

Analysis of the ministry and its context

This paper will focus on analysis of ministry through a specific biblical theological understanding arrived at in our AGT classes. In narrative unity, the Bible consistently presents God as determined to restore communion with and rule over His created people (Wright, 2012). In the present age, the body of God's restored people go out to the nations in communities which testify to the administration of God's character (e.g. care, justice, holiness) and eschatological hope in Jesus as the only way to salvation (Pax Tan, class discussion). For the purpose of the present paper, ministry encompasses both the personal and corporate influence of Christians who embody this theological stance. I focus primarily on reporting the results of naturalistic observation, giving brief consideration to the social and philosophical context to ministry.

Observations of village ministry: Reaching children through households

My experience of ministry in Takeo began before any church programs did, in observing environmental and incidental practices of discipleship. Environmentally, the front wall of Andrew and his wife, Sovanneary's house is inscribed with Bible verses. Sovanneary explained this would show family and visitors their house is a Christian place and give opportunity to discuss salvation through Jesus Christ. Incidental discipleship practices included saying a consistent 'grace' to thank God for food, and call for strength and wisdom before meals – both of Andrew's children (3 and 5) and even an unbelieving neighbour engaged in this practice through imitation-learning (the natural mode in the community). I was also exposed to another pastor who leads his family through their



Figure 1: Jaja (3) learning by imitating Ba

own ‘family altar’ multiple times weekly. In my observation, Christian disciplines occurred



by household.

Figure 2: The inscribed prayer demonstrates their heartfelt intentionality to make their home a testimony to God: “I love God. I love my family. I want to serve God. Lord Jesus please bless our ministry in this village.”

Takeo village life seems to be characterised by geographical spread, simple family living, the cultivation and family-pooling of natural resources and a non-directive, slow-paced rural lifestyle. Against this backdrop, twenty children gathered at the local preschool twice weekly for Saturday kids’ club and Sunday church. (Incidentally, they were also the core group who gathered at any community event – even dancing at local village house-warming). The program focus was on learning English (Pastor Andrew’s wife, Sovanneary, is a trained school teacher with good English), singing and receiving Bible teaching, all were enthusiastically received – by children. Andrew and Sovanneary are the only adults and all leadership falls to them.

Why no adults? Querying prevailing worldviews

Sovanneary reports sharing Jesus Christ with her network of local friends as they naturally gather to weave silk skirts. Often her appeals are met with resistance from local Buddhists. Cambodian adults appear unable to be convinced of an alternative way to salvation while traditional religion fulfils this need. However, they are happy for their children to attend church programs indicating developing pluralist attitudes in this globalising nation (where the children watched YouTube nightly and English is prized).



The most apparent worldviews I encountered included the fatalism of poverty paired with hope in ‘salvation by migration’ to developed nations. The above photo was taken at the conclusion of a very favourable visit to a poor family who requested I visit, help, and maintain contact over Facebook. I suspect my white skin may have represented an escape from national poverty.

Ministry at Shalom School

Shalom School is not presently intended to provide explicit gospel proclamation. The Christian value of Shalom School is found in the organised response to the need for English language skills with an



aura of Acts 7. The young people in this developing nation are situated within a global, mostly English-speaking world, so learning English fills their need.

I observed a powerful application of integral mission at the school involving a family who had faced hardship and now lived in a pastor-built house on school property below the

director's weekday residence. After a traumatic birth, part of a surgical needle was left in the body of a young Cambodian new mother (23) whose family is in hardship. The family have been allowed to stay at Shalom School until the child is one year old, and there are plans to help her gain employment, source a cataract operation for her mother and help them transition to economic independence. The family interact regularly with Pastor Andrew who lives onsite.

There is considerable investment in resources in this one family and their conversion would be no statistical triumph. However, by the pastors' meeting this family's physical, mental and social needs (in itself an echo of God's heart for the poor), in as visible an environment as a school, students and staff at the school can be exposed to this shadow of an alternative, restored community where God's mercy abounds.

Summary and Conclusions

In this reflection I have shared qualitative observations of village and school ministry by local Cambodian pastors. My narrow experience with this one national church movement seemed to indicate that recent rapid growth of the Cambodian Church relies upon the social attractiveness of kids clubs and local Christians who nurture long-term, prayerful, relationships and contribute meaningfully to the restoration of justice in local communities.

This limited exposure has uncovered other unanswered questions. For example, I am not aware of how the Shalom network interacts with other Cambodian churches. I have not really been able to engage with national Buddhism, and my observations of pluralism and the 'salvation by migration' mindset have mostly been derived from interactions with younger adults. In addition to linguistic challenges, I also note that I have presented impressions coloured by my own cultural lenses.

This visit has challenged my appreciation of ministry effectiveness. I surmise the demonstration of Christian community response to needs, restoring people's understanding of being precious to God may be the contextualisation of the gospel required in the Cambodian context where daily life is characterised by a lack of hope, basic provision and is so frequently affected by injustice. Further creative exploration is warranted to understand resistance to the gospel along demographic lines and understand the gospel on Khmer terms and reinforce existing contextualisations of church practice – e.g. churches as extensions of households and national hymns.

An Invitation to Churches in the developed world: Partner with skills

Practically, I note that the quality of Shalom's educational impact could be improved by medium-term contribution from native English speaking educators engaging in teacher training. More generally, this model of demonstrating God's character as gospel testimony is not restricted to English education; it is embodied in Andrew and Sovanneary's Christian house and school caring for young village children for instance, and could equally suit other organised community responses – for instance, optical and dental needs were repeatedly observed.

Having enjoyed a pleasant week (where God wrapped us in cotton wool, sparing us from illness, providing only edible food, pleasant weather and enjoyment of the rural environment), and discovering my youth navigating Thai-Australian cultural differences helped overcome potential culture shocks, I have been challenged to consider if I could return to fulfil some medium-term needs.

However, I believe it is important to finish on the note of encouraging this local ministry – it both is and is not a missionary effort. Amidst prevailing thought currents, my concern is for the sustenance of Christian leaders' vigour and location until the next

generation of leadership takes over. These competent, contextualised and effective local missionaries for Christ should be encouraged to maintain their regular incidental, family-based practices of discipleship and lives of personal integrity. Presently, I am encouraged by Andrew and Sovanneary's ministry, rooted in articulable motivation to share the only hope for salvation and change the negative mindset of people around them. Their ministry could be encouraged through sensitive and empowering cross-cultural partnerships which not only supplement access to skill sets, but also presence and solidarity with them in their situation in order to maintain hope as their nation is sandwiched between an uncertain past and certain eschatological hope, lest it seems too far off and also be swept away by the zeitgeist of 'salvation by migration.'

Operation World (2015). Cambodia. Accessed 23/7/2015 from:

<http://www.operationworld.org/camb.>

Wright, C. (2012). *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids