

## Seeking to be immersed in the Cambodian culture

By Alexis Hamilton



*Alexis and Alan with Ps Chhinho's family*

My husband and I spent a week living with a Khmer family in Phnom Penh. We stayed in the house of Pastor Chhinho, who is the leader of Shalom Mission Cambodia. He oversees several pastors who help lead churches all over Cambodia. Shalom is run by locals, and has many small ventures to its name, including churches, a school, and insurance and loan schemes. It believes in holistic ministry and seeks to help people spiritually, physically and economically. The international school is just outside of Phnom Penh and seeks to educate children no matter what their socioeconomic status.

Our personal aims on this trip included discovering what life is like for Cambodian Christians, how much persecution is a factor and how they came to know Jesus. We also wanted to learn more about the nuance of Khmer culture and the differences between life in the city and life in the provinces. We also wanted to test God's calling for us to Cambodia, research where we may be useful and what people and the church need.

What struck me about the ministry most was the fact it was run by local people and that it had very holistic aims. My experience of Cambodia in the past has all been around expats and foreign missionaries, mostly in leadership roles in partnership with the locals. It was refreshing to see in Pastor Chhinho a Cambodian with so much vision and drive to lead his own organisation.



The ministry is small but with a large vision, which means it has so many areas in which it can grow. The only limit is resources. I had a real sense it was a ministry that has a great degree of potential. Saying this doesn't mean it is not already doing great things. It is challenging culture by asking its members to save, a kind of life insurance, for when they die, something that is not done in Cambodia. It seeks to minister to the poor and it does, in both a spiritual and practical way. The pastors themselves have built houses for people in a day to shelter those in most need, who were not Christian. It very much relates back to the teaching we had on integrated mission, poverty and justice. It is no

good just ministering to the soul when the body is in need, and we met many people in real need. Nevertheless, the people we met, even in immense poverty had the joy of Jesus in their heart, and it showed. The joy in their eyes, their stories, and their hospitality, all spoke to us about how Jesus was in their lives.



The ministry had little in order to support the pastors it employed but it offered ways to help support them financially. They have a loan system where the pastors can obtain a loan to enable them to start a small business. We saw this put into practice in many ways; not all ventures are successful but it gives

independence and a means to do more. What is interesting to note is that many schemes like this do not work so well in Cambodia; it is a fairly corrupt country, and whereas this does not cover all officials or people by any means, it is safe to say that in many areas things get done by paying the 'right' person. This has unfortunately led to some schemes like this being vulnerable, and subsequently pastors have given into temptation and run off with the funds for such loan schemes. In that light, something like this working is also a great example to both the church and the missionaries in Cambodia (some of whom have become sceptical of locals), that integrity can work and have a deep and lasting impact.

There is a long way to go, but the ministry is definitely working hard to see people go beyond, to encourage the country to heal, grow and be redeemed through knowing Jesus.

The week had a mix of experiences, highs and lows. We were very lucky that we had quite a few people who, despite their protestations otherwise, could speak pretty good English. We had an interpreter both at the local church and 'out and about' in the provinces. This helped enormously and we would not have learnt so much without it. It was still a challenge, however, as we were asked some fairly deep and complex questions. The answers had to be kept in simple English, though it could be argued this helped us think about exactly how we were answering the questions posed. Some things were definitely lost in translation and there was the ever present notion of powerlessness and ignorance on our side. It increased our already adamant desire to learn the language, and learn it well. We want to be able to talk to, socialise with and learn from the Khmer people as much as possible.

One of the most insightful days was Sunday and going to church. We loved the Khmer church service we attended. We may not have known the songs or the language but we felt at home and we felt welcome; this was where we wanted to be. In complete contrast we went to an English service later that day in an international school. God challenged me in many ways there. I was heavily discouraged looking at the school and realising the fact that only the rich Cambodians could go there. They had an orphanage but they shut it down and it was very

western orientated, full of missionaries. I'm not saying any of these things is wrong, but it troubled me and made me realise that it was not what I was there to do; it was not the kind of missionary I wanted to be. It reiterated to me that I didn't want to just hang around the expats and occasionally dip my toe in the Cambodian culture; I wanted to become immersed in it. I wanted to see what Cambodians were doing and work alongside them, not just barrel in, decided what it was I wanted to do and tell everyone 'follow me'. Honestly, I was very upset in that service, but God also spoke to me and warned me not to judge the hearts of those around me. They may be doing things differently, but who was I to judge someone else's servant? The sermon was the culmination of it all. It was a taped sermon, from the states, about mission, more to the point it was about serving the poor. It was almost exactly word for word the same teaching we had had the week previously in class! It was certainly not a coincidence.



The greatest joys were getting to know people; it confirmed my love and heart for the people of Cambodia and how much I wanted to serve them. Meeting people from so many different places and also spending such wonderful time with Pastor Chhinho and his family was truly a blessing.

I will apply so much of what I have learnt when we go back. We learnt that we want to be amongst the people, not amongst the expats, but conversely, we also learnt that we need to give ourselves time to be 'western'. Meeting up with our old friends was so refreshing for us it wasn't until then that we realised how draining being in another culture was.

Looking back, I know this was a God-ordained trip for us; he had gone before us, and definitely set lessons to learn and valuable insights to gain before we went back to live in Cambodia. He has given us new friends and reignited our passion for the country and its people. It has given us many areas for reflection and helped guide our way to what God is leading us to in the future.

*Alexis and Alan Hamilton were among nine students of Asia Gateway Training who went on a one-week mission trip to Cambodia as part of their seven-week residential training at STM, Malaysia, in July-August. The couple hails from the United Kingdom.*