Cambodia Adventist Mission

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Miranda Lundby, graduated with a B.S. in liberal studies from Montana State University—Billings in 2016. She went on to take her M.A. in education from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies. Her first encounter with the people of Cambodia was in 2015 when she spent about 7 weeks substitute teaching. She returned again as a student missionary in 2016 with Adventist Frontier Missions. She currently serves as a missionary in the Battambang Province where she is partnering with the Cambodia Adventist Mission to open a boarding academy for grades 7-12.

Cambodia Adventist Mission is a unit of church organization comprising the territory of Cambodia. Cambodia Adventist Mission was organized in 1991, and reorganized in 2001, as part of South East Asia Union Mission in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventists. Statistics (June 30, 2018): Churches, 6; membership, 3,221; population, 16,005,000.1

Overview of Country

The Kingdom of Cambodia is primarily a Buddhist country with historical roots found in animistic and, later, Hindu belief systems. There are also a significant number of Muslims and their numbers are growing. The country is 181,035 square kilometers located between Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east, with Laos to the north. The country’s population as of 2018 is 16,245,729. The primary ethnic group is Khmer Cambodians, but Cambodia also has a wide range of ethnic minority groups. The official language is Khmer, but there are additional spoken
languages as well.

The history of Cambodia is rich, but more recent history has been that of conflict and instability. Cambodia came under the influence of the French in the late 1800s. World War II later took its toll on Cambodia as well as surrounding countries. Tensions in Cambodia remained until 1975 when the Khmer Rouge restricted the society to the point of mass genocide that resulted in the deaths of 1.7 to 2.5 million Cambodians. Refugee camps were opened on the border of Thailand, where many Cambodians fled. In time, after the Khmer Rouge was overthrown, a new government developed and the country has slowly begun to heal.

Origins

The first recorded entrance of the Adventist message into Cambodia was in the 1920s when colporteurs sold Signs of the Times in Phnom Penh. The second recorded entrance came on January 30, 1930, when missionary pioneers Fred and Ada Pickett moved to Phnom Penh to begin work. When a church could not legally be established on Cambodian soil, Pickett, with the help of Rankin Wentland Sr, established the first church in Vietnamese (then called Cochinchina) border territory. Native CambodiansEng Pheng and Svy Sas assisted in this church’s ministry. It was only in 1937 that Robert and Martha Bentz arrived to work in Phnom Penh. At this time, the Picketts had moved to Saigon as Fred Pickett had been called to work as the mission president there. Martha Bentz passed away a year later in August of 1938, leaving behind a five-month-old son. Before passing, she told her husband to get in contact with her friend and classmate Martha Keompel, also a missionary, working in Morocco. Subsequently, Martha Keompel arrived in Phnom Penh in 1939. Bentz and Keompel were married a few weeks after her arrival. Martha Bentz (previously Keompel) went on to open a maternity clinic. Sadly, with the arrival of the Japanese in Phnom Penh in 1941 the work came to a near halt as missionaries were forced to leave the country for the duration of World War II.

The next phase of efforts in Cambodia was begun in 1953 by Tran Tran, a colporter who prepared three baptismal candidates during his work in Phnom Penh. These three were baptized in 1955 by W. K. Sam. Two years after these baptisms took place, missionaries Ralph and Beatrice Neall made their way to Cambodia and were soon followed in 1958 by Giang Tu Minh and his wife. November 1, 1958, marked the opening of the first Adventist church on Cambodian soil. At its conception, this church had 11 members and legal government recognition came in 1959. At this time evangelistic meetings and the work of colporteurs began in the Chinese, Khmer, and French languages. Manuel and Edith Tortal and Wong Ye and Lock Seng added their help to the cause of the truth in Cambodia in 1962 when the Nealls were on furlough. This year also saw an average of 44 attending Sabbath school programs and there were a few baptisms as well. In 1964 efforts took a turn to Kompong Thom province in hopes of expanding the work. Missionaries were again required to leave the country in 1965, and Neall led as mission president of the Cambodian Mission from Vietnam. The one existing Adventist church was forced to close and during this time many members left the country.

In 1970 Pastor Johann C. R. Adam and his wife entered the country and began to work in Phnom Penh. They were soon able to regain control of the church and services began in the spring of the following year. Reo Clyde was able to baptize two Cambodians that summer and an English Language Center was founded in 1972 by Edwin Moore. The language center was primarily operated by student missionaries. Gary Wagner took over responsibilities as director in 1973. The language center was also used as a center for evangelism, offering an evangelistic series each year after its conception. Though many of the previous members had left the country, the church began to grow again, reaching an average attendance of 100 each Sabbath. Of these 100, however, only 26 were members. Before work was again shut down in the country, Sabbath attendance reached an average of 150. At the same time the language center boasted more than 300 students, with only five student missionaries as teachers. Once again, in March 1975, all workers were evacuated and the work came to a halt.

Judy Aitkins and those working with Adventist Frontier Missions Refugee Project, working in cooperation with ADRA, the Thailand Adventist Mission, and the Southeast Asia Union Mission, assisted in the refugee camps. They offered humanitarian assistance as well as evangelistic efforts to train and minister to the Cambodian refugees. When the camps began efforts of repatriation, these organizations worked together to organize the opening of the work in Cambodia. They hired church planters from among their members and leaders in the camps to establish worship groups as they moved back to their native land. The first of these workers are as follows: Men Mara, Chantha Ung, Oum Kosal, Chom No In, Chea Savoen, Nhek Mann, Sy Bo, Khiev Bun Roeb, Nong Kravon, Lim Sokha, Sath Yoeun, Seng Sam In, Thing Phalla, Kim Thi Ratana, Vin Keat, Ouen Cheth, Norng Sovannary, and Pastor Marc Coleman.

In 1988 the first access was given to an Adventist presence when the Cambodian government agreed to have ADRA assist in repairing the Barai irrigation system found in Siem Reap. ADRA’s work in the country assisted in making it possible for church work to enter the country. On July 7, 1992, the first two pastors were able to return to Cambodia and start their work. On the same day, a young Australian couple, Tim and Wendy Maddocks, arrived in Phnom Penh to begin their service. Maddocks began working for ADRA as a project manager in Siem Reap. SALT ministries were later started by the Maddocks in 1996. When Global Mission began assisting the Cambodia Adventist Mission in 2000, church planters, after receiving training at SALT, were then sent out to continue their work throughout the country. The Maddocks have continued their work in Siem Reap until present. Throughout the years they have been able to establish a church, a school, an orphanage, a media studio, and, more recently, Butterfly Paradise at their Wat Preah Yesu compound. They have also established a number of satellite programs and ministries.
Yesu has hosted five country-wide camp meetings since the first one in 2004.

Pastor Deane Jackson presided as mission president from February 2009 through December 2015 and was assisted by his wife Ruth. During Pastor Jackson's leadership there were many key focus areas. Spiritual nurturing, discipling, and providing resources were given a primary role. Professional learning and leadership were also emphasized, the goal being ongoing training that was specific to outreach, church nurturing, and discipleship for pastors, pastoral interns, and church planters. Under Jackson’s leadership the mission saw many expansions of the work, including an AWR studio at the mission, official opening of the Cambodian Adventist School, building Samraong and Ta Kong Adventist Schools, opening a number of literacy centers, construction of seven church buildings, and the commencement of the building of the Battambang Essential Lifestyle Centre. Land was also purchased in three areas of Cambodia to be used as cemeteries for church members. Other initiatives were focused inward for the development of better reporting and recording systems that called for accountability throughout the country as well as bolstering other structures and procedures of the mission. It is also noted that outreach to tribal people groups was a focus during this time period.

Pastor Lim Pheng returned to Cambodia during this time, after living and studying in the United States, and he worked as the Phnom Penh church pastor from 1994-1996. Pheng also worked to locate church planters and pioneers who had been returning to Cambodia. He later worked as a department leader in the mission for a number of years before becoming executive secretary in 2000. During his work in the country he has assisted in the growth of the mission. In 2016 he became mission president.

With the assistance of Global Mission beginning in 2000, many Cambodian church workers and church planters have been sponsored to work in their native country reaching out to their neighbors in sharing Christ. Much work has been accomplished through the empowering of local workers by Global Mission and other sponsoring entities. Pastor Hang Dara worked as a Global Mission coordinator during the beginning of their work and later as executive secretary of the mission.

ADRA has played a large role throughout the country in promoting awareness and education about the bad effects of cigarettes and smoking. They also played a key role in banning cigarette advertising in Cambodia.

Adventist Frontier Missions has sent a number of missionaries to Cambodia over the years, beginning in the early 1990s, and has continued to support the country through their work and presence. They have established worship groups and an Adventist elementary school in the country as well.

Pioneers

R. M. Milne and Tan Kia Ou are the first recognized Adventist workers to enter Cambodia. They were colporteurs who sold the Signs of the Times in a Chinese translation in Phnom Penh in the early 1920s.

F. L. Pickett was the president of the Cambodia Mission and then the Indochina Mission, which combined the Cambodian and Cochinchina missions in 1937. Under his guidance the first Cambodian church was established on the Vietnamese border as early as 1934, but was not recognized until 1936. He worked with two native Cambodians, Eng Pheng and Svay Sas, the first native workers recorded. These two workers had taken Bible study courses at a center in Saigon run by a missionary family by the name of Howlett. Pickett was accompanied in his work in Asia by his wife Ada Reeder-Picket. They adopted two children from the United States in 1937 by the names of Johnny and Joan. After their adoption, the Picketts returned to Asia, but Pickett passed away less than a year later and Ada and the children returned to the USA.

Robert Bentz moved to Phnom Penh in 1937 with his wife Martha, who gave birth to a son, Raymond, a year later. Martha contracted malaria when Raymond was five months old and passed away shortly thereafter. Upon Robert Bentz’s request, Martha’s friend, Martha Koempel, was asked and agreed to come to Cambodia to assist him with his motherless child. A few weeks after her arrival, Bentz and Koempel were married and carried on the work. Martha Koempel-Bentz opened a maternity clinic and both she and Robert wrote books for the Cambodian work and had them translated for distribution. They left in 1941 after being ordered out of the country. They attempted to continue their work for Cambodia from Vietnam with the assistance of two Cambodian natives as translators. The couple had four more children, losing one, and Martha opened another maternity clinic in Vietnam.

When the work in Cambodia opened again it was by a colporteur, Tran Tran, in 1953 who opened a Sabbath school and provided Bible studies in preparation for baptisms. Three baptisms resulted from his efforts in 1955.

In 1957, the missionary couple Ralph and Beatrice Neall reinitiated the work in Phnom Penh. Beatrice Neall would write a book entitled, The Prince and the Rebel, this was translated and distributed in the Khmer language. Ralph Neall became the director in Cambodia and also founded the first Pathfinder club. Ralph Neall would later return to conduct an evangelistic series in 1974.

Giang Tu Minh and his wife joined the work in Phnom Penh in 1958. Minh founded and managed a Voice of Prophesy school in the Chinese language.
Manuel and Edith Tortal and Wong Yew and Lock Seng were two couples that came in 1962. Colporteur work and evangelistic meetings were a focus during their time and they reaped many souls for Christ. Wong Yew Seng was the first known missionary to expand the reach beyond Phnom Penh when he conducted an evangelistic series in Kampong Thom.

In 1970, Pastor and Mrs. Johann C. R. Adams reestablished the work and, once again, opened the Adventist church in Phnom Penh. Ng Gan Theo and his wife Ivy Foo Mee arrived in Cambodia in April 1973 and focused their work on reaching the Chinese speaking Cambodians. Gary Wagner, also in 1973, ran the English Language Institute where he worked with student missionaries. Wagner remained until June 1974 when he returned to the states to finish his studies. The work in Cambodia continued to grow until all work shut down again in 1975. Many church members lost their lives in the ensuing years as Cambodia became a turbulent war zone. A select number of members and workers were able to flee to refugee camps and even fewer were able to relocate to the U.S.A. or other countries.

Gary Wagner later returned to Cambodia in the 1980s to work as director of S.A.W.S. (Seventh-day Adventist World Service) in the refugee camps of Thailand along with other organizations. Scott and Julie Griswold began their work in September 1992 in Cambodian Refugee Camps on the Thai border. Following repatriation, they moved to Phnom Penh in the spring of 1993. They were able to open churches in the slum areas and began a widows’ project. The widows’ project was a community effort to increase the ability of widows and their families to support themselves through small business ventures. They also assisted in the development of an SDA hymnal in the Cambodian language as well as the organization and development of contextualized Bible study lessons. The Griswolds had two children, a daughter and a son, during their time working in Cambodia.

Tim and Wendy Maddocks have been working in Cambodia since 1992. They have two sons Caleb and Shannon, who now join them in ministry along with their families. Throughout their time ministering in Cambodia they have opened an orphanage, school, studio, church, church plants, and satellite schools, as well as participating in a number of other evangelistic efforts and training programs. They are currently preparing to open Butterfly Paradise, a butterfly emporium and educational center that will attract tourists and build up funds for the spreading of the gospel in Cambodia.

Pastor Lim Pheng and his wife have both worked in the country from the early 1990s and were married in 1995. They have both had a large impact on the growth of the church and mission in Cambodia. They currently serve in Phnom Penh where he holds the position of mission president. They also have two children, Lesley Philip Pheng, who is currently a student at Southern University, and Jennifer Pheng, who is studying 11th grade at an international school in Phnom Penh.

Institutions

Churches

The first Cambodian SDA Church was opened in Vietnam on the border of Cambodia in the 1930s. The next Cambodian church, and the first on Cambodian soil, opened some 20 years later on November 1, 1958, in Phnom Penh. This church closed in 1965 and reopened five years later in 1971, only to be closed again later in the 1970s.

Health Institutions

The first Adventist health institution in Cambodia was Martha Keompel-Bentz’s maternity clinic that was open a maximum of two years before it closed when the Bentz family had to leave for Vietnam in 1941.

Educational Institutions

The first educational institution in Cambodia was a Chinese Voice of Prophesy School opened by Giang Tu Minh. The next educational institution was an English Language Institute opened by Edwin Moore in 1973, but it was closed again in 1975 when foreign missionaries left the country.

Cambodia Adventist Primary School was opened in 1995 with only the first two grades. As the school continued to grow into a K-12 school the name was changed to Cambodia Adventist School. The school runs a fully international program with English as the main language. Sharon Rogers is the presiding principal and has been with the school since 1996.

Chom Roeum Phal Read and Feed School is located in Phnom Penh and provides elementary education and a free meal for street children. Many of these children come from extreme poverty and this school is able to meet some of their physical needs as well as educational needs.

Phnom Penh Vietnamese Literacy School is open for grades K-9 and now operates on two different campuses in the capital city.

Ta Kong School is located in Banteay Meanchey province of Cambodia. They have an elementary school and are currently developing a vocational school.

Samraong Adventist School was taken over by the Cambodia Adventist Mission in 1990, but was originally opened by International Children Care. In recent years the project has been reestablished with new goals for the school.

Other notable educational institutions include some of Cambodia’s literacy centers such as Tang Krasang Literacy
Center and Thma Koul Literacy Center.

Supporting ministries operate schools that work in affiliation with the Cambodian Adventist Mission. These include: Was Preah Yesu Orphanage and the Kantrok Cambodian Adventist School run by SALT Ministries with Tim and Wendy Maddocks as directors, Take Adventist Academy sponsored by Continental Mission Movement with Kim Dong Hyeuk as principal, and Mondul Kiri Christensen Adventist School operated by Adventist Frontier Missions.

Other Institutions
Healthland and Vissot Foods

Effect of Political Developments on SDA Work

Throughout previous years the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Cambodia has been interrupted a number of times due to war, internal political unrest, and genocide. The first political interruption came in 1941 when the Japanese entered Cambodia during World War II.

The second political development came with Cambodia’s independence in 1953. This allowed for the work to be reopened and for the first church to be established along with the opening of an Adventist mission in the country. In 1965, with changing political tensions and Cambodia breaking relations with the United States, foreign workers were evacuated and the church and mission were quickly shut down.

In 1970, the year that Lon Noi assumed power and formed the Khmer Republic, the work was reopened until 1975 when Lon Noi was overthrown by Pol Pot. Workers were again evacuated and Adventist work again came to a halt in Cambodia.

Challenges to Mission and What Remains to Be Done

As Cambodia is still a largely unreached country with a very small Adventist presence, the mission is working to spread the message of truth along with supporting ministries. There are many difficulties that face the small number of workers in this country. The vast majority of Cambodians hold a deeply Buddhist worldview with a very small percentage of other worldviews present. This can provide difficulties for reaching out to others when their life, education, healthcare, work, customs, and holidays are entrenched in this worldview. Poverty is also very prevalent for most Cambodians, while reaching out to those in wealthier classes can have the same difficulties as reaching people in the western world. For most Cambodians, Sabbath challenges arise in most educational facilities and in the workplace. Cambodia operates on a six-day workweek with Sunday as the off day, so this can make finding work or education opportunities for dedicated church members difficult.

The Cambodia Adventist Mission, as well as other supporting ministries, work hard to develop and translate materials for the work in Cambodia, but there is still much work to be accomplished. Resources are not always available for evangelism or discipling programs. Contextualized and relevant materials need to be continually developed for the work moving forward. Along with materials and resources, training for Cambodian workers and lay workers is also a great need.

SOURCES


“Cambodia.”


NOTES


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