

Emerging Church in Cambodia

Dedication of first meetinghouse in former war-torn country marks new era

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Conditions in Cambodia were bleak and forlorn when missionaries arrived 10 years ago. Many roads were largely pot holes lined with dirt. No members of the Church lived in the country. Society ranged from disorderly to lawless.



Families band together to travel to meetinghouse dedication. Once a bleak and forlorn country, Cambodia is emerging with a revitalized spirit. Church is enjoying steady growth.

Photo by Elder David Thornell



Vietnamese District President Phan Son Tung, left, attends dedication with other members.

Photo by Elder David Thornell



Members and missionaries greet on street prior to dedication.
Photo by Elder David Thornell



Prince Norodom Sereyvudh, right, is greeted by Brother Rodacker Muang during open house. "This is just what the young people of Cambodia need. I support this," he said.
Photo by Elder David Thornell



Meetinghouse in Phnom Penh stands as a symbol of beauty and strength Church is bringing to Cambodia. With Cambodian-style accents, the two-story building will house three districts with other offices and facilities.
Photo by Richard Hunter

But now, a short decade later, there is a vigorous membership of more than 6,000 in the Church divided into two Cambodian districts and one Vietnamese, with 18 branches. Society is generally peaceful and law abiding. Streets are clean, paved and lined with flowering trees. There is a growing sense of beauty and contentment.

The Church is adding to these positive circumstances. Under tranquil blue skies on Jan. 25, the first meetinghouse of the Church was dedicated, a symbol of the emerging Church in a country long fraught with civil strife.

"I'm impressed with the quality of people coming into the Church," said Bishop Richard C. Edgley of the Presiding Bishopric. "Their faith is as strong as any people on the earth. They seem peaceful and very happy. The effect of the gospel is very evident from the light that shines from the eyes of the members. The new chapel is beautiful and will serve the Church well for many years. I have a strong impression that the Lord has His hand over Cambodia."

Bishop Edgley, first counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, presided over the three dedicatory sessions. Nearly 2,000 members participated, filling the chapel beyond capacity. Many live in Phnom Penh. Others, like the four bus loads of members from Kampong Cham, traveled more than two hours to attend. Thirty-nine members from the Battambang Branch, formed a month earlier in December 2003, traveled six hours.

A session was held for each of the three districts in the country; namely, the North, South and Central districts. Two sessions were conducted in Khmer, the language of Cambodia. The third was conducted in Vietnamese.

In addition to Bishop Edgley, members of each session listened to counsel from Elder William K. Jackson, Area Authority Seventy from New Delhi, India, and President David J. Towers of the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission, as well as district leaders. Sisters Pauline Edgley, Ann Jackson and Myrna Towers also spoke.

The Cambodia District Center, or meetinghouse, is a two-story structure constructed by Cambodian workers and features Cambodian-style architectural accents. The ground floor has a spacious foyer and classrooms; a large chapel is on the second floor.

A gentle breeze from overhead fans tempered the tropical heat during the dedicatory sessions. Youth choirs performed in two sessions, while a family choir performed in the third. Of particular note were two organists who accompanied the choir and congregation. Because private opportunities to study music are limited, two young sisters, Noug Davy and Phoung Sokhouen, have been taking piano lessons from senior missionary sisters for the past two years. They were able to practice on the new organ after it was installed a week prior to the dedication.

Following the war-torn years of the 1960s and 1970s when Cambodia figured prominently in the Vietnam War and the civil strife of the Khmer Rouge and the atrocities of the Pol Pot years that followed, conditions in Cambodia became forlorn and bleak.

Political circumstances began to change in the early 1990s when democratic elections were held. The new government of Cambodia granted legal recognition of the Church on March 4, 1994, and authorized the Church to provide humanitarian aid. Shortly afterward, a small feed mill and cannery were proposed and three senior missionary couples with agricultural background were called.

"The Cambodian people were interested in what we were doing," said Joyce White in a *Church News* interview. She and her husband, Leland, were among the early missionary couples. "They wanted the gospel taught as much as they wanted to learn English. The people were eager to be your friend. We never experienced any hostility among the young people."

The humanitarian effort proved to be the means of opening doors and making friends, said Brother White, who was later called as the first mission president to Cambodia.

Soon, sufficient trust had been developed that missionaries were permitted to enter the country. The first missionaries were transferred from Cambodian-speaking missions in the United States.

But in 1994, political and economic conditions were still tenuous enough that Elder John H. Groberg of the Seventy and Area presidency questioned whether missionaries would be safe.

"When I arrived for the first time to meet the four new missionaries, the first thing I saw as I walked off the plane were kids, probably teenagers, dressed in baggy clothes slinging pistols," he said in a *Church News* interview.

No sooner had Elder Groberg met the missionaries in a nearby building than the phone rang. A general in the Cambodian military had learned of Elder Groberg's arrival and wanted to meet with him.

Elder Groberg and the missionaries watched as the general and his entourage of three military vehicles with mounted machine guns approached.

It was an imposing sight, Elder Groberg said.

The general began questioning Elder Groberg through a Cambodian interpreter. On occasion, the missionaries, who had learned their Cambodian language in places like Boston and Los Angeles, would correct the translator. Soon, the general turned to the missionaries and asked them to translate.

"There was still turmoil in the country," Elder Groberg described. "The Khmer Rouge was still strong and Pol Pot had not yet been caught. The fighters were called insurgents, but I felt they were more like bandits. I questioned whether it was safe for missionaries to be there."

At first, discussions with the general were tense. He told how he had shot at 20-year-old American soldiers during the Vietnam War for self-protection. But as the general learned the missionary message, he came to appreciate their purpose.

"Other young men came here with guns," the general said. "But your young men come with books. It is better to come with books than guns."

"The general must have sensed my apprehension," Elder Groberg said, "because he took a liking to the missionaries and assured me that they would be all right.

" 'They are now under my care and protection,' he said.

"Word must have traveled quickly that the missionaries had the general's approval and protection," Elder Groberg said, "because the missionaries were welcomed and didn't need to fear for their lives.

"It's amazing to me what the Lord has accomplished in Cambodia," he continued. "To me it is verification that the Lord wants to be there and has people in Cambodia ready for the gospel. From that tense moment with the general when dark suddenly turned to light has come strong roots of the Church that will someday become a stake. It's absolutely amazing."

Conditions for the Church and in the country made a decided turn for the better after President Gordon B. Hinckley's visit and blessing May 28, 1996. On the 10th stop in a two-week tour of 14 places that included the dedication of the Hong Kong Temple, President Hinckley spoke of the miracles that were taking place in Asia where small congregations were growing into strong organizations.

"The Church will grow if you do your part," he told members in a packed house in the Cambodiana Hotel. The next day he blessed the land that the "little handful of members might become a great army."

In the next two years, political circumstances began to stabilize. Defections of the Khmer guerillas to the government began, followed by the death of Pol Pot in 1998.

The year 1997 marked a year of growth for the Church. By July, the 17 missionaries who had been serving in Cambodia under the leadership of the Thailand Bangkok Mission were organized into a new mission, the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission with Leland White as president.

This was a time when missionaries felt a revitalizing spirit and expressed joy in their callings and gratitude for the Lord's blessings. On April 30, the first full-time missionary called from Cambodia, Elder Suy Chhay Leang, entered the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, prior to serving in the [Idaho Pocatello Mission](#).

Since the first baptism on Sept. 3, 1994, growth of the Church has been steady and encouraging. The year 1997 ended with 601 members in three Cambodian branches and one Vietnamese branch. By 1998, the year ended with 24 missionaries baptizing 256 members for a total of 891 members. By 1999, about

400 members joined the Church. By July 2000, when President John P. Colton began serving, membership climbed to 1,400. The next three years saw 1,500 new converts join, including many families.

Humanitarian projects continue to reach out to many, including water projects, wheelchair projects, dental clinic refurbishing, books and hygiene kits. Sewing classes, computer classes, employment, family history and English classes have proven popular and have been the means of introducing the Church. Each session, hundreds are turned away for lack of equipment and space.

"The rapid progress of the Church, and the reception of the gospel in Cambodia, is an exciting thing to be involved with," said President Towers. "These beautiful and humble people are hungry for the truth and are so appreciative to hear it from our great missionaries. Often discussions are taught in grass shacks, by candlelight and under very simple conditions, and although many are very poor in temporal things, they are becoming rich in things of the Spirit, and are showing forth great faith, courage, hope and endurance. We are so blessed, and grateful, to serve in Cambodia."