

# Cambodia Case Study

## *Introduction*

It is now three years since we arrived on the field, and it has been our deep privilege to see, hear, and experience first hand, His blessed activity in Cambodia's "*Field of Souls*". We have come to an understanding, and appreciation of the missionary methods, and indigenous principles in operation. Furthermore, we have had sufficient time to thoroughly evaluate and/or scrutinize their effectiveness upon the work, the national church, and its leadership. Therefore, we will be attempting to provide details with reference to the evangelistic activity, and church planting methodology of the Cambodia Baptist Convention (CBC), as well as the overarching strategy, philosophy, and principles which guide the organization team. Moreover, we will be making some general observations for consideration by the larger family.

There is no attempt in this document to promote these principles, methodologies, and conclusions as the only viable model for consideration, and implementation. We don't have the belief that "*this*" or "*that*" way is the **only** way to plant a church. We are not trying to *transplant* the church so that it resembles any "prototype" anywhere else in the world. We earnestly believe that God will do through us what He could not do through others in Cambodia. So, we desire that each of you benefit from this reading, and that it will be helpful to the work in your respective regions.

### **1. Describe what is happening in terms of evangelism & church planting?**

In general terms, it is estimated that the total number of Evangelical Protestant churches in Cambodia is approximately 700, and the total number of Christians is approximately 50,000. The Ministry of Cults, and Religious Affairs reported 101 churches, and 21,705 Protestant Christians in early 1995. The church in Cambodia has been experiencing explosive growth during this adolescent period.

In the early summer of 1993, Bruce Carlton established a group of locally funded church planters called the Khmer Partners. In its initial stages, Bruce developed a church planting manual in the Khmer language which was used to train these church planters, and it later became the standard text for the church planting module in our Rural Leaders' Training Program (RLTP) throughout the country. In addition to their church planting ministry, each of these church planters were enrolled in the RLTP, and received continuing education in servant leadership, Chronological Bible Storying, and utilizing the Jesus film in evangelistic outreach. In brief, this group of seven church planters had established 29 different congregations in eight provinces, and 20 districts of Cambodia by September, 1995. At that time, approximately 60% of all new Baptist churches were being started by this group of church planters. Their overarching objective was to take the good news of Jesus Christ to as many communities in Cambodia as possible. As such, it was their vision to extend Christ's body into every district (177) of Cambodia by the year 2,000.

In my opinion, the leadership within the CBC, and its Church Planting Committee did not deliberately target certain regions for a church plant. In most cases, the church planter returned to their homes, and began to engage in evangelistic activity in many ways (e.g., sharing the good news on a one-to-one basis; distributing tracts; utilizing Chronological Bible Storying for both pre-evangelistic, and discipleship activity; showing the Jesus film; witnessing along relationship lines, i.e., immediate family, relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.; and/or evangelistic services associated with Christian holidays, e.g., Easter, and Christmas). Of course, there were overseas Khmers that were returning to visit family, and friends, and always shared the gospel. In these cases, the local church planter, and/or

leadership from within a local church would be present to "gather in the results of the witness," and subsequently assemble these believers together for worship. Furthermore, a small minority of churches during these early years put into practice the church planting methodology facilitated during the RLTP, and consequently started daughter churches as well.

In December, 1995 during a church planter conference in Phnom Penh, I began to share a "larger" vision for the unevangelized regions, and unreached peoples within Cambodia that did not have access to the gospel. I began maintaining a statistical report (Khmer/English) to monitor the growth and development of the church, as well as mapping where these new churches were being established throughout the country. We began to pray more strategically/intelligently for these regions, and solicited the earnest prayers of our vast network of intercessors (both within, and outside the country). In May, 1997 during the Third Annual Conference of the CBC, Pastor Tuon Kakda, President of the CBC proposed his "Bold Mission's Thrust" through the year 2,000. The goals set by the CBC were "at least one church in 50 Districts by May, 1998; at least one church in 85 Districts by May, 1999; at least one church in 128 Districts by January, 2000; and at least one church in 177 Districts by January, 2001."

As of June 15, 1997, a total of 96 churches, and 30 preaching points/missions had been reported. Twenty-seven new churches have been established since our Third Annual Conference in May, 1997. A total of 15 churches have been established by other churches who have caught the vision! The other 12 churches have been established by the local church planters. There are many more stories of exponential growth throughout the land. We have seen the total number of believers in the Svay Rieng Province grow from 994 to 1,401 in just four months. Recently, a total of 64 new leaders began the first of eight modules in our RLTP in Svay Rieng.

We began the Cambodia Adult Literacy Project in June, 1997, and have approximately 650 Cambodians learning how to read and write their own language. In seven of 14 provinces where we are offering the literacy program, 145 of 199 students have already professed faith in Christ. Many Cambodians have been extremely responsive to ministries resulting from prolonged physical, and emotional needs (e.g., after the catastrophic flooding in Cambodia in September/October, 1996, the CSI, and CBC conducted emergency relief efforts to respond to their need for food, medicines, etc. Over 5,000 families received assistance, and approximately 1,200 people prayed to receive Jesus Christ). On the other hand, there are unprecedented opportunities with Buddhist monks as our personnel are teaching English and Bible studies within pagodas. To the glory of God, we have witnessed one teacher in the pagoda, and one Buddhist monk come to faith in Jesus Christ. The teacher has already made his profession of faith public, and followed the Lord in believer's baptism. The Buddhist monk will be making his profession of faith public on November 2, 1997, and following the Lord in believer's baptism as well.

## **2. What missionary methods were/are being employed?**

Indigenous church planting principles have been encouraged since the development of the church planting program in 1993. We have sought to establish self-governing, self-propagating, self-training, and self-supporting churches in Cambodia. Although this has been our goal in missions, the CBC has yet to assume full responsibility for their work.

The CBC was established in April, 1995 with 43 member churches. In the preceding months, Bruce Carlton, and Thavy Nhem, a Khmer Baptist from the US, worked closely with the representatives of the Baptist churches in the development of a constitution for the CBC. At this time, it was decided that no CSI personnel (or foreigner in general) would hold a leadership position within the CBC. We

have always respected, and affirmed the leadership of the CBC at all levels, and believe they are just as capable of being led by the Holy Spirit. We have sought to work in a supportive role (servant), seeking to mentor, equip, and encourage the leaders of CBC. On September 13, 1995, I assumed responsibility of being the primary liaison between the CSI and the CBC. Prior to this time, Bruce Carlton worked in the capacity as an advisor to the CBC, and this role has been maintained by myself as well. However, as a result of this difficult transition process, I have sought to transfer more responsibility to the local Cambodian leaders, and for them to be less dependent upon my input, and participation (so as not to suppress their initiative). Moreover, there are no foreign missionaries that are serving as church planters, and/or pastors of churches. Thus, it is not necessary to mentor a local Cambodian to take responsibility for a church plant, and/or pastorate.

Although every representative of the organization is personally committed to the winning of souls, it is very apparent that the **most effective** evangelism is being done by the local Cambodians. There was a period between June, 1996 and January, 1997 that we sought to utilize short-term teams to be more directly involved in evangelistic endeavors in order to evaluate this theory. There were hundreds of professions of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and several churches, and small groups resulted from these campaigns. Subsequently, the local Cambodians began to conduct discipleship activities, and many of those who had previously prayed to receive Jesus Christ advised these local Christians that they, in fact, had not made a profession of faith. They stated that they did not want to cause the Western messenger to lose face by denying his urgent appeal to come to faith in Christ, so they said "yes" to the Westerner (but did not say "yes" to the Lord Jesus Christ). At the same time, the local Cambodian church has advised that they do not want our assistance in the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ. Most Cambodians often face persecution from family, friends, local authorities, and the religious majority, so they understand the cost of following Jesus Christ. As such, many of these Christians are faithful, and committed to sharing the gospel.

In the area of leadership development, the RLTP was established to equip new leaders of new congregations in rural areas (85.6% of Cambodia's population resides outside of the city of Phnom Penh) so that they can administer effective, and viable ministries in their respective communities. This program was designed to allow rural leaders to maintain their regular sources of income while, at the same time, providing a quality training program that will enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities in local church ministries. This program recognizes the need, and affirms the validity of bi-vocational leadership in Cambodia. There are two key aspects of the RLTP. First of all, the participants are required to pass on to their congregations that which they have learned (II Timothy 2:2). This is a Biblical principle which must be instilled in the hearts of these young leaders, if their churches are to become evangelistic in nature. Second, we are striving to prepare, and equip local Cambodian leaders to be spiritual guides, and respected teachers of their own people. Thus, we are not attempting to monopolize the RLTP, and/or leadership development ministries of the Cambodia Baptist Convention (CBC) by providing financial, and human resources. We are utilizing local Cambodian leaders to conduct training sessions as much as possible. We think that Cambodia needs to develop its own leaders who themselves are capable of training their own people. Without such capable leaders, the Cambodian church will forever be dependent upon outside resources to stimulate her growth, and spiritual development. We are currently employing several methods of discipleship, and leadership training in Cambodia. We have not been content that **one** program of study meets all the training needs of the Cambodian church. Although there have been 142 graduates, to date, in our RLTP, many of these men/women are beginning Theological Education by Extension (TEE) courses of study. Furthermore, there are two Itinerant Trainers that travel extensively throughout the country conducting discipleship/leadership training, as well as more specialized programs of study (decentralization has been the impetus). There have been many trainees in the RLTP that have been

working as an apprentice with more experienced church planters, in an effort to develop skills, and abilities in missionary work.

As it concerns self-support, the CBC, and its member churches had never been given the privilege of giving, and/or participating towards the support of their ongoing ministries prior to 1996. There had been some general teachings about giving/stewardship. However, the local Cambodian churches did not take the initiative to take financial responsibility as funding was being provided by outside supporters. I spent considerable hours teaching both the President, and the Treasurer of the CBC about the need to become self-supporting, and to encourage their participation in 1997. In 1996, the member churches of the CBC gave a total of 0.03% towards the costs of their programs. However, the CBC made commitments in 1997 to provide 5% towards the costs of all their programs, as well as an additional 15% towards the support of their RLTP program (i.e., as students would begin to make a contribution to the support of their theological training). The resulting factor has been the following: the CBC, and its member churches have averaged 26.5% towards the support of the RLTP in Phnom Penh; it has averaged 23% towards the support of the RLTP in Svay Rieng; it has averaged 7% towards the support of the RLTP in Battambang; representatives of 87 churches provided 17% (\$515.52) towards the cost of the Third Annual Conference of the CBC; and member churches have increased their giving to the CBC by 2%. These contributions are not proportionate to the ability of many Cambodian churches, but they do represent some sense of responsibility.

### **3. What were the broader context dynamics?**

Most Cambodians are very responsive to the gospel resulting from years of suffering, and social upheaval during the last 20 years (i.e., it has loosened the bond between nationalism, and Buddhism). The Cambodian people are more open to religious change than any other time in their past history. The shake-up, and/or disintegration of their entire way of life has significantly decreased their ties to Buddhism. Consequently, the prevailing belief system of Theravada Buddhism has evolved to nothing less than a hybrid of its pure form practiced by its adherents in Sri Lanka (and/or a syncretism of various belief systems, i.e., Animism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and to a smaller degree, Marxism). In 1993, the new constitution guaranteed religious freedom. This newfound freedom, and the exponential growth of the church has presented a number of challenges, and opportunities. The Cambodian church is very young, and the vast majority of its leaders are new believers. There are growing pains, and a lack of sound Biblical teaching. Much of the leadership within the churches are untrained. Many church members and leaders are illiterate (40%). There are issues of competitiveness, and/or sheep stealing/buying which continue to plague the young church. In addition, there is an influx of denominations, and independent groups, as well as all cults preying on the vulnerable young church.

### **4. Why this happened: Give us your insights, and interpretation?**

It is axiomatic that the country of Cambodia has received much publicity during these past several months. There is more mobilized prayer for the people of Cambodia than any other time in their history. We are adamant in our belief that there is a window of opportunity available to Christians in this country (i.e., one which is favorably inclined towards the spread of the gospel, and the establishment of indigenous churches). This door might close to the gospel, resulting from the outcome of the next elections in May, 1998. Further, if Christianity does not rapidly advance throughout the country of Cambodia, the Cambodian people will likely return to Buddhism for stability (as it was representative of the former peaceful, and stable way of life). It is imperative that we avail ourselves of every opportunity to engage these peoples (21 people groups) and especially those ministries which might afford more responsiveness (e.g., primary health care, rural development, agricultural assistance, etc.).

There is a profound belief, and reliance upon the Holy Spirit in the lives of His messengers, and these new converts. The power of God has been such that even the **most** evil hearts are being changed to good, and unclean vessels are now being made usable in the service of the Lord. The mustard seed faith of this infant church is moving mountains as spiritual strongholds are being demolished, and advances are being made into enemy territory. As such, there is significant spiritual warfare. His presence and power have been manifested through human intermediaries, and they have seen demons exorcised, persons healed, and in one case, a man raised from the dead. These happenings are not necessarily an everyday occurrence, but we have learned to expect "exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask, or think."

##### **5. Principles to Derive: What are the reproducible principles that can be derived from this case study?**

It is critical for the missionary to place definite time constraints upon the church, and/or convention with regard to assuming responsibility for the management/administration of their own work. Untimely delays will destroy their self-initiative, enthusiasm, and sense of responsibility.

It is indispensable that elders be appointed, and the development of emerging leaders occur as quickly as possible. Without such leadership, any movement towards indigenization will be futile.

It is essential that we train, and equip new converts so that they have a clear understanding of the Christian faith. One great effect resulting from this teaching is that many become evangelists, and/or missionaries, and are zealous to share their faith in Christ.

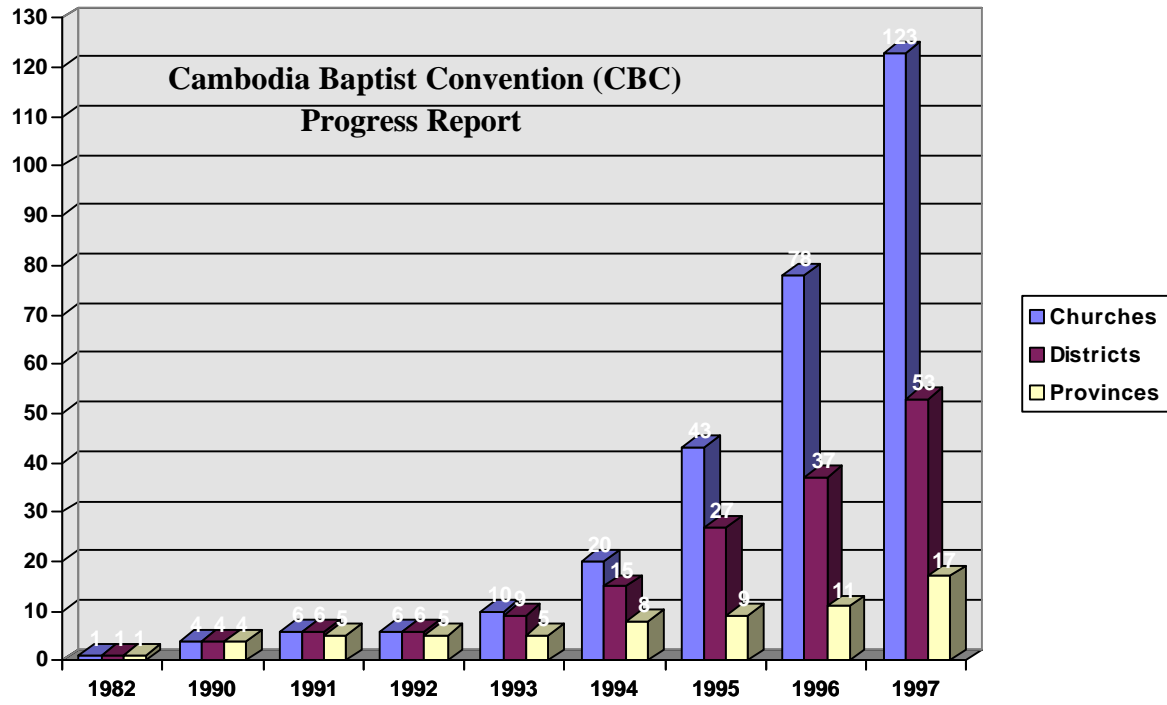
At all costs, avoid the temptation, and entrapment of being the high profile front man (church planter). Earnestly seek to become the low profile foot man (i.e., God's lackey), and work towards mentoring/equipping others for this vital ministry.

Demonstrate self-sacrifice by spending lots of time with those to whom you are mentoring. Teach by example (admitting times of failure and weakness is very important). Give simple instructions (uncomplicated...most all of our new leaders are **new** converts). Provide opportunities for your apprentices to practice what they have learned (constantly evaluate, and reevaluate). Constantly supervise (**not** control) the apprentices in their practical ministry assignments (i.e., until they are able to pass on what they have learned). Multiply yourself!

Don't deprive and handicap the churches by not encouraging their financial support, and contribution to the work of the Lord. Don't hesitate to teach the new converts about principles of Christian stewardship, or this will undoubtedly engender gloomy, and reluctant givers!

Churches planted by other churches are reproducible, but those started by "funded" church planters are not (few exceptions to this case; it is not necessarily the right message we need to send to our churches, and national conventions as well).

Outlined below is a chart which represents the establishment, and growth of Baptist churches in Cambodia since 1982:



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