# Theology  

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## Cambodian Youth in the New Millennium

Brian MAHER

Awell-worn cliché assures us that "Christian young people are leaders of the future church." Like all clichés, this one is dangerous because the half-truth it contains comes to be believed and acted upon if repeated enough.

The truth is that young people are the leaders in church today as well as tomorrow. Christian young people are leaders just by virtue of being Christian. Many of Cambodia's urban churches are filled with believers between the ages of 15 and 25 . How did this happen? It came about through Christian young people telling their friends about their experiences with Jesus Christ, and allowing them to observe how He changed them. Is this not true leadership?

Cambodia over the last seven years has seen numerous groups from outside wanting to train church leaders through short seminars. (Too often these groups come uninvited, and know little about the people, culture, or church history of Cambodia.) Over all those years I can't remember many groups coming to lead seminars for youth, except for an occasional David C. Cook seminar to develop their writing skills. Youth ministry has not seen much foreign input except for strictly denominational events. There has been little interest from overseas to help Christian young people as a whole. More encouragement has come from within the national church and the international Christian community here in country. For example, EFC Youth Commission's annual youth conference is financed largely by the international Christian community in Cambodia and the national church. Youth ministry does not seem
to loom large in the vision of overseas missions in general. Even my own supporters take care of my personal needs but rarely contribute specifically to youth work.

The Cambodian churches who will still be around in the next twenty years will be those with a sustainable vision for youth. For example, Open Gate Fellowship in Phnom Penh encourages this generation of Christian young people to take part in all its programs and planning. This church has been discipling and using its young people as participants in ministry, in contrast with others where the pastor holds all the power and spends a lot of energy protecting and consolidating that power. Open Gate thrives because it grasps the value and potential of youth-a necessary ingredient for the health and growth of any church.

My first trip to Cambodia was in September 1990, with Kong Chhon and Sithan Lee. Sithan and Chhon held training sessions with national church leaders (pastors and elders) on the third floor of Pastor Im Chhrorn's church, then called Psa Tmei 1, while I taught young people from Santho Mok, Psa Tmei 1, Toul Tom Poong Church, Tonle Basaac Church, Tom Nop Tek Church, Takmau Church, Solomon and some others. There were nine churches in the Phnom Penh area in that time. On that trip Muth Bunthy and Sar Paulerk served as my translators.

I remember meeting Eang Chhun, Bin David, Ngin Sacrowar, Khieu Vanlorn, Taing Nary, Lav Houn, Yorng Soth, Ung Sophal, Ngeth Sambo, Em Sithan and Heng Cheng. I also met a lot of young people as well. Some of the orphans that Ngin Sacrowvar worked with in Orphanage \#1 were Christians in their late- and mid-teens. They attended Muth Bunthy's church, which was meeting in his house at the time, near the orphanage on the river road, just this side of the Chreuy Changvar Bridge. I clearly remember spending time with Srey Rot, Chan Remey, Srey Chenda, Song Sol Molly, Mr. Son Tha and Mr. Oun Chan Sinat. Sao Volek, Srey Heim, Somaly, and scores of others also made my acquaintance.

On a 1992 trip I met Uong Vibol, Uy Pheara, Heng Borin, Suy Visal, Sileng Sumanea, Chan Dara, Wattanah Lo, and Pastor

Uong Rein, who was pastoring Psa Tmei 3 Church at the time. There are many I have left out, but if we stop to wonder what these particular young people of ten years ago are doing now you would be pleasantly surprised to find that most of them are still actively pursing the Christian faith and are indeed involved as "leaders" in churches, Christian organizations, Christian NGO's, businesses, public schools, and the like.

Because of people like Chhon Kong, Ngin Sacrovar, Bin David, Muth Bunthy, Uong Rein, and other pastors who realized the value of Cambodian young people early on, and who nurtured and encouraged them along the way, we now have a small solid cross section of church leadership with close to ten years of experience in the faith and ministry.

In 1992-93, with the influx of Christian NGO's and missionaries, and with Christians returning from the border, the church got an additional boost and continued to grow numerically. In the urban areas, many lower-middle to middle class youth were attracted to gospel. This generation of youth had seen how communism and their traditional religious beliefs had failed them. They were sick of corruption, war, exploitation, and a succession of governments which only served themselves at the expense of the people. Through the lives of Christian young people, the new Cambodian youth got a glimpse of the Good News being practically worked out. And they saw hope.

The instability of the early and mid 90 's seemed to encourage the growth of the Kingdom of God, as young peopl pondered their philosophies of life and religion, and the influence of these on their personal and national lives. With the coming of UNTAC in 1993, a whole new world opened to Cambodian youth. The west introduced both its often seamy popular culture, as well as its more positive science and technology. A majority of middle class, educated youth rejected former ties to traditional beliefs and communism, and put their hope science, technology, and democracy as their new gods. So the challenge here, at least in the city, is not so much to unravel the mysteries of Buddhism, animism, or the worship of ancestors in order to learn how to make

Christianity more applicable. The challenge is not to become expert rational apologists who can effectively answer academic claims of naturalistic materialism, secular humanism, and evolution (although on occasion this would be helpful). The real challenge is make our faith existentially relevant.

Many youth leaders have told me that they cannot get people to come their youth programs anymore. They are afraid of reung sahsnah--anything smacking of religion. They suspect it is something religious and politely decline the offer. Proclamation and confrontational styles of evangelism used for youth are hardly effective these days. Christian organizations that use such models are finding the return on their efforts next to nil. Even the tried-and-true "ambush" method of evangelism-where you invite unbelievers to a seemingly "normal" event at church and then sneak up and give both barrels-is failing.

It is time to move out of the program mode. We cannot expect our audience to come to us; we must go to them. This is what Jesus did. He went to where the people were. Today what we offer the world is seen as irrelevant. When we offer them the "liberating truth of the Gospel," we are often perceived as being arrogant or pushing a particular religious agenda. We Christians are not seen as meeting the perceived needs of the people of this world. The youth, as salt, need to get out of shaker and into the world. Christian youth need to earn the right to be heard by their peers by meeting both the real and perceived needs of the community, whether it be caring for the environment, ministering to AIDS patients, engaging in emergency relief, or serving poor or displaced people. Through such relevant and biblical ministry, youth can have a powerful impact on their peers by serving in a natural rather than contrived contexts.

Another challenge for young Cambodian Christians is to develop a valid, biblical theology, and to understand the world. To many, "the world" is anywhere one finds rock'n roll, sex, alcohol, gambling, or smoking. To much of the Cambodian church, a mature Christian is someone who doesn't puk, see, srey nee, ounbong (sex, drugs, and rock \& roll). If you have cut these things
from your life, then according to some Christian circles you have arrived. Influence from traditional beliefs and some of our more conservative foreign missionaries reenforced this unhealthy concept. In many cases it leaves sins of the heart unaddressed. While the obvious observable sins have been purged, prejudice, wife beating, hatred, discrimination against women, jealousy, control, and lust for power continue to live on in the heart. What happens is that we have sanctified bodies with a secular worldview. An understanding of Romans 12:2 and how the renewing of mind is critical in becoming like Christ is sorely needed.

There are few who are engaging the world as Jesus did. The majority embrace a theology of retreat from the world. In reality, "the world" is a "worldview"-a thought and value system-which opposes Kingdom values. There is no place for God in this system. Man is lifted up rather than God. The drinking, gambling, use of prostitutes, etc., are simply observable symptoms of a person whose worldview is "worldly." The challenge here is for youth not to retreat from the world, but to engage it like Jesus did. Jesus was perceived by "sinners" as being relevant to their needs. Cambodian Christian young people need to learn how to be real salt and real light, living in the world while not being contaminated by its value system. We, as disciplers need to make 'holistic' disciples. That is, we need take to heart Matthew 28, especially the verse where Jesus exhorts us to "[teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you." Jesus showed his disciples how to live in the world in all areas. Our obligation in discipleship goes beyond sitting down with a young person and going through a Navigators study. It entails teaching him or her how to interpret "the world," and how to live in it victoriously in all areas of life-life-style, courtship, family life, Christian response to social problems, stewardship of finances, citizenship, etc.

There is further confusion among youth about the value of the roles they choose. Many are taught that the highest calling is to become a pastor, missionary, full-time church worker, or staff in a Christian NGO. So, whether "called" or not, they pursue the
ministry out of misguided direction. The highest calling is not to become a pastor; it is to use one's talents and gifts wherever God calls. If God calls a young person to be soldier, he needs to be a soldier. If God calls a person to be a business person, she needs to do that. God calls people into every facet of vocational life in order for the church to be salt and light that is evenly distributed. "Full-time Christian workers" are no more valuable for the Kingdom than Christians who live out their faith as doctors, lawyers, journalists, dentists, foresters, geologists, business people, etc. Cambodian Christian youth need to understand the value of a role outside the church, in order to enter all levels of society to be salt and light. Neither Joseph nor Daniel were pastors, yet they transformed society from within. Cambodian Christian young men and women entering the system as professionals will not only thus acquire a natural context for Christian witness, but may also effect policy changes which result in Cambodian society resembling the Kingdom of God in one area a bit more than it did before. When this repeatedly happens, the Cambodian church will be effectively working with Jesus to "reconcile all things to himself"-souls and systems alike ( $\mathrm{Col} 1: 19,20$ ).

A tall order for Cambodian Christian youth? Not at all. They have the heart; they have mind; they have the potential. And, unlike some of their spiritual fathers, they are flexible. They are more interested in unity, have fewer problems working side by side with foreigners, and exercise a more global perspective. This generation of Cambodian Christian young men and women will really make an impact on this country. But a lot of that will depend on what kind of guidance, teaching, and encouragement the Cambodian church leaders give them, as well as what kind of guidance the Christian expatriate community gives both youth and national church leaders. In many ways, it is also up to us. So, let us stop for minute and consider the situation of Cambodian Christian youth. Who will walk with them side by side, teaching them to take initiative and use their creativity to address new dilemmas the church will face?

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