
A New Initiative To Reach Street Working Children in Cambodia

THE BUS

When on September 24th, 1999 I landed in Cambodia, I was told that up to 20,000 children were sleeping on the streets of Phnom Penh.

WEC, the year before, had been given a big bus from a church in Korea that was turned into a mobile Drop-In Center with a classroom, a shower/toilet and a medical room.

From 1999 to 2003, I would go out almost every day along with a Cambodian team. My job was mainly cutting the long dirty finger nails of the needy children who came on board. A great way to get to know the children, to hear their stories, and also a great opportunity to practice the litte Khmer I knew.

In 2003, the bus (that was already well used when we got it) was constantly breaking down. The following year it stopped functioning.

Though we were ministering each week to 500 street children, I was somehow frustrated. Frustrated to see that as soon as the children had enjoyed an hour or two on the bus, they were back on the streets, alone to face all kinds of danger till we meet them again the following week.

Though I was not working on the bus anymore, I decided to keep on meeting the children. Most of them were earning a living from collecting recycled items from rubbish found on the road side.

Along with a couple of Cambodian believers, we drove around town looking out for the poorest of the poor. We shared the Gospel and gave out some food.

For almost a year, there were only a handful of us going out and I felt discouraged at times.

By 2004, new volunteers joined in. It was a real breakthrough.

We decided to rent a small room where we would store food, clothes, sandals and Christian literature to distribute on our regular outreach. The word was out that 3 times per week, a team (foreigners and Cambodians) was going out meeting street working children.

The best way of transport was the 3-wheels tuk tuk (that was still a novelty in Cambodia then).

THE HOUSE

In order to do a better job, I felt the need to look for a house in town where the street children could find rest, help and counseling. Along with co-workers, Christine and Manil, we found a place close to the famous "Smoky Mountain" rubbish dump.

I named the new project "The Bridge of Hope". The Bridge was registered with the Cambodian government. Full time Cambodian staffs along with volunteers made up the core team.

We realized that most of the children now were living in slums. We met the children in the slums of Bang Tapon, Bantey Sleuk, Borey Keila in the morning and had the Bridge house open in the morning.

We praise the Lord for those, over the years, who had crossed the Bridge into a better life.

Every Monday we kept the street outreach going.

However as with the mobile Drop-In years before, I felt somehow frustrated; frustrated that only a small number of street children were being ministered to. How could more needy boys and girls be reached?

In 2008, I felt the Lord asking me to handover the leadership of the Bridge of Hope. The verse from 2 Timothy 2:2, *"Pass It On"* came over and over again. I handed the ministry to Christine, who later teamed up with Valeria, fellow WEC missionary. Currently, The Bridge is being relocated to the town of Siem Reap.

6 months after passing The Bridge on, my heart was still very much passionate about reaching street working children in Phnom Penh. It was while on a long walk alone on a cold beach in Northern France that I felt the Lord stirring my heart in a new way for the still many children on the streets in Cambodia.

A new strategy is about to unfold.

BIG BROTHERS/ BIG SISTERS

The previous day, I came across the story in Luke 14, where Jesus, during a meal, had healed a sick man. Those around the table were angry at Jesus for healing the man on the Sabbath. Jesus turns to them and says, *"If your son or your sheep fell into a well on the Sabbath, would you not go down and get him out?"*

I could picture a huge well, an immense pit. It was not one child who had fallen into it, but hundreds of them : boys and girls, young people, who had come to cities like Phnom Penh, Bangkok or Manila looking for a better life. But shortly after arriving in the big city, they had fallen into the pit of child labour. They will join the many children who had already spent years collecting rubbish for a living. The pit was just too deep to get out. They were damned to stay there in the filth, for who knows how many years!

They will get married in the pit. Give birth in the pit and see their children one day working as slaves in the pit!

Then I saw a rope near the well, a rope long enough to reach the children. As long as the rope was being held firm from the opening of the well, those down in the dirt would be able to climb out and be free.

As I got thinking about Phnom Penh, I realized that there are now hundreds of churches in town. Thousands of believers on one hand, thousands of children on the streets on the other hand. If only the two worlds could meet.

Instead of paying local staffs to work for a project (as it is the standard way in most NGOs in Cambodia), I thought of looking out for volunteers with a passion for God and for the poor, who would be willing to help hold the rope above the pit.

I have just finished reading a book, *"When Invisible Children Sing"* by Dr. Chi Huang, a Christian doctor who spent a whole year ministering to street children in Bolivia.

He writes, *"One first world baby stuck at the bottom of a well generates more heartfelt anxiety than the 100 million children trapped on the streets of the developing world ever will."*

The idea is very simple : one volunteer (or mentor) becomes the big brother/sister of one street working child.

The Mentor's Task Is To :

1. Help the child leave the streets (a sponsoring programme – about £4 will be put in place for those children who are forced to work on the streets in order to bring an income into their families).
2. Ensure the child goes to school every day (public school, private school, vocational training, ...).
3. Encourage the child to join a local church (Sunday School, Youth Meeting, Home Group, ...).

A Big Brother/Sister Is Anyone Who Is :

- A born again Christian, recommended by his/her pastor and is over the age of 18.

A Big Brother/Sister Must Commit To :

- Meeting his/her little brother/sister at least once a week.
- Meeting up with fellow mentors for accountability, prayer, support and the sharing of information that could benefit the others.

I came across this verse the other day, *“I, will appoint responsible shepherds to care for them, and they will never be afraid again. Not a single one of them will be lost or missing,” says the Lord.* (Jeremiah 23 : 4).

It is God’s will that not a single one of those little ones be lost.

When I was about 4 years old back in France, I fell into a well (thankfully with no water). I could not get out. I called for help. A neighbour came running to the well. He brought a ladder and got me out. I was only in that pit for a few minutes. Millions of children, some as young as 4, have been down there for a long, long time.

They deserve a better life.

There’s a rope for every child. We just need willing hands and willing hearts to help out.

Thank you for your prayers and encouragement in this new venture in reaching street working children in Cambodia.

Timothee Paton
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