

Thailand Missionary Visits Bars to Reach Prostitutes

Nella Davidse says desperate women come to the popular resort town looking for opportunity

Three nights a week, missionary Nella Davidse goes to bars and hangs out with prostitutes.

She lives in Pattaya, a popular resort town on the coast of Thailand, where an estimated 20,000 women work as prostitutes. Most are lured by the promise of big money and the hopes of meeting a rich, foreign husband. Many are raising children in extreme poverty. Most loathe their jobs, but feel they have no choice.

It's not an easy place to be. But, Davidse says, it's where God wants her.

"I needed perseverance," said Davidse, 42, who left her native Holland to join Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in Thailand nine years ago. "For a long time we didn't see much fruit. I felt like I had my feet in the door, and if I pulled back, it would smash. ... I had to say ... 'God, I trust in You and not in people.'"

Davidse first trained with YWAM in northern Thailand. While still taking language lessons, she found herself on a short outreach to Pattaya. She walked the streets and knew God had called her here.

In 1999 Davidse founded the Tamar Center, a downtown mission offering English lessons, job training and discipleship to the

bar girls of Pattaya. "We came with an invasion of eight people, all committed for five years," she said. "After a year, only I was left. That was hard."

One by one, life circumstances and discouragement took Davidse's team away. But she stayed, focusing at first on relationship-building and daily intercession, adding English lessons and job opportunities and finally moving the center into an old school building.

From there, she and seven other single women counsel, give health-care advice and teach regular language classes. Lessons are preceded by a short devotional and usually close with worship in English and Thai.

Many at the center make greeting cards as a means of alternate income; the cards are sold on the Internet at . Training in sewing or hairstyling is also offered annually.

"God told us we shouldn't call this place Sodom anymore," Davidse said. "We should call it Nineveh because this is the city that will come to the Lord."

The center joined with an American missions team in March to host two dinners for bar-girls. Almost 50 were invited the first night; on the second, that number more than doubled. Tamar staff reported several healings and say even the local teenagers hired to serve dinner came forward at the evening's close and asked to receive Christ.

"Revival is on the way," said Surapon Yuthiwattana, who pastors New Vision Christian Fellowship in Pattaya. "We believe that God will revive Pattaya city—every ministry and

church and government and business.”

But things are still hard for Davidse. Part of the trouble is the culture. Thais profess Christ with ease, she says—tell them He is something good, and they want Him. But without a clear understanding of who God is or what He requires, they falter.

“We see girls coming to the Lord and really excited, but to really persevere and be changed—we haven’t seen it,” she said.

Among other things, she’s praying that the Holy Spirit will convict the city of its sin. “They come to Jesus because they want something,” Davidse said. “It feels so different sometimes, me living my life for God, making sacrifices for Him—and here are people who only want something from Him.”

Still, it’s clear God is working here—even in unexpected ways. The U.S. Navy visits Pattaya each year, dropping off 3,000 sailors for a little R&R. When that happens, Davidse and her staff join sailors and local churches in a worship service at a local hotel. Not long ago, Davidse met an American couple whose son had become a Christian in a Pattaya hotel room while there with the Navy.

For Davidse, the incident was further proof that God works in mysterious ways. “When we came here, we felt God saying: ‘Don’t focus on the darkness. Focus on Me,’” she said. “It’s like the seed in the ground—dying to self and trusting God. I just want to be obedient.”

Benjie Hughes in Pattaya, Thailand