

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: JUSTIN THACKER

Volume 34 • Number 1 • January 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Way of Hope in Cambodia

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KEY WORDS: *Cambodia, Way of Hope, cell movement*

Introduction

Cambodia's approximately 12 million people have suffered decades of civil war, including genocide under the Khmer Rouge holocaust, where as many as 2 million people died. This extended period of destruction has devastated Cambodia's social, economic, and intellectual infrastructure, limiting its ability to break itself from the grip of poverty. Child mortality rates are alarmingly high: one Cambodian child in ten dies before reaching the age of five compared with one death in 85 in most developed countries. About 85% of Cambodians live in rural areas with inadequate access to education, water, credit, and medical services. More than one half of Cambodian children are malnourished. The spread of HIV/AIDS has been a more recent phenomenon but Cambodia now has the highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in all of Asia.

Cambodia is one of the least Christianized countries in the world. Only 0.7% of Cambodians are Christ-followers, about 60,000 Christians in a population of 12 million. While Buddhism

shapes the very core of the religious, social, political and cultural life of Cambodia, Cambodians are strongly influenced by animism, seeking to appease spirits and ancestors through worship and use of talismans. Cambodians are just as likely to visit a traditional faith healer as a medical practitioner in response to illness and disease.

The church in Cambodia is young and lacks experienced leadership. Although evangelical activity began in Cambodia in the 1920s, the church struggled to grow and develop. Only one Protestant denomination, the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), was allowed to work in Cambodia until the Khmer Rouge regime came to power when all religious activity was shut down. At the time of the Khmer Rouge takeover, there were only 12 evangelical Khmer pastors. Almost all of these died under the Khmer Rouge so that when Christian denominations, including the CMA, Assemblies of God, Baptists, and others, were allowed to work in Cambodia in the early 1990s, they essentially had to begin anew. All of Cambodia's current pastors and church leaders are from among those who became Christians in the 1990s.

Way of Hope

Way of Hope is a movement of six thousand Cambodian Christ followers, organized into more than 800 cell churches, reaching out to children and families in more than 162 villages in five provinces. Over 37,000 children are involved in the associated community health program, and more than 5,000 volunteers are active in raising HIV/AIDS awareness, providing education and home visiting.

World Relief,¹ the initiator and catalyst of the Hope initiative, began working in Cambodia in 1991. The Hope initiative grew out of a child health and evangelism (CHE) program launched in 1993 in tandem with World Relief's microfinance initiative, now a separate institution called *CREDIT* serving in excess of 20,000 families through loans and savings.

The aim of World Relief's child health and evangelism program, called *Hope for Cambodia's Children*, was simple: evangelism and preventative health messages aimed at children ages 5-12. As children were impacted, parents began to enquire and many adults began to follow Christ. In response, World Relief organized the adults into cells giving birth, in 1997, to the *Way of Hope* cell movement. *Way of Hope* models an 'every member in ministry' approach, where each cell member is engaged in ministry to their greater community. *Hope for Cambo-*

dia's Children became one ministry vehicle for the *Way of Hope* cells. In 2002, World Relief launched *Mobilizing for Life* (MFL), to promote behaviour that prevents HIV/AIDS transmission and support families affected by HIV/AIDS. The *Way of Hope* cell churches became a primary vehicle for reaching out to the wider community. Today, all three aspects of the Hope initiative, *Hope for Cambodia's Children*, *Way of Hope*, and *Mobilizing for Life*, work together and complement one another. The Hope initiative also partners beyond World Relief with, for example, *Christian Service International*, in training volunteers about nutrition and the benefits of the Moringa tree.

Way of Hope's cell churches generally consist of 8-15 people, multiplying to 16 or less.² *Way of Hope* is known as a 'church without walls' meeting, primarily, underneath homes built on stilts. Meetings are short in length to allow for the daily demands of village life. First level cell groups are called 'Paul Groups' (currently about 420) while subsequent groups, birthed by the Paul groups, are called 'Timothy Groups'.

World Relief 'Adult Educators' train volunteer leaders chosen by the cell members through a voting process. Discipleship-focused training, which includes theology, health, HIV/AIDS, and cell multiplication, occurs on a weekly basis at the provincial level.

1 World Relief (www.worldrelief.org) is U.S. based nonprofit working worldwide to empower the local church to serve the most vulnerable through health, economic development, refugee assistance, and disaster response.

2 Note, the Cambodian government requires registration once a group exceeds 30 people so, from the practical perspective of avoiding the bureaucracy involved, the cells have remained small.

Local institutional churches provide a venue, and some resources, for a three month, second level training for cell leaders. The volunteer leaders do not, as a norm, have a high level of education; some are illiterate. Participation, story-telling, and interactive methods are used to overcome these barriers. For some, Bible lessons through *Transworld Radio* complement the training initiatives.

The notion of 'church' in Cambodia usually connotes a building, 'a big flat or apartment to worship the Lord'. For *Way of Hope*, church is defined from the Book of Acts: 'For us, church means a group of people in the community where people can meet, can talk about God's word—not only on Sunday. So our church is that we want them to come together, five people or ten people. *Our church is a church with no walls.* For others, they have money or funds, so for us the obstacle is that other denominations have funds to build a church. For us, we only have a relationship with God to give them.'³

Still, cell members tend to view *Way of Hope* as an 'impoverished' version of church when compared to its institutional counterpart. As such, leaders regularly emphasize the Acts view of church along with its communal life and emphasis on outreach.

To complement and support the cell movement, World Relief has placed 'Community Life Mobilizers' in each province with the aim of connecting the cells to the greater community. Various committees, organized along the-

matic lines, such as 'Church Growth', 'Health Knowledge', 'Teaching Skills and Arts', 'Evaluation', and 'Counseling' have been implemented to ensure quality impact.

Since its inception, the Hope initiative has emphasized four key values: prayer and worship, local ownership, child participation, and relationships. Integrating prayer and worship into all programmatic activities has reinforced a vision of holism; local ownership has resulted in significant empowerment, well beyond World Relief; child participation has produced a leveraging, or multiplying affect, and; the emphasis on relationships has allowed the volunteers and staff to be responsive to the needs of the community.

Theological Reflection

The *Way of Hope* cell movement models at least three important characteristics for theological reflection. *First*, 'Way of Hope' moves beyond an instrumental, or utilitarian, ecclesiology. In para-church circles, it's common to view the church primarily as a means to an end, as a vehicle to serve the poor and oppressed. Others resist this narrow definition,⁴ saying the church itself is also the goal of mission, 'in constant need of repentance and conversion' to become all it's meant to be as the bride of Christ.⁵ The *Way of Hope* movement

³ Based on an interview with Nareth, World Relief provincial leader, in September 2007.

⁴ See for example, Harper, P. and Metzger, P.L., *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Brazos Press, 2009).

⁵ *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, from Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Maryknoll Orbis, 1991).

is both a *vehicle of mission*, in reaching out to the greater community, and an *object of mission*, for renewal, discipleship and, most importantly, worship. The cells are little communities of hope, *ecclesiolae*, fully incarnated within the pressing problems of the rural Cambodian landscape.

Importantly, the non-instrumental character of the cells allows them to define, and redefine, their outreach mandate according to emerging issues. The cells are able to outlive their initial outreach task, adapting to the changing needs of the community, primarily because their *raison d'être* transcends its current instrumental cause.

Second, 'Way of Hope' moves beyond common dichotomies. The cell movement is facilitated by a para-church organization, World Relief, in loose partnership with the Cambodian institutional church. *Way of Hope* emphasizes both 'word and deed' expressions of the gospel not merely 'alongside each other',⁶ but rather in an integrated, interdependent fashion. To be a cell member is to worship; to worship is to reach out.

Further, *Way of Hope* leadership consists primarily of female volunteers, very few of whom are formerly trained for the ministry but who are deeply engaged in the community. By moving beyond 'male/female' and

'clergy/laity' dichotomies, the cells significantly empower those closest to the needs. It allows the movement to remain incarnational, allowing Christ to dwell deeply, through a 'church without walls'.

Third, 'Way of Hope' moves beyond working 'on behalf of the poor' to allowing the poor to become their own actors of change. Too often, well intended outsiders seek to work 'for the poor'⁷ or even 'with the poor' but, in so doing, snuff out local initiative.⁸ Such posture, and corresponding models, can further entrench poverty, especially the form of poverty that results when our friends feel inferior relative to the west.⁹ Ministry 'by the poor', within their own communities, has the potential to transform from the inside out. Moreover, the likelihood for these interventions to sustain is higher because ownership is higher. *Way of Hope* allows the poor, those marginalized and on the periphery, to become actors in solving their own community problems. This represents empowerment in its truest form.

⁷ Often characterized as becoming 'a voice for the poor'.

⁸ In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 1990), Paulo Friere refers to this as 'conscientization', that is, when the poor move from being mere objects in the process of change to actually becoming subjects, or change agents.

⁹ Bryant Myers, and others, tackle this subject by identifying 'poverty of being' and 'poverty of vocation' as the deepest and worst forms of poverty. See *Walking with the Poor* (New York: Maryknoll Orbis, 1999).

⁶ Quoted from the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission, developed at the Micah Network consultation on Integral Mission held in Oxford during September 2001.