

Mission Philosophy of the Allison Family in Cambodia

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Cambodia is currently in a state of what the Joshua Project¹ would call unreached, meaning there are less than 2% evangelical Christian adherents. A large number of various Christian groups work here doing just as many various types of work. The tragic history and current socio-economic state of Cambodia is such that the incredible numbers of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) present here is rivalled by no other country in the world². Many of these NGOs are Christian and run mostly relief and development programs for local people around the country. These programs help to fuel a substantial dependency mentality from people here. In the years after the Khmer Rouge period, relief was indeed a huge need that the international community stepped in to meet. Relief never shifted to sustainable development, however, and people who were already culturally dependent on family and other patrons more or less shifted their dependence to foreign NGOs and churches, took them on as patrons, and quite willingly became their subservient clients. We also can't forget that quite literally everyone in the country has been profoundly impacted not only from a broad cultural standpoint but also in a very real personal sense by the loss of culture, children, siblings, parents, peers, a sense of security and so much more due to the decades long genocide and fighting from the Vietnam War period all the way through to the early 1990s.

This viewpoint shapes much of our understanding of Cambodia, and our philosophy of service here is, understandably, affected dramatically by it. We believe strongly that we need to put ourselves in a position of equality and even subservience to the locals as peers and servants (Phil 2:3-5). If we are not careful, they would easily accept outwardly whatever we tell them with no inward change whatsoever. That is, for us, simply not good enough. We want to build believers and churches that function independently from us almost from their birth. We believe they should learn as early as possible that they are responsible for their own relationship to God (Phil 2:12), the governance and maintenance of their church (1 Pet 5:2), the continued evangelisation of both their own people and even those far off (Acts 1:8), and ultimately for their own understanding of God and interpretation of His Word leading to a theology that is unique to them.

To this end, we will be intentional about church-planting in a way that encourages what has been called "The Four Selves"³, namely self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-theologizing churches: qualities of truly indigenous churches. This method of church-planting requires a process of maturation that takes many years, but we believe that churches which are nurtured in this way make substantially greater contributions to the Kingdom of God and are able to exist and flourish after the missionary presence is gone.

The "four-self" formula

1. Self-governing
2. Self-supporting
3. Self-propagating
4. Self-theologizing

¹ www.joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12662/CB

² www.thediplomat.com/2013/12/ngos-in-cambodia-its-complicated/

³ www.missionfrontiers.org/pdfs/29-4-three-self-churches.pdf
www.missionfrontiers.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/RPriest_Healthy-Contextualization.pdf

There is much debate about what constitutes indigenous churches. There is no definitive answer, so for the purposes of this document we have decided to simply use this "4 selves" definition.

The Missions Process

1. Learning
2. Growing
3. Collaborating
4. Phasing Out

According to Abilene Christian University professor and author Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen there are four primary stages in the process of forming indigenous churches: learning, growing, collaborating, and phasing out⁴.

During the learning stage we spend most of our time working to learn the language and culture, essential for starting indigenous churches that can be most easily reproduced by locals. This period is foundational to our later effectiveness and, in actuality, never ends.

The learning stage blends into the second stage which is the growth stage, in which four tasks are primary: evangelism, church planting, member maturation, and leadership development. During this stage, we will work with people to

identify their God-given gifts and serve the church as it grows. Lay leadership is one of the pillars for ongoing church growth and church planting. We will encourage families as they follow Christ, focusing especially on fathers' leadership, marriage enrichment, and parenting. We become as much a part of the local community as possible and immediately begin laying the foundations of partnership with the local Christians.

Cambodian culture is, in many ways, almost the exact opposite of ours. For example, while we value and reward independence and ingenuity, they value status quo, scorn "making waves", and believe that each person fits somewhere in a hierarchal pyramid structure with the more powerful and wealthy at the top. Our spiritual responses differ dramatically as well. One of the primary ways we respond to our sin and our understanding of God is with guilt, while most Cambodians do not identify with that at all. They instead respond by feeling shame. This ties right into individual vs. group mentality: we experience life as individuals and value individual rights and choices, while Cambodians



go through life as groups, rarely singling out individuals for any reason. This understanding has huge implications for the ways in which we identify with and evangelize people. For example, we seek to teach groups of people instead of individuals and hope that the group as a whole will decide to follow Christ. We do not put a heavy emphasis on the guilt of humanity after the fall but rather focus on the shame that came through our sin and which Christ took for us on the cross.

Many people, some of whom are good friends of ours, are involved heavily in NGO work and volunteering. Based on what we said above, we feel strongly that this is not our place in Cambodia. I (Chris) do, however, plan to secure a local job as possible. We hope this will provide a good example of husbands providing for their families. Such a job will also help us reach communities which we would not otherwise be a part of. Some of the options we have considered are teaching at a local school, counseling (which would require additional education), and computer or literacy training. Despite getting a local job, we do not intend to create any large-scale community

⁴ www.missiology.org/?page_id=8

development initiatives. To the end of evangelism, we will probably do some projects such as a soccer club, teaching English to village kids, small scale agricultural projects, etc. We intend to spend the majority of our time actively working to evangelize communities and strengthen churches in whatever ways the Lord leads.

Continuing in explanation of the missions process, the growth stage then blends into the third stage of collaboration as the local Christians mature and begin to take on more responsibility of sustaining and growing the church movement. The locals begin to take charge of their own churches, and we partner together with them to maintain the church movement. We also believe there is a strong need to help strengthen and encourage existing churches that have little, if any, input from outside sources. There has been little teaching given to local Christians about their own responsibilities in and ownership of their churches. It has been said that the church in Cambodia, as a whole, is “an inch deep and a mile wide”. The churches here need teaching in true and selfless faith, persecution, evangelism (both the need for it and how to do it well), marriage and family, discipleship, and Christian life. They also need practical teaching in areas such as finances, parenting, and time management. We pray that we can make an impact here both by evangelizing Buddhists and gathering them into small groups that evolve into churches and also by getting into advisory roles with existing believers, encouraging them towards deeper and fuller understanding of and obedience to the Lord.

Finally, as the local Christians are fully in control of their churches, phase four begins and we as the missionaries gradually assume less and less responsibility for maintaining the church movement, become more of an advisor, and eventually leave. We believe that we should always provide examples of what a healthy Christian does, such as evangelism. While we will try to work ourselves out of a job, we intend to continue evangelizing, all the while working to increasingly include local believers.

On a more practical note, we envision entering a community (through an existing contact) and targeting heads of families by using a variety of evangelistic methods such as those mentioned above. We will then follow up in people’s homes with anyone who expresses interest, encouraging them to also bring along their family and friends to participate. As people mature in faith to the point of expressing commitment to Jesus, a willingness to leave behind their past, and a desire to put on Jesus as Lord and Savior, our presence and role will begin to shift. While continuing to teach those who are interested, we will move more into the roles of mentoring this new Christian, counselling him and his family, and partnering with him to reach his family and non-Christian community for Christ.

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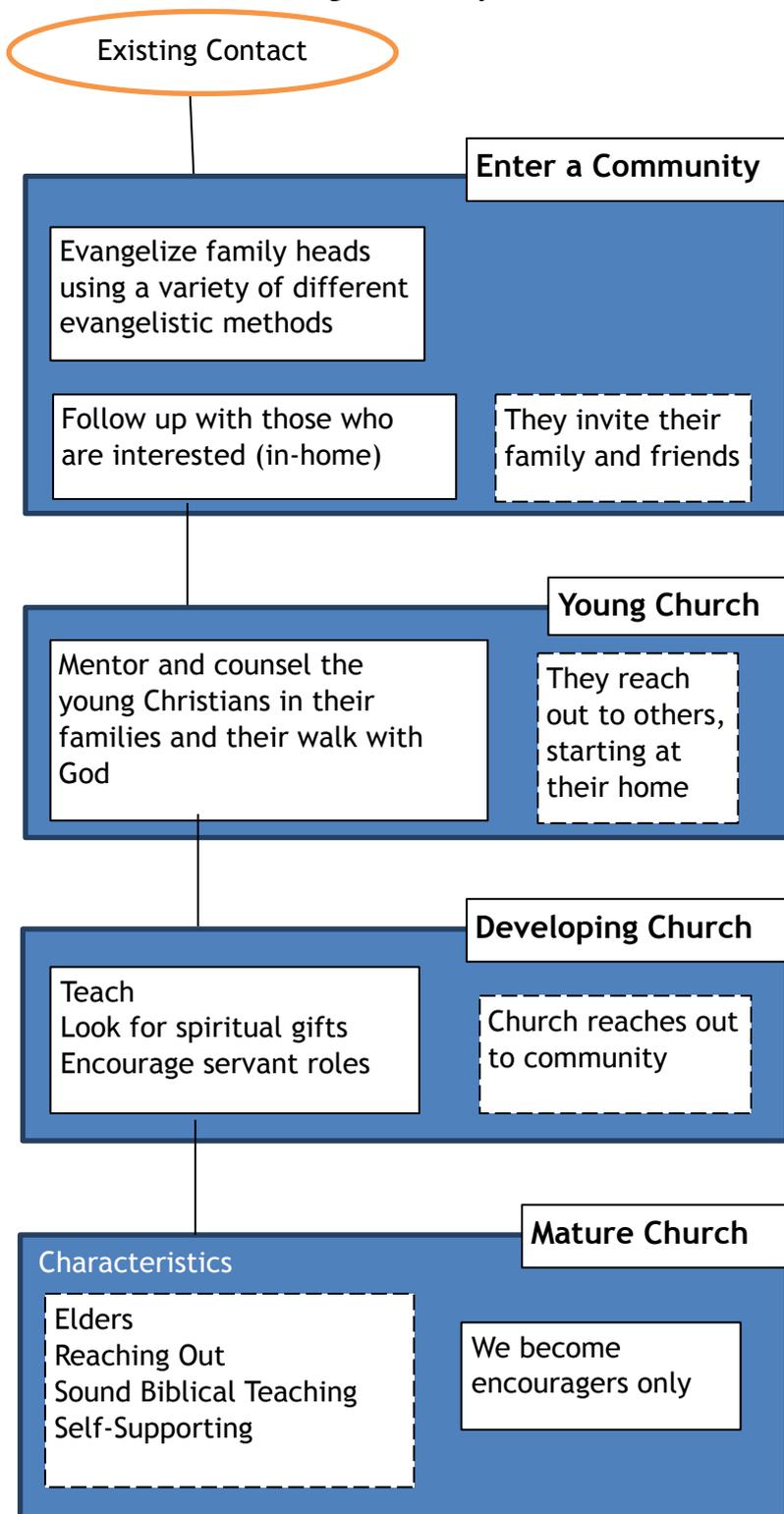
Ten Universal Elements of a Church Planting Movement

1. Prayer
2. Abundant gospel sowing
3. Intentional church planting
4. Scriptural authority
5. Local leadership
6. Lay leadership
7. Cell or house churches
8. Churches planting churches
9. Rapid reproduction
10. Healthy churches

⁵ <http://books.google.com.kh/books?id=zWqbxEkeYI4C>

Churches we envision are communities of families who are faithful to Christ in all circumstances, repentant of sin, and committed to living pure lives in Jesus. These churches will meet together often (at first in a logical existing location) as a community to fellowship, pray, study the Word, and celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. Service, first to each other and then to the surrounding community, will be an utmost priority of the church, both in taking care of physical needs and evangelizing and maturing people in the Lord. As more people begin to believe, leave behind their past, and join the church, our roles will shift again to being more of a shepherd to the church. We will look for and encourage people to use their God-given gifts, serving as mediators and mentors, and eventually helping the church appoint elders and function independently.

Below is a simple ministry plan flow chart to help visualize how we intend to work within communities to start and grow healthy churches.



There is, of course, no accurate way to predict when and how well these things will occur. We feel the need, however, to express a basic timeline for what we have done and how we hope to carry out this ministry plan in the future. We know that God is the only One who can guarantee results and we humbly submit to His leadership and work within people. We also believe, though, that He has put us here as His representatives (2 Cor 5:20) and to that end, we should be working our hardest to achieve the goals written here both to the best of our ability and as quickly as possible while still maintaining a healthy family and ministry (1 Tim 5:8).

We moved to Phnom Penh in April of 2009, and our first two years in country were spent in the Learning phase although, as mentioned, this is a phase that never really ends. It seems that the more we learn of the language and culture here, the more we realize there is to learn. We entered the Growing stage following our initial two years of language study. We moved twice - once from the south part of Phnom Penh to the north (May 2012) and secondly out west to Kampong Speu province where we are now (June 2014). Each move presented its changes in what/who we were involved with. We have continued to maintain many of the relationships built in each location and have continued building more as we moved along.

Our current activities have revolved primarily around getting adjusted to our very new lifestyle in the country. Although our village of Phum Po is not very far away from Phnom Penh (about an hour's drive), or the provincial capital (about 20 minute's drive), it is still a very rural area. We still have no grid electricity and instead use solar power to run our house and a generator to pump water from the well we had dug. We have spent a lot of time and energy focusing on getting our home liveable and setting up new routines and systems. We have tried to stay connected with friends in Phnom Penh and set up other "self-care" fallbacks during this transition. We plan to keep those systems in place as we go along to improve our longevity and effectiveness on the field.

We have made many friendships in our village and surrounding areas given the relatively short time that we have been here. We are beginning to focus much of our effort now on evangelism. The evangelism we are doing and planning now is primarily teaching the Bible in homes through story-telling. We intend to also use other methods to interest people, such as handing out gospel tracts and we may even use tools such as evangelistic videos and other things as we see fit. As mentioned above, we are looking for creative ways to get involved with people, and one of the biggest needs we have seen in our community is for young people



(especially young men) to be disciplined. The young men we see are expected to grow up to be undisciplined, drunkards, etc. and they have way too much idle time on their hands. We would like to utilize a soccer club or similar project as a way to be involved in their lives, teach discipline, and promote fun for the sake of fun (as opposed to gambling). We have yet to see how well such a project will work. We are trying to build relationships in various venues and find ways to lead people in spiritual conversations with the hopes of beginning storying sessions in their homes or work places.

As for existing believers, we are trying to get to know them and learn about their faith and their situations. There are 2 believers in our village and 2 who are nominal or have fallen away. We are trying to encourage them regularly by praying with them and teaching them. Depending on their wishes, we may start a new church here in our village starting with these few. They are currently attending a church in a town nearby. We already have the blessing of this church, which is a huge encouragement and important step in the process. There are a few other churches within a several mile radius of us from varying backgrounds. We are working to get to know the leaders of these churches and see if there is a place for us to work with them, teach them, encourage their members, hold seminars in evangelism and family enrichment, promote Biblical leadership, and serve in other ways as needed. We are not entirely sure yet what direction this will lead and we are praying for the Lord's leadership and wisdom as we work to encourage these people.

Another group of people we highly want to influence is other potential missionaries. To that end, we plan to host summer interns from American Universities. We have talked with people at Harding, Oklahoma Christian, and Abilene Christian Universities and feel confident that some will be sent to us. We see this as an invaluable way to influence young people to join the ranks of missionaries. A possibly even more invaluable influence is to host longer-term apprentices who could come to live with us for as long as a year or two. During their stay, we would expect them to spend their time learning and serving as pseudo teammates for us. We believe their presence would be very useful for them, for us, and for the work here. We do not yet have anyone lined up for this type of apprenticeship, but we hope that in the coming years, a young couple or two will step up.

Hopefully this brief document will serve to help any reader understand a bit about our philosophy of service in Cambodia and mission work in general. That said, we may have mis-worded some things and not accurately represented our true values. If you have any questions or feel that you don't understand something written here, please do not hesitate to contact us directly to clarify. You can email us via the contact page on our website at www.allisonmission.com.

Additional Reading

There are many sources of information that have helped shaped our philosophy of Cambodia and missions. Most of these are common sources known to the missions community such as works by Hiebert, Hesselgrave, and Winters. There are a few less known sources that have shaped us which I have included below:

“The Messenger, the Message, and the Community” by Roland Muller (pseudonym)

The ideas in this book contributed much to my understanding of cultural differences such as the shame/guilt ideas expressed above. This is a very useful book for anyone pursuing missions.

www.rmuller.com/mmc.html

“Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts” by Gailyn Van Rheenen

This is a very well-written book about animistic cultures, which Cambodia is despite the popular view that it is purely a Buddhist nation. It is actually a blending of the two with some other influences as well and is known as Folk Buddhism.

www.amazon.com/Communicating-Christ-Animistic-Contexts-Rheenen/dp/0878087710

“Cambodia’s Curse: A Modern History of a Troubled Land” by Joel Brinkley

While this is written by a non-Christian and is admittedly quite cynical, I think Brinkley has much good insight about Cambodian culture, history, and current political goings-on.

www.amazon.com/Cambodias-Curse-Modern-History-Troubled/dp/1610391837om