



2023 Year in Review



Mark Wilson – Cambodia

2022 included many changes like Deb's retirement and a continued transition to a US-based Cambodian ministry. At times the changes, challenges, and transition felt overwhelming. However, 2023 was a year of physical and emotional restoration. It was a year in which we greatly saw God's hand at work in Cambodia. To clarify our roles in the Cambodian Ministry, Deb officially retired as an RCA missionary but I continue to actively serve the ministry from the U.S. with extended, in-person times in Cambodia twice per year.

Highlights of the year included the hiring of Ms. Srey Sochenda (Chenda) to be the new Director for GoL. This was an answer to our prayers. In 2023, GoL counseled 27 people, provided training to 80 people from various church and Christian organizations, and completed their 5-year plan!

As for PPBS, highlights of the year included the return post-COVID of Field Ministry (FM) Exposure Trips. With over 75% of Cambodians living in rural areas, exposure to this type of ministry is essential for our students. Likewise, our Extension Education (EE) program was able to go on the road again teaching the Word of God and equipping mostly rural Christians to study the Bible.

Building on the work done in 2021-22 to establish a Master of Arts in Christian Ministry program, PPBS expanded the program in 2023 to assist Christians who have not formally studied the Bible in a formal classroom setting.

2023 also provided opportunities to catch up post-Covid on "deputation" visits. I was truly blessed to spend time in Michigan, Iowa, and New Jersey with partnering congregations and individuals. These visits also provided times for me to catch a clear vision of what God is doing in and through partner congregations and individuals. As a bonus, I spent extended time with folks discussing Cambodian history and religions, the Cambodian ministry, and missions in general, all over graciously and deliciously provided meals! On one occasion, I was even able to participate in a Bean Bag Toss fundraising event for missions—a lot of fun even though our team lost.



Chenda – on the right



A visit in New Jersey.



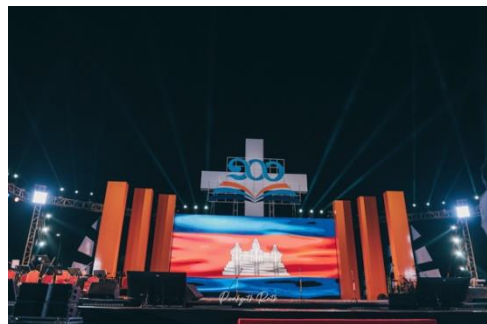
In Iowa with friends.

I apologize to those individuals and congregations with whom I have yet been able to visit! I have set aside time in 2024 for more visits. Until then, please [check out this video](#) which I recently made from clips recorded this year to give you a closer look at the people and places related to the ministry.

Last but not least, I am finally happy to say that we are now 90% finished with the work of rehabbing my freezing “barn office” space into a well-insulated and brightly lit workspace!

A glimpse at what your support made possible:

100 Years & Counting! For two days in 2023, Christians from all over Cambodia came to Phnom Penh to celebrate the centennial anniversary of protestant missionaries arriving in Cambodia. Led by Authur Hammond in 1923, the first protestant missionaries immediately set about translating the Bible and establishing the first Bible school. While Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge had set about wiping out the Christian church in 1975 and while there were only three protestant pastors remaining alive in the country by 1979, the Word and purpose of God were not thwarted. Rather, as the rain and snow come down from heaven bringing forth life, the Word and work of God did not return empty—it accomplished that which God purposed and succeeded in the thing for which God sent it! (cf. Isaiah 55:10-11) An estimated 10,000 Christians celebrated God’s faithfulness and demonstrated the amazing growth of the Cambodian church.



Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, thanked Christians for maintaining peace and for their “significant contribution to Cambodian society,” especially through Cambodia’s post-war reconstruction and more recently during the Covid-19 pandemic.

God has and God is using your financial and spiritual support to build up, equip, and encourage the next generation of leaders in Cambodia. God *is* working through you to expand His kingdom reign in Cambodia. It is now estimated that the Cambodian church is growing at a rate of almost 9% compared to a global rate of only 2.6%. With a great deal of certainty, I can say that both current and past students of PPBS are part of this growth. PPBS alumni as well as faculty and staff have reached the lost with the gospel (in all but one of Cambodia’s provinces), planted churches, started youth groups, and more importantly, they have played and continue to play a vital role in ensuring that the ever-growing Cambodian Church will grow on the firm foundation of God’s Word.



To the left is a picture taken just a few months ago when I had yet another encounter with former students planting a church together in a remote corner of the home province.

Faithfulness Amid Trials. Pagna began serving God as a youth leader in 2014 and by 2018 he returned to his hometown to help plant a church. I first met Pagna in 2020 when he came to PPBS to grow in his call as a pastor. We studied the book of Genesis together. Pagna often walked with a limp due to pain in his back and legs. We often prayed for him in class.

In 2023, I had Pagna in class to study Leadership. During our time together, he shared that he was finally diagnosed with “*Ankylosing Spondylitis*,” or AS. According to the Mayo Clinic, AS is a disease that causes inflammation in the spine’s joints and ligaments. Over time, AS can cause some of the vertebrae in the spine to fuse. And, as in the case of Pagna, this disease causes pain that ranges from muscle cramps to stabbing pain. There is no cure for *Ankylosing Spondylitis*.

One of the biggest challenges Pagna faces is carrying on with his responsibilities. And yet, Pagna carries on faithfully. I’ve seen him struggle through a Friday class and then get on his motorbike for the hour-long trip back to his home and church. Pagna tells me that God enables him and his passion for serving. He says that God has blessed him with a lovely wife who has the same heart to serve God reaching the many young people in their homeland.

Pagna reached out to me a month after our class ended to share that things were not well. As other former students have done, Pagna took up my offer for “Coaching” which I make to every student as they conclude their time at PPBS.

With his permission, I share that Pagna felt depressed and disappointed about his situation and he considered leaving the ministry. I asked Pagna to think about what he wanted most from our Coaching sessions. He said he wanted to find a way to understand why God had allowed him to have this disease—to experience such suffering. As a Coach, I could not give him the answers but rather asked him a series of questions. With plenty of times of silence and reflection and guidance by the Holy Spirit, Pagna decided on a series of steps he felt confident would help him move closer to understanding his situation and enable him to continue with life and ministry.

When I checked in with Pagna recently, he told me that because of our time together, he was encouraged, his mental health had improved, and he had more passion for serving and helping others. Now, when he meets others who are “brokenhearted” by sickness or financial stress, he says he can truly relate to them, and that God uses his life and example to encourage them.

When I asked Pagna about the future, he said, “I feel that my life would be wasted without serving God. I’m committed even to death. I want to die serving God and his mission.” Pagna has a vision for expanding the reach of their church and building a dormitory to help, encourage, and evangelize students who come to the provincial capital to study high school.

A Man after God’s Heart in the Land of the Butcher. This story is an update to a story that I shared previously about a former student named Hout Soheng. Soheng, like Pagna, contacted me after graduation for coaching. Like Pagna, Soheng was on the verge of leaving his church planting ministry.

By the late 1960s, even before Soheng was born, a man named To Mok became a senior member of the KR and was tapped by Pol Pot to lead their armed forces. As the BBC reported in his obituary, Ta Mok was known as “the Butcher” for directing the massive purges in the KR. After the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, Ta Mok remained a very powerful leader in the northernmost regions of the country with a base in Anlong

Veng (the place where Soheng is now planting a church). In April 1998, Ta Mok fled into the forest with Pol Pot. A few days later, on 15 April 1998, Pol Pot died. On 6 March 1999, General Ta Mok was captured and in February 2002 he was charged with crimes against humanity.

By now, you might ask: why another Cambodian history lesson? The answer lies in the contrast between the infamous Ta Mok and the humble and gentle follower of Christ, Hout Soheng, the pastor of a church plant in Anlong Veng—the very heart of the KR’s last stand and the final home of “The Butcher.” Soheng and his family are shining lights in a land once filled with darkness.



During this year’s Field Ministry Exposure trips PPBS students spend five days with Pastor Soheng at his home and church in Anlong Veng. The students reported that they had gained new insights and experiences and learned “what it means to be an adaptable, humble, and self-sacrificing leader;” they experienced first-hand an example of an honest leader who “loves the church and the people around them.” As the students shared other ways their visit with Pastor Soheng impacted them, I was admittedly proud that Soheng had not only *listened* in class, he was *putting into practice* what he learned in a way that impacted others.

During my most recent time in Cambodia, I made time to meet Soheng. One challenge Soheng faces as a church planter is how to provide financially for his family. This had been weighing heavy on his heart and was the topic of our Coaching time on several occasions. As I asked him about this, he shared with me one of the most incredible and challenging things that I’ve heard. He said matter-of-factly that his financial situation had not changed—he and his family still struggled to meet their basic needs—however, he and his wife had “spent time before the Lord and had agreed to continue in this ministry despite these and other challenges.” He told me that living in poverty had “actually been a blessing” as he is now more able to meet people amid their poverty and challenges.



Visiting with Soheng

I was stunned, proud, and very encouraged. God is using *your* financial and spiritual support, through PPBS, to send out across Cambodia pastors and leaders *to provide the Cambodian Church with leaders of sound Christian character who can faithfully serve the Christian community, effectively teach the Bible, and boldly proclaim the gospel through words and actions.* Thank you!

Our challenges of 2023

God has provided ways for me to face the challenges of 2023 with the help of others, such as a trained Christian Counselor, Deb, other family members, many of you, and current and former students.

One of my biggest challenges is working remotely. As an extroverted introvert, I feel lonely and isolated at times and find it difficult to keep up with my ‘to-do’ lists, especially writing. This is very different from the context when I

was in Cambodia with an office at PPBS. To remedy this in 2024, at least in part, I plan to find ways of staying connected, even from a distance. This includes spending more time on Zoom with PPBS colleagues as well as designating time for relationship building and maintenance in Cambodia before and after meetings and in-person teaching. As for making better progress with curriculum writing, I have already found an “accountability partner” in the U.S. who has also struggled with their Ph.D. dissertation and hopes to make better progress in 2024.

An additional challenge last year was settling into my role as a member of the PPBS Board. While this will continue during 2024, this past year God provided several ways to help me adjust to and feel more confident in this new role. Over the past year, I’ve been able to better navigate the balance needed to both teach and sit on the board, and I’ve built stronger relationships with other board members, especially the Board Chairman, Mr. Lo Sovan. When I asked Mr. Sovan about this, he shared that he appreciated my perspective and understanding as someone who has taught at the school, among other skills I bring to the board. Finally, he thanked me for showing him “how to serve with the heart on top of the mind.”



With grads

I was also challenged this past year by several health issues including the need to have surgery on both eyes and to have a cancerous growth removed from my left forearm (I’m left-handed). I am very thankful for once again having access to medical care. Together with the chronic pain that I have struggled with since 2013, these things get me down at times. I continue to learn to live with them by finding ways to manage the symptoms and remain productive.

Please Pray

- As we **rejoice and celebrate** the birth, growth, and maturity of the Cambodian church described above, let us consistently pray that more and more **Cambodians dwelling in darkness and the shadow of death** will come to see and wholeheartedly embrace the great light of God’s love through Christ. May they come to *know* Him, *worship* Him, *enjoy* Him, and *share* Him with others. Pray for God’s protection against Christian-like cults which draw believers away from the truth of God’s Word. This is one of many things that make theological education and leadership development so important in Cambodia.
- Let’s **give thanks to God** for all the people who passed through the doors of the Garden of Life and the Phnom Penh Bible School and for all that God *has done* and *is doing* in and through these ministries. Please **pray** for the Spirit to guide and strengthen **GoL’s clients’** as they continue their journey of restoration and wholeness. And pray for the hundreds of **PPBS students and alumni** scattered across the land. May God motivate and help these leaders to press on serving faithfully, teaching and preaching effectively, and proclaiming boldly the gospel of Christ. Especially remember in prayer those living and serving in isolated areas and those who are struggling to make ends meet.
- Finally, **give thanks and praise to God** for all the men and women whom God has raised to be a part of the Cambodian Ministry, including the many individuals and congregations who have faithfully given their financial and spiritual support. Please hold up in prayer the new Director of GoL, Sochenda, and

the rest of the staff and Board members. Pray for the faculty, staff, and Board members of PPBS, including myself. May the Lord refresh our vision for serving Him in these special roles and empower us through the Holy Spirit.