

Saiyarak: Questions and Answers

What does Saiyarak mean?

It is the name given to the group by the members, and it means Streams of Love. They tell us this is exactly what they have found there.



Why is CoroUniting connected with a group in Northern Thailand?

A family from CoroUniting church (Scott and Rachael Litchfield and their two sons) were living in Nan City, working in mission. They came to know the woman who became the leader of Saiyarak (Seekum Jittaree) and helped her to re-form the group after lack of support had closed it down. They invited CoroUniting to partner with them in supporting this group through finance, prayer and by visiting. We have been doing that since 2006.

Why does Saiyarak need support from outside Thailand?

Thailand is a developing country, with only 0.7% of its population professing Christian faith. Nan province is rural, near the far north eastern border with Laos and therefore quite isolated. When the AIDS epidemic hit Thailand almost 30 years ago, the church was ill-equipped and unwilling to have contact with the victims. There was a lot of misinformation in the community in general and a cultural reticence to have overt dealings with people with sexually transmitted diseases. The social stigma for sufferers caused families, schools, employers and neighbours to shun them. There is no government welfare system in Thailand.

The adult members of Saiyarak are all widowed single parents. Many share the same story - their partners died without ever confessing that they were HIV positive, and the women did not know they had become HIV positive until they started to develop symptoms. The news of their infection was a double, sometimes triple shock – their spouse had been unfaithful, they were now infected with an incurable and deadly disease, and (for some) they now found that their children had been infected at birth. When their families and neighbours found out, they became destitute – unable to work because of ill health, unable to rent in some cases, unable to send their children to school or to provide enough food.

Haven't things improved by now? Is the support still needed?

Yes, the situation has improved in many significant ways. For the members of the group, it has been their lifeline – their hope, their friendship base, their future. They are incredibly grateful.

But the stigma remains, albeit a little less virulently in the Saiyarak district. Still there are Saiyarak children who are not allowed to attend their local school because they are HIV positive.

The members of Saiyarak are, for the most part, using government-supplied Anti-Retroviral Drugs which are improving their health and lifespan. No member has died of AIDS since early 2009. This is also due to the good health education and support the group provides. There are still some HIV positive children whose families will not acknowledge their health status and refuse to put them on the drugs, but the Saiyarak leaders continue to encourage them to do so.

Seven of the children in the group are orphans, and the group continues to support the extended families who care for them so that the extra mouth does not create resentment and lead to abuse. This is reassuring for the living parents, who know that their own children will also be cared for in the event of their own death.

Thanks to Saiyarak and the support of people in Australia, the adults of Saiyarak have been given new skills and opportunities to provide for their families, by sewing, weaving and breeding farm animals. Prior to this they were labourers, but their ill health made it too difficult to obtain and keep up with such physical work. Now they are in control of their own enterprises, and they support each other in practical ways when health issues present challenges.

Even with the income they can now earn, the group is supporting orphans and running extra activities which cost more than they can provide. Most of the money we send goes to enabling the children to attend school and go on to post-secondary training so that they can get better jobs and care for their own families and their surviving parent without need for support in the future. Our support is about ensuring they can reach that future.

How can we be sure they are using the money we send properly?

The leaders of the group keep careful records of income and expenditure and send those figures to CAM in Chiang Mai quarterly, which are translated and sent to us here at CoroUniting. In addition, CAM send staff to visit this village (which is seven hours' drive from Chiang Mai) at least every three months. They also have contact with young people from the group who travel to Chiang Mai for study. A report on each of the children/young people is received annually.

What is CAM?

CAM is the AIDS ministry arm of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), a major Christian denomination which includes a number of denominations as we know them. CCT is a sister denomination to the Uniting Church in Australia.

The ministry of CAM was started in 1992 by Pastors Sanan and Jaruan Wutti, who were called by God to minister to AIDS victims when the rest of the church found the issue too challenging. (They declined a pastoral position in a church in Washington DC, USA to take up this role!) We have a direct connection to CAM through the Wuttis because they spent 6 months in Adelaide at the invitation of the Uniting Church, and stayed with a CoroUniting family (Otto and Jenny Wichert and their two children). Another CAM staff member, Goong Lek (Nawanat Kunasawat), spent three months in Adelaide at the end of 2008.

When the Litchfields finished their work in Thailand, CAM agreed to take on responsibility for Saiyarak, in spite of the distance from Chiang Mai. We maintain regular contact with CAM, who graciously organise the schedule of our visiting teams, and do all translation work so that we can keep relating to Saiyarak.

Is supporting Saiyarak mission or just a handout?

Our support of Saiyarak is definitely Christian mission. Some people are concerned because only one of the three leaders is Christian and many of the group are Buddhist. Does this mean that the gospel is hampered?

There are many signs that the gospel is doing its work in Saiyarak. On every occasion that the Litchfields visit, or CAM visit (including when a team from Australia goes), the gospel is shared through Bible study and prayer. Some of the children also attend a Christian kids' club down the street, run by a couple who provide a hostel for children from Christian Hill Tribes villages.

Seekum is a member of the local CCT church, and sometimes the church engages with Saiyarak activities at Christmas involving the whole group. This is significant in a country that does not recognise the Christmas season. The Saiyarak house, where the group runs all its activities, is on Seekum's land. This giving of the land by Seekum's now deceased parents was in the name of Christ, and the opening ceremony in 2008 (in which a CoroUniting team participated) was conducted in entirely Christian terms. The house includes a room set aside for palliative care for any members who can no longer care for themselves.

One of the most precious proofs of the work of God is the close-knit and self-sacrificial nature of the Saiyarak community. This is a measure of love and trust and service not seen in the communities around them. Some locals have even tried to join the group on false pretences because they want what they see there.

That said, not all members of the group yet confess Christ as their Lord. Some have, including several who have since died. We can be praying that all these people for whom Jesus died will come to know him as the one who is the source of community, hope and love.

Why do we send teams, spending all that money for a couple of days with Saiyarak? Wouldn't it be better to just give them the money?

One of the strengths of this project is that it's about relationship. It is much easier to just send money – it doesn't demand the investment of ourselves, although those who give do so, in fact, with real compassion and dedicated prayer. Not all want or are able to make the journey.

An outcast group of rural women and children need more than money. They need to be treated with dignity, have the chance to show their gratitude, and to know that they are valued as people. All of this is achieved in small measure by people visiting them. We become partners in the true sense, not just benefactors. And we are changed by the visit too – humbled, inspired, challenged.

Does any one of us meeting any one of them really make a difference? It's not really about the one-to-one relationships, which are limited in a short time with no common language. The relationship is between two groups which together are bringing the Kingdom of God in tangible ways.

I have questions that aren't answered here. Who do I ask?

Ask a Saiyarak Support member. All of us who have visited Thailand and met the wonderful, dedicated people at CAM and Saiyarak will gladly answer your question if we can.

July 2008 team – Jenny and Christie Wichert, David Buxton, Claire Bell (with the Litchfield family)

October 2009 team – Jim Brown, Anne Neimke, Caroline Wicks, Shirley James (with Rachael Litchfield)

October-November 2012 team – Abbi Gottsche, Mel and Sarah Ingham, Cathy Litchfield, Angela Pyne, Lesley Thompson, Shirley James (leader)

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