



December 2024

### Cambodian Ministry Update

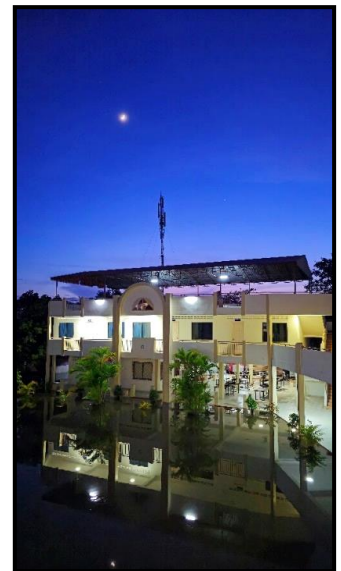
Dear Ministry Partners,

For some of you it may seem strange to be called a “ministry partner,” but that is what you are! Whether it be through individually or through your church, your words of encouragement, financial support, prayers, or many other ways, you partner with us as we do so with our local Cambodian partners, Garden of Life & Phnom Penh Bible School. After having just spent two plus months in Cambodia, I (Mark) can tell you that God *is* continuing to work *in* and *through* our partnerships!

Here is a link to a video update, if you’d like to follow along visually:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_oGZXf1ipFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oGZXf1ipFU)

Folks on our direct ‘email blast’ list recently received an email from Deb outlining many of the *in-person* aspects of ministry with which I’d be involved during my time in Cambodia and accompanying points for prayer for each. One answer to those prayers was my safe return to Oregon *on our anniversary: yay, thanks be to God!* In this letter, I will share more updates following Deb’s outline. Some of you might wonder why Deb did not go to Cambodia this year, good question! While we *originally* planned to go together, Deb made the difficult decision to stay behind to continue setting up our life in Oregon and help keep our family budget on track for 2024.

**Teaching** was a top priority of PPBS for my time in Cambodia. After I had a few days to work through climate and time changes, the students and I began a four-week journey together studying *Biblical Leadership*. It was a privilege to spend so much time with them, some of whom I’ve known since they began studying at PPBS, many of whom have now come to the end of their studies. One core idea of the course is that while *understanding leadership principles* and *practicing leadership skills* are both necessary and



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important, they are not enough for *faithful and fruitful* Christian leadership which depends greatly on a leader's *internal growth & transformation*. With this in mind, we spent time working through three interconnected aspects of leadership head, heart, and hands, with a special emphasis on the heart, equipping students to grow in their *awareness* of themselves & in *clarity* of their purpose.



*For many students*, this was their first time setting aside time to consider and then share about such things. While I am still thinking through some adjustment to the course (given the age / maturity level of many students), overall, we had good times learning *together* through reading, reflecting, sharing, and praying. We also had the opportunity to hear from (and pray for) a recent PPBS graduate about his reflects on these things. In past years, I invited 'senior' pastors to share their experiences during this course but this year felt led to ask this '*next generation*' pastor as he is already known & respected by many of the students is someone who I believe could share with them the realities of what we cover in the course as well as the student's final assignment; he was able to share openly and deeply about the importance of vision and the willingness to face potential adversities of ministry, especially as a church planter. I also had the opportunity to spend several days visiting his family & ministry.

**Pray for these students**, that they would be led and empowered by the Spirit to *faithfully* walk in the *vision & call for ministry*. Pray that they would consistently *continue* the practice of setting aside times for reflecting and listening as one way of "checking in" with the Lord & with themselves (including reviewing their recently completed plans for *sustaining & refreshing their call* and for *leading and caring for themselves*).

**Give Thanks to the Lord** for the *strength & safety* He provided during my time in Cambodia. While I got sick twice, the timing was 'good' and did not interfere with my teaching, visits, or special meetings. Lastly, regarding teaching, **pray with and for me** for wisdom & perseverance as I work to complete grading assignments—this is my least favorite aspect of teaching in a formal setting.

### **Alumni Visits**

There are currently close to 400 PPBS alumni serving the Lord in a variety of ministries and contexts throughout Cambodia, so this was another priority for both for the school and for me. As I've shared in the past, loneliness and discouragement are not uncommon among pastors and other leaders. I found this to be true for folks serving in the church as well as in Christian non-profit organizations like the one where God led me to begin my time in Cambodia, Food for the Hungry. As it relates to the Bible school context, many of our alumni serve in physically and/or socially isolated contexts. Likewise, it is not uncommon for the same group to experience various types of hardships (cf. 2 Cor. 11:25ff). This is one of reasons schools like PPBS endeavor to serve their students *both* while they are on campus *and* after graduation; it is also one of the indicators looked for by the ATA in the accreditation process.

Several years ago, I spent time with a student who had graduated recently and looked on with amazement how hard and creatively he worked to be financially self-sufficient so that he could work full time in the church he was planting. I was able to visit him again several weeks ago and we had many good conversations, plus, this time, I met his bride and son as well. As we talked, he shared with me his struggles in serving the church full-time and supporting his family, especially after the birth of their son. However, he and his wife discerned that he should *not* continue working with a Christian non-profit organization that he had joined to make ends meet; though the organization did very good work and the stress on their finances was substantially less, it took him far from home and ministry). Their decision was later confirmed when their family was provided with a place to live (in the building behind them) which also serves as the gathering place for worship and ministry for the church (and where I stayed). He also shared with me his feelings of loneliness in ministry due to serving in a fairly remote area in the country's northwest. I was deeply touched when he thanked me for coming to meet *his family*, telling me what a blessing it was to have someone who is a father figure to him to come see his new family. He was orphaned as a child and never knew his own father ... their son now calls me 'grandpa' (which is a story of its own for another time involving muffins). This was one of many visits with alumni—I am thankful to the Lord for *continued* opportunities to connect with alumni both in-person like this or remotely (as I do from Oregon via Zoom).



Over coffee or some sort of "rice," I met with ten alumni During my time in Cambodia. The Lord also provided opportunities to visit several of them in their homes, places of ministry, and I was blessed to stay overnight(s) with a few of them. The family of the young pastor mentioned above who visited our leadership hosted me for a few days, sharing their lives and ministry with me. I was again struck by the creativity and the lengths to which their family goes to plant a church in this former Khmer Rouge stronghold—another story for another time involving the same muffins. After leading a women's Bible study until 10p, the pastor's wife got up at 3a to bake the muffins to sell at the market and a few for my trip, so sweet! (**While** Mom was away, the rest of the family taught me a game called *Skip-Bo* which was new to me but which our family has now started playing together)



**Give Thanks to the Lord for the alumni I met.** It was a privilege and encouragement to me to see these servants of the Lord steadfast, immovable, and abounding in the work of the Lord even in the face of hardships and obstacles! I hope that it is an encouragement for you all well. But wait, there's more; you can't imagine how some of the folks associated with PPBS spent their recent holiday 🤗

**Give Thanks as well for health and safety** as I travelled by bus, local taxi, & mottos to visit with alumni, and ... **Give Thanks for the people** who helped me find the right places to wait for the buses & taxis, *arrange* for the right seats with enough room for my legs, and even for the 'taxi' which helped me travel between less-traveled places. It was like "*back in the day*" in Cambodia (Guatemala & Bolivia as well) when this type of 'taxi' was used to travel to places *too far* to travel by moto(bike) but *too close* for buses service; similar to modern-day Ubers,

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these folks use their personal cars, almost exclusively Toyota Corollas. They wait at a designated place until their car is “full” before leaving (there is no ‘set schedule’ and ‘full’ meaning either the number of *actual* passengers or *seats sold* to passengers who, like me, wait somewhere along the way; *the advantages of cell phones!*). Once they arrive at the destination, they do the same in reverse. For my three-hour trip the driver decided to add “just *one more*” passenger who was standing on the shoulder of the road hoping to catch a lift from someone. Our car was already ‘full,’ even by Cambodian standards, but somehow there always seems to be enough space to add *just one more!* If you can imagine it, the driver shared his seat with our new passenger.

Again, *I’ll Say- Give Thanks to the Lord for safety in travels. Please Also Continue to Pray for all our staff, faculty, students, and alumni* as travel like this is dangerous, especially by motorbike, and is a routine part of the lives and ministries of many. One of the alumni who I visited lost his wife and youngest daughter in a traffic accident four years ago, just months after I visited them. *Continue to Pray also for their emotional health* as many of them serve amidst challenges and hardships.

### **Accreditation Process**

As a member of the PPBS board, I took part in this process. The Asian Theological Association, or ATA, sent a “Visiting Evaluation Team (VET)” to PPBS to look at every aspect of our school’s two bachelors programs (for reaccreditation) and our master’s program (for first time accreditation). Over three days, the VET had in-person interviews with students, staff, alumni, board members, and faculty reading. The interviews were in addition to reviewing hundreds of pages of related information submitted by the school. At the end of their time in Cambodia, the VET presented their *draft* results.

***I am exceptionally pleased to share with you all that the VET recommended all three programs for accreditation!*** Just to be clear, there will be *continued* communication between PPBS and the

ATA as the ATA Visiting Team sends the final version of their report to PPBS. This will be followed by a time for response by PPBS, followed by a final determination by the ATA, which, if positive, the ATA will issue their *formal* accreditation sometime next month (Jan 2025); ATA accreditation is valid for 5 years. ***Let Us Give Thanks to the Lord that the evaluation process*** was conducted with transparency and integrity, and that, from my perspective, representatives from both the ATA and PPBS worked together in Christ-like and God-honoring ways! Likewise, ***give thanks and pray for the draft report & for follow-up to this part of the process;*** the draft report included *commendations* for things done well, *recommendations* for areas which could be improved, and several specific *directives* for aspects which are, from their perspective, necessary for both the well-functioning of the school and its ongoing accreditation by the ATA.

*While the final report from the ATA might differ from their draft*, both the PPBS board and the local leadership team of the school have already begun *considering* their observations and recommendations and we will continue our plans for things noted by the VET which were *already* on our radar. *Finally*, when I asked the ATA Team about schools with accreditation in Cambodia, they confirmed that PPBS is the *only* theological education institution that meets the standards to be directly accredited by the ATA. Interestingly, they also mentioned that any institution in Cambodia seeking ATA accreditation will need to ask PPBS for a letter of recommendation as a part of their application process now that PPBS has become a known and trusted member of the ATA network.



*Left to Right, Academic Dean, ATA based in Hong Kong, ATA based in Singapore, Principal, PPBS Board based in Singapore, Administrator, Student Dept Head, ATA based in Philippines, and Member based in the US).*

***In closing, thank you*** for the many ways in which you support the Cambodian ministry including your encouragement, your time, your finances, and your prayers. Thank you especially for your prayers over the past few months while I was in Cambodia. God heard, God remembered, God saw, and God understood just how and when to respond, providing others and me with *strength and health*. I had *effective pain management* during long plane flights and bus rides, and *God empowered me to be a conduit of His's love, encouragement and direction*.

With thanks, love, and blessings as we continue this journey together

Mark Wilson