

Cambodian Latter-day Saints: Moving in a New Direction

By Chad E. Phares

Church Magazines

In the midst of the late spring rainy season in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the Tonle Sap River—which has poured into the Mekong River for months—defies its natural movement and changes course to flow in the opposite direction.

This directional change causes the Tonle Sap Lake at the head of the river to swell to five times its size, bringing much-needed nutrients to the fish and birds that feed there.

Like the river that changes direction, members in Cambodia have felt how the gospel of Jesus Christ has helped change the direction of their own lives. Their hearts now overflow with the joy and peace the gospel brings. This swell of joy provides spiritual food for their souls.

Although the country has faced dark times, the gospel of Jesus Christ has helped many Cambodians see the light of a new day shine through the darkness of the past.

Changing Direction

During the country's political turmoil in the 1970s, many Cambodians were driven from their homes and lost family members.

Loy Bunseak, president of the Siem

Despite facing severe trials in the past, Cambodian Latter-day Saints are discovering that the gospel of Jesus Christ is giving them a reason to hope for the future.

Reap Branch in the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission, was nine years old in 1975, when he and his family had to leave their home. They—along with millions of others—were required to perform hard manual labor in the country's vast fields.



help get him through his pain.

"I always had hope," he says.

The determined hope that helped President Loy get through the trials of his child-

hood is the same hope that later allowed him to recognize the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because Cambodia is largely a Buddhist country, President Loy grew

During this time, President Loy lost both of his parents and five of his eight siblings.

Despite the hardships, President Loy always had at least one thing to



Opposite page: Loy Bunseak, a branch president and tour guide in Siem Reap, shows visitors the city's ancient temples. He also finds opportunities to teach about Latter-day Saint temples by displaying a photo of the Hong Kong Temple in his tour van. Left: Despite feeling hopeless at times during his younger years, Sen Sok Branch president Khan Sarin joined the Church after his wife, Suon Sokmo, invited him to study the scriptures with her. Top: Phnom Penh.



received my testimony of its truthfulness from God,” President Loy says. “I could see how living by the teachings of the Book of Mormon made my family happier.”

up without a knowledge of Jesus Christ. He began to learn about the Savior when Latter-day Saint missionaries came to his home and told him and his family they had an important message to share.

“I had never heard of Jesus Christ until I met the missionaries,” he says. “I wanted to learn more about Him.”

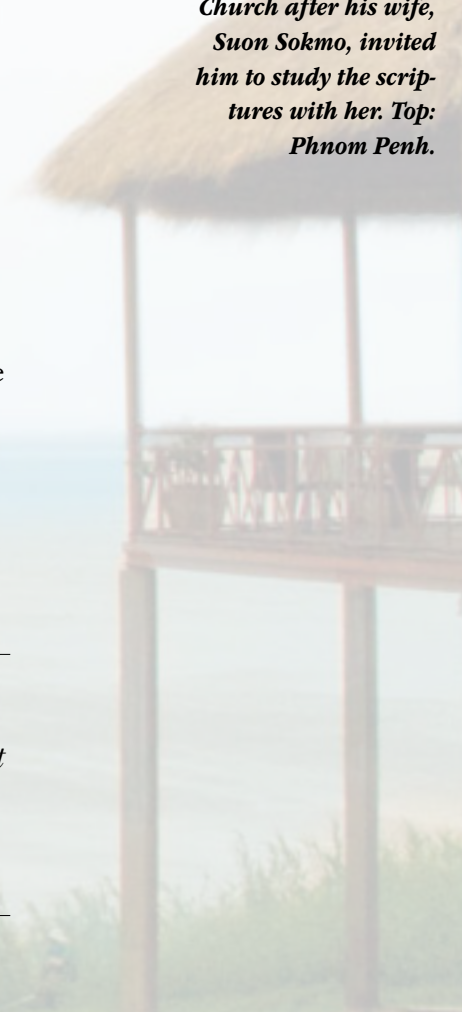
After intense study and discussion, President Loy and his family were baptized in 2001.

“The missionaries helped me learn from the Book of Mormon, but I

President Loy’s experience is not unusual. Khan Sarin, president of the Sen Sok Branch in the Phnom Penh Cambodia North District, was separated from his family as a teenager and forced to work in the fields.

“After I became a member of the Church, I . . . received a new light that I never had before.”

Khan Sarin



Below: A recently completed meeting-house accommodates the growing membership in Cambodia's capital city of Phnom Penh. Bottom: When they were young, Pich Sareth and his wife, Seng Tha, were separated from their families for extended periods of time. They feel grateful to have the opportunity to spend time with their children and raise them in the Church.

"I felt hopeless at this time," President Khan says. "I did not know if I would survive."

Looking back, President Khan feels that the Lord protected him from harm several times in his life. As a young man he joined the army and was shot at from as close as 20 feet (6 m) away but was not hit. He also stepped on many active land mines that did not explode. One land mine he stepped on did explode, but he was not seriously injured.

Because of the dangerous circumstances soldiers found themselves in, they did whatever they could to be protected. Several men in the military got tattoos because they believed the tattoos could help keep them safe.

"Before I became a member of the Church, I didn't know anything," President Khan says. "Now I know that it was Jesus Christ—not the tattoos—that saved me."

After President Khan's wife, Suon Sokmo, met the missionaries and was baptized, he was impressed by the changes he could see taking place



within her. He accepted her invitation to study the scriptures together, and he soon decided to be baptized.

"The most important thing that I ever received in my life is the testimony I obtained from studying the scriptures," he says.

Pich Sareth, a member of the Phnom Penh 12th Branch in the Phnom Penh Cambodia North District, also saw trials at a very young age. He was only five years old when he was separated from his family and forced to work in the fields. He would



“I cannot even explain the joy I felt in the temple. . . .

I know that the temple is necessary for families to live together forever.”

Loy Bunseak

sometimes find crabs or frogs he could eat to quell his hunger.

Brother Pich’s wife, Seng Tha, and her family were also forced from their home. Because she was only four years old and small, she was not required to work, as other children were. She was separated from her family much of the day and was watched by elderly women who could not work.

After meeting the missionaries in 1995, Brother Pich and his wife began to learn about the love Heavenly Father has for them. “When I had problems, I could see that praying helped me get through them,” Brother Pich says. “I knew Heavenly Father cared.”

After Brother Pich decided to be baptized, his wife also gained a testimony of the gospel and was baptized.

A Swell of Joy

Since their baptisms, Brother Pich and his family have recognized the joy that stems from gaining a testimony of Jesus Christ. The Pich family takes

time every day to read the scriptures. As they have done this, the joy of the gospel has permeated their souls.

“We feel we are on the right path now, and we want to stay on this narrow path and continue to progress,” Sister Seng says. “I am grateful every day that we can have our children on this path with us.”

The joy that President Loy feels extends in both directions—to his ancestors as well as his descendants. President Loy and his family visited the Hong Kong China Temple in 2004. Not only were President Loy’s wife and children sealed to him, but the saving ordinances of the temple were also completed for his father, mother, and the brothers and sisters he had lost.

“I cannot even explain the joy I



felt in the temple,” President Loy said. “I knew my family was being made strong. I know that the temple is necessary for families to live together forever.”

President Khan and his family also had the opportunity to be sealed together as an eternal family in the Hong Kong Temple. “The feeling I felt at the temple is something I had never felt before. It is hard to express my feelings in words,” President Khan says.



Nutrients for Survival

Thanks to the spreading of the gospel, members in Cambodia are receiving the spiritual nutrients they need to survive. Although the Church is growing in Cambodia, members hope that this growth is just a precursor to a huge blossoming of the gospel in their country.

Just as the fish and animals receive needed nutrients when the Tonle Sap Lake overflows, a growing number of Cambodians are receiving the spiritual nutrition they need thanks to the overflowing desire in members' hearts to share the gospel.

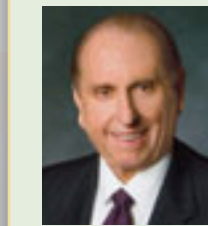


HUMANITARIAN SERVICE

Latter-day Saint Charities has played a significant role in meeting the needs of Cambodians who have lacked the basic commodities and services needed to be healthy.

Family Food Production

LDS Charities has focused efforts on helping farmers harvest more rice and produce healthier rice by teaching them how to use organic fertilizers



MIRACLES CAN OCCUR

The Church was officially recognized in Cambodia in 1994. Today there are about 8,000 members in 24 branches. The gospel of Jesus Christ can spread to other areas of the world where the Church currently has little influence. President Thomas S. Monson counseled us to pray for this growth: "I would ask that your faith and prayers continue to be offered in behalf of those areas where our influence is limited and where we are not allowed to share the gospel freely at this time. Miracles can occur as we do so" ("Welcome to Conference," *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 6).

Although ancient architecture and temples abound in Cambodia, the gospel has brought a sense of newness to the lives of Church members here.

"When a pot is covered, it boils over," President Khan says. "This is the feeling I have in my heart. I must open my heart to tell everyone what it is feeling."

President Loy hopes the residual effect of the gospel being taught in his home will be that his daughters will continue to embrace the gospel and teach their children.

"After I found out about Jesus

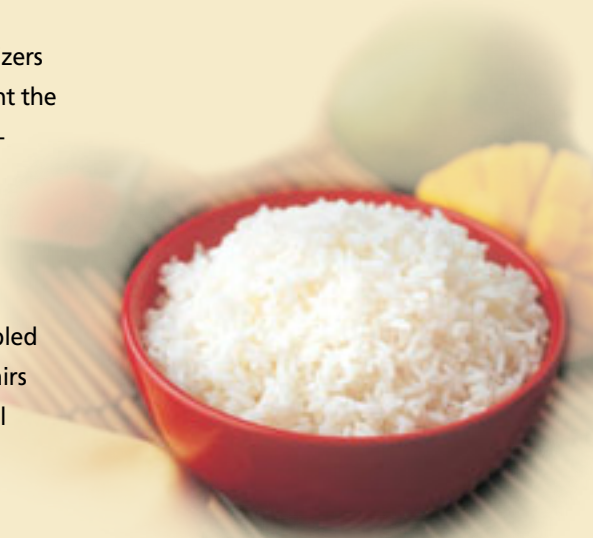
Christ, everything became better in my life and with my family," he says. "Having the priesthood in our home brings us together. If we have a problem, we sit and discuss it as a family."

Since the government of Cambodia granted the Church legal recognition in 1994, thousands of Cambodians have accepted the gospel. The Pich family looks forward to the day when the gospel will

and decrease the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides. Farmers are also taught the importance of producing rice for themselves as well as rice that can be sold.

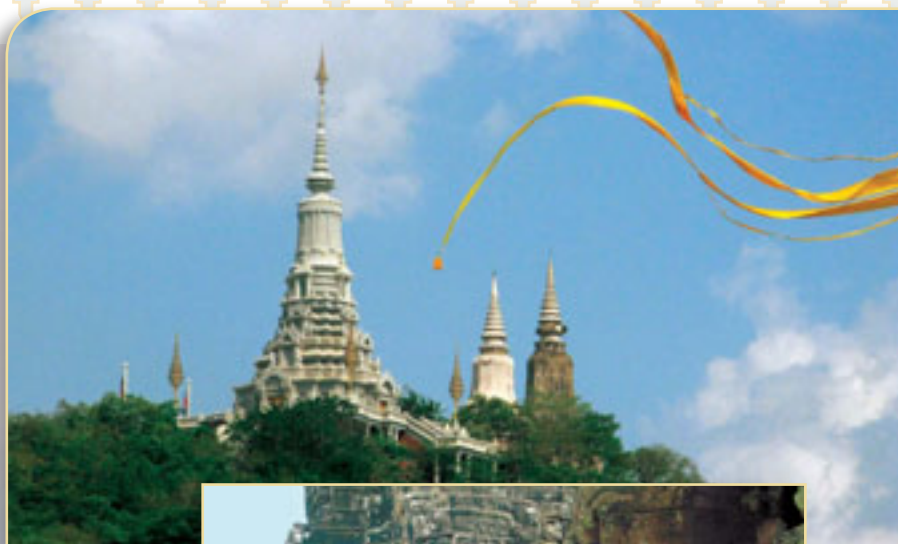
Wheelchairs

In December 2009, LDS Charities delivered more than 1,000 wheelchairs to the National Center for Disabled Persons in Phnom Penh. The wheelchairs were given to Church members as well as to other Cambodians in need.



“When I had problems, I could see that praying helped me get through them.”

Pich Sareth



spread across all parts of the country. Brother Pich says, “I hope someday there will be a temple in Cambodia.”

Sister Seng agrees: “Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, are alive. My hope for the future is that the Church will continue to grow so a temple can be built.”

President Khan recognizes the ways his life has changed since

learning of the Savior. He believes the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only thing that can heal Cambodians from their past trials.

“After I became a member of the

Church, I lost a lot of the pain I felt from things that had happened in the past. I’ve received a new light that I never had before,” he says.

“Everything feels new.” ■

Water

LDS Charities has provided Cambodian villages with soap, water filters, toilet facilities, rain-harvesting systems, and resources to perform water-quality analysis. LDS Charities has also overseen the drilling of several wells, which are helping thousands of people.

