

Alumni Spotlight: Karl Dahlfred (M.Div. '06)



Current Title: Missionary with OMF International

Family: wife Sun; children: Joshua (15), Caitlin (12), John (8)

Favorite Professor: Dr. Timothy Tennent, Dr. Gary Parrett

Favorite Class: So hard to choose JUST one class! I'll say "Old Testament Survey" which I took my first semester on campus because it helped me understand the big picture of what was happening in the Old Testament, whereas before that I had a patchy, fragmented understanding of the OT

Favorite memory: All the great conversations and laughs with my fellow students in the cafeteria, in the dorms, and in the library (shhh!)

Where are you currently serving as a missionary and what is your work there?

My wife and I work as missionaries in Thailand with OMF International, though due to COVID-19 and other factors we are temporarily in the U.S. In Thailand, we have been participating in church planting efforts in Bangkok and elsewhere. I have also taught church history and missions at Bangkok Bible Seminary and assisted with the editing and translation of Thai Christian books at OMF Publishers Thailand. We expect to be involved in similar ministries when we return to Thailand, yet even before we return, I will soon begin virtually advising Bangkok Bible Seminary Doctor of Ministry students on their dissertation research.



Left: Speaking at South Florida Thai Lao Christian church with Rev. Anukul Sangsupan

Have you always been a missionary, or did you serve in other positions before becoming a missionary?

Before coming to Gordon-Conwell, I had already been on the mission field in Thailand for a couple of years, and I went to GCTS with the specific aim of getting better equipped to return to Thailand as a long-term missionary. I got married near the very end of my studies at Gordon-Conwell, and a little over a year later my wife and I and our infant

son went to Thailand. We spent 4 years in Central Thailand doing Thai language study and church planting in partnership with a small-town Thai church. We then spent 1.5 years in Southern California where I completed a Th.M. at Talbot School of Theology in preparation for teaching at Bangkok Bible Seminary. I didn't know if seminary teaching was a good fit for me, but over the next four years in Bangkok, I really came to enjoy it as I split my time between the seminary, a new church plant and assisting one day per week at a Thai Christian publisher. Coming to the conclusion that I really wanted to teach long-term, our family moved to Scotland for 3.5 years so that I could write a dissertation on Thai church history. Living in Scotland was



a great experience for the whole family and I finished my Ph.D. in World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh at the end of 2020. Because of COVID-19 and decreased financial support, we couldn't return to Thailand right away so we are now living in Florida and working toward returning to Thailand in the not-too-distant future.

How has God woven together your time at Gordon-Conwell with other life events to lead you to where you are now?

The most obviously impact of my time at Gordon-Conwell is the biblical, theological and practical ministry formation I received that has helped me to teach, preach and minister over the years. For that I am very thankful.

One of the other fantastic benefits of my time at Gordon-Conwell is the relationships and connections that have developed. I am still in touch with several friends whom I first met at Gordon-Conwell and it has been great to keep in touch with them, seeing how the Lord is using them and sharing joys and burdens of ministry. Some of these friends I have even welcomed to Thailand as they have brought short-term teams from their churches and we've ministered together. Another Gordon-Conwell classmate recommended that I contact his home church for missionary support and that church has been a faithful mission partner for more than a decade.

Being a Gordon-Conwell alumnus has also enabled me to connect and re-connect with many other alumni, and opened doors to further ministry and opportunities. At the tail end of my M.Div., I decided that I wanted to seek ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America instead of my former denomination and thus sought out a PCA congregation to join. When I introduced myself to the pastor of the first PCA church I visited in Southern California, he said, "Hey, I went to Gordon-Conwell too!" I joined the church and did an internship there before heading back to Thailand.

Dr. Timothy Tennent, from whom I took multiple missions classes at GCTS, recommended that I connect with Dr. Seree Lorgunpai, a classmate of his at GCTS in the 1980s who was now the general secretary of the Thailand Bible Society. When I moved to Bangkok, I met up with Dr. Seree and later had the pleasure of collaborating with him and other Thai pastors and professors on some writing projects as part of an inter-denominational theology committee. It was also Dr. Tennent who first made me aware of the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh, since he had earned a Ph.D. there. Thus, when I was looking for a doctoral program, Edinburgh was on my radar and I went on to complete a Ph.D. in World Christianity there.

At a GCTS alumni gathering in Los Angeles, I met fellow alumnus Dr. Allen Yeh, a professor of intercultural studies teaching at Biola University, who've I've enjoyed connecting with both personally and professionally in the world of evangelical missiology. At the same alumni gathering, I also met GCTS president Dr. Dennis Hollinger whom we had the pleasure of welcoming to Thailand the following year for a GCTS alumni gathering in Bangkok. There are Gordon-Conwell alumni literally all over the world and it is joy to cross paths with so many of them. Studying at Gordon-Conwell is the gift that keeps on giving.

What do you love about your work? What are some of the hard things about life as a missionary in your context?

There are so many great things about being a missionary but one of the things I appreciate most is the opportunity to have input into the formation of Thai Christian leaders through teaching at the seminary level. The in-person instructional time is obviously a huge part of that but the questions and interactions with students outside of class hours is a joy, especially as they figure out answers to ministry challenges they are facing and grow in Christian service.

Probably one of the hardest aspects of being a missionary is the feeling of always being an outsider and the daily low-level stress that comes along with that. After many years of living in Thailand, I can speak, understand, read, and write Thai fairly comfortably but people are always surprised I can say more than “Hello” and “Thank you” in Thai. Because I am white, there is a common misperception that I am just visiting and don't really live in Thailand. If I go to a place that I shop regularly after coming back from a two-week vacation, it is not uncommon for the shopkeeper to say, “Oh! You're back?! I thought you moved back to your country.”

What piece of advice would you give to alumni who are considering the mission field?

There are so many great opportunities for ministry around the world in places where the church is small and there is a huge need for well-equipped, mature Christians to invest in evangelism, discipleship and leadership training. An education at Gordon-Conwell is a solid foundation for ministry anywhere in the world. As a missionary, you may not have the simplicity of receiving a regular salary from a local church, nor the convenience of living and ministering in your native language and culture, but God has always provided faithfully for our family, not only financially but also in terms of relationships, fellowship and great experiences for my wife and I and our three children. Missionaries are often thought of as people who make great sacrifices in order to live and minister in another culture and language but there are so many other blessings, both in ministry and family life, that more than make up for what is given up by not living in the United States.

Do you have any publications or links to share?

I have been blogging and posting resources for many years at my personal ministry website www.dahlfred.com as well as www.thaichurchhistory.com, a bilingual site that I started as a place to post materials for my seminary students in Thailand. Under the “Resources” tab at dahlfred.com is a list of my publications, including a short biography titled “Daniel McGilvary: Pioneer Missionary to Northern Thailand.” This book began its life as a research paper that I wrote for a church history survey class at Gordon-Conwell.