**Promoting Christian Ministry to Men in order to Increase the Impact of the Church on Social Issues in Cambodia**

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**INTRODUCTION**

This research has been conducted to discover the extent of Cambodian church leaders’ involvement in men’s ministry and how men’s ministry can impact social issues.

In Cambodia there are about 2000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs)[[1]](#footnote-1) and 2500 churches[[2]](#footnote-2). Almost 98% of those NGOs and churches focus their social or community oriented work on economic development, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption, education, sexual abuse and exploitation of women and children, domestic violence against women and children etc.

As Cambodia has developed there has been some progress in most of these areas, and yet there is still much to do. In the areas of abuse and exploitation, traditionally, the vast majority of work has focused on the needs of women and children, yet it is very clear that the main perpetrators of these abuses are men[[3]](#footnote-3). It is also clear that in areas of poverty alleviation, development and corruption, those with most influence, positive and negative, in Cambodian society, are men.

Below are some statistics to evidence who the chief perpetrators of abuse are:

* The Sex Trade: one of the epicenters of the global sex trade, it is estimated that 49-70% of the demand for sex workers is from indigenous men with a ‘high demand’ for virgins[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Prostitution: 59-80% of men are estimated to have visited a prostitute at least once[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Pornography: is so prevalent that children have said that watching (all types) of pornography was normal[[6]](#footnote-6) This is overwhelmingly produced by men.
* Domestic Violence: 77% of men in a recent survey had perpetrated some type of domestic violence at least once in their lifetime[[7]](#footnote-7)

**GOALS OF THIS RESEARCH**

1. To establish what understanding Cambodian church leaders have of the role of men in church growth, ministry and impacting Cambodian society and its social issues.
2. To ascertain ways in which Cambodian churches are engaging men
3. To see if there are differences of understanding between the generations of those questioned
4. To identify ways that Church engagement of men can be increased so more men are helped to be:

* Good sons, husbands, fathers and neighbours, and
* Positive advocates of the Christian life, who are willing to address issues in their communities and Cambodian society.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research involved questioning 39 pastors and church leaders in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, and the following provinces, Kandal, Siem Riep, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, Takeo, Pursat, Kampong Chhnang, and Kampong Thom.

The pastors and church leaders were engaged in small groups to consider, discuss and answer the questions - facilitated by the researcher. The Ten Seeds technique was adopted to prompt the discussions and obtain answers[[8]](#footnote-8).

We divided the research questions into 3 parts; basic questions, church issues and social issues.

**BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

Many people are aware of the Cambodian Genocide and its consequence; a whole generation of Cambodians suffering serious social and emotional trauma. This horrific episode followed centuries of decline and oppression by local rulers and foreign powers, which reduced the once mighty Khmer state to weakened remnant that almost vanished in the mid-nineteenth century.

This trauma did not affect just one generation of men; its effects are still being experienced 37 years after Pol Pot’s overthrow. The resulting psychological damage and stress disorders in men have produced behaviours that have brought suffering to wives and children, which in turn has affected their children. The deliberate destruction of family relationships and trust also resulted in parenting and relational skills being lost and, in many cases, never recovered.

Many older men suppressed their fears and emotional pains through addictive, abusive or irresponsible behaviours which served as distractions or desensitizers. These were transmitted to their sons either by example or as a reaction to those behaviours. Little professional counselling is available to help these men, but if it were, most would not acknowledge their need or accept it.

The collateral damage of the genocide, coupled with centuries of male dominance, explains why social problems; domestic violence, rape, child abuse, abortion, divorce, gambling, drug abuse and alcoholism appear to have multiplied.

Additionally, the market for prostitution increased alarmingly in the 1990s with the arrival of UN and NGO personnel with vast amounts of disposable income. It continued after they left, mainly servicing Cambodian men, with sex tourists accounting for only a small percentage of customers.

Cambodia is an honour and shame based culture where the worst offense is to cause someone to lose face publically. Most men will never allow anyone to learn of any weakness for fear it will be exploited and used against them. Most Cambodians must ‘yoke chineah’ (win) at all costs, no matter how insignificant the issue, over those deemed equal or inferior to them. Their heroes are those who hold ultimate power over others. Women are seen as their inferiors and their feelings don’t really matter.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This also affects attitudes to sex; many believing they are entitled to satisfaction from their wife/woman, or failing that, from other women. For example, many Cambodian men, some highly placed and with resources, have one or more women they regard as additional ‘wives’.

Cambodian proverbs are good windows into the male psyche:

**“Men are like gold. If it falls into the mud it can be cleaned and look shinier than before.” Woman are like cloth. If it falls into the mud it is stained for life and its value is gone.”**

**“Men may shed blood, but may never let a man shed tears.”**

When all these factors are added to the rapid changes taking place in Cambodia, the oppression and corruption practiced by Cambodian authorities and the influx of modern culture, finance and people from outside, it is not surprising that many men struggle to have a positive and healthy view of themselves or their future, whatever they may portray externally to others.

Churches often do not help men face their problems. More Bible studies, sermons and gatherings create passive participants hearing teaching that does not address their inner needs. Some leaders themselves display negative behaviours or simply do not know where to begin and so can offer little help by word or example.

Cambodian men need other mature Cambodian men to help them on their journey to discover their true self and the healthy manhood that God intends. Men often feel humiliated and shamed not only by wrong done **by** them but by wrong done **to** them. They need to know they are not alone and that their experiences are not shamefully unique to them. They need opportunities to hear the life stories of others, to share their own stories, to name and identify their pain and fears. To do that, they need fellow men willing to listen to them and to be being a part of their journey.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

1. Advance communication to local church leaders about the research was not fully understood.

2. Some participants had not considered these issues before and so did not have well formulated ideas.

**FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH DISCUSSIONS WITH PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS**

We asked questions and the ensuing clarifications and discussions yielded the following:

***1. How long have you been involved in your church/ministry’s leadership?***

All questioned had been in some form of Church ministry for a minimum of 10 years.

***2. What is your primary vision for your own church/ministry in the next 5 years?***

The primary vision they had for the next 5 years were:

* to see church grow in number of believers who attend the church,
* church being able to make more disciples of Jesus,
* congregations having good relationships with their neighbors,
* church members having sufficient income to have a reasonable standard of living
* men having the ability to reach men in the community with the gospel of Jesus.

(Protestant Christianity was introduced to Cambodia in 1923 and religious freedom was fully

granted in 1990 but many Christians are weak and ineffective due to lack of proper disciple-

ship. Many lack confidence and feel small, insignificant and poor, which undermines their

own faith and their ability to evangelize others).

***3. What do you think are the main issues that prevent the Cambodian church from growing?***

There seem to be three issues which hinder the Cambodian church from growing:

1. **Faith versus Food**

The majority of Christians are poor and could be described as “rice Christians”. Many people initially come to church with the hope or expectation of receiving some support or financial aid from the church or missionaries there. When a local church does not meet their physical (or their spiritual) needs, many leave, perhaps to try a different church. Some rural people migrate to find a job in the cities or abroad; especially Thailand and Malaysia.

*“If we want to keep young people to stay in the church we need to provide some financial support and a place for them to stay”* said one pastor*.*

Another told the following story that had happened in the last 5 years *“A local church ministered to around 40 people in their church. Then Korean missionaries came and built a big church building just 200 meters away from the local church. Every week they gave some rice and packs of noodle to those who came to their church. Eventually, nearly all members of the local church went to join the Korean missionary church to receive some rice and packs of noodle. After 6 months of giving rice and packs of noodle to people who attended the weekly service, this was stopped. People stopped coming to both churches, neither the local church or the Korean missionary church.”*

The current problems that prevent the Cambodian church from growing are those repeated from the last 5 decades. Christianity in Cambodia depends excessively on financial support from outsiders to plant churches and maintain church ministries. When money is received to carry out church ministry, the number of people attending rises quickly. However, when support is cut or no more funding is available at all, numbers dry up. A vast number of people who used to attend the church come no longer[[10]](#footnote-10).

1. **Misunderstanding of great commission**

Many Christians and leaders bear in mind strongly that the great commission is to preach the gospel about Jesus to people and they do this by inviting them come to [their] church. This approach can be successful but it has only a short life. Khmer culture is to save each other’s face. Therefore when a friend invites their friend to come to church, they will accept the invitation. Many churches may see someone new attending most weeks.

However, some come for only a few weeks and then stop. For example, there were always new people coming to my church. 3-5 people appeared to accept Christ as their savior every week. Unfortunately the number members stayed the same – there was no increase. Going out and inviting them to come to church is always good, but it would be better if church leaders also felt compelled to follow the great commission of Jesus Christ by going out and *making disciples*, baptizing and teaching them to obey all he has commanded.

Many church leaders admitted that *“Lack of knowledge to make disciples, poor desire and passion in response to the great commission, irresponsibility, laziness and negative thinking by leaders have prevented the church from growing.”*

1. **Plan the Work, but never Work the Plan**

One of the great concerns that many pastors raised during the research was “leader plans the work, but never works the plan.” They have found it hard to get church members to commit to and participate in plans they make to advance the work of the church. This leads many leaders to no longer dare or want to make plans or have vision for their church. Giving by Cambodians has traditionally been low because of poverty, therefore many plans have depended on outside supporters. Many older leaders report financial support being cut or donors ceasing completely to give. They grumble because church members leave their church when falling finances mean that their church cannot maintain their previous works.

***4. What should the church do to increase the number of people believing in Jesus Christ?***

**Vision versus reality**

Many responses were given to this question which can all be grouped into 3 strategic answers; 1) be the model of faith, 2) be the hope in the community,3) reach out to family leaders [men].

These 3 ideas emerged from discussions about plans not being fulfilled or being translated into reality. Many church leaders seemed reluctant to start something on their own. They mostly wanted to mobilize a big group of people and encourage them to work according to their vision. But this was not happening. In contrast, leaders began to see that they could dream big but had to start small. They should start with themselves and their families. Their commitment and example might then mobilize other church members to join them in kingdom building work. Specifically they should target family leaders, fathers and husbands as potential helpers who might share responsibility in future.

***5. What methods do you normally use to bring people to faith in Christ? Are they effective?***

**Yesterday’s success will not suffice today**

Cambodia was extremely poor between years 1979 to 2000. People felt persuaded to give up time to come to church, to listen to pastors preaching about Christ, because they would be given some food and rice in return. Similar methods of gathering people to come to church are still popularly used by many leaders. They enable them to produce positive reports, with pictures, of apparently healthy churches.

Many research respondents told us that *“their method to get people come to faith in Jesus Christ is to meet, eat and preach”.* This could only be done if the resources were available and even if many responded to gospel preaching, the result was usually weak commitment and Christianity became known as a source of materials benefits.

6. ***What methods do you use to bring people into your church? Are they effective?***

There are various methods to bring people into the church. Though, there are two methods below that really effective in bringing people into church.

1. **Invitations to Christian special events**

Christmas and Easter days have been known and celebrated by many Khmers especially young people. Many of them have been invited to join fun events, to eat nice food, and make new friends within their friends’ churches. But when the events are over the numbers in church remain the same. These two events have become traditional Christian feasts for both Christians and non-Christians.

1. **English and computer classes**

Such classes have become well known among young high school people. Some churches have been very successful; using these to introduce hundreds of young people to faith and then developing them through their regular, good quality discipleship programs. At the same time hundreds of churches have failed because of limitations in resources, ability, skills and commitment.

***7. Do you have more men or more women in your church? What are the reasons for that?***

Nearly all the pastors across Cambodia admit that numbers of women in their churches are much higher than men. Men are not easy to reach with the gospel. They are focused on their work to earn money to support their family. Many men also spend lot of their time drinking alcohol and playing games.

Many church leaders and evangelists find it more comfortable to present the gospel to women and children rather than men. They are easy to talk to and more readily make a decision to come to Christ. Furthermore, they have time to come to church. Yet, many of them grow like a seed in the thorn bush. This means that when their husband and father persecutes them they will not be able to come to church anymore or many of them gave up their faith.

***8. How are your church members discipled?***

Nearly all of the church being interview had no discipleship program and some didn’t really understand what “disciple” means.

**9. What are the five issues below that most significantly affect Cambodian Christians?**

1. Men’s demand for sex through prostitution 8
2. **Domestic violence 30**
3. Sexual abuse of children (rape) 10
4. Sexual abuse of women (rape) 4
5. Lack of trust in others 26
6. **Alcohol abuse 42**
7. **Drug abuse 54**
8. Dishonesty 26
9. Working too many hours to provide for the family 16
10. Lack of good parenting and good role models 24
11. **Debt 46**
12. Pornography 20
13. **Unresolved unforgiveness 30**
14. Loneliness 8
15. Depression 16
16. **Anger 34**

The top six selected were:

1. **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence is usually perpetrated by men. In Cambodia, men are seen as the leaders of their families – they are the bread winner. Society still regards them as being entitled to authority or power over women. This makes many feel justified in being violent if their female partners displease them. The participants confirmed the result of a survey that 77% of men had perpetrated some type of domestic violence at least once in their lifetime (The Change Project: Understanding Gender, Masculinities and Power to Prevent Gender Based Violence - Preliminary Findings…Dec 2012).

1. **Alcohol abuse**

Research published in video entitled The Popular Killer; released by Voice of Democratic showed that 91% of young men and 70% of young women are using alcohol and drug illegally in Cambodia. Heavy advertising the wrong message about using alcohol and it has become deeply rooted in to many young men.

**“Drinking alcohol proves to others that we are real men.”**

**“Alcohol gives men influence.”**

Attending church does not attract men as much as getting together with friends to drink beer and visit KTV bars.

1. **Drug abuse**

Many parents and church leaders raised their great concern regarding drug abuse within their own community. Drugs are cheap and accessible, making it too easy for young people, especially boys, to buy and use them. As young men become experienced drug users they become stubborn, liars, thieves and trouble makers. The church finds it hard to cope with such boys and if any come to church, the parents of other children tell pastors to keep them away as they are concerned their children will be hooked into drug addiction.

4. **Debt**

Many church members are poor and live in debt. When they are unable to repay the loan agency, some may take out another loan and thereby get deeper into debt. Others quite often decide to move away from their current home to find work in a city or even abroad. Many have gone to Thailand where they have worked illegally for low wages and in danger of arrest and deportation. They will leave any children to live with their own elderly parents.

**5. Unresolved Unforgivenness**

Revenge is a feature of Cambodian society as is saving face. Therefore individuals may seem to forgive an offence or be unconcerned there may well remain a desire to exact revenge when an opportunity allows. The doctrine of karma may also contribute to the idea that there is no forgiveness in the sense of withdrawing or excusing guilt. This results in grudges, the destruction of relationships, church splits and sometimes outbursts of violence.

**6. Anger**

Anger has been recognised as a feature of many Cambodian’s behaviour and may be a product of the long-term history this people have been through. This was undoubtedly exacerbated by the Cambodian Genocide where a whole generation suffered serious emotional trauma and whose treatment of their families and children was also affected. Many pastors are aware of this anger within church members and see its destructive effects, but many feel unable to help people troubled by it.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In line with the goals of this research the following recommendations are made.

1. To establish what understanding Cambodian church leaders have of the role of men in church growth, ministry and impacting Cambodian society and its social issues.

***There seems to be a limited appreciation of this issue and a lack of confidence in addressing it.***

1.1. Church leaders must cease being content with the status of pastor of an ineffective church.

1. this may require a renewed personal commitment to Christ and his commission
2. this also requires a willingness to think in new ways.
3. there is a need for senior church figures to lead by example

1.2. Church leaders need to see that their main resources are;

1. God and his power, provision and wisdom in their own lives and ministry.
2. the born again members of their churches, and that they must be mobilized in ministry.
3. their faith that Christ will begin show them how to fulfill the Great Commission where they are with what they initially have.

1.3. Men have roles in society as role models and those who take responsibility. Pastors should;

1. accept that men need a roles and responsibilities in the church beyond mere attendance at meetings and following their lead – or lack of lead.
2. focus on developing good relationships and fellowship with their men so that a positive and trusting environment grows, which will help to attract, keep and motivate men
3. mobilise their men beyond internal church activities to evangelise and carry out “good works” kindness to impact their communities for good with the gospel

1.4. Leaders must decide to overcome their fear or lack of knowledge about ministry to men by;

1. recognizing that their churches will grow and their pastoral burdens will be shared if they successfully develop men to serve Christ and the church
2. seeking help and learning from churches and ministries that focus on this
3. being willing to share and delegate authority and responsibility to men who show ability in reaching and serving men

2. To ascertain ways in which Cambodian churches are engaging men

***Lack of understanding and faith has resulted in little being done by the average Cambodian***

***church. Some ex-pat led churches have started men’s groups because they are familiar with***

***them in their home countries.***

Invitations to church events have not been very productive but even when men have joined

churches there has been very little effective discipleship or ministry to their spiritual needs.

There are examples of men who have been instantaneously transformed and set free/healed of

the kind of damage outlined earlier in this report but most men need ongoing pastoral

understanding and help that is rarely found.

1. These needs must be met if men are not to disappear from churches when personal crises, frustration, offences or apathy kick in.
2. Cambodian culture values compliance with those of a higher status. Pastors must move away from authoritarian roles and assume the role of servant/equal friend/mentor, and develop other men who can do the same, which will be more welcoming, encourage trust and openness and allow the Holy Spirit freedom to work in lives
3. More training in discipleship which leads to lives that impact society is needed. This must model more of a mentoring relationship that meets the needs of the Cambodian church than a course of study to be “passed”.

3. To see if there are differences of understanding between the generations of those questioned

***There is a generation gap, with clear frustration among younger pastors and leaders with***

***the adherence of the older generation and their protégés, to traditional (and at times***

***seriously corrupting) donor dependent methods - and their sometimes naked desire to***

***protect their status.***

3.1. Ways must be found to encourage ground-breaking leaders to attempt new ways of ministry

1. The Cambodian mindset of reluctance to disagree with elders or proceed without their backing must be challenged. If a new generation has lost respect or faith in those who previously led them they must politely and respectfully find God’s will for themselves.
2. New leaders must expect and withstand criticism, misunderstanding and opposition.
   1. There needs to be a rejection of the poverty mentality, often found among older leaders, that repeatedly states “we are poor - nothing can be done without donations’ and “people are too poor to give”.
3. Leaders need to assess what the minimum resource requirements to launch new ministry are, so they are not deterred by unnecessary demands e.g. do we need our own building?
4. Men’s ministry need not be led by salaried clergy – it is probably better if it is not. It does not need expensive premises to function – why not someone’s home or a coffee shop? Participants can cover costs quite easily, especially if they believe it worthwhile.

4. To identify ways that Church engagement of men can be increased so more men are helped to be:

* Good sons, husbands, fathers and neighbours, and
* Positive advocates of the Christian life, who are willing to address issues in their communities and Cambodian society.

***Most of those surveyed were short of ideas and so need some input. Previous efforts to gain support for men’s initiatives e.g. holding workshops and events have been unsuccessful. This is because those invited – church leaders who should have been interested, expressed immediate support but then did not respond to follow-up.***

* 1. One way to increase the engagement of Christian men may for churches to strengthen links with NGOs – especially those that their members work for. These organisations often complain of lack of funding/resources. However, if they co-operated more closely with churches, made more use of volunteers and moved away from expensive donor dependent operations, we may see greater church involvement in impacting Cambodian society.
  2. It seems that the established Church networks are not advancing the cause of men’s ministry so it may be time for less formal networks to be established where like-minded and visionary men can help and encourage each other. NGOs like Good Real Men can play a part in linking people together and facilitating the training of men’s leaders. Where local church leaders want to participate they should be welcomed, encouraged and helped, but where this is not the case then independent groups that reach men should be initiated.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, there are many initiatives planned by the EFC as part of their Mission Kampuchea 2021 campaign which may lead to significant growth in church numbers. The critical issue, as far as this research is concerned, will be how many converts are effectively discipled so that they live transformed lives – set free from the sins and damage of the past, equipped to reach out to other men and confident to welcome them into blessed fellowship.

It may prove to be better to start more modestly with men who understand the necessity for men’s ministry and who help each other to do this in self-sustaining and culturally appropriate ways that Cambodians can identify as their own.

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4. "Locals Fuelling Child Prostitution," Straits Times (Singapore)/Agence France-Presse (AFP), Oct. 7, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. USAID, "Cambodia HIV/AIDS Technical Support: Technical Assistance and Support Contract 3 (TASC3) Indefinite Quantity Contract Section A – Request for Task Order Proposal (RFTOP)," Taken from procon.org: http://prostitution.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=004119 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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9. The Warrior Heritage – A psychological Perspective of Cambodian Trauma [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The “Thinning” Revisited – Dependency and church planting in Cambodia [↑](#footnote-ref-10)