



RCA Global Mission

2020 Year in Review



Mark Wilson – Cambodia

As well as serving on the board of TEEAC (and writing materials for them), I have the privilege of being a full-time member of the faculty at the Phnom Penh Bible School. Responding to God's call on my life, I have committed to using my knowledge, gifts, experiences, and skills to love, encourage, and equip my students at PPBS to increasingly discover, understand, and live into God's very good intentions for themselves, their families, the church, and their community. I also encourage and pray that they in turn will intentionally and prayerfully *lead others* to do the same! And so, my role here at PPBS is that of teacher, mentor, coach, and encourager. During 2020, I taught courses in Spiritual Formation, Global Mission, Holistic Ministry, and Biblical Leadership. I also served as a mentor for a small group and was on the Chapel Committee.

Blessings of 2020

While 2020 was a challenging year, it was also an exciting one; I heard examples of students and their churches following Jesus into a lost and broken world before and even during the pandemic. In February, our small group went out for our annual Field Ministry Exposure Trip. It was a great time to observe PPBS students as they spend a week in the countryside serving alongside pastors and churches around the country. This year I was again encouraged by their dedication to serving the Lord and the local church, spending hours working together, planning, and responding to the needs of the place to which God sent us. They led worship, visited local families to pray, shared their testimonies, taught Sunday school, etc. At the end of the week, the leaders of the local church expressed thanks to the group for their humble service, noting how it was an encouragement to both their church and their village (often churches mention how helpful it is to have Christians come and share their testimonies with their neighbors. It helps them see that there are Christians who come from every part of the country).

Similar to other countries around the world, the government here stopped public gatherings of all types, including schools and churches. And while it was a difficult decision for many churches, and one that they did not all agree with, they followed the government's decision, knowing that not doing so would reflect poorly not only them locally, but for all Christians in the



country. Of course, that begged the question as to how to “do” and “be” church then you are not allowed to meet formally. Both Deb and I were very impressed and excited about the answers to those questions:

As mentioned in one of our past newsletters, members of our local Cambodian church quickly rallied together using social media to produce an online service of worship. In less than one week after the closure, they found a way to “do” church online!

As Christians around the world have done so many times during crises, many churches in Cambodia looked at the situation as an opportunity to “be” a church by blessing those in need around them. One example is Seila (*Say-la*), a third-year student in one of my courses. Seila is one of the few students at PPBS whose parents are Christians; most students are the first Christians in their families. Their family lives in Banteay Meanchey province in the northeastern part of Cambodia, bordering Thailand. They worship in a small church whose pastor died several years ago and their oldest elder died this past year. When PPBS closed, Seila went back to his homeland to live with his family. He said that it was challenging as many members of their village used to cross the border to Thailand for work, or do cross-border trade. Due to the pandemic, everyone who had gone to Thailand could not come back. It was also challenging for him because studying online meant he needed to find a quiet place away from regular village life to study. He also needed to find a way to get online and stay online for hours every day. Here is where things get exciting for me ...

In response to a call for help by many RCA missionaries for various COVID-19 related challenges, congregations and individuals throughout the RCA responded generously by praying and giving. Students at PPBS, including Seila, were among those who received your gifts, enabling them all to get online and stay online throughout the second semester! At times, they had better internet access than we did in rural Oregon. We thank you for being a blessing to our students during your challenges!

In response to what we were studying together in class, Seila met with the leader of his village to ask if he could visit village families to share his knowledge about staying physically and financially healthy. These lessons on handwashing, stopping the spread, and managing finances were especially important given their location on the Thai border. He also shared with the village leader that he wanted to share these lessons as an *intentional* “act of love” to reflect God’s love for all people and every aspect of their lives. The village leader agreed and Seila spent time each day visiting the families in his village.



Seila doing COVID-19 training

While Seila is back at PPBS now finishing his studies (graduating in August), he says that his times visiting his neighbors were not only helpful for them but a blessing to him. He learned a lot from them and began many new relationships that he will follow up on as soon as he returns; like many of our students at PPBS, Seila’s church is waiting for him to finish his studies and come back to become one of their leaders.

Challenges of 2020

As many of you know already, my father-in-law became very sick early in the year, so much so that I left my small group mission trip early to be with Debra and deciding together that she should leave Cambodia to spend time with him. That was challenging, but then when you consider the complications of the beginning of the pandemic with the challenges of international flights, changing immigration rules, etc., life became very challenging for us. To make a long story shorter, after the Cambodian government closed schools due to COVID-19 and banned Americans from entering Cambodia (so that Deb could not return), we decided that I should also return to the U.S. to be with Deb. As was the case with many countries (and still is,) the Cambodian government

continued its travel ban and sealed its borders. We ended up being “displaced” in the U.S. from March through October 2020.

We thank God for the provision of various places to live in Michigan and Oregon during that time. It was refreshing for us to spend an extended time with members of our family while we continued our ministries remotely. It was the longest single period that we’ve ever lived in the U.S. and near family for our whole missionary careers. For much of that time, we enjoyed living near our son Zachary, including being able to celebrate his graduation from Northwestern College together.

As you can imagine and possibly have experienced for yourselves, working/learning *remotely* can be a challenge. This was especially true for us as we were living in the Oregon countryside without stable internet, 15 time zones from Cambodia! As we were living in a trailer behind the barn on my aunt’s property, it was a challenge for Deb and me to work at the same time. We ended up moving my office to a room that we cleaned up in the barn. Likewise, the students from half of my classes were living in the Cambodian countryside while I was able to Zoom into the classroom for the other half. Though it was a challenge for all of us, I am thankful for God’s provision and protection so that students *did* continue to learn and grow in their understanding and practice following the Lord. Even though some students chose not to study online, all but one of our students returned for the new academic year that began in November.



Learnings from 2020

As mentioned above, I was extremely impressed by my students and their churches in how they handled the shutdowns by the Cambodian government; they did not focus on what they could *not do* but what they *could do*—submitting to authorities and always being ready to do what is good, being gentle and showing true humility to everyone (cf Titus 3:1-2). I know that there is/was a lot of frustration in the U.S. about the way that some local and state authorities have/are managing the pandemic, and that it has impacted churches and their members in many ways. I also know that even during a partial or complete shutdown, there are many opportunities to “be” church together in appropriate ways, doing good by loving our neighbors as ourselves. I am so thankful that so many in Holland, MI, loved me in that way!

Hopes for 2021

As I am finishing this Year in Review, we are already into 2021 and continue to face various challenges in our ministry, including having started and stopped in-person classes three times already. However, as the writer of Laminations says, (after remarking “my soul is bowed down within me”):

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in Him.”

This photo shows one of many rainbows that God showed us while we were living on the ranch in OR, reminding us of His great faithfulness and mercies. Therefore, we do not lose heart but rather we press on and look forward to what God will do in 2021. We know God is faithful and He will provide what is need for that to which He has called each of us here at PPBS, *“to provide the church with leaders of sound character and the ability to serve the Christian community by effectively teaching the Bible and by boldly proclaiming the gospel through words and action.”*



Specific goals for 2021 are to prepare and send out another group of students in their final semester with a clear vision of who God is calling them to be and what God is calling them to do. This is the final paper for the Biblical Leadership course that I teach. I am also making plans to begin the editing process for the Holistic Ministry Student Study Guide I have been writing. For those of you tracking this project, we are in “the home stretch” and hope to complete the project in 2022. I did not learn *until* after I started the process that study books are written for Theological Education by Extension, or TEE, usually take eight years to finish; I believe it!

For several months in the fall of 2021, Debra and I will be doing our home assignment. Our goal is to communicate with all of the congregations that support the Cambodian ministry, as well as personally visit those we were unable to visit last time.

How We Can Pray

- Pray that God’s kingdom would continue to expand here in Cambodia so every individual would have the opportunity to hear about Jesus, come to know God, worship Him, enjoy Him, and share Him with others!
- Pray that this next generation of Christian leaders at PPBS would discern God’s call and be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord their labors are not in vain.
- For qualified teachers, both Cambodian and expatriate, especially with the vision to serve full-time and long term.
- Pray for a continued, stable spiritual and financial support base to journey with us as we serve our local ministry partners in Cambodia.
- Pray for the provision of a visa for Deb. When we returned to Cambodia, we discovered that the Cambodian embassy in the U.S. gave her (and others) the wrong type of visa. At the moment, she is unable to renew it! Long story short, if we cannot find a way to renew the visa, Deb will need to return to the U.S. to start the process again (including quarantines on both ends, COVID-19 tests, and reprocessing her visa).
- Pray for Mark’s health. I (Mark) am unable to visit my regular doctors in Singapore and so will need to find a way to replenish my medications, some of which are not available in Cambodia. Also, we are hoping that surgery for my chronic pain condition, which was postponed from 2020, might be able to be performed before we head to the U.S. for a home assignment. In 2016, following my ministry in Thailand after the tsunami, I began to have headaches. Thankfully, these were eventually treated by medication until about two months ago when they returned, all day, every day.
- Pray for strength and wisdom for our 2021 home assignment; we enjoy it very much, but it takes a lot of planning and extensive traveling.

Thank You

This sums it up: *wow! What a blessing, thank you!* As noted above, congregations across the RCA gave generously of their finances in response to the pandemic and helped every single one of my students continue their studies even though they were many miles away—*wow! What a blessing, thank you!*

Likewise, as Deb and I found ourselves stranded for eight months in the U.S., many congregations that support the Cambodian ministry came alongside us in special ways. This was especially the case when I quarantined alone in one of the RCA mission homes in Holland, Michigan, for two weeks while Deb was in Detroit, watching her father slip away, and Zach as in Iowa, finishing school. It brings tears of joy to my eyes as I remember how pastors, elders, mission committee members, and youth came to bring food, share their toilet paper, and pray; *wow! What a blessing, thank you!* And since that time, many have continued to check up on us via email and social media, for which we are very thankful! Some of these experiences rank among the most challenging that I have experienced in my 35 years of overseas life and ministry. *Thank you, what a blessing!*