Joshua J. Lovelace

FROM SEEDTIME to Harvest

The History of the Assemblies of God in Cambodia

Pentecost Around the World Book 5

Foreword by Edward L. Smither
From Seedtime to Harvest
The History of the Assemblies of God in Cambodia
by Joshua J. Lovelace

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# Table of Contents

Publisher’s Preface  
iii  

Foreword  
v  

Acknowledgments  
vii  

Dedication  
ix  

Introduction  
1  

## Chapter 1  
Historical, Anthropological, and Religious Characteristics in Cambodia  
5  

## Chapter 2  
An Analysis of the History of the Assemblies of God and Cultural Dynamics in Cambodia  
25  

## Chapter 3  
An Analysis of the Missions Practices Used and Projections for the Future  
49
Bibliography
77

Appendices
83
Publisher’s Preface

to the Pentecost Around the World Book Series

We are pleased to announce that this new book, From Seedtime to Harvest: The History of the Assemblies of God in Cambodia, is the fifth volume in our Pentecost Around the World series. The purpose of this series is to provide a place for historical reflection on what God is doing through the Pentecostal Movement, particularly in the Asia Pacific and Pacific Oceana regions of the world.


Unfortunately, the first three books are no longer available. Dynnice Engcoy’s book is available for purchase through our website, www.aptspress.org.

If you have any questions or comments, you are welcome to contact us through our website.

We hope you enjoy this book.

The PUBLISHER
The prominent church historian Justo Gonzalez once asserted that the history of the church is the history of mission. More than the history of buildings, doctrines, or famous theologians, church history is a narrative of God’s mission among all peoples. Recognizing how the gospel has spread into different parts of the world and to different cultures, it is an uneven, messy, but amazing story.

While we look forward in mission and strive to develop strategies for reaching a rapidly changing world with the gospel, we must also look back. How were churches planted? Who were the missionaries? What were their strategies? What mistakes did they make? What innovative approaches did they take? What do these voices teach us for mission today? To look back and reflect is an exercise in humility. It means that we actually have something to learn from the past. It first means that we accurately understand the past—the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is an honest inquiry. When we’ve humbly engaged in the study of mission history, we realize that this is ultimately God’s work and we get to participate in it.

In this work, Josh Lovelace invites us to grasp the story of the Assemblies of God mission in Cambodia, which began in the late twentieth century. The decades of war and even genocide in the southeast Asian nation seemed to prompt a greater openness
to the gospel message. Assemblies of God missionaries responded to the call and have faithfully served the peoples of Cambodia in evangelism, church planting, and other aspects of Christian mission over the past few decades. As we meet the growing church in Cambodia, let us learn from the Assemblies of God mission journey, and reflect on how we ought to move forward in twenty-first century mission. In the end, let us pause and give thanks to God for his faithfulness to bless all peoples (Gen 12:3).

Edward L. Smither, PhD
Dean, College of Intercultural Studies
Columbia International University
This work was birthed from a desire to know more about the initial history of the Assemblies of God in Cambodia. Various missionaries and pastors had stories to share and each made significant contributions of their time and expertise. It is a privilege to serve with these wonderful individuals who continually demonstrate a call to serve among the Khmer people.

I am indebted to many people who are part of the ministries at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in Baguio City, Philippines. Dave Johnson does a tremendous job serving as the director for APTS Press. I appreciate his enthusiasm to provide resources which assist our fellow brothers and sisters throughout Asia. Sam Bowdoín has served in various capacities at APTS and currently serves as the director for ICI Philippines. He was an amazing thesis mentor and provided continual insight throughout the research and writing process. Moreover, APTS Press editors Frank McNelis, Jon Smith and Joy Varnell assisted in countless ways to make the manuscript even more readable. Thank you for lending your skills to this project.

My family (Carmen, Emma, and Jude) have always been my biggest cheerleaders and give encouragement when I need it most. They are a wonderful team as we serve together in Cambodia. Thank you for your love and willingness in all areas.

Above all, praise and honor to Jesus Christ for His strength throughout this project. He is Lord of the harvest in Cambodia.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to
the persevering Khmer church leaders
and pioneer missionaries of the 1990s.

Christianity has advanced
in Cambodia because of you.
His name was Vith. Our paths first crossed in April 2012 when I went to his small store to purchase 20-liter water bottles for our family’s supply of drinking water. His smile was pleasant, his eyes twinkled, and he was always eager to demonstrate quality service. Normally, Vith was already running toward me before I could park my Toyota Hilux truck and then he would linger afterwards to converse about various topics. Time after time the routine was the same—stopping at his store to purchase drinking water followed by pleasant conversation.

October 23, 2012, was a different day at the water store, however, which ultimately changed my life and perspective. For that particular day allowed me to see a different side of Vith and a different side of life in Cambodia. I did not immediately see my friend but waited for several minutes in the small, dusty parking area in front of his store. Instead of running to greet me, he slowly emerged from under the tattered green awning that draped across the entryway. His feet slowly kicked the dust while his eyes were firmly fixed upon the ground, as if he didn’t want to make eye contact with me. The wide-open smile, abundant kindness, carefree attitude, and prompt service were all missing. Time seemed to stand still as I waited for him to approach my truck.
Sticking my head out the window, I greeted Vith in the Khmer language then asked how he was doing. The short distance he traversed usually took a few seconds, but that day it seemed to take minutes as he eventually arrived at the side of my truck, all the while keeping his eyes pointed downward. I gently spoke again and patiently waited for his response, sensing that something was definitely wrong. He finally made eye contact with me as he spoke words that yet ring in my ears and I feel in my inmost being. He quietly yet firmly stated, “I have no hope in this life.”

Over the next few minutes, Vith described situation after situation and problem after problem, all the while repeating the same phrase in Khmer: “I have no hope. I have no hope. I have no hope.” It was at that moment I realized two distinct actualities. First, the Lord had provided an opportunity to share the message of hope in Jesus Christ with an individual; and second, I was cut to pieces with the reality that’s common to so many who live in Cambodia. The records of history I had previously read about civil war, genocide, displacement, border camps, and rebuilding a country, etc., flashed before my eyes in those few moments in that small, dusty parking lot in Siem Reap Province. It was painfully evident that life can be without hope, and many in Cambodia face this actuality each day.

This incident continually reminds me of the reason for cross-cultural ministry in places such as Cambodia. It is for people like Vith that missionaries leave their home country to adopt a new country of residence, learn a new language which they speak from their head instead of their heart. It is for people like Vith missionaries search for ways to minister, in a contextualized manner, in order to convey the message of hope in Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is because of this situation, which can be observed worldwide, that the Assemblies of God has been vigilant for the past century to ensure that missionaries are sent to foreign lands
to reach the lost, plant churches, train believers, and serve with compassion. This was the scenario in 1990 when the Assemblies of God entered Cambodia and started working with believers to establish a national church known as the Assemblies of God Cambodia (AGC).

Although our Fellowship has maintained a presence in Cambodia since 1990, little has ever been recorded about the Assemblies of God Cambodia by means of in-depth research and writing. It appears that many individuals (both Khmer pastors and expatriate missionaries) carry noteworthy components regarding the history of the Assemblies of God in Cambodia. However, the majority of those individuals have not had an opportunity to contribute to the telling of various historical events. It is this particular notion that has helped me recognize the need to resource our Fellowship, and other ministry networks, in regard to our history and its significance.

Students of history, specifically church history, are always intrigued by the concept of collecting data that can serve to make past events come alive. Furthermore, this endeavor encompasses the chronological framework of the past, present, and future to demonstrate how a movement came into existence, explain its current functions and purposes, as well as provide an indicator for the days to come. These aspects related to time (especially the significance of past events) have brought me to a place of continually searching to understand the how’s and why’s of the present time as we examine the past and speed toward new opportunities on distant horizons.

Since my arrival in Cambodia in 2010, I have sought to find any attainable annals or other sources of history related to the Assemblies of God and its ministry among the Khmer people in Cambodia. This opportunity has enabled me to survey the detailed historical context through a three-fold lens: a historical background of the Khmer people, an analysis of the Assemblies
of God’s 25 years in Cambodia (1990-2015), and a proposed application that can provide foresight into the next 25 years. These foundational areas of Khmer history, events within the Assemblies of God in Cambodia, and analysis of how the past could shape the future will demonstrate the significance of the past two-and-a-half decades both inside and outside the realm of Christianity.

The primary research involved with this project is three-fold: historical literature, anthropological application, and personal interviews. In regard to history, various sources have been tapped to provide an overview of Cambodia’s recent history, including the key turning points; this takes into account the overall relation to the Khmer people, religious trends, and society in general. Anthropological aspects are taken into account via various assessments that are connected to historical characteristics and provide a detailed analysis to shed light on the intricacies of culture and worldview. Lastly, personal interviews with Assemblies of God pastors, leaders, and missionaries function as a means to illustrate events and details, along with notable trends and patterns, which shaped the Fellowship from 1990 to 2015. This specific approach to research then allows the writer to make a proposal, as those involved with the Assemblies of God look ahead to the next 25 years.