

The Economics of Partnership

# The “Thinning” Revisited Dependency and Church Planting in Cambodia

by Jean Johnson

In the 1990s Cambodia was still recovering from a horrific genocide referred to as The Killing Fields. That period offered the remnant of Cambodian believers and missionaries a fresh opportunity to plant indigenous churches that had the vision and capability to multiply within their context and beyond. Yet, I question whether missionaries, including myself, were able to make the most of that opportunity. The answer to that question can be found by understanding two time periods, the church before The Killing Fields and the church after.

## *The Growth and “The Thinning” of the Church in the 1950s and early 1960s*

Don Cormack, the author of *Killing Fields, Living Fields* who witnessed ministry unfold in Cambodia, traces the history of the Cambodian Protestant church from the 1920s to the 1990s. He wrote a chapter called “The Thinning” which explains how the church of Cambodia grew in the 1950s and early 60s to 2000 adherents and then was “thinned” to merely 300 believers during the mid-1960s. Some of the “thinning” had to do with a government crackdown against Christians, weak faith commitments and an atmosphere of apathy within the country. I wish I could say that these were the only issues that “thinned” the church of Jesus Christ within Cambodia. Unfortunately, “the doing of missions” contributed to the “thinning” of the church in Cambodia as well. In the 1950s and early 1960s, there were viable and growing churches in Cambodia guided by both ministers and lay leaders. During this time, a key foreign missions board made a vital decision. Cormack describes this decision and what it revealed:

...It was at this time that the foreign mission board announced it was phasing out its monetary aid to the churches in order to encourage them to become self-supporting. This action was received with considerable dismay and reluctance by the Khmer workers and their congregations. For a few difficult and testing years it appeared that practically every worker might be lost to the church, as one by one they left their ministries to accept more lucrative employment elsewhere. Although it was a painful decision, and some might argue a time bomb which should have never been left so long before defusing, the mission stuck to its resolve in the interest of devel

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oping a strong healthy indigenous church, and not one forever tied to the apron strings of the foreign missionary society.

It is little wonder, therefore, that all those who had 'entered the ministry' primarily because they saw it as a secure and respectable career, in which they could always rely on the patronage of wealthy foreigners for support or for other material or social perks, soon became disillusioned with the reality of grueling and thankless toil with no substantial reward. These were among the first to be thinned out, returning to secular employment or taking positions with other organizations willing to pay them well enough.

The education, social skills and English language they had acquired at Bible School did open other doors to them. This hireling mentality would continue to plague the church in later years, indeed right up to present day, but especially with the arrival in the early 1970s of Christian relief organizations and various cults all eager for recruits, workers, and instant 'indigency' to impress the homeside support base with half-digested and popular missiological slogans, and willing of course to pay well for the Khmer 'membership'. This patronage syndrome, so entrenched throughout Khmer social, political and military culture, was to become a fundamental weakness in the Cambodian church, stunting its true indigenous growth, distorting its perception of Christian discipleship and service; exposing it to attack and ridicule, and endlessly dividing it by creating all manner of jealousies and misunderstandings within the community of believers. (Cormack, p. 100, 101)

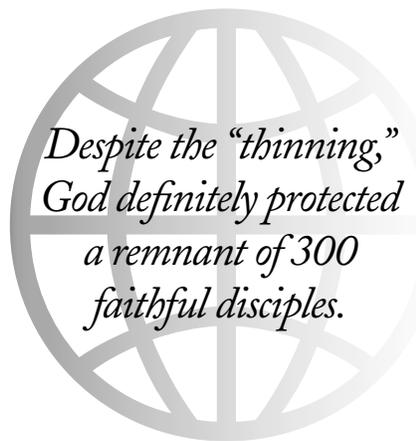
The foreign mission board's decision to wean away aid revealed the negative effects on the local Cambodian churches caused by patronage strategies implemented by missionaries and mission's organizations.

### ***Determination Not to Repeat the "Thinning" of the mid-60s***

Despite the "thinning," God definitely protected a remnant of 300

faithful disciples. This remnant persevered and served God with pure motives. In 1965, the church began to grow and strengthen again. Pastor Yeah was a part of this fresh start. He was determined in his heart to not allow the church to be thinned out again.

...And men like Pastor Yeah were determined that it should never be allowed to slip back into a state of lethargy and dependence. Surely after forty years they were ready to stand mature in Christ! If and when missionaries returned, their



relationship with the church and their responsibilities would have to be carefully negotiated. It would be necessary to emphasize the importance of the Khmer church managing its own affairs, fully supporting itself, and realizing its obligation to take the Gospel to all Cambodians, both within and around the country's borders. (Cormack, p. 115)

The church had gone through much "thinning," "growing through trials," and now was ready to move forward. 1970 marked a year of freshness and hope.

...Now 1970 was at hand, a great watershed year in the history of the Cambodian church, with the fields finally ripening for harvest. When that harvest season arrived there was numbered in the whole of Cambodia only about three hundred Christians, the same number as Gideon's army. (Cormack, p. 115, 116)

### ***Civil War and the Khmer Rouge Genocide from 1970 to 1979***

As the church began to grow in the 1970s, so did the sounds and sights of civil war. April of 1975 became the darkest time ever for Cambodians, also called the Khmer. The country was suddenly under the spell of a notorious communist regime. A group of Cambodians led by Pol Pot—exposed to the ideology of Marxism—formed themselves into a totalitarian movement known as the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge determined to turn the country back to the year zero in order to create a perfect agricultural utopia. In an effort to turn back the economic and social time clock, Pol Pot's regime evacuated all city centers, dismantled families and completely destroyed the country's infrastructure to the point of creating one large back-breaking egalitarian labor camp throughout the country. Subsequently, the Khmer Rouge tortured and exterminated the educated and skilled such as government officials, civil workers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, bankers, librarians, musicians, and Buddhist monks. Pol Pot's regime eventually executed people for the smallest infractions: singing out loud, snatching up a bug to eat, collapsing from hunger and escaping to find a family member.

The fields were stained with the blood of Cambodian men, women and children, hence the label "The Killing Fields." From 1975 to 1979 the Khmer Rouge exterminated approximately two million Cambodian citizens.

### ***The Struggle and Rebuilding after the Khmer Rouge Genocide from 1979***

The "year zero" experiment came to an end in 1979 due to an offensive attack by Vietnamese troops which forced the Khmer Rouge to relinquish power and hide. The 1980s consisted of sporadic fighting with the Khmer Rouge, withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops and the grueling process of rebuilding a shattered nation.

Before this incomprehensible genocide, the church of Jesus Christ existed, grew, struggled and impacted the people of Cambodia, but tragically during the reign of the Pol Pot regime ninety percent of Christians were executed. The remnant of Cambodian believers who survived eventually rebuilt their lives and began to spread the gospel anew.

### ***Not Again! The 1990s to Present Day***

During this rebuilding time in the 1990s, Cambodia became like a magnet drawing relief agencies, humanitarian organizations and missionaries. I was one of them! As an appointed missionary, I entered Cambodia in July of 1992 and initially served as a translator at the Ministry of Health, while applying myself to church planting. I was anxious to implement all that I had learned while living among Cambodians in America. Unfortunately, I never heard Pastor Yeah's exhortation to allow the Cambodian church to manage and financially support its own affairs.

I went right to work *managing* and financially *supporting* the church of Cambodia. I distributed my share of handouts, paying rent for churches, providing resources, building others' buildings, holding positions, importing foreign forms and modeling non-reproducible methods of ministry. Although I had missions training, I leaned more on my experiences in America. These actions led to creating psychological and financial dependency among those I worked with.

So much awesome Great Commission work has been done and is being done in Cambodia. Yet, from my long-term observations, an ample amount of those doing missions—to varying degrees—have recreated the state of lethargy and dependence that Pastor Yeah was so determined to prevent. Dependency is like a spider with many far-reaching tentacles, creating all sorts of “life-sucking” problems, such as loss of self-dignity, lack of

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motivation, stifled creativity, bare minimum local giving, unwillingness to support local leaders, jealousy, competition, maneuvering, mixed motives, undermining local value systems, superficial conversions, deficiency in lay leaders and volunteerism, lack of credibility, desire for self-recognition, being perceived as foreign-driven, and stunted growth. Jesus movements or church planting movements do not rise up out of this dysfunction.

Due to travel to various countries, ample reading and conversations with missionaries, I believe this pattern of dependency is not a unique problem to Cambodia, but is an overall “missions” issue affecting many parts of the world. I invite missions executives, missions organizations, missionaries, short-term missionaries and mission-sending churches to allow Pastor Yeah's message to formulate our missions strategies.

Over the last 16 years as I served in Cambodia, God has taught me many lessons and I now “do missions” differently. Not that I have all the answers or implement missions perfectly, but by the grace of God, I am learning how to intentionally plant indigenous and sustainable churches from the beginning. I am in the process of writing a book called *Intentional Planting of Indigenous Churches* in which I share more details about how missionaries can implement premeditated sustainability, multiplication, and indigeneity.

### ***The Very Means Becomes the Stumbling Block***

From the onset, outside funding from churches, organizations, and missionaries in the form of handouts, subsidies, donor-funded projects, gifts, salaries, building projects, and scholarships seemingly speeds up church planting within a given country. For

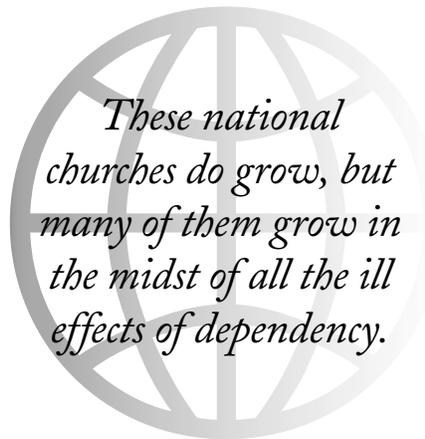
sure, outside funding speeds up the first generation of church planting by or in conjunction with foreign mission efforts. However, from my experience and observation, the very means for birth and growth can eventually cause the local church to stop growing and even regress. Below are some common examples of how the means can become an actual stumbling block for church growth and multiplication.

- Money, supplies and gifts are shared generously from missionaries and foreign Christian workers among those they consider poor and needy. Although the assistance does alleviate some people's needs, a deeper mindset is being formed within the people: “We are weak and it will always be this way.” Fatalism becomes their identity.
- Foreign funding is supplied to provide income for local church planters. While this assistance seems advantageous for spreading the Gospel, the local people view these foreign-funded local evangelists as hirelings from a foreign organization which diminishes the local church planter's credibility.
- A salary from a missions organization to support a pastor seemingly empowers that local leader to implement his ministry. While the pastor is receiving subsidy, the church is forming this mindset: “The missionaries are responsible for supporting our leaders and we can never give to the degree that the missionaries supply.” The pastor finds himself leading a church that has no motivation to give or to take responsibility for managing their own functions and resources.

- Handouts which accompany the Gospel presentation are intended to lead people to respond to Christ due to love in action. Yet eventually when a church is formed, the members give little and constantly come to the church for money and help, treating the church like their patron. In addition, many people stop their faith pursuits of God when their needs are not met in the same way as after their first introduction to Christ.
- Foreign visitors, who want to see their donated money at work, come to both visit and do ministry. They naturally use western forms, styles and resources to help the local churches advance. The local churches, in due course, adopt these foreign forms and styles. The communities surrounding these churches shake their heads and exclaim, "Why do our fellow nationals believe in the foreigner's god?"
- Forms of evangelism and ministry are used by those doing missions in which they rely on techniques and finances readily available to themselves. Yet, when the local believers conduct evangelism and ministry they become discouraged as they cannot reproduce what was modeled to them with their own local resources and capabilities.
- A missionary desires to model pastoral leadership, thus he serves as a pastor of a local church. Upon transferring the pastoral role to a local leader, the local pastor intensely struggles to gain respect and is unable to charm his congregation with dynamic sermons, access to jobs, and financial helps like that of the missionary.

Mission organizations have been able to establish national churches using gifts, labor, community services, financial assistance, salaries, grants, and building projects. These national

churches do grow, but many of them grow in the midst of all the ill effects of dependency. I call it "dysfunctional growth." My plea is that we evaluate our means as cross-cultural ministers and consider the long-term effects on the overall church of Jesus Christ. As cross-cultural communicators, we may want to ask this question frequently: "What should I do or not do so as to participate in the planting of local churches that have the vision and capability to multiply disciples without unhealthy dependency on myself or my organization?"



### *Day 1 Affects Day 100*

I have a saying that guides my cross-cultural work, "Day 1 affects day 100." In other words, what we do from the very beginning will either impede multiplication or enhance it within a given cultural context. The "thinning" teaches us that those doing missions cannot transfer vision, psychological ownership, and the capability to sustain and multiply to the local church; rather, these qualities need to be intentionally affirmed, planted, and modeled from the beginning onward. Each and every local church throughout the world needs to believe the spread of the Kingdom of God is dependent on their relationship with God, intercession, sacrifice, unity, faith, giving, devotion and passion. Missionaries can participate in such a movement by taking seriously their role of facilitating multiplication, promoting the indigenous church, and

advocating self-reliance among local churches from the beginning. **IJFM**

### *Reference*

Cormack, Don

1997 *Killing Fields, Living Fields.*

OMF International & MARC  
Crowborough.