

Takeo School Project

Cambodia is a country that endured great hardship over the past 25 years. Known in the West as the "land of the killing fields and the Khmer Rouge", Cambodia endured a three year nightmare from 1975 -1979 when under the rule of Pol Pot more that 1 million Cambodians perished out of a total population of 9 million people. Pol Pot and the fanatical soldiers of the Khmer Rouge attempted to turn the clock back to the times of ancient Khmer glory of the 10th and 11th centuries when the Kingdom of Angkor ruled Southeast Asia. In this misguided revolution of terror a decree was made to destroy all institutions that had any connection with modernity and industrialization. Cambodia would be reduced a nation of farmers and peasants and all other classes of people were to be eliminated. Banks, schools, hospitals, factories and all business were closed or destroyed and most of the intellectuals of the country were killed. Books and learning were banned as Cambodia descended into social and moral chaos. Finally in 1979 the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge from power. However, as an occupying power, Vietnam did little to rebuild the infrastructure of the nation that had been so totally destroyed. The Vietnamese later withdrew their army from Cambodia in early 1990 and then slowly aid agencies from around the world came to assess the devastation and misery of the country. The United Nations sent in advisors and consultants as did several Christian Relief and Development agencies. What they found was a country unlike any other in recent history. Medical care, education, government, social services, the economy were all in a shambles or non-existent. One advisor from one agency commented, "the country is almost a total write off, no one will be interested in helping to rebuild this place."

As Christians we know that God never gives up on any body or any place, no matter how much has been destroyed, we believe God has a plan of redemption. Mission of Mercy in partnership with World Relief and the Assemblies of God entered Cambodia in 1990. The conditions were very difficult but in meetings with newly appointed government officials we asked them, "What can we do to help you rebuild your country". The officials were quick to ask for help with the nation's children, those were the ones most victimized by the tragedy. "Could you help us with schools, children's homes, clinics? " "We have hundreds of thousands of children and no schools for them, could you build some schools, train some teachers - please help us." In response to these requests and in cooperation with the newly formed government agencies the Ministry of Education and Social Action, agreements were reached to bring in expatriate project advisors and begin the contraction of new schools and homes for children. Missionaries came to Cambodia as project advisors from some of the surrounding countries of Asia and began to invest their lives in the children of Cambodia.

Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia and became the base for the new operations. However the conditions in the outlying provinces were even worse than in the city. One government official asked one of the newly arrived project advisors to travel with him to his own home province -Takeo - to see what could be done there. Takeo is only about 60 kilometers (40 miles) from Phnom Penh, however due to the war and destruction of the roads the trip took almost 3 hours. Once there they visited a small village not far from the official's home, the people there were poor farmers, disease was evident and the average family managed to subsist on about \$1 a week. In the dusty roads of the village were hundreds of undernourished children and many in need of immediate medical care. The missionary immediately asked the elders of the area what the greatest need of the village was and they asked if he could help them with a school and help with the children.

The vision for the Takeo school was born that day. Soon an agreement was signed with the government officials in Phnom Penh and construction began on the new school. Originally begun with the construction of 3 small buildings, each costing about \$7000, the enrollment of the children in the village began. Soon over 500 children were waiting to attend school. Mission of Mercy agreed to sponsor these children and provide books, uniforms and a meal for each one everyday. Also, teachers were asked to come to Takeo from Phnom Penh, not only to teach the children but also to help train some of the leaders from the village to teach as well. Once the buildings were completed classes began and children who previously would have no chance to learn to read and write in their own language began their education. Many of these children were already 10, 11, 12 up to 17 years old but they had never seen a school, much less had the chance to attend one. Classes were conducted from 7am until 11am for one set of students. After lunch the same classes would be taught again to a different set of students enabling the school to help many more children. The school was a great success from the beginning. The people of Takeo saw the school as "their school"; they had helped build the buildings, make the desks and were now helping to teach their children. The pride of the people was evident to all that visited the project and the school quickly became known in the entire region as the best school in the province. Takeo School was up and running.

About 2 years later the school asked if Mission of Mercy could help expand the school. More and more families from surrounding villages wanted their children to have a chance to attend school. The missionaries working with the school had been very involved in visiting the children and their parents that had led to the establishment of several churches in the villages of Takeo province. The reputation of the "Christians" was spreading. They were people of love who cared about the children and their families. The school had been active in not only primary school education but also in Community Health. Much of the disease in the area was preventable if people understood the basics of hygiene. The Takeo school became a center for community health and education, the churches that were being established in the area also participated in the educational process. The school grew that year to over 700 students. The cycle of poverty was being broken and people began to understand that they did have the power to make their lives better. The gospel of Jesus Christ was beginning to transform the province of Takeo.

As of early 2000 there are over 850 students in the Takeo school and 10 village churches have been established and are growing. In addition to the school the Mission of Mercy project managers have been able to conduct numerous health education clinics and have begun a "rice bank" which loans out rice for planting to the members of the village when the rice crop is not sufficient. This was begun with the help of several of the school teachers who knew that the people who loaned rice to the village were always charging exorbitant interest rates making it almost impossible to pay off the loans. The community of Takeo now has several young people that have finished school that have begun to start small businesses in the area, unheard of before the school was begun. Several other young students have gone on from the school to attend the Bible School in Phnom Penh and want to begin churches of their own, others have decided to get training so they can become teachers as well and are dreaming of beginning other schools in Cambodia. In addition a holistic community development program is now underway. This church based approach to development is centered on helping families within the surrounding villages with gardening and agricultural projects. Many of the parents of the children in the Takeo School are members of local churches and leaders in these projects.

Someone may ask you "what good can you do helping a child in a poor third world country". I am in the habit of telling them that we change the destiny of a country by changing the destiny of its children. The school at Takeo is an example of God's grace in a very broken place. Today Mission of Mercy is helping with schools not only in Takeo but in Siem Reap, Battambang and

Kompong Som Cambodia sponsoring over 2,000 (?) children. The results in those places are much as it is Takeo - children are being educated and developed socially, physically and spiritually - and communities are being changed as a result. Thank you for all you do to make it possible to care for the children of Takeo and the places where God has called us to make a difference. Never doubt that when we touch the lives of children in Jesus name we are making a difference in eternity.