, she used the funding to start a cooking school, which has since become sustainable enough for her to operate independently from UNOH. In fact, she's gained enough financial stability from her small business to move out of Klong Toey. She has also published a book *Cooking with Poo* (2011) which you can buy on Amazon and has even been featured on restaurateur Jamie Oliver's cooking show! Poo's story offers a glimpse into what it looks like when the vulnerable are treated with dignity, as carriers of God's image, and given the opportunity to dream and envision a future never thought possible.

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