# Theology  

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## Meet Yos Em Sithan

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## YOS Em Sithan

Yos Em Sithan became a Christian in 1975, one week before the Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh. Her brother Yos Ann Tipo led her to the Lord; her sister Yos Kam Molly was already a strong believer.

Having so little time to understand her new faith, she cried almost daily to God, "Why was this all happening? Please help me." Such was the extent of her new faith. God answered her prayers in a variety of ways. Although she had previously been a student and her father a government official, she was able to convince the Khmer Rouge soldiers otherwise and thereby avoid almost certain elimination. She was often asked what she used to do. "Are you a student? What was your job before?" She replied that she had been a vegetable seller in the market.

She was fortunate that her entire family was able to remain together when they were relocated to Prey Veng to work as rice farmers. Suspicious that she and her family were from the educated class, the soldiers would often ask questions regarding their skill in farming or hard labor. God intervened by giving her rice-planting skills, which as a city girl she had never had. Another means by which God provided for their family was Em Sitan's father's background with the Ministry of Agriculture. This gave him some understanding of farming, and allowed them to secretly grow extra food for their family. In 1978 her family was eventually separated, and the Khmer Rouge arranged for her subsequent marriage.

After the fall of the Pol Pot regime, her family did not immediately declare their faith openly. Her father, knowing the then-current system of government, felt strongly that they should be cautious. He had witnessed the deportation of a World Council of Churches representative known for his evangelistic activity.

1989 was a year of new life, and the realization of eternal life, in Em Sithan's family. Her husband, Malk Wathna, become a Christian following study in Cuba, and her father, Yos Ann, went home to be with the Lord. He had been respected in both Christian and Buddhist circles. The arrangements for his funeral created a major dilemma. How would they perform the ceremony in a manner that reflected their Christian faith? They sought permission from the local authorities, only to be turned down. They did have a ceremony with many in attendance. Seang Ang performed the ceremony, and leaders such as Oung Rien and Sar Paulerk were present. After this Em Sithan began to wonder just how we as Christians should practice our faith? She was encouraged by a leader in the Catholic community to write the government for permission to actively express their faith.

She knew of a prominent official-related to her father by marriage-who had close ties with high-ranking government members. Because she and her family were not associated with any certain group, and because of the tremendous respect her father had in government circles, he agreed to help her submit a letter to the proper authorities. She then began to feel that "God had a plan for us." She met regularly with an official responsible for religious matters to discuss Christianity. He wanted to know what Christians
were and who was behind them (meaning outside foreign support). When he realized that she had no outside support and that she was a teacher in the Ministry of Education, he saw that it was possible to be a Christian and simultaneously maintain love for Cambodian people and culture. Permission was granted for Cambodian Christians to openly express their faith.

In 1990 the Olympic Church opened its doors. In the beginning, Em Sithan's family would simply read the Bible, sing songs, and listen to FEBC (Far East Broadcasting Cambodia). They started without any denominational or outside support in order to avoid being perceived as having been deceptive in their initial discussions with the government. Today the church has between forty and fifty members. It has no pastor. She calls herself a church leader. There are four elders who share the speaking duties each week. Bible study is taken seriously in this church. Em Sithan has a TEE degree, and the church has an active outreach program. The Olympic Church has sister churches in Kampong Cham, Kang Meas, Batheay, and Rokakong (Kandal Province).

From 1993-97 Em Sithan served on the translation committee with Arun Sok Nep for the new translation of the Cambodian Bible. Until March 2000 she had maintained a parttime position within the Ministry of Education. She now works full time for the Bible Society as their Executive Secretary. The mission of the Bible Society is the translation, printing, and distribution of the Word of God for everyone, everywhere in Cambodia-especially the non-Christian.

Em Sithan remains optimistic regarding the growth of Christianity here. She sees the church and growing both spiritually and materially. She would caution fellow believers to always remain faithful to Jesus, as He is their only Savior. Following Christianity for power and gain is wrong. She is saddened to see poor Cambodians giving offerings to build lavish pagodas, which seldom address their personal or spiritual needs. She feels strongly that tithes, which go into churches, should be used outside the church for God's work. The Olympic Church uses their offerings for outreach and missions in the provinces. She would also enjoy having more fellowship with other local Christians, but finds that
her days are full with the demands of her church and the Bible Society.

When discussing the evangelization of Cambodia, Em Sithan has an open mind, and welcomes foreign missionaries. She believes strategies should fit the situation as well as the country. Evangelism must be lived as well as spoken. It is important to share the need to love God and each other. What should not be done is to spend too much time arguing over denominations and translations. What is important is to obey God, fear and respect Him. He, alone is the judge; we should not judge each other.

In 1994, American evangelist Mike Evans brought a disastrous "crusade" to Cambodia. He made promises of healing to all who came, and eventually narrowly avoided having the stage overturned by the riotous stadium crowd. When Em Sithan saw the promotion of this event, she found it disconcerting that the evangelist's name was given more prominence than name of Jesus Christ. She made the decision that Olympic Church would not take part in this event. When co-workers at the Ministry of Education taunted her regarding the failed spectacle, she simply replied, "If you have questions regarding my Christianity, I would be happy to share with you. If, on the other hand, you wish to argue and criticize the events of the crusade, then I really have nothing to say." She believes as Christians study the word of God they will gain discernment regarding the various messages and messengers who come to Cambodia.

Em Sithan admits that there are many misconceptions regarding Cambodian Christians. A former co-worker at the Ministry of Education was surprised that she was a Christian; after all, she was an educated woman. She continued with the equally popular question, "So how much money do you receive for having a church in your home?" She replied, "If you really believe my faith is just about the money, why don't you open up your house and make some money as I do?"

Em Sithan was right to believe that God has a plan for her and Cambodia. He has shown her His faithfulness, protection, perfect timing, and provision. She has responded with a sincere desire to serve Him with humility, integrity, and a love for her country and its people.


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