

Reluctant Recruits...Our Story

Peter and Ruthie Dutton, global personnel

Missionary? Is *that* what you are? *Really?* The skepticism and incredulity we have experienced have often been palpable. In truth, it has been years since we have used the term “missionary” to describe ourselves, our work, or our sending organization. We have resorted, instead, to a spectrum of terms that, at times, both enlighten and obfuscate. “Cross-cultural workers,” “global personnel,” “development experts”—each of these terms speaks to parts of our work or hints at different roles we have assumed. Neither of us grew up in the Evangelical Covenant Church, the organization under which we have worked, but we were both children of missionaries. Peter’s parents, Harold and Agnes Dutton, experienced thirty-five years of nonstop war in Vietnam from 1939 to 1975. Don and Mary Jo McCurry, Ruthie’s folks, worked almost twenty years in post-colonial Pakistan from 1956 to 1975.

So maybe it seems natural we would become missionaries. We each had positive experiences growing up in Pakistan and Vietnam, but in college, going into missions was the furthest thing from our minds. Our goals were more along these lines: Pursue the American dream—build a home and settle down. To that end, Peter began building homes with Ruthie’s brother. After a couple of years, with our first child on the way, we wondered: Was this what we’d dreamed about? Was this what we really wanted?

God Meets Us Where We Are

One day out of the blue, we received a call from an administrator for the organization under which my (Peter) parents had worked. “Would you be willing to run a handicraft project in a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand for two years?” The timing was less than ideal. Ruthie was

eight months pregnant, and we knew from friends that they didn't accept workers with new babies. For good measure, we raised a few more issues we thought might rule us out. Surprisingly, we were told "they would not be an impediment." We prayed about it, and after a couple of days, we concluded this type of service might be a good fit for us. We would be doing down-to-earth and practical work, not direct evangelism and not preaching, which we didn't feel equipped to do at that time. After a weekend of discernment, we said yes. God, who created us, knows us. God drew us in, giving us an opportunity to serve—without a long-term commitment when we were not yet ready.

Four months later we were on a plane to Bangkok, followed a few days later by a car trip to the northeastern Thai province of Loei. We began work in a camp for Hmong refugees, just a few kilometers from the Mekong River and Lao border. Looking back, we wonder how we were entrusted to run a \$100,000 mail-order-catalog business at the ripe ages of twenty-six and twenty-three.

God provided for us in wonderful ways. We felt truly fulfilled. We enjoyed the camaraderie of working with about fifty other expatriates from many countries and multiple organizations. While most workers were young, God provided a veteran missionary couple to be our mentors. We enjoyed the work so much that we extended our time for an extra year.

Those three years taught us much—especially that we still had much to learn! Even though we had both been children of missionaries, we didn't know as much about working cross-culturally as we thought. We needed to process what we'd learned and work through our beliefs and faith to arrive at our own convictions. Learning the local language was needed to communicate with people at the heart and spiritual level. We needed to understand Scripture better. Thus, we set our sights on Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where we'd heard of a great program in cross-cultural communication and missions.

What did we learn at Fuller? More than anything, we learned of the breadth and challenge of communicating God's love in cultures as varied and differing as they really are. And we learned that we never stop being learners until the day the Lord says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

While at Fuller, we began attending Pasadena Covenant Church. We had visited the ministry started by a Covenant missionary working in Thailand, and we decided to apply for service under the Evangelical Covenant Church. At the time, this meant spending an academic year

at North Park Seminary. With three children in tow, no car, and just a few dollars in our bank account, we headed to Chicago. God provided what we needed: a car for \$1 and \$50 for repairs. God gave us part-time jobs that were just right for our needs, and God provided someone to pay the balance of our tuition anonymously.

God Will Provide When You Step Out in Faith

As we became Covenant missionaries, we were motivated by the holistic nature of the Covenant work in Thailand, a work that merged the practical (pig and fish raising) with the spiritual (preaching the gospel). We studied Thai for fifteen months and then moved upcountry to apprentice “on the farm” with the expectation that we would begin a ministry in Roi Et, another part of northeast Thailand. We’d only been in Udon Thani for two weeks when Jim and Joan Gustafson invited us to lunch and asked, “Would you consider starting a new work in Laos?”

Having previously worked with Lao refugees, we said an enthusiastic yes. Disparate parts of our lives seemed to be coming together. We set our hearts on working somewhere near Laos’s capital city, Vientiane, only about two hours from Udon, but God had other plans. Instead of Vientiane, we were sent to the far north of that country, as far away from colleagues and support as it was possible to go. We teamed with a slightly older Thai couple who had never lived in another culture. We went in cooperation with World Concern, a faith-based American NGO, to work in a development project to help villagers begin “market-oriented” agriculture. In that communist country, this was one of the first agricultural projects to be allowed to work outside of the capital city of Vientiane and one of the first from a “market-oriented” nation. We soon realized the huge learning curve ahead for all of us—both villagers and “foreign experts” (as we were called).

For our first six years we concentrated on finding and promoting products that villagers could sell. In our early trips to Luang Namtha’s fresh market, we discovered beautiful birds, squirrels, and bamboo rats fresh from the forest! If we slept in, we missed it all. The market only lasted until 7:30 a.m. We found that, indeed, the pork and fish we had raised back in Thailand was very marketable, but were villagers ready to raise animals and fish in an integrated system? With fishponds carefully dug (by hand, tractor, or dozer) and stocked with only tilapia (carefully propagated and male-selected), and pigs happily defecating and procreating on the dikes above, this integrated agronomic system worked. Well, sort of. It worked if the villagers could find the ingredients for pig feed.

And if they fed them regularly. And if they did *not* eat the maize and broken rice themselves. For Akha or Hmong or Khmu villagers it was a significant stretch for them to begin earning income from such activities. And, oh yes, that happened only if they managed to get their pork and fish to market and were able to sell it at a reasonable price, speaking a foreign language (Lao) they were supposed to know!

We were called “foreign experts,” sent to help villagers begin market-oriented occupations. We had learned much from our cross-cultural communications and missions classes in seminary, especially that we needed to be ready to learn from others. Our baptism by fire wasn’t easy, requiring multicultural collaboration in this multicultural context. Not only the polyglot of villagers from different ethnicities, but the task of learning to work with Thai colleagues sent to work with us from our churches in northeast Thailand proved challenging. We realized our colleagues didn’t have some of our Western prejudices, but they did have their own proclivities. Individualism, we learned, is not only an American thing. Our families needed humility and a willingness to learn.

Faith, Risk, and Crisis Always Come Together

We found God often allows us to experience crises to help us grow in reliance on him. This was the case in both our personal lives and our work lives. Our first four years in Laos saw a major crisis each year. Because we had moved upcountry in Laos and our children were all in their primary school years, we felt the best schooling option for our children was found at a Christian boarding school I had attended as a child in Malaysia. So, off they went, much as we had, with teddy bears and backpacks. After less than two months away, we awoke one night to the tinkling sound of rocks on our window. One of our colleagues had received a call from friends in Thailand who had heard from our kids’ school. It was 11:00 p.m. and we needed to call immediately. Those calls could only mean bad news. Doctors in Malaysia feared our daughter had leukemia. After a tearful, prayer-filled night, a boat ride across the Mekong, and flights to Bangkok and Malaysia, we reached Erin. But by then the crisis had melted away. She leaped from her bed delighted to see us! In the end, the doctors could not explain the change in her white blood cell count. “An unknown virus, a mystery,” they said. We knew that scores of people had been praying. We knew our God had healed her! That was our first year in Luang Namtha, our remote northern province of Laos.

Our next years in upland Laos taught us a bit more. In year two the director of World Concern was deported from the country, and

we thought the whole organization might have to go. In the end God allowed the organization and our project to stay. In year three our Thai colleagues decided it was time to go and left suddenly. In our fourth year Peter had a serious motorcycle accident and spent months recovering. God was faithful through each of these crises. We are confident our desire to persevere came from the faithful prayers of supporters. Repeatedly we learned that our lives and all of our projects and relationships would be challenging, but we could get through if we kept our eyes fixed on Jesus, our provider. We realized we have never been promised easy lives, only that God would never leave us or forsake us.

By then we had been in Laos for five years. We loved our work and the sense that we were really helping villagers. But one area of disappointment was this: We could point to no one who had accepted Christ, *not one convert!* The vice governor of our province had sat us down during our first week to tell us clearly, we were not to “propagate religion.” We would be watched. Now government employees were sent to accompany us on all our trips to villages. Luang Namtha was a province with no known believers, and the government wanted it to stay that way.

Then in the fifth year, the de facto head of one our project villages became a believer, a man we will call “XF.” What a firebrand! He couldn’t keep the good news to himself. Soon, other villagers began coming to faith. Within a year he was put in prison. We saw him one day, accompanied by guards, traveling down the road. As part of a prison work detail, he began singing a Lao praise chorus as he passed by to let us know he had not lost faith.

Faith, Risk, and Crisis: Phase II

As villagers started to come to faith, we realized the work of the Holy Spirit is to draw people in. Our job was to share verbally and in our living. Our thinking began to evolve. We realized we would need to begin taking more risks in both our verbal witness and our efforts to make a difference in the livelihoods of our villagers.

We started to imagine a different future. How could we have the time and contact with villagers to see them begin a new kind of agricultural production? We concluded we would need to become an agricultural business to effect that kind of change. For almost two years we spent time away from our small province visiting churches in the States and making trips back and forth across the Thai and Lao border.

If we wanted villagers to risk generating products for the market, we ourselves would need to take the same risk. A business would mean we

could buy and sell products and crops across the boundaries of nations surrounding us. We would need startup funds. Our own knowledge base was limited. We weren't agronomists or international exporters, nor did we have much capital. Trusting that God would provide, we submitted a business plan to the foreign investment division of the government.

After more than a year, our application and business plan were accepted. We could return to the north and start building our new company, Friend of the Upland Farmer. We began small, with only four employees. Villagers were hesitant to start anything new. We found markets by making trips to China, Thailand, Vietnam, and South Korea, but we didn't have enough product to export. It was tough going. Of course, we started to receive pressure from the government. They wanted dramatic results from one of their first foreign investments.

Nevertheless, each year crop output increased. By year eight, Friend of the Upland Farmer had grown to forty-five employees and exported over 2,000 metric tons of crops to Thailand, China, Vietnam, and South Korea. Every year brought new challenges. When we stepped out in faith, God enabled us to find the talent, skills, and people we needed. We worked with a wonderful Dutch colleague, an agronomist with expert backing from his networks. A young Thai couple joined us for four years, bridging the age gap with some of our employees and bringing needed expertise in raising fish. Through all of this, we realized God shows up when we feel most inadequate.

Loss and Crisis...More to Learn?

In year five, just as the business began to take off, we received some devastating news. Our oldest son, Graeme, who had spent a year with us visiting villagers and helping our company transport product to the Thai border, had died in a motorcycle accident in southern California. Our home church, Pasadena Covenant, provided comfort and space for a memorial. Friends from far and wide attended. Our Evangelical Covenant Church supported us with grief counseling and help for our other two children to gather with us back in Laos.

At that point, Laos felt so much more like home than the US. We could laugh, and cry, and remember Graeme in this place he'd loved so much. Our Lao friends, it seemed, lived much closer to the edges of life. Nearly every family we knew had experienced death in some way, and we learned from them. We learned that the "right words" are less important than being there, sometimes expressing sympathy, sometimes sitting in silence.

Through all that time, the business was growing. More and more village families were growing crops—cardamom, corn, soybean, and rice. We learned another important lesson: Working together as a multi-national team could be a real strength. As a team made up of Dutch, Thai, American, and Lao, we all had very different perspectives on issues and problems that surfaced. We were forced, in turn, to listen to each other and, ultimately, made better decisions.

At the same time, many villagers were coming to faith. We tried to encourage and facilitate, even while we were watched carefully by the Lao government. Some villagers traveled to Vientiane and some to Thailand where they studied and were disciplined. At the same time, the increasing number of believers made government officials unhappy. They began refusing the renewal of various business licenses required for operation. We heard, also, that some top provincial officials wanted the property and fish farms we had developed. Finally, we received an official government letter ordering us to close and sell the business.

It was not easy to learn this lesson: All we have belongs to God. We learned, like Job, that though the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, we still need to bless the Lord. Great loss can deepen your faith in ways blessings and success do not. It also develops a better understanding of what it means to suffer with Christ. During that time the first believer, XF, whom we mentioned earlier, was taken, along with his wife and eight-year-old child, from a bus station and never seen again. Since that time, many believers have been put in jail on trumped up charges, but it has only seemed to increase their faith. Without Friend of the Upland Farmer, we had no basis or reason to be granted a visa in Laos. We left and moved across the Mekong River to Chiang Rai, Thailand, where we hoped to buy agricultural products from the many farmers with whom we had relationships in both Laos and Thailand.

Mekong Valley Foods...A Brief Hiatus

We started another company just across the border from Laos in a northern Thai bordertown called Chiang Khong. We had hoped we could remain in relationship with many farmers and producers in Laos whom we knew. That was not to be. We started from ground zero again. This time we set up a factory to produce supplemental food for Burmese refugee children, made from corn, rice, and soy. After about one year, the factory hit its stride producing products primarily shipped to refugee populations along the Thai-Burma border, as well as Cambodia and Burma. After three years, we were ready to move on to

something else. We were invited back to Laos by two Lao friends and colleagues. Our Dutch friend and colleague, Wessel Huisjes, bought the company in Chiang Rai and continues to provide food for these vulnerable refugees.

Back in Laos...a Brief Interregnum

For a period of almost two years, we worked with two Lao partners who were entrepreneurs and experienced businesspeople. For one, we helped set up a pig and fish farm. For the second, a woman in her sixties, we helped develop silk production in another province upcountry. Both owners were people who had come to faith. Both had connections in the upper echelons of government. We thought that by working with Lao companies and not being the owners, we would “fly under the radar” and avoid notice.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. Apparently, officials from Luang Namtha heard we had returned to Laos and decided that we should not be allowed to continue working anywhere in the country. One day, as I (Peter) was filling out immigration paperwork to cross from Laos back into Thailand, I was told that if I left, there would be no return. I turned around for the trip back to Vientiane. We stayed for another eight months, but then it was time for a scheduled home assignment. While in the States we applied for a Lao visa from the embassy in Washington DC, and it was granted. We thought we had weathered the storm.

Not so! After a thirty-hour flight from the US, we arrived at the airport in Vientiane expecting to connect with the project owners we knew well. We stood in line, and when the immigration officer took my passport, he looked up and then picked up a walkie talkie. I was told I would have to leave the country on the return flight. Ruthie, on the other hand, would be permitted to enter the country. It was miserable! With scores of people watching, I was escorted back to the plane by police. The whole incident has given us much sympathy for those currently being deported from the United States without due process.

I expected when I reached Bangkok I would be allowed to rest and regroup after more than thirty-six hours on the plane from Los Angeles, but upon arrival I was put in a detention center deep within the airport. Thai officials explained that a bilateral agreement between Laos and Thailand forced them to deport me. They assured me I just needed to leave the country. When I returned, I'd be accepted back. They kindly gave me the password to their internet, so I was able to call Ruthie in Laos and friends in Covenant Offices.

Ruthie observes: It's not uncommon that during such unsettling times God provides comfort. Peter remembered that all the Asian Covenant churches were having a gathering in Taipei, so he chose to fly there the following morning. To be welcomed into that loving and encouraging community was overwhelming in a positive way. Once again, God was reminding us that we are never alone. He will always be with us, but he often provides other companions to bring comfort.

Déjà vu—The Work Belongs to the Lord

Once again, we found ourselves asking, “What next, God?” We felt God leading us to work with the Covenant church in Roi Et, the place where we had expected to go twenty-five years earlier. This was quite a shift for us. We would be working officially and directly with a network of churches in this northeastern Thai province, and we came with some expectations. We thought that working with believers would mean fewer occasions for misunderstanding. Our Thai colleagues also assumed that our arrival meant funding for various endeavors would also be more plentiful. For a while that was indeed the case. Funds from the sale of businesses in Laos and Thailand, though not massive, did fund many improvements to the Covenant camp property in Roi Et.

Overall, our Thai colleagues were discouraged. Growth had stagnated. Some leaders had a huge vision with evangelistic outreach as their primary focus. Others wanted to focus on discipleship and spiritual growth before expanding outward. We knew that our “taking charge” would not be good. Competing visions and agendas were ever present. In addition, a Korean missionary working with some of the church leaders had big dreams and a different vision for the work.

Those tensions simmered. In our third year one of the groups left to work with the Korean missionary. We discovered that one natural Thai reaction is “to save face” by saying the work is expanding when, in fact, there is a split. Our focus after the split was to work on discipleship, leadership, and theological training. We were able to use the church property for seminars while opening it to the Christian community for trainings and camps.

When COVID-19 hit, everything but the local fellowship stopped for a year and a half. As the pandemic eased, we returned to the US feeling there was a good group working together towards a common goal. We thought it was time to allow the young leaders to grow and not depend on our close input. Staying in the US, making trips, and mentoring through Zoom seemed promising.

Problems resurfaced. Various team members wanted to be leaders. Jealousy arose, and within nine months there was another split. Heartsick, we returned to Thailand and spent an intense time trying to bring about reconciliation, including with leaders from the first group that had split off. The reconciliation did not hold. Now we maintain relationships with all the groups and visit all of them on our trips to Thailand. When invited to teach or preach, we do that, and we pray that God will bless each of the different ministries. We've learned that God works despite and often through our brokenness and failings.

Conclusion

Here is a summary of some of the most important lessons we've learned in our missionary journey:

1. God meets us where we are.
2. We should never stop being learners.
3. God provides when we step out in faith.
4. The journey isn't always easy, but God never abandons us.
5. Everything we have belongs to God.
6. God works despite, and often through, our brokenness.

In addition to sharing some of the lessons we've learned, we want to end with a question: Why should each of us consider being a part of the work of serving globally? The easy answer is, because Christ commanded us to go into all the world and make disciples. That should be enough for us. But we think there's more to it. We have learned so much from others with a different worldview. We see how comprehensive the Bible is for the whole world. Sometimes it is a ceremonial detail that catches the attention of our Khmu friends in Laos. Sometimes it is learning to grieve the loss of a child or loved one, as we did in Luang Namtha. And sometimes it is learning how to revere Jesus as king, as we have found so meaningful to our Thai friends in Roi Et. These are just three examples from our lives.

We are now living in a world inextricably interconnected in ways it never was prior to the advent of the internet. We live in a time when people from all nations are immigrating and emigrating. Maybe God isn't calling us to go to another country, but it's likely someone from another country is living near us. They still need to hear the good news. Additionally, our interaction with our neighbors from distant places will deepen and grow our own understanding of who God is.