



Preface



This book was originally intended to explore the emergence of a new church among Cambodian exiles in refugee camps in Thailand over the years since 1975, when Cambodia fell into communist hands and hundreds of thousands of her people began fleeing their homeland. I found I was unable to do this without looking back to Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror (1975–9) - that fiery crucible, sparks from which ignited revival fires in grim border refugee camps in Thailand. But even the moving story of the church under the Khmer Rouge cannot properly be understood without first examining the preceding five years of great harvest (1970–5), part of which I witnessed personally in Phnom Penh. That much-prayed-for ingathering would not have been possible but for the tenacious roots which for fifty years before that had persistently pushed deeper into the resistant Cambodian bedrock, through many seasons of sowing with weeping and of long waiting with patience.

Thus we need to trace the history of the Cambodian Protestant church from its humble origins among the hardy rice farmers of north-west Cambodia in the mid-1920s. After this followed decades of near fruitless toil and considerable opposition, culminating in





the incredible 1970s, when joyous harvest was juxtaposed with indescribable devastation. Throughout the turbulent 1980s, insecurity and communist rule forced the decimated church underground in Cambodia, drove it across into neighbouring Thailand's crowded refugee camps, and then scattered it across six continents. With the 1990s came the opportunity for a new beginning, with the restoration in Cambodia of a heady freedom for all.

Some have written about the Cambodian Church up until the fall of Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge on April 17, 1975, using the reports of missionaries and relief workers. In this book, however, along with personal observations gleaned over more than twenty years, I have attempted to use primarily the testimonies of Cambodian Christians themselves, and to write from their experiences and recollections.

What follows is by no means an exhaustive scholarly history of this remarkable church. Rather, it is a portrait, an unfinished portrait, and a distinctly impressionist, perhaps even surreal portrait, of the Cambodian Church, interpreted and understood through the lives and testimonies of a number of stalwart, very typical, and in some cases very strategic Cambodian believers and their families. They experienced all the times and seasons, both peaceful and tumultuous, through which the Cambodian Evangelical Church passed in her first eighty years. Their memories and roots reach back to the first Cambodian Christians in the early 1920s, and their branches extend into the Cambodian Church today, inside Cambodia and scattered throughout a world-wide diaspora. Looking through the eyes of these families is like taking a cross-section right through the history of this amazing church.

A portrait thus composed would lack unity and form indeed, and so I have taken the liberty of filling in with broad strokes the background landscape of Cambodian life and culture, and where appropriate, highlighting the images with touches and hues from the experiences and reports of numerous other Cambodians I have known. The result is not a precise photographic representation. This can never be. All recorded history is an interpretation. What emerges is a portrait which I believe depicts authentically with human warmth and colour, when surveyed as a whole from a suitable distance, a true and compelling picture of the historic pilgrimage of this church.



My purpose in writing this account is four-fold. *Firstly*, I have written for the glory of God, to promote righteousness among men and the praise of His Name. 'Let all thy works praise thee, O Lord.' For as we penetrate ever more deeply the mystery of our Christian vocation to be children of God, the church of Jesus Christ is served. Through these glimpses into the history of the Cambodian Church we behold the salvation of God realised in the fabric of human time and space. We behold another part of God's grand design to purchase for Himself a people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

Secondly, I wanted to preserve these precious memories primarily for the Cambodian Christians, many of whom live beyond Cambodia's borders, and the growing number of new Christians in Cambodia. Most are unaware of their rich Christian heritage, and the sheer cost to those who preceded them in holding fast the integrity of the gospel. Most of the early Christians are now dead, and almost all the mature leadership perished under the Khmer Rouge. If Cambodian Christians today are aware of the faithfulness, the endurance, and the martyrdoms of their spiritual mothers and fathers, I trust this will help keep them from playing fast and loose with the precious and eternal gospel which they have received intact; and which they also are now called upon to live out and pass on to others amid many of the same kinds of testings.

So much of Cambodia has been squandered and destroyed in recent years. The Cambodians are a people cut loose from their physical and spiritual moorings, adrift in uncharted and hazardous seas. But not so the Christians. They have an Anchor which holds them fast to their Source of life, and a spiritual history which, although relatively short, is filled with a great cloud of witnesses. What could be more relevant to them today, than the realisation that they are part of that glorious and unbroken progress of pilgrims through history, ascending the 'Mountain of the Lord', worshipping as they go. The summons to 'remember' is God's antidote for carelessness and faithless forgetfulness.

Thirdly, I have written to edify fellow believers throughout the world. The Cambodian Church may be poor in outward form, but it possesses, through the testimony of its members, a spiritual reservoir from which we can all draw living water. Testimony such as this should not be kept 'under



a bushel'. It must be shared so that others may be encouraged, comforted, chastened, and led to glorify God for His mighty works of salvation.

And *fourthly*, to study the brief history of the Cambodian Church is an instructive exercise, for here we catch glimpses of the sovereign hand of God moving among the Cambodian people. Its relatively short historical back-drop includes raw paganism and spiritual darkness, civil war, imperialism, political intrigue, great power rivalry, corruption, persecution of every kind, atheistic communism and militarism at its most cruel and radical, refugee camps, massive Christian and secular relief, and a world-wide dispersion. It serves as an excellent model for the evaluation and scrutiny of our modern missionary enterprise.

Our quest is to discover the true 'planting of the Lord', those 'oaks of righteousness' who can never be uprooted. But we need also to look honestly and realistically at what has been merely the planting of men in the flesh, thus resulting in wood, hay and straw. Questions must be raised and issues faced as we consider the priorities, attitudes, strategies, methods, motives and styles that have been adopted, all in the name of doing the work of God.

These issues are as old as the missionary mandate itself, for tragically, it seems that each generation must learn again, too often remembering little from lessons of the past. Today there are pressing new problems demanding our attention. For example, what is the impact of the great multinational Christian relief organisations? Do they operate on a biblical basis? What is their effect on young national churches? How do they tie in with overall mission strategy? How does a missionary with his concern for indigenous church-planting principles relate to these organisations? What is the impact of revivalism which sees God's blessing primarily in terms of material benefits, self-gratification and short-term commitment? What are some of the motives and characteristics of Christian giving? What about the practical realities of a powerful media which nearly always misrepresents Christian work? And how do we walk with skill through the political mine-fields around us? Have we replaced genuine spirituality with activism? Are we anxious to turn out know-how functionaries or men and women who know God, slick entrepreneurs for God in the world's mould or children of God with the mind of Christ? And where do we go from here?



These and numerous other questions suggest themselves as we sift through the history of a church which is the result of modern twentieth-century missionary endeavour, and see just what has survived the flames.

I have struggled within myself about writing some of these things, and have often been tempted to abandon so ambitious and complex a project altogether. I have sought to avoid political and missiological correctness in this age of spiritual slogans and sound-bites. There is the risk of being misunderstood by friends, both Cambodians and westerners. It would seem safer to leave much unsaid. Why raise questions in an already confused and troubled situation? However, if we are to be good and faithful servants in God's Kingdom, we need to consider how God is planting His church and in humility evaluate how much more perfectly we can be workers together with Him.

Finally, it remains for me to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to those who have laboured with me in prayer and direct participation for so long in the writing of this book. To all our faithful praying friends around the world, thank you for persevering with us through the years, interruptions, difficulties and discouragements. Your encouragements and reminders were a constant rebuke to my often flagging zeal. I say a deep 'Thank you' to my Cambodian brothers and sisters for their patience with me as I interviewed and recorded them, and questioned them relentlessly for every detail. To my wife, Margaret, no amount of thanks could express my gratitude for her seeming endless patience over this project as we packed and unpacked it and hauled it from place to place round and round the world in battered cardboard boxes; for her invaluable advice, her painstaking typing and retyping the manuscripts, and most of all her godly prayers. The final copy was typed by Paulette Sheard with incredible speed and accuracy. I am grateful for the helpful suggestions of the late Phyllis Thompson and the gentle encouragement of Julia Cameron, both of OMF. I also wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank those mentors and exemplary senior missionaries I was blessed with over the years. Without their graciousness and patience I would not have gone very far: Denis Lane, John Miller, the late Henry Guinness, the late Dr Pauline Hamilton, the late Alice Compain, Andrew Way, Canon John Benson and Archbishop Moses Tay of Singapore.