



**April 2023**

### **Cambodian Ministry Update**

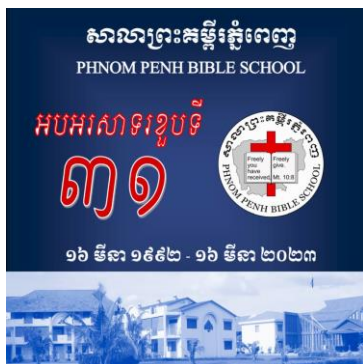
Dear friends, family, and partners,

#### **Greetings this first quarter of the New Year!**

There is much to celebrate and some concerning news to share and pray about with you. First, of course, let me share with you the news for which we can celebrate and give thanks! The new academic school year got off to a great start.

There are now 53 students in the undergraduate programs and the master's program has expanded to 20 students! Thankfully, there were no delays nor restrictions this year due to COVID, not even for those whom the government considered to be "old" (yes, they put me/Mark in that category, which meant at one point I was not able to teach *in person*. But now longer!).

At the end of January, the Cambodian national church celebrated the centennial founding of the Protestant church. Faculty, staff, and students all joined this historic celebration. Join us in giving thanks to God for His mercy on this land and how His Spirit has moved—according to the *World Christian Database*, the growth of Cambodia's church was greater than any country in Southeast Asia; it is now estimated at around 3 percent of the population which, considering Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge's almost complete annihilation of the church which ended in 1979, is nothing short of astounding from a human perspective.



The Phnom Penh Bible School (PPBS) also celebrated God's goodness through the years, though not quite 100 years—this year marked our 31st year since the founding of the school (graphic left). To meet the growing pastoral needs of the Church in Cambodia, our school was founded by the late Daniel Yee-Wah Lam with support from many Cambodian believers and Christian organizations. After negotiation with the Cambodian government, PPBS was officially recognized by the government on March 16, 1992 (only five months after the Paris Peace Agreement was signed). To God be the glory. We hope to share with you some of the "rest of the story" sometime when it is possible.

*Would you like to receive these updates digitally? Please email Kelli at [kgilmore@rca.org](mailto:kgilmore@rca.org) to be added to the email list. You will receive more timely updates from the missionary you support and help us be good stewards of our resources.*

**ស៊ីស៊ីស៊ី Happy New Year!**

From Fri, April 14 to Sunday, April 16 Cambodians all over the country (and around the world) gathered to celebrate the Cambodian New Year. It is the biggest holiday of the year, a time of thanksgiving for the year gone by and a time of renewed hope for the year to come. It is also a special time for families—a time to meet, share gifts and stories, and enjoy food and games.



For Cambodian Christians, including the students at the Bible school, it is a challenging time. Cambodia is, at its heart, a *Buddhist/animistic society* so most Cambodian holidays involve some sort of religious ceremony. Many activities are held at local temples (wat); they are mixtures of social entertainment and religious events. It is difficult to separate the religious from the social: often Christians feel obligated by family and/or peers to participate and may even face exclusion or persecution if they don't. Many new believers succumb to this pressure and return from the New Year's holiday feeling defeated or discouraged. Even so, it is a time when PPBS students and Cambodian Christians all over the country have a wonderful opportunity to share the Good News of God's love with their friends and families as this holiday usually coincides with Easter and the message of "renewed hoped for the year to come" is truly fulfilled in Christ.

### ***Field Ministry (FM) Exposure Trips***

Those who signed up to receive our less formal direct updates already received prayer requests last week for the **FM Trips**. *(If you would like to be included on this shorter, more frequent list, let me/Mark know: [mwilson@rca.org](mailto:mwilson@rca.org))*

When I told my aunt that these trips were going out, she remembered the time when the Small Group I was mentoring went close to the Vietnamese border and we had some “unexpected” guests each night. Do you remember? Well, each night the head of the village sent two soldiers armed with AK47s to the house of the pastor where we were staying to “watch and take care” of me. This was after the hour-long Q&A session when we first arrived at the house. We could only assume that this extra caution was because of our location near the border and the date for the national election was drawing near.

[illegible]

This year, however, I had the privilege of staying home and praying as the faculty led our students out to various churches around the country (map above) to learn, serve, and share the Good News. As the trips were winding down and the group was returning, I connected with the pastor of the group that went to the top-left part of the map. This is Anglong Veng in Oddar Meanchey province, the pastor is Hout Soheng, and the teacher is Nhep Vanna. What was so special about this trip you might wonder? Good question! I'll tell you ...

**Pastor Soheng** is an alumnus of PPBS who is planting a church in Anlong Veng. Oh, did I tell you that this town was Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge's (KR) former stronghold? Also, some of you might remember **Teacher Vanna** from my Year in Review, she too is a PPBS alum who went to Singapore for a bachelor's degree, returned to PPBS to teach for many years, then set off again to Singapore before COVID-19 hit for her master's degree. She just recently and successfully returned to rejoin the faculty! So then, the photo below left shows not only current students but three "generations" of students! (left: Teacher Vanna, *fourth from the left* wearing red), Pastor Soheng (*third from the right* wearing blue, together with his wife. His daughters are there too, wearing their black and white school uniforms). The rest are current PPBS students, a mix of students from freshmen to seniors.

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As the trips were wrapping up and the Small Groups were heading home, I connected with Pastor Soheng, keen on hearing his perspective of the visit now that he was a *pastor* receiving a group rather than a *student*. It was wonderful to hear his account of how he, the church, and the community were blessed by the group. He was encouraged and refreshed in his vision for serving the Lord!

After talking with Pastor Soheng, I was hoping to hear the student's perspective on the trip, so I of course checked their Facebook posts. I was amazed by God's goodness—I was so encouraged by what I read that I wept. While I cannot "connect all the dots" for you, I recently wrote to you about part of Pastor Soheng's story (not using his name). So, after reading what the students read, I am *even more* thankful that he continues in ministry in Pol Pot's former stronghold and because of the impact he had on these students. Here is what one student said ...

*I have learned from my small group to be adaptable and humble with those around me, to be honest, to love the church, and to be self-sacrificing and flexible.*

*What I have learned from the Pastor is that he lives simply in life, but he is happy, has strong leadership, is dedicated, honest, and humble, and makes his livelihood by planting crops around the house (photo above right). What I see there is that the church there is small but strong in faith and whose members help each other. What I have learned and will never forget from the Pastor is that no matter where we go, we must not use gifts but bring the gospel.*

### ***Taking a Look Back***

In March 2012, we celebrated God's goodness and were very thankful that Deb was able to have surgery in *Phnom Penh* to repair her broken collarbone and put in a metal plate; God also provided a skilled surgeon to perform the procedure. We were also thankful for the many people, Cambodian and foreigner alike who helped, prayed, and encouraged us from near and far. The photo to the right was how she got around, a homegrown Cambodian "tuk-tuk" which is all but a thing of the past these days. In that Update, we were also thankful that I/Mark had not been sick for over *three and a half weeks* which was a new record for that time (I had gotten dengue fever that year which lowered my resistance to everything else). We now celebrate that Deb is in the process of getting a new knee, no tuk-tuk required!



***Thank you for continuing to pray!***

- **Praise God** for how He has worked in Cambodia over *the past 100 years* bringing the Kingdom of God to the Kingdom of Cambodia! Please continue to pray that *more Cambodians* will find Jesus as their source of truth and security and salvation and that God's Kingdom would continue to expand throughout this land.
- **Pray for the Bible School students, the GoL staff, and Cambodian believers** all over the country as they face temptation and potential persecution over the next few days of Khmer New Year celebrations.

- **Pray for PPBS alumni like Pastor Soheng** who are faithfully following the vision that God has given them for ministry, often in socially and spiritually isolated places (map to the right). Many of these faithful servants like Soheng often struggle financially as well due to the small size of the churches and must find creative ways to take care of their families. As the student noted above, Soheng is working on making his livelihood by planting crops around his house. Pray for his success in both his spiritual and physical planting. Can you imagine it, a growing body of believers in the very place where Pol Pot and the KR (who attempted to stomp out the church) had their stronghold? Praise God!



- **Pray for Garden of Life Ministries** - Sadly, the Executive Director that was hired to replace Deb unexpectedly quit last month with only one week's notice. However, there was a positive side to this in that all the Board members stepped up to the challenge doing what they could (some were local while others were international). We'll keep you updated on this. This enabled the hiring of new part-time staff to go ahead as planned; Toun Dany began working in April. Please pray for the staff and Board during this critical time of transition. Pray especially for the Board as they discern the next steps in the process of hiring a new director.
- **Pray for PPBS**- I mentioned above that there was some concerning news to share with you and to ask you to pray with us. Over the past year, financial support for the school has dropped significantly and it has come at the same time as significant transitions on the school's Board. As you may know, we have a new Board Chairman, and I am also new to the Board; there have been other transitions as well.
- **Pray for the Cambodian people** to find healing from trauma-related suffering and dysfunction so they can find the abundant life which God intends for them. Jesus has come so that we may have life and have it abundantly!
- **Pray for those** whom the PPBS **Small Groups** encountered last week as they went out on their Field Ministry Exposure Trips serving local pastors and churches, and sharing the gospel (often local churches ask students to go with them into the community to share their testimonies so that community members can see and hear that God is indeed real and working in the lives of many Cambodians throughout the land, not only in the few that they have met in their village).
- **We give thanks** for you and the others like you around the world who continue to support the various ministries to which God has called us here in Cambodia through prayers, encouragement, finances, and friendship! We are currently evaluating our ministry finances as some congregations

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have recently ended their support for various reasons, including their departure from the RCA while others misunderstood that I/Mark was retiring along with Deb last year, etc.

- **Lastly, would you pray for my eyes?** - In January and February, I started losing sight in my left eye, like it was being covered by layers of cellophane. Honestly, I was too anxious about another health issue to tell anyone until it became a problem for driving. Long story short, I did go check it out and it was a fast-growing cataract, not only in the left eye but both. I've had surgery on the left eye already, and surgery on the right eye was last week. Sadly, the surgery on the left eye needs to be "fixed" by an additional procedure as well as a procedure to remove a scar left behind the cataract. Would you join us in praying for all of this? It's not life or death, but these things add up for me given the other things going on. Thank you!

**With love and blessings.**

**In Christ Alone,**  
Mark and Deb Wilson