# Theology  

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## How Can They Believe? How Can They Hear? The Khmer Church in Cambodia Today

## Background

TThe name of Christ was probably first brought to Cambodia by Portuguese and Spanish traders in the sixteenth century. The stormy passage of the Roman Catholic Church in Cambodia has been well recorded in François Ponchaud's Cathedral of the Rice Paddy. ${ }^{1}$ It seems that only Brahmanism and Buddhism came across from India at the beginning of the Christian era when cultural links were growing between India and Cambodia, even though we know that a church existed in southern India from the first century. But the Khmer people-apart from those living in Siam where the gospel first penetrated in the early nineteenth century-had to wait until the twentieth century to hear the evangelical gospel.
${ }^{1}$ François Ponchaud, The Cathedral of the Rice Paddy-450 Years of History of the Church in Cambodia, preface by Bishop Yves Ramousse, postface by Cardinal Etchegaray, translated by Nancy Pignarre and the Bishop Salas Cambodian Catholic Center (Le Sarment: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1990).

Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, issued a call to prayer in 1875 for the "vassal" states to the south of China, including Cambodia. Trading links had been established about a thousand years earlier as Chinese settlers came down into the Indochinese peninsula, but China itself was then only just opening up to receive the gospel. Around the world people were praying for Indochina. In 1902 the Swiss Brethren were the first to arrive, settling in southern Laos. God laid the burden of planting the church on the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who sent their first workers to Vietnam in 1911. These pioneers started to preach to the Kampuchea Kraom people in the Mekong Delta, but found the door to Cambodia itself closed to them by the French, who did not want competition for the Catholics. Eventually, however, God gave the Alliance the opportunity to send two missionary families in 1923, the beginning of today's evangelical church in our country.

The early work centered on Battambang, where groups of migrants from Kampuchea Kraom proved responsive. The first known church group was in Chkaè Kôn, where Granny Yim still lives; she came as a five-year-old to live and share Christ in Cambodia with her parents.

Now in the next century where is the church? A simple answer-everywhere! For the first time we can find Christian groups in every province around the country. When you consider the turbulent history of this country, it is amazing to see how God worked so that people can and do believe in Christ. Only twenty years ago there was a deliberate attempt to stamp out not only Christianity (regarded as Western and imperialist) but all religions. Yet God preserved a remnant-a significant word applying to those who clung to their faith in spite of everything. Isaiah 46:3-4 reads, "Listen to me . . . all you who remain [i.e., the remnant] of the house of Israel. . . . Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; . . . I will rescue you."

## Leadership

In 1974 there were only twelve full-time pastors, though many had been trained at the Takhmau Bible School. The entire class I taught there from 1974-75 perished during the Khmer Rouge period, apart from Nhem Sokhun, who died not long after reaching the United States. Yet as I look around today, I see quite a few church leaders who were Christians before 1975, truly preserved by God's grace. Nevertheless, most people in leadership today became Christians after 1990. This is true of virtually all lay pastors in the country churches. They therefore have few models to follow, a fact that shows up in the way they organize their churches like associations or societies with elected committees. Few groups have leaders appointed because of their spiritual qualifications according to the Pauline pattern.

## Training of Leadership

As churches started multiplying, the cry went up, "We need leadership training!" Many Christian mission groups have responded to this call, with the result that seminars, short-term Bible schools, and training sessions are on the calendar virtually every month. The Theological Education by Extension program started by the Christian and Missionary Alliance is currently training over six hundred people, mostly in the provinces. The materials originally written for church leaders in South America are well translated and eminently suitable for the Khmer leaders. A TEE association has been set up to make this training available to the whole church here in Cambodia. Another TEE type program has been started by the Assemblies of God, called "Train and Multiply." This relies on personal mentoring of leaders, who in turn mentor others-good news indeed!

Residential courses are run at seven Baptist centers across the country for two weeks at a time. After two years the rural leaders will have studied for eight sessions, giving them basic training in leading churches and teaching the Bible. The Phnom Penh Bible School has already graduated six classes of students
who have studied for three years, and current enrollment is sixty. Campus Crusade for Christ runs a school for evangelists, and the Assemblies of God opened their Cambodia Bible Institute in July 1996. Kampuchea for Christ also has residential training courses, as do the Methodists. Many short-term courses are also held in Phnom Penh and the provinces, which church leaders from around the country attend.

Training materials are available from many sources, besides the workbooks that go with the above TEE and Bible School courses. Leroy Eims' How to Be a Leader was translated from Thai and typed in 1992. There is a range of Christian and evangelistic books that need to be made more readily available to the local churches so that Christians can read for themselves, but few people have access to these books or can afford to buy them. Few, too, have shortwave radios, another great source of teaching through daily FEBC broadcasts, though those living close to FM stations have a choice of Christian programs. Cassettes can be listened to several times over on tape recorders, and some are distributing teaching material this way. But a lot more use could be made of resources already prepared if libraries were set up in each Christian center.

## Evangelism

Most Cambodian Christians have come to believe through the witness of family or close friends. Not only did they hear message of the gospel from them, they also saw how its power changes lives. Sometimes their overseas relatives, converted in the refugee camps or in a third country, have come back and explained the gospel to them.

But in some cases the warm generosity of overseas Christians has clouded the issue and led the poorer relatives to think that becoming a Christian is part of a bargain for receiving assistance. New believers are freguently asked how much they are paid for becoming Christians, and it is not easy for them to give an appropriate answer to dispel these wrong ideas.

Some have become Christians because God healed them. Disease is very prevalent, and the practice of going to folk healers (krou Khmer) still very popular. In this context, God has stepped in and shown his power to heal both people's physical bodies and their broken and emotionally distressed hearts, as well as to deliver the many who have allowed the devil to trouble or possess them. Those healed then proclaim the message of God's peace that passes all understanding, unknown to them before accepting Christ.

The most powerful form of evangelism is still the life transformed by the power of Christ. In rural communities no one can hide himself away, and it soon becomes the talk of the village when a person's life is radically changed. Recently I spoke with a former soldier in Svai Reang province who was convinced he had become HIV-positive because of his previous loose lifestyle, and had spent hundreds of dollars seeking treatment. He was attracted to the gospel because of the "trust in Christ" attitude of some fellow villagers. Now he is following Christ-one truly snatched from the fire (Jude 23).

## Worship

Nearly every Sunday there is a new group of Christians meeting somewhere in Cambodia for the first time to worship the true and living God. Every year many hundreds celebrate their first Easter and Christmas. God's church continues to grow numerically, but it still has to mature to attain the whole measure of fullness that Christ has prepared for his body. His aim is to bring church into the unity of the Spirit. Year by year we are seeing a movement in the right direction, towards acknowledging the headship of Christ. Sadly there are still those who seek to get their own groups or denominations established without encouraging fellowship and mutual building up of all the Christians in one given area. But in time local Christians will insist on the truth that they are "the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grow[ing] and build[ing] itself in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:16)."

This is already true in the experience of worship, where the Cambodian Christians have their own hymnology and sing with great gusto the indigenous songs given to them by the Lord. How precious this gift of music and poetry and art forms, a heritage of the Khmer people, and now used expressly to worship God! An official in the department of religion and culture in Kampong Thom province recently praised the local churches for upholding Khmer culture in their worship songs.

## Future Development

Having watched the blossoming of churches over the last ten years, I expect growth to continue as more villages are reached with the gospel. Today many people who previously had resisted the gospel message are becoming Christians, just as in the early days of missionary activity so few responded even though many heard. We need to continue to reach out to those who never have had the opportunity to respond to the gospel.

As Christians mature, they should develop a burden to carry the gospel to other districts in their own provinces and beyond. Increasing maturity will also bring a sense of responsibility to "parent" and discipline new Christians. At present many new believers are left to fend for themselves with inadequate follow-up. I would dare to hope that the churches will develop truly into Christi in communities caring for one another like their own family and welcoming in the new believers as part of this family.
$t$ present many churches and denominations are heavily dependent on foreign input and NGO's. Therefore they do not fully perceive their own responsibility to carry out Christ's commands in sharing what God has given them. Foreigners need to evaluate whether their input is actually strengthening the new believers' faith in God who "will provide," as we can actually hinder rather than help their trust in God by becoming substitute patrons.

As Christians develop, they will know God on an ever deeper level, and come to acknowledge him as the center of their lives, their families, and their churches. Today we have a
multiplicity of church groups often competing with each other (like shops setting up together to attract customers). When God becomes the focal center, then differences will recede and Christians will willingly join together for fellowship, also to make an impact on the $99.5 \%$ of Cambodia that still does not acknowledge Christ as savior.
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14).



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[^0]:    ${ }^{(1)}$ François Ponchaud, The Cathedral of the Rice Paddy-450 Years of History of the Church in Cambodia, preface by Bishop Yvers Ramousse, postface by Cardinal Etchegaray, translated by Nancy Pignarre and the Bishop Salas Cambodian Catholic Center (Le Sarment: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1990).

