

Stepping Outside The Box Into Cambodia's Long Ordeal

By Brian McConaghy

ON April 17, 1975, I was 12 years old and living in Belfast. I was dyslexic, and in many ways an academic failure; and I was subjected to bullying. I had little knowledge of anything outside my own world.

If you asked Cambodians to recall that date, they would remember exactly where they were on April 17, 1975. That was the date the civil war ended – and life, as they knew it, was about to end.

The population of Phnom Penh, more than two million people, came out nervous, but relieved to welcome the victors, the Cambodian communists.

They anticipated life could be rough under the communists, but wouldn't be as bad as the bloody Civil War. Little did any of them know the Khmer Rouge was about to institute a revolution unprecedented in the 20th century. The country's physical, governmental, educational, economic and social structures were to be systematically dismantled.

Families were separated, and sent to the killing fields. All city residents were evacuated; thousands died just in that process. People like you and I were forced out into the fields, and had to learn survival.

Little did I know the events of April 17, 1975 were to utterly change my life.

Christian principles

I grew up in a Christian home and was well taught Christian principles. But sooner or later I had to decide whether this was a real faith for me. Was it truly mine, or was it my parents? Would it have an impact on my life, or be simply a tradition I adhered to because of my culture and heritage?

Through my teen years in church, I was exposed to missionaries. I didn't have a particularly high opinion of them. They would come and tell their stories; but it was very 'other world' for me. It did not really interact with my life at all.

In 1978 we emigrated to Canada. I well remember one of the very first days of school when I was brought into an English class. I was the kid with the funny accent. I felt totally out of place. Just as I sat down, a car backfired outside. For a kid from Ireland, that meant a fairly dramatic physical response. And I was quickly off my chair, and lying on the floor being stared at by these amazing Canadian kids – who were wondering: "Who is this weirdo?"

It didn't get a whole lot easier, but I struggled through. I eventually went to university and obtained a degree – to the amazement of myself and others. I became skilled in the academic study of firearms, and also became skilled in their use as a sniper. The combination of the academics and hands-on skills caused the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to pursue me for work.



Ratanak Foundation head Brian McConaghy presents the symbolic key of a new ambulance to the leader of a team of Cambodian paramedics.

And so I was taken on by the RCMP in April 1986, and was the subject of a rigorous training program. I had seen violence in North Ireland, but hadn't really seen it up close and personal. Now, as part of my RCMP work, I was subjected to autopsies and crime scenes and all the ugliness those things can provide. It was not a particularly positive thing for me.

As therapy, if nothing else, I started working with international students at UBC who needed a lot of help adjusting to Vancouver. They were interested in learning about Canadian culture. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to understand the Judeo-Christian ethic which inspired our legal system, our medical system, and the democracy we all cherish. This was done through Bible studies.

But as I led these studies, and as we attempted to understand the history of Christian faith and how it impacted Western culture, it became clear they were fairly bewildered. I figured the best way for me to serve these students was to get to know how they processed information; the best way to do that was to get on a plane and go to Asia.

So I decided to do just that, with no plans, just to learn what it felt like to walk out of an airport scared, as they all had done in Vancouver.

On this first trip, I had been asked to bring a care package to a homesick Canadian girl who was working with Christian and Missionary Alliance in Thailand. I took the package to her, and she made arrangements for me to go out to the refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. What I experienced there in October 1989 was to change my life.

Compassion

The refugee camp, where a small team of about 15 expatriates were working, held 42,000 people. The team was trying to provide medical services while the camp was being shelled. This was truly amazing, to witness real missionaries; I was witnessing compassion in a way I had never before seen it.

On several occasions, I was brought up to the Cambodian border and allowed to see into this forbidden, mysterious country no one was allowed to enter, which was awash with mines, gunfire and shelling.

The very fact that it was forbidden presented a certain challenge to my personality. And I dedicated myself to helping.

My plan was to collect two suitcases of medication and bring them into Cambodia for kids who needed it, because very little medication was getting into the country because of an embargo. That was my plan. It was not God's.

God's plan was to provide me with nine tons of medication – and he did not consult with me about the change of plans. So I ended up with no shipping experience, no medical experience, no anything – but I was sitting on nine tons and \$100,000 worth of medical supplies in Vancouver.

I managed to figure out how to ship and distribute it in Cambodia despite the communist officials who were, to say the least, not helpful.

Underdogs

Through all of this I discovered a real heart for the underdog -- the underdog I felt I had been for so many years. Now, rather than just witnessing the compassion I had seen in the missionaries, I had the privilege of participating in it.

Coming from the heritage of Northern Ireland and having been to countries such as Somalia, I've seen hate as a very powerful, insidious thing, multiplying from generation to generation. Over the years I have discovered that

compassion is more powerful – and can disarm even hate.

As my involvement with Cambodia grew, I established the Ratanak Foundation (now Ratanak International). We developed water systems, emergency rice distributions, literacy programs, agricultural training programs, clinics and hospitals. Today, 25 years later, we are just as committed to helping the people of Cambodia by providing much-needed access to community development programs, education, medical aid, and social services. We are also passionate about confronting human trafficking through our prevention and restoration programs. Ratanak Australia is currently running a project to supply an additional ambulance for up near the Thai/Cambodian border, an area still plagued with land mines.

Do I have a particular strength of character? Absolutely not. I have simply found that my faith drives me to really live. For me, faith is not the repetition of ancient rituals or social practices, nor is it a crutch.

Faith frees me to function in areas in which I would not otherwise function. It allows me to function outside the box that caution and fear would dictate I should live within. I hope I live up to the responsibilities to others, both far and near, whom God has given me to love.

As a forensic firearms specialist, I have a fairly useless skill set for Christian missions. Yet I have known the privilege of seeing the oppressed helped, the rescuing of the lame, the gathering of the scattered and the bringing of many to a new home. I have been privileged to participate in all of this while completely unqualified, untrained and unprepared.

The only thing I've been able to bring to the table is a willingness. I am convinced that God requires only willing hearts and hands. We have few excuses to not engage with our world – be it far away, or in our own communities. I am thankful God uses our willingness.

Brian McConaghy is the Executive Director of Ratanak International. This article was first published in BC Christian News in March 2008, and his testimony was adapted from a British Columbia Prayer Breakfast presentation.

For more information on Ratanak International and to find out how you can help please contact Brian Harper at brian.harper@ratanak.org or go to www.ratank.org