

Leland D. and Joyce B. White, Ensign, January 1997, pg. 77

Gospel Gains Foothold in Cambodia

By Leland D. and Joyce B. White

"The Church provides Cambodians with a way to seek spirituality, which for many Cambodians has been nearly absent for the past 20 years," says Vichit Ith, a convert who has been instrumental in helping the Church pioneer in Cambodia. "The teachings of the Church help me more than anything else," he says. "I am more focused on my family life, and I am striving to keep the commandments."

Though Cambodian refugees have been joining the Church around the world since the 1970s—in fact, several cities throughout the world have Cambodian-speaking units—the gospel did not officially enter their homeland until January 1993. Soon after Thailand Bangkok Mission president Larry R. White heard a favorable report about religious progress in Cambodia, Brother Ith (who was then living in Thailand), President White, and Elder John K. Carmack of the Seventy, a member of the Asia Area Presidency, entered Cambodia to ask government representatives about the possibility of establishing humanitarian projects.

Cambodia's political and social situation has been extremely volatile—even brutal at times—since the nation became independent from France in 1953. Nevertheless, a United Nations-sponsored peace treaty was signed in 1991, and elections held soon after the first visit of Church representatives in 1993 went smoothly, allowing Cambodia to make much progress toward democracy and rebuilding. At that time Brother Ith received an appointment as a special adviser to the new prime minister. Today Brother Ith works as president of Cambodia's national airline and as secretary-general of the Cambodian Investment Board.

Elder Carmack and President White returned to Cambodia to submit the Church's formal application for legal recognition and arrange for couple missionaries to assist the Cambodian people by teaching English, distributing clothing donated by Church members, participating in technical university projects, and sharing the gospel. Legal recognition was granted to the Church in March 1994, and before the month ended Donald C. and Scharlene Dobson of Logan, Utah, were transferred from their missionary labors in Madras, India, to Phnom Penh as Cambodia's first missionaries. The first Church meeting was held at a hotel on 27 March 1994, with six members and nine investigators in attendance. On 9 May 1994 Sister Pahl Mao became the first member baptized in Cambodia. Other humanitarian-service couples soon arrived, and four young proselyting elders were transferred to Cambodia from Cambodian-speaking missions in the United States. Since these recent beginnings, the Church in Cambodia now has 12 proselyting elders and 285 members organized into three branches.

One of the most impressive things about the Church in Cambodia is the cooperation between Cambodian and Vietnamese members despite long-standing political antagonism between the two populations. About two-thirds of the members are Cambodian natives, and the rest are Vietnamese.

Eighteen-year-old Vietnam native Phuong Hong Hanh first visited the Church in July 1994 because she was interested in learning English—but she was soon converted to the gospel. “I knew it was right,” she said. An Chea Maline, a Cambodian who joined the Church in May 1995 and served as a branch Primary president before immigrating to Australia, recalls that for a long time she knew nothing about God. “But now I know this Church is true,” she says. “It is a bright sun for me.” Seng Suon, a convert of nearly a year, was a university student when missionaries met him. “I prayed to know if the Book of Mormon and the Church were true and if Joseph Smith was a prophet,” he says. “The answer came around midnight. I awoke, [page 78] and everything seemed bright. I had the feeling that it all was true.”

When young-adult Cambodian convert Theany Reath was investigating the Church two years ago, she worried that her family would be offended when she stopped praying to her deceased ancestors. To her relief, her parents have been tolerant of her new beliefs and behaviors. “I feel the love of my parents a great deal,” she says. “They respect my new practices such as fasting, and they no longer expect me to drink tea with them.” Today she serves as a branch Young Women president.

Leland D. and Joyce B. White, “News of the Church,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1997, 78

Oum Borin, Cambodia’s first native branch president, along with his wife, Samay, joined the Church more than a year ago. “One night, my wife had a dream of two stars that fell into the house,” Brother Oum recalls. “Then two missionaries came to our house, and we felt the stars symbolized the elders. I know this Church is the true Church of Christ.”

Ha Phuoc Thach and his wife, Nguyen Thi Hong, are Vietnamese converts of nearly two years. In 1990 all three of their teenage children were lost at sea in a boat filled with Vietnamese refugees. Despite—or perhaps because of—this tragedy, the couple embraced the gospel when they heard it. Speaking about their baptism, Brother Ha says: “Our lives changed. It was a spiritual change.” His wife adds, “I want everyone to pray, because God does answer prayers.” Brother Ha serves as a counselor in the Vietnamese-speaking branch presidency, and his wife is Relief Society president. When asked why with all they have suffered they are always smiling, the couple respond: “Because now we are happy.” The same could be said of numerous other Saints in Cambodia as they embrace the gospel.

After the May 1996 dedication of the Hong Kong Temple, President Gordon B. Hinckley, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Elder John H. Groberg of the Seventy flew to Cambodia with their wives and met with some 439

members and investigators there. Early in the morning of 29 May 1996 on the banks of the Mekong River, President Hinckley dedicated Cambodia and left a beautiful blessing upon the land.