

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING CAMBODIANS

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

12/1/04

PROFILE OF CAMBODIANS IN THE UNITED STATES

General Background

Cambodia is a Southeast Asian nation bordered by Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, noted by its recent history of Japanese control, French colonization, a monarchy, and then the brutal Khmer Rouge communist government that decimated perhaps 30% of the population from 1975 on. The neighboring wars of Vietnam and Laos, along with the Vietnamese incursion to throw out the Khmer Rouge, have caused the severe dislocation of substantial portions of the population, who have since been cast out as refugees or asylum seekers.

Within Cambodia, the years from 1975-1985 were a time of great suffering and many families were separated. Thousands of refugees made it to the border of Thailand and lived in refugee camps until they could enter the USA or Canada, sponsored by churches, or American families. Some came as parolees or immigrants, sponsored by family members. Many families were divided up in the difficult Khmer years, and only are beginning to reconnect in their new circumstances.

The family is very important to the Cambodians. Children must respect their elders. Often three generations will live together with grandparents assuming childcare and household responsibilities while parents work. Adult children will often live with parents after marriage. Family sizes tend to be larger than for any other Asian group, and the age of Cambodians is markedly younger.

Supervision and discipline of children may be quite lax compared to American standards. For instance, parents and church leaders need to work together to discourage tots and preschoolers from "wandering" in the aisles and hallways at church. Adults may also be uncomfortable addressing the misdeeds of someone else's children, even when the parents of those children are not at church.

Women take care of the money and financial transactions, although men may be the visible leaders. Relationships between men and women are strictly regulated.

Often there is an intertwining of cultural (Buddhist) influences with Christian motifs, as in wedding ceremonies.

Immigration Patterns

The Cambodian immigration to the U.S. and Canada is primarily a recent development and more often than not, related to the refugees numbers. It is now estimated that there are over 200,000 Cambodians in the United States, many who are ethnic Chinese, and others who are identified by their tribal affiliations such as the Hmong, Lao-speaking Khmer and the Mien, each group with distinct languages, cultural traditions and practices and religious background.

There were three distinct migrations: 1. Those that avoided the Pol Pot (Khmer Rouge) regime. These were military officers and government workers. These are now well adapted to the North American setting and beyond "survival mode." 2. Those who fled the Khmer Rouge and lived for short periods of time in

refugee camps in other locations in Southeast Asia. These had primary sponsorship arrangements that facilitated their adaptation. 3. Those who were housed for ten years or more in refugee camps, and have since relocated to North America are still trying to meet survival needs.

Religious Heritage

Though Hinduism was the early religion of the area many years ago, Buddhism has since displaced it. In many ways, the culture of Cambodia today bears similarity to its neighbor, Thailand. Much of the country has historically been made up of farmers with little formal education.

A sense of class division is retained in the language itself, as different terms are used to speak to different groups of people, such as the young versus the elderly, aristocracy versus the working class. "God" and things pertaining to him must be addressed using a particular linguistic style, requiring considerable linguistic insight by those wishing to communicate religious knowledge.

The Church of the Nazarene has seen Cambodian ministries develop into full-fledged churches in Minneapolis and Columbus, OH with church-type missions in Kansas City Long Beach, CA, Rochester, MN, Richmond, VA and other locations.

Other significant concentrations of Cambodians where ministries could be planted are Des Moines, Iowa; Oregon City, Oregon; Mankato and Moorhead, Minnesota, Washington, D.C. area; Massachusetts (particularly the Boston and Lowell areas); Lincoln, Nebraska; Stockton, Fresno, Modesto, and Sacramento, California.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Cambodians

General Suggestions:

Identify the population patterns of Cambodian and of the various tribal groups. It may be that national origin is less important than tribal identity, so that Vietnamese Hmongs may have more in common with Cambodian Hmongs than with fellow compatriots who are ethnic Chinese.

Recognize that the hill-tribal peoples are especially responsive to the Gospel. Look for evidence of this in the Christian institutions in the area.

Understand the tortured history represented by the immigrants and refugees coming from Cambodia.

Distinguish the various “waves” of immigration, recognizing that each wave represent different stages of adaptation to the new culture, and different needs occasioned by it.

Use the tools of compassionate ministry such as ESL classes, legal consultation, practical services such as food, clothing, and housing to build relationships within the Cambodian community.

Connect with the existing network of Nazarene Cambodian churches, finding ways of mutual and moral support. Collaborate with the Cambodian Strategy Committee.

Realize that Cambodians are very “group conscious” and would prefer to make decisions collectively than individually. They are also a “face-saving” culture that requires great sensitivity to avoid embarrassing individuals unnecessarily.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR DISTRICTS IS TO:

- Find “bridging” persons who are already connected to the Church of the Nazarene, such as cross-cultural marriages of Cambodians with North Americans.
- Given the limited Asian-American leadership models in the Church of the Nazarene, any identified potential leader should be mentored carefully and convincingly by somebody that is respected, especially an elder.
- Invest in quality leadership, choosing wisely those who have bi-cultural skills, a deep commitment to Christ and a willingness to work within the constraints of the Church of the Nazarene.
- Discuss openly financial issues ahead of time, to avoid misunderstandings. Be helpful financially where it can “jump start the ministry” to a new level. However, don’t make financial subsidy essential to evangelistic maintenance.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR LOCAL CHURCHES:

- Nuance the differences between the various ethnic, tribal, and linguistic groups that come from Cambodia.

- Work with organizations such as World Relief to adopt a Cambodian family, in either a family-to-family arrangement or church sponsorship arrangement.
- Recognize that cultural adjustment and incorporation into the Christian church are long processes, requiring resilient commitment, considerable prayer, and incredible patience.
- However, do not lock church or family sponsorship into dependencies that kill initiative and freedom. One church avoided this by sponsoring a ministry for a one year time commitment only.
- Note that Cambodians tend to be younger with more children and extended family than other groups. This gives ample opportunity to develop children's ministries tailored to the mix of cultures.
- Recognize that within Buddhist culture, religious begging is ubiquitous and that, among Christians there is considerable concern not to appear as if a ministry is begging for tithes and offerings. Also, many Cambodian immigrants send funds back to the homeland for their family's sustenance. Principles of tithing should be taught, but not made a barrier for the young Christian.
- Identify hidden leadership skills, often latent because of the cultural divide and the historic fear of institutions and politics that have abused in the past. Recognize that trust relationships are very important and that the host culture needs to prove trustworthiness before commitments are often made.
- Develop home Bible studies that address real needs with the Cambodian life situation.
- Seek for cross-cultural ministry personnel, perhaps former missionaries and others who have cultural experience in Southeast Asia.
- Develop ministries among Cambodian youth, integrating them into the full program of the Church. Sports programs, including volleyball and soccer, basketball and drama can be a tie that binds.

