

Alice's Reflections



**Over 40 years on the mission field in
South-East Asia**

Alice Compain

Alice's Reflections: over 40 years on the mission field in South-East Asia

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Introduction

On my last visit to Cambodia in January 2007 a valued friend took me aside. She asked me if I would share insights from my experience in Asia, particularly Cambodia, relating to topics that she felt new workers needed to reflect on during their early months in the country. What follows is my endeavour to answer that request, no more and no less. It is not an autobiography, though autobiography is included, nor is it advice or instruction, though it does contain advice, given in love and humility, it is simply my reflections as I look back over four decades of missionary experience. I have endeavoured to write briefly what I have learned about the subjects suggested to me by my colleague.

God gave wonderful encouragement to this project by prompting Paul Baker to offer to transcribe and edit my scribbles, later assisted by Naomi Sharp. I am truly grateful since otherwise, the project might never have reached an end.

It has now reached an end, however what I have written is in no way complete. I have recounted many incidents and encounters with godly men and women that I have known over a lifetime of serving the Lord, but these are only examples from among very many more. Some of these I recall but have chosen not to include, some of them I no longer recall, but each has their value in the sight of God. He knows each one and each one will receive their reward.

Beginnings

“Where do you come from?” is a phrase that occurs in most of the Asian languages I have learned. When you meet somebody, you break the ice by enquiring about their background.

My background was influenced significantly by my parents, with whom I lived for the first 20 years of my life, growing up in London in the same house where I was born. My parents helped me to think through the major decisions in my early life, such as choice of musical instruments, professional training, and career.

My father had a French name – James Compain – which means ‘companion’. ‘Pain’, means bread and ‘com’ means with. “In the old days,” my father would explain, “Roman soldiers used to share one loaf of bread between two.” You shared with your ‘companion’ or, in French as they say today, with your ‘copain’. It was not just his name that was French, however. He was born and raised in France, was schooled in French, and he always counted in French throughout his long life. (He died aged 97.) His father, a ship’s doctor, married my grandma who was of English origin. When he went to school at Boulogne-sur-mer my father stayed with an auntie who ran a boarding house for English people. This explains why his English was better than most French people – he had very little trace of an accent.

My mother, a Swiss German lady who wanted to learn languages, was no more English than my father. She went first to the French part of Switzerland, and eventually came to England as a tailoress au pair, joining the Swiss church in London where there were friends from her home country. She met my father on an organized church ramble – he had been transferred to the London office of his company, Mory, a French transport business. Some time later they became engaged. My mother went back to Switzerland first to prepare for the wedding there, after which they settled down in London.

My father’s job continued until the Second World War in 1939. Then, when I was five years old, he was called up into the French army to fight the advancing Germans, but after a short while he was sent back to London to be with the family. There he joined the Free French and worked with General De Gaulle. During the war he helped with the shipping of goods from the colonies that were still known as Free French areas. After 1945, however, it was hard to find work. For my father, the possibilities were to return to France with the government, to go to a French colony, or to resign his job and find somewhere else to work. After about a year, a Swiss friend suggested that they go into partnership to import fruit, flowers and vegetables from the Continent and North Africa, and this is what my father did until he retired at the age of 69.

Life was never easy for our family. My parents had always saved and invested and they earned enough after the London home mortgage had been paid off. While my father worked in the Free French Offices from 1942-45 he made contributions to a French pension which he drew for 27 years alongside his British one. My mother found out that she had a Swiss state pension available to her which my father had the foresight to augment, so together their income in retirement was a wonderful provision and a marvellous testimony to God’s promise in Isaiah 46.4: “Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”¹

We used the garden and the allotment to give us enough food to keep going. Both my mother and father were from the countryside and they knew how to make good use of the resources that they had, even living in a suburb of London. Growing up in the 1940s and during the war and post-war years made me aware of how it is possible to make ends meet even when food is in short supply. My parents built a chicken run in our back garden, and my mother made clothes for my sister and me, from parachute silk, and from my father’s old woollies which we helped unpick. My colourful zebra-striped sweater was the talk of the school with its clever design!

¹ Isaiah 46.4 New International Version

My earliest memories are of my parents praying with me. I always remember them taking my sister and I as small children to the Christmas service at the Swiss/French church in Endell Street near Tottenham Court Road. Here, an enormous Christmas tree was placed, soaring right up into the roof with hundreds of candles lit on it making an awesome sight. I knew that God was there, that Jesus was His Son and we were celebrating His birthday. At home too, in our living room, we would have a small Christmas tree. My father would play his oboe to accompany Christmas carols, sung in German, French and English, for the various visitors who joined our family celebrations. Later on, my sister Ruth and I played the piano and violin with them. Our musical skills were also made good use of in our local church, Hyde Congregational Church, in Colindale where we lived.

Ruth and I both wanted to learn music. When I was six, there was no piano in the house but I was able to start learning the violin. Later, when my parents had been able to buy a piano, my sister started to learn and this became her main instrument. I needed to spend time practicing and well remember my mother saying that we could not really afford the lessons. "If you stop practising" She warned, "The lessons will definitely finish!" With that thought to spur me on I continued my playing with determination.

Ruth and I enjoyed the weekly activities at the Girls' Brigade. We went to camps where we had lots of fun and also benefited from Bible teaching about the Christian life. I remember, when I was about 13, Captain Ganderton took as a theme the hymn *Take my life and let it be*.² This was the time when I made a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ, and it has stayed in my memory:

Verse 1 *Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord to Thee;*

Verse 2 *Take my hands, – even these hands playing the violin – and let them move at the impulse of Thy love; take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.*

Verse 5 was particularly challenging

*Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine:
take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.*

My Swiss godfather, who lived in Edgware and attended Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones' church, Westminster Chapel, was a keen Bible scholar. He often encouraged me to read the Bible and showed me the value of underlining verses using a colour scheme. Through this, and using Scripture Union notes to help me, I learned as a teenager to search the Scriptures and find out for myself what God was saying, rather than rely on talks and sermons.

Occasionally at church we would hear about the London Missionary Society and the pioneer work done in the Pacific by John Williams (himself eaten by cannibals!) and others. I heard about another mission field – China – through a friend of my parents who worked in the Newington Green Offices of the China Inland Mission. She suggested I join a youth group called "Comradeship for China" and I embarked upon reading their library books with great gusto, especially as we were studying China in Geography at school. Inevitably the biographies and stories of Hudson Taylor and many others made a deep impression on me. I started to understand a lot more of what it meant to pray for and be involved in missionary work but my ambition was to be a professional musician; my violin studies were going quite well and I wanted to play in an orchestra, not be a missionary.

² Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-79)

How did I find out what God wanted me to do with my life?

My first big decision was what to do on leaving school. I was encouraged by my violin teacher and good exam results to think of going on to a music college, but I wanted to be sure it was the right decision by using “Gideon’s fleece”,³ in other words, by testing it. So I asked God for a distinction in my Grade VIII violin exam, and the result came 10 marks over the distinction level! This convinced me of God’s will for my future, so I went ahead and took the entrance exam to the Royal College of Music, starting there at the age of 17. My Danish professor, Henry Holst, was a tremendous help in encouraging me through the various exams during the three years I studied. For the first two, I concentrated on violin playing for orchestral performance with organ as my second instrumental study. In the last year, however, I was able to change to the teaching course for violin so I could graduate with a teaching degree. This was extremely helpful, not only giving me teaching skills, but also providing me with a certificate that was later very useful when I needed to get into communist Cambodia.

During these years God did something in my life and showed me that I must give myself fully to serve Him abroad in a missionary capacity. I had joined the Christian Union and a few of us met every week to pray together, to study the Scriptures, and also to pray for the mission field. I remember a medical student coming from a London hospital to lead a particular prayer meeting on mission. She spoke to us from Luke chapter 10, verse 2: “He told them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’”⁴ She did not talk about the harvest field but the lack of workers, challenging each of us to ask ourselves – did God want us as His workers? If we wanted to pray for the mission field, she explained, we must also be willing to go ourselves. A seed was sown in my heart... was I myself willing to go for God? From that day I realised God was calling me to serve Him abroad.

I left The Royal College and took a teaching post for two years at a school in Keswick in the Lake District. My job was Assistant House Mistress to the junior boarding girls which, helpfully, meant my board and lodging was paid for. In my school holidays I started to help with evangelistic camps in the north of France with The French Village Workers⁵.

The knowledge that I was taking seriously a future in missionary work filled my parents with alarm. They did not want me to give up my secure teaching post and go so far away from home. France, where I went to Bible College, was comfortably near and they could combine holidays with business, but the hot, steamy Far East was too remote. They ventured to Africa in order to visit my sister Ruth with her husband Keith and their family in Burundi and Kenya, but never any further.

It was through good friends from the evangelistic camps that I heard about the European Bible Institute on the outskirts of Paris. After much prayer I applied to this Bible school, which had a strong emphasis on evangelism and mission, and was accepted in 1956. It was an excellent training ground where God started to smooth the rough areas of my relationships with different kinds of people. We were just a small community of 30 students from Europe, and one girl from Japan. I found myself sleeping in a room with five other girls in bunk beds. We certainly did not see eye to eye on whether or not to keep the windows open!

Afternoons gave us the opportunity to find some local employment as some students needed to supplement their fees. I had enough for one year only, with no church support, so took advantage of the possibilities which eventually paid for the rest of my two years’ study. This was my first lesson in embarking on a project where funds were not fully supplied, and God met my needs right to graduation day. As well as classroom studies we also visited churches in Paris to help with meetings and door-to-door evangelism. We did not find many people at home, but I learned to stuff letter-boxes and climb stairs! One painful incident remains in my memory as it was a precious learning

³ Judges 6.36-40

⁴ Luke 2.10 New International Version

⁵ A mission organisation active at that time.

experience. I had offered to help with translation at a Nurses' Christian Fellowship meeting. As exams were looming, we were not allowed out and I took the refusal quite badly. "Surely God wanted to use me?" I reasoned. Two ladies on the staff took me aside and helped me to understand that I was under authority and no exceptions were allowed. God also spoke to me at that time from Philippians 2.3: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."⁶ It was a lesson learned early on that was to be repeated many times.

In my first term at The European Bible Institute God tested my willingness to go anywhere, even into the unknown, gradually dealing with conditions I had laid down (I withdrew them) and even with the good intentions of a friend who lined me up to be her co-worker. (I did not sense God leading in that way.) There were two language groups to choose from on the course. I opted for French over English because I wondered whether God wanted me to return to my father's homeland. Here I could see a great spiritual need, especially in the north of France where we had worked in the camps. At the Bible Institute, a French pastor – Daniel Bordreuil – was due to come and speak to us. He was going to Vietnam with the Christian and Missionary Alliance and would tell us about Indo-China, showing slides of the Hmong people in North Laos where people were turning to the Lord in great numbers. Laos touches China, a land closed to missionaries and one whose church I had been praying for. Again I put out a "fleece": having been unwell with a bout of hepatitis and isolated for two weeks I prayed that I would be well enough to attend the chapel hour to hear him speak. My recovery was quick enough for me to go to the meeting... I had my answer! Immediately my interest was aroused in this mission field of Laos.

As the way became clearer God drew my attention to the current *Millions* magazine of the China Inland Mission (CIM/OMF).⁷ An article reported on a survey trip to Laos by the original *Mission Evangélique au Laos* (Evangelical Mission in Laos) who were Swiss Brethren. The mission had requested that OMF send in workers, especially those who spoke French, and OMF responded positively. When I read that article, it was as if I saw my name written down on the page, such was my conviction that God was calling me there. At the next opportunity I went to Newington Green to contact Mrs Kathleen Lyall who, with her husband Leslie, was the candidate's secretary of OMF. I asked what training I needed to go to Laos, or even to Asia, and she encouraged me to complete my Bible school training and remain in contact.

⁶ Philippians 2.3. New International Version

⁷ Originally the China Inland Mission, from November 1951 the mission was known as the China Inland Mission Overseas Missionary Fellowship (CIM/OMF) and from October 1964 simply, Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), now OMF International. For simplicity I will use "OMF" hereafter.

Interlude – On serving the Lord

Philip Eveson wrote an article setting out what he believed were the necessary characteristics for anyone seeking to serve the Lord on the mission field.⁸ The ideas it expresses resonate with the process of thinking and praying that I was experiencing during my Bible school years.

- *A growing conviction of why and where God is calling you to work.*
- *A feeling of compulsion there is no other way ahead. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9.16 "I am compelled to preach the Good News".⁹*
- *The prospective missionary must possess a deep compassion for the plight of humanity, and a growing love for Jesus and His church.*
- *You may well have doubts and fears and an inner struggle before submitting to the will of God. This can be mentally exhausting.*
- *Competence: as you examine yourself and your motives to enter mission work, you sense you have some gifts you can use for Christ. From this stems an even closer relationship with the Lord. You also realise you must be prepared to deny yourself and may have to die for the sake of the Gospel.*

⁸ Philip Eveson – American Theologian

⁹ 1Cor. 9:16 "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" New International Version

Preparations for Asia

“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”¹⁰

I have always described my time in London and Keswick as my “Jerusalem and Judea”, and my time in France as my “Samaria”. Where would God take me next to fulfil His promise to be His witness to the ends of the earth? In the 1950’s most OMF candidates did just two years’ Bible training in the UK and I did not want to delay my departure for the Far East by beginning a third year at the European Bible Institute, so I left to join the candidates’ course in Newington Green, London. My greatest doubt was whether or not I would be accepted – did I have sufficient training? I prayed sincerely that God would either open or shut the door according to His will and, after filling in various application forms, I was invited for a weekend to be assessed as to whether or not I was suitable for the course. I found myself with Brenda Holton and, naturally nervous of meeting these prestigious missionaries, we encouraged each other. We need not have worried, however – we were accepted!

We received excellent teaching from Leslie and Kathleen Lyall. One lecture on missionary failures was disturbing, while another on classical music made me sad at the thought of leaving so much behind. But at least my violin was portable! We met with the candidates’ committee where some hard questions were asked of us, some no doubt drawn from our references. I remember how my cheeks coloured with embarrassment when I was asked whether I found it difficult being patient. My answer was that, as a music teacher, I had learned to be patient with my pupils’ mistakes! I was trusting God to shut the door if I was making a wrong move, but OMF accepted me and the door was opened.

I attended some of the youth conferences that OMF put on and will never forget David Bentley-Taylor, with much enthusiasm, telling us what qualities are necessary in a missionary:

1. A victorious life
2. An urge to win souls
3. A steady conviction
4. A thorough knowledge of the Bible
5. A desire to be a learner
6. Average health
7. Adaptability
8. Freedom from parental obligations

I pondered over this formidable list and felt, as I considered my own inadequacies, that I was ruled out on several points. Galatians 2.20 became my life verse: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”¹¹ I came to realise that if I truly believed this, I should allow Christ to take over my inadequacies and reveal Himself in and through me. “Not I but Christ” was a motto card prominently displayed in my bedroom at home. Setting forth on a big adventure to Singapore was, in fact, a test of my faith in Christ who would enable me to get over many hurdles. With this in mind I set sail for Singapore in April 1959, along with nine others from the UK.

¹⁰ Acts 1.8b New International Version

¹¹ Gal 2.20a New International Version

God always provided

What about my home church? I joined Camrose Baptist Church, because they were committed to mission, and was baptised by immersion there. The pastor, Alfred Wood, came from Barnsley – Hudson Taylor’s birthplace. He was very supportive and gave encouragement to my parents who had thought I was making a mistake in abandoning the security of my teaching career. My parents attended the OMF conference at Swanwick where they met many other missionaries and friends who went out of their way to welcome them and explain how the mission took responsible care of its recruits. From that time on, they gave me their full support and returned regularly to the conference for over 20 years. My father also went to the weekly prayer meeting at OMF Headquarters in Newington Green which resulted in his being able to trust God more fully about all my future needs. When my parents retired, they moved from London to Pembury and came to know more missionaries (retired) at Cornford House.

I would like to put on record how God does provide, through parents, family, friends and home churches. Camrose Baptist Church has supported me in prayer and gifts for 48 years. They sent me out to the Far East as their missionary, even though the membership declined over the years and they were unable to support me fully. At one stage they decided to put aside £10 a month towards my eventual retirement and in 2001 they presented me with a cheque for £9000! Six years on they are still sending OMF a monthly sum for my support and I give thanks to God for such a commitment over such a long period of time.

Joining OMF in 1959 I wholeheartedly approved of the financial policy of relying on God to meet my needs through thick and thin times. Right up until the 1990’s, OMF financial policy meant pooling of funds, whether donated for an individual or for the mission.¹² As the cost of living rose or exchange rates became unfavourable, OMF sometimes found that money was insufficient for our food and housing costs so our allowances were reduced to 80 percent. But God always provided “ravens” with choice food, especially from local Christians and friends, and packages sent out to missionaries from home countries. I realised that in such leaner times our OMF workers serving on the home staff found it harder than we did overseas and their faith was surely tested. Yet being together in the OMF family we readily shared our blessings and proved God’s faithfulness for ourselves. We learned, in practice, what Hudson Taylor had laid down as fundamental principles of CIM: Ebenezer – “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us”¹³ and Jehovah-Jireh – the Lord will provide.¹⁴ We also learned to economise and be aware of local living standards so that we did not appear so rich that we would be like landlords or patrons. They were ready to help the numerous poor members of their extended families by taking them into their households. The level to aim for was that of a local teacher as they were highly respected because of Confucian-influence in society, and as educated people who used their salaries wisely. In reality, as war conditions prevailed in Laos and Cambodia, teachers had to seek supplementary income as the value of their salaries reduced. It is a situation that remains today. Since their living standards have dropped, teachers can no longer be an economic norm for foreigners, but the idea is still valid as we are still respected like them. However that may be, we need to demonstrate the falsity of the commonly held local view that we are receiving large salaries from our respective home governments. Where do we buy our food – at the local market or at a more expensive supermarket? This is quickly noticed by our house-help and reported to our neighbours. Are we willing to ride a bicycle or do we have to use a car? Our choices will depend on factors including our location and the size of our family, but trying to keep a simple lifestyle brings us much closer to the local population.

¹² A new financial policy was adopted at this time which still emphasises sharing of financial resources within the fellowship, while at the same time encouraging individuals to take personal responsibility for good stewardship and reliance on God.

¹³ 1 Sam 7.12 King James Version

¹⁴ Gen 22.14

To Singapore and Laos

Our group of missionaries from the UK was joined on the P&O Liner, *Chusan*, by a party of 15 from North America, and we were all shepherded by Kathleen Heath returning to Taiwan. Among our number were another music teacher, Carolyn Willis, and several instrumentalists, so we struck up a joyful noise as we held services on board ship. The voyage took three weeks which gave us time to become accustomed to the tropical, humid heat. My violin, however, fared less well and came apart at the seams due to a fungus growing in the glue, but once in Singapore one of our missionary recruits – David Boyce – was able to glue it together so that it lasted out the first four years.

We made interesting stops on our journey at Gibraltar, Aden, Bombay and Colombo, where our guide was Harold Withington who had seen these places during military service. When we steamed into Singapore early one Sunday morning I went to the upper deck to find out what was happening, only to see the directors of OMF boarding the ship! I beat a hasty retreat and rushed to the girls' cabin to wake everybody up!

The OMF Language School was in Chancery Lane, Singapore, in what is now Discipleship Training Centre. The girls slept three-in-a room upstairs in an old Chinese-style building. I found myself with Mary Anne, from the USA, who went to the Philippines, and with Alma, from South Africa, who 20 years later was working in Bangkok when I went there. We were not yet designated to fields when we arrived in Singapore so the first week was taken up with interviews to ascertain God's calling and our suitability for the various fields. I had made an open offer, even though God had directed me to apply to OMF through the needs in Laos, because I felt the mission would know best where to place me. At the end of that week I joined Don Wilson from the UK, Anna Müller from Switzerland, and Renee Otto from South Africa in the Laos team and we embarked on learning this language, 70 percent similar to Thai but written in a different script. Lao is a tonal language where there are short and long vowels which can cause confusion. If you shorten the word 'news' (as in "good news" or gospel) for example, it could sound like "precious rice"! I lost count of all the mistakes I made in those early days but, once in Laos, the Christians helped us tremendously by listening to us patiently as we tried to string together coherent sentences. I laughed as I read Psalm 18.29 in the Authorised Version: "By my God have I leaped over a wall." Language learning seemed like a wall to leap, but I didn't quite get to the top of it! I held on to God's promises that he would give me language ability and cultural understanding in order to be an effective communicator of His good news. The New International Version describes this cultural obstacle more realistically perhaps, saying: "With my God I can scale a wall."

In 1959 Singapore was half way between the East and the West. The city was only just modernising, yet it was at the hub of South East Asia, the ideal home for the headquarters of the China Inland Mission, now OMF. It was also the ideal location for Language and Orientation School and, yes, it was a great experience! We had many opportunities to learn from the Directors and spent a lot of time with them, including our informal Sunday evenings. I remember a skit on candidate selection procedures which referred to a portrait of Hudson Taylor giving the thumbs up, or thumbs down sign to indicate candidates' acceptance or rejection. This had our Directors in peals of laughter! The three months we spent in Singapore was also time to learn to appreciate one another coming, as we did, from every continent of the globe. But the day soon came for us to disperse to Japan in the North, Indonesia in the South, and many countries in between.

Singleness

The UK party leaving for Singapore with OMF in 1959 consisted of one engaged fellow, three single men and six single women. The general ratio in the mission at the time was about two men to every three women, with a relatively high ratio of single to married people. This meant that there were a lot of single ladies and, consequently, plenty of opportunities to form lasting friendships. Today in OMF singles are very much in the minority and they lack that advantage, however many families would welcome an extra 'aunt' or 'uncle' to help the children feel that they are still part of a larger family when their real extended family is a great distance away.

I am not ashamed to put "Miss" in front of my name, knowing for certain that this is what God intended for me. Not for me to put "Ms" and let people guess my marital status! Even so, at one time I had a rubber stamp with "Mlle" (short for Mademoiselle) on it as I often wrote to French contacts and once received a letter addressed to "Mrs Mlle"!

As a young Christian teenager I was looking for my life-partner and went to a dance at the church hall. Because I was so tall – a gangly six feet tall by this time – I did not find "Mr Suitable". God led me to evangelistic camps and Bible school in France where I met several "possibles" but by this time I really wanted God's choice and asked Him to spare me from relationships that would cause painful experiences later on. I tried to comfort girlfriends who felt that a certain person was their "Mr Right" but found him unresponsive, and this experience taught me to watch over my heart and emotions and let the Lord be in control.

In my first term in Laos I wondered how I would cope away from my family at Christmas-time, but God had prepared something special for me – I was asked to play my violin during the Chinese Christmas programme in Paksé. For those first four years I found myself sharing Christmas with Alfred and Rose Bosshardt, who had been pioneer missionaries in China. They reminded me of my own parents, Rose being Swiss French and Alfred's parents Swiss German. We shared meals with Bernard and Hélène Felix, so spoke together in French.

In 1960 I found myself sharing a house in Takong with Anna Müller and Jean-Jaques and Georgette Dunant. I felt such warmth to be accepted as 'aunt' into this family, later sharing birthdays and holidays with them and being able to rejoice and weep with them through many situations. Their second daughter, Suzanne, is now a missionary with her family in Paris where I recently spent a few days with them, marvelling at how God has called the next generation to continue His work.

In 2000, as the most senior lady of the OMF Cambodia team, I was asked to lead a discussion on singleness. I asked Wei Wei, a single missionary from Taiwan, to share her experiences and give her views. Her reply was simple – God had not given her a husband; nobody had asked her to be his wife and she was really happy as this was the way God wanted things for her. She reminded us that God has a perfect plan for each of our lives, and this includes the husband He has chosen for us if that is His will.¹⁵ For those of us who remain single, we gradually come to recognise that God has chosen the best for us and added many bonuses to compensate for not having families of our own.

Reflections from Scripture are the best conclusion on this subject:

*You are precious.
I will not forget you.
I have carved you on the palm of my hand.
I have called you by name.
You are mine.
You are precious to me.
I love you.¹⁶*

¹⁵ In February 2007 Wei Wei became Mrs Daniel Zwygärt!

¹⁶ Based on Isaiah 43.4 and 49.16

Friendships

Friendship is a wonderful bonus of living on the mission field for over 40 years. I have formed many rich friendships not only with English people and Europeans, but also with those from other countries around the world.

In our introductory candidates' course back in autumn 1958, Leslie Lyall gave us a solemn lecture on how to understand and relate to North Americans. We listened carefully, knowing we would join up with the North American party on board ship and be outnumbered by them! I had had godly North American teachers at the European Bible Institute and had learned to appreciate their different backgrounds as they struggled to adapt to European culture. Then, at language and orientation school, we new missionaries were thrown together for three months in Singapore, trying to adapt to the exotic East, and to the international setting of CIM/OMF with its strong Anglo-Chinese flavour. So the seeds of international friendships were already sown well before I arrived on the mission field.

Once in Laos, I had a wider choice of friends than other OMF workers as I spoke French. We worked alongside the Mission Evangélique au Laos and several of these colleagues became good friends with whom I am still in touch today, meeting many of them again at the centenary of the mission in 2002. Over 30 of us who had worked in Laos, from both the Swiss mission and OMF, were able to get together – what a reunion!

The OMF team in Laos included one family from Geneva, Switzerland – Jean-Jacques and Georgette Dunant and their children. How I appreciated being an “aunt” to this family, especially as in those days letters from home took between a week and a month to arrive. No snappy e-mail communication then! In 1961 Jean-Jacques and Georgette tragically lost their second child, Luc, at 10 months old, then Jean-Jacques had an infected foot from a bamboo injury and would have lost the limb if he had not been skilfully treated at the French military hospital. The Dunant family took me on holiday with them several times with their two daughters, including an epic visit (there were very few tourists in those days) to Cambodia in 1963 to visit French missionaries and see the temples at Angkor Wat, Siem Reap province.

Some years later I became a “senior aunt”¹⁷ to the Lebrun family and lived with them for three and a half years in Takhmao, a provincial town south of Phnom Penh. Jean-Luc, like my father from the north of France, had met Ling, a Cambodian, on a business trip to the USA when he brought a present sent by a Chinese friend of Ling's in Paris. They married in 1986 and Jean-Luc was able to transfer to Silicon Valley (USA) where their two sons, Pierre and Justin, were born. In 1993 Jean-Luc transferred to work in Singapore from where Ling could visit her homeland quite frequently. There, she also managed to trace the “red-haired lady” whom she had first met in a refugee transit camp in Bangkok in 1979. Because my name was on the certificate for the “Living Water” course she had taken, Ling was able to ask expatriates in Phnom Penh where I was. I was, in fact, visiting my parents in England at that time so it was by telephone that she made contact with me and invited me to Singapore to get to know her family. Ling gave me such a warm welcome. She explained that through reading the first chapters of Genesis in that refugee camp her unanswered questions about man's origins were answered. Then, at a simple Sunday meeting, she heard that we could pray to God anywhere, and she made a conscious decision to join God's team because He was the creator God and Lord over His creation. Moving on from the camp to San Diego, Ling received a good grounding in the faith and, as her English improved, read many devotional books. She wanted to take care of me to the end of my days and, indeed, she was God's wonderful carer during my surgery in Singapore in 2006. This is a very precious friendship, a real gift from God.

¹⁷ In Cambodian culture there are particular familial forms of address, including *Om* for someone who is of your parents' generation but is older than them.

Adapting to culture

Coming from different countries, my parents were adapting to a third culture in England so my sister and I benefited from a background where we learned to appreciate richness in diversity. We pitied our English friends who never knew the joys of continental cuisine, especially garlic! Today, of course, people's tastes have broadened significantly as they travel world-wide, enjoying local foods. Staying with our relatives abroad during holidays, my sister and I appreciated different customs and religious practices. This prepared me to adapt to Eastern culture, and my sister to 16 years in Africa and six in France. The important thing, I found, is to be open and flexible to other life-styles and to enjoy the challenge of change.

At the age of 14, I had started to read all the CIM books for young people in the library at the Headquarters in Newington Green, London. One could not fail to notice how Western missionaries identified with the local Chinese in every way possible, for example by dressing, eating and living like them, in order to remove some of the barriers between East and West. This background reading helped me to prepare more fully for future cross-cultural mission therefore, I believe, obeying the great commission more effectively.¹⁸ Meeting missionaries who explained their approach to church-planting helped me further – they were living illustrations proving that cross-cultural mission worked.

I realised that personal appearance is far more important in Asia than in our casual Western society. In Asia you dress to honour the status of the person you are meeting, so beware of the impact you may make on teachers and officials! I was always grateful to those Asian friends I could trust to tell me what was appropriate and, unusually, they did not mind telling me the truth.¹⁹

I had to learn what was meant by their body-language; for instance, did a welcoming smile mean they were pleased with what I had done? Since I came home in 2006 I found a valuable insight by Claire Ly, a Khmer Catholic in France who says: "The smile becomes a door which one closes gently but firmly. It invites all strangers to keep their distance".²⁰

I was always grateful to our senior missionaries who were not afraid to warn us about what was offensive to the local culture, even to the point of directing how articles of washed clothing should be hung up to dry. Later, finding myself in the role of "senior missionary", it seemed to get harder to give similar warnings to new workers who may have felt that in their own "foreign" households, they could get away with it and not cause offence.

As my hair became greyer, I did appreciate the extra respect and help given me, as is customary in Asian society. I wondered how insensitive I had been to older folk when I was younger. As Robin East rightly said, as first-termers on the field, we need to display our L-plates like learner drivers²¹. We should be willing to learn more about the culture where we live and work.

¹⁸ Matt 28.18-20

¹⁹ It is considered rude in many parts of Asia to give someone a straight answer when one fears it may be something the person does not wish to hear.

²⁰ Article by Claire Ly in the Catholic magazine *Le Croix* (French language publication).

²¹ In a sermon at Camrose Baptist Church

Cambodian music and worship

Cambodian music is very different from Western music. If we study and listen to world music, which is increasingly popular on the radio, we realise how many different styles there are, how many different rhythmic patterns and scales.²² Whereas in Western classical music, we use scales that evolved from ancient Greek culture over many centuries into a system of major and minor modes, the scale used in Cambodia has its roots in Indian culture and is shared with the musical traditions of Thailand, Laos and Indonesia. Western scales contain seven notes, unequally spaced²³, whereas the Cambodian scale contains seven equally spaced notes, hence the perception by people of each tradition that the other's music is "out of tune" when they first hear it, and the result that the "out of tune" notes are adjusted so that they are more comfortable to sing. Although the Cambodian scale has seven notes, the fourth and seventh notes are rarely used, leaving five notes or a "pentatonic" scale in common with Chinese and many other folk music traditions around the world.

Another problem is encountered with regard to the rhythm of Khmer²⁴ language songs set to Western tunes. Unless there has been some foreign influence, all Cambodian tunes are written with either two or four beats to the bar, one reason why Western melodies in triple time (three beats to the bar) or compound time (6/8 etc.) are unnatural for Cambodians to sing – they often draw the music out to fit a four beat pattern. A second reason is that in Khmer, it is predominantly the final syllables of words that are stressed whereas in English, it is the first syllable. Melodies are written to take this rhythmic characteristic into account. Thirdly, Khmer is made up of short and long vowels. If a long vowel (such as at the end of the name *Jesu*) comes on a short note, the tendency is to lengthen the note to make the word intelligible in Khmer. These three factors conspire to make many Western melodies difficult to sing (or at least unattractive) when translated into Khmer.

Traditional Cambodian music has no harmony but is based on melodic lines weaving in and out of each other in a contrapuntal style following a basic tune, usually accompanied by some sort of percussion. It is hardly unexpected, therefore, to find that few people seem able to pick up the basic harmony of a song. Some musical influences, however, have come from the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and increasingly the West, introducing harmonic instruments such as guitars and electric keyboards (often with preset harmonic functions) to provide chord accompaniment. Now that modern popular music is readily available on radio and television, Cambodian ears will gradually become attuned to hearing Western harmony. This adjustment will take some time, however, just as it takes time for Westerners to "get into" Cambodian music.

Those involved with music in Cambodian churches should, where possible, teach young people to read music²⁵ and encourage them to learn affordable, portable instruments such as the recorder and guitar if there is no-one who can teach them the *Tro*²⁶ or *Khim*²⁷. In traditional bands a lead player, usually on the *Tro*, starts off and everyone joins in when appropriate.

²² In music a scale is a step-wise arrangement of notes, from which tunes can be made. The size of the "steps" (how far apart the notes are) can be varied, contributing to the distinctive qualities of music from different parts of the world.

²³ The spacing is a pattern of whole and half steps.

²⁴ The words "Khmer" and "Cambodian" mean the same thing and are often used interchangeably.

²⁵ Using the book *Akhsor Phleng* by Naomi Sharp, available from CAMA at time of writing. Once they can read music notation, they are able to read and play any song in the hymnbook.

²⁶ Cambodian two-stringed fiddle ត្រូ

²⁷ Cambodian dulcimer ឃីម

Indigenous worship and church structure

The church in Cambodia has expressed a desire to regain (in some cases retain) its national identity and missionaries are working to return leadership to national Christians. Nevertheless, non-Christian Cambodians still consider the Church to be a foreign organisation since church culture and institutional structures are unfamiliar to most people. For a Cambodian, to become a Christian is not an easy thing – he or she not only experiences a spiritual transformation, but also has to adapt to some aspects of Western church culture. For this reason most churches have a difficult time discipling new believers as they tend to return to their old beliefs after a brief experience of Christianity. I think this problem comes about through cultural nostalgia – the church has neglected the importance of contextualisation and these people are “homesick” for their old Cambodian identity, something they perceive they have had to give up.

Many discussions have taken place on ways to establish indigenous leadership structures in the Cambodian church. Traditionally, leadership is related to the role that one may play in society, and to seniority. Wisdom is often associated with age, so a young man is not normally in a good position to teach and advise older people. Missions have a tendency, however, to focus their efforts on training young people because of their readiness to learn Western ways of doing things. As a result, older people are neglected and think that evangelism, or other tasks for God, are young people’s jobs. Consequently, the church has lost a natural way to impact the community. We should neither neglect older people in Cambodian society, nor underestimate their importance.

Another important aspect of religious life in Cambodia that should not be overlooked, is its monastic organisation. The concept of a church with a salaried priest or pastor working in an office is not familiar to Cambodians and for this reason, pastors are often considered more as mission employees or civil servants than as religious or spiritual leaders.

It is worth considering whether either or both of these structures (hierarchy based on seniority, and monastic structure) could provide a model for the structure of the church in Cambodia.

Evil Spirits

I grew up thinking that evil spirits belonged to the Bible era, and that ghosts and witches flourished in medieval times but had been phased out by more civilized thinking. When I started reading books about the mission field where spirits and closely related idol worship seemed to be part of everyday life, I had to think again. “The Spirits of Mindoro”²⁸ is a magnificent story and example of how primitive peoples of the forest were completely enslaved by fear of the spirits. It took much time and patience on behalf of sensitive missionary ladies to get near enough to the Mangyan to learn their languages and bring them the message of salvation and freedom in Christ Jesus. Today these same forest Mangyan are going to other parts of the Philippines and sharing God’s good news of forgiveness and eternal life. Another book, written about the Oy people of South Laos near the Cambodia border called “As the rock flower blooms”,²⁹ also demonstrates the power and tyranny of the spirits over people; the Oy murdered one of their chiefs because he had become a Christian, and they wanted also to murder his son, Peng, the hero of the book.

When I arrived in Laos I discovered that the Lao people, themselves officially Buddhist, were prepared to kill those in their community who were believed to harbour a powerful evil spirit³⁰. If warned, these individuals would seek refuge elsewhere; the first Christian community in Song Khone was mostly made up of such people. The Lao told me that there was a hierarchy of spirits and village sorcerers. Some Buddhist priests possessed power from a spirit and so were able to exorcise less powerful spirits and perform miracles of healing. Strong stuff!

I took some girls from the Bible School with me to the leprosy village. The dark held unknown terrors for them, so they insisted on having a light burning all night when there was no moonlight. When I had no reply to my call at night, they explained that they would not dare answer me without seeing me in case it was a spirit impersonating me. I had a lot to learn about their worldview, even after they became Christians.

When a family wanted to believe, the Lao church leaders always went to their house. There they would go through a list of possible spirit paraphernalia and altars and solemnly destroy any they found by fire, or by throwing them into a deep river. They realised the importance of physically cleansing the home when people wanted to believe.

Those living in the Western world have an inclination not to take the subject of evil spirits very seriously. “Bad influences” which affect young and old are usually attributed to underlying social conditions – lack of opportunity in employment, childhood abuse, drugs, poverty and so on. But speak to Christian missionaries working in Cambodia and Laos – and indeed in Asia more generally – and you will discover that evil spirits are an integral part of daily life for most people. I think it is vital that those who feel called to work for God are under no illusions as to the powerful influence of evil spirits with which they will have to contend. However, we must not be discouraged as we know that our Lord Jesus Christ conquered Satan at the cross. He and his demons roam around this earth only until God’s judgement day when they will finally be destroyed.

Moving from Laos to Cambodia, which I knew was famous for its protective amulets such as charms, scarves and cloth with writing, I made many more discoveries about the spirit world, too numerous to record, but some of which I will attempt to outline in the section that follows:

In general, spirits can be good or harmful depending on human actions, however some spirits, such as *prey beysach*³¹ only cause harm. There is a hierarchy of spirits with the *tevoda*³² (angels) above the *neak ta*³³ (territorial spirits) for example.

²⁸ Catherine L Davis *The Spirits of Mindoro: The True Story of How the Gospel Came to a Strangely-prepared, Demon-fearing People* 1998, Monarch Books

²⁹ Rosemary A Watson *As the rock flower blooms* 1984, OMF Books

³⁰ Fear of the spirits then takes precedence over the normal Buddhist rule against the taking of life.

³¹ ព្រៃប៊ិសាច

Types of evil spirit which affect Cambodians³⁴

1. The spirit of destruction or *komraol*³⁵ is an evil spirit that leads people to want to take their own life through medicine and other methods. Sometimes people go mad through too much study or become possessed by the spirit called *baek chveng*³⁶.
2. Some spirits encourage sexual immorality, often through love potions called *dak yun snae*³⁷.
3. The spirit of pride and boasting entails piercing oneself with spears and needles; this is practiced by the Chinese as well as Cambodians, for example eating fire by putting burning incense in the mouth. The technique is learned through sorcery handed down by older people, usually family members.
4. The spirit of fortune telling. Many Cambodians go to fortune-tellers who give advice, for example on whether a chosen spouse is suitable, or which day is auspicious for a wedding. Because Cambodians are very superstitious they are often genuinely afraid of life and death, so they keep going to the fortune-teller in order to try and avoid making mistakes.
5. The spirit of sickness. Many Cambodians believe sickness or bad luck is due to the individual's neglect of the local *neak ta*. These are believed to be ancestral spirits that preside over one's property to keep other spirits away, rather like territorial spirits.

The day-to-day significance of spirits in Cambodia

- Tattooing is performed by sorcerers and involves much more than the application of a design to the skin; it is a spiritual ceremony in which incantations are said, imbuing the tattoo image with spiritual power.
- Strings are often worn to seek protection from spirits, for example red strings to seek protection from *neak ta* (territorial spirits). These may be worn on the wrist, around the waist or neck, or even tied to motorbike handlebars for protection.
- The Sap river has a very powerful *neak ta*. To appease it, people living beside the river make rafts with offerings of fruit and flowers then release them and let off firecrackers.
- A lady who sold rice in my local market died near the end of pregnancy. The local people were fearful of the *prey beysach* that, they believed, had caused her death so they had a special cleansing ceremony at her house.
- There is a preoccupation, you could even say an obsession, with the magic power known as *sil*³⁸. The plots of many films use it, even those from China and Hong Kong, and one Cambodian television station shows fire-walking and other supernatural events each Sunday evening.
- Some people cut their hair in a ceremony called *lea bomnon*³⁹ in order to be free from obligations they put on themselves when making vows to spirits, for example during sickness. The hair is shaved or cut and then placed on altars, or even in the ruins at Angkor Wat.
- During the water festival ceremonies to spirits are performed over the racing boats.
- In theatre and dance, spirit ceremonies are carried out before each performance. Musicians too burn incense to spirits before playing.
- In sports such as boxing, a contestant will bow to his coach in respect but will also call on the "spirit teacher" or *kru*⁴⁰ in order to win. He is told which way to enter the ring (under or over ropes etc) according to this spirit.

³² ទេវតា

³³ អ្នកតា

³⁴ These notes were developed in consultation with Mayura

³⁵ កំរោល

³⁶ បែកធ្លេង

³⁷ ដាក់យន់ស្តែ

³⁸ សិល

³⁹ លាបំណន់

⁴⁰ គ្រូ

- The witch doctor, or *kru ap*⁴¹ is indwelt by a spirit which can cause harm and death, and lives in dirty places like the mud around a house. Local people often plant thorny bushes to discourage the spirit from finding mud in which to implant itself.
- Many house meetings and churches pray that the spirits will have no way of disrupting their meetings through non-Christians present, recognising the power of spirits to get in this way. This is especially important in tribal areas like Rattanakiri.

Neil Anderson has warned us not to be overwhelmed by that powerful spirit world which exists in every country in the world.⁴² We need to watch ourselves against paranoia and used the sword of the Spirit and other weapons as Paul describes in Ephesians chapter six, to fight “against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”.⁴³

To encourage timid believers I often use the illustration of a dog on a leash, sometimes growling, at other times wagging his tail to get our attention. It is only as we approach the dog and get too near that we can get hurt. God in Jesus Christ has already overcome our arch-enemy, Satan.⁴⁴ “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ គ្រូអាប័

⁴² Neil Anderson has written a number of books on the subject of spiritual warfare

⁴³ Ephesians 6.12 New International Version

⁴⁴ 2 Thessalonians 2.3-11

⁴⁵ 2 Thessalonians 2.8 New International Version

Partnering with other agencies

Back in 1962 about 20 OMF workers went for a barbeque in the Lao forest during the annual conference. I found myself roasting my meat next to Arnold Lea, the main speaker who had come from IHQ in Singapore. He asked me how I found working alongside the Swiss Brethren mission, known then as the “Mission Evangélique au Laos”. I mentioned my own Swiss background: having French as a strong second language; worshipping with English Brethren in Keswick for two years (not forgetting my scarf and hat!); and joining the mostly Brethren French village teams for summer evangelistic camps. In other words, God had prepared me through all those experiences for this Lao field.

Later, when I worked in a team representing church leaders and missionaries on the national Lao hymnbook, I came to know Dr Edward Roffe and his wife, the leaders and pioneers of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in North Laos. I discovered that the C&MA had more developed literature resources and Bible school courses than us in the south, and they willingly shared their treasures with us. This mission pioneered in Vietnam (1911), Cambodia (1923), East Thailand and North Laos (1928), an answer to Hudson Taylor’s call to prayer for Indochina back in 1875 – a worthy mission to work alongside indeed!

In the OMF Handbook, a paragraph is given to networking and partnering that reads as follows:

As an international team of men and women from around the world, we value diversity and partnership. We partner with churches in sending countries to mobilise, develop and support members for effective service. We network and partner with other mission organisations that share our goals.”⁴⁶

How has this worked out concerning the Cambodian field?

OMF was invited to work in Cambodia by Major Taing Chhirc in 1973, to partner with the Khmer Evangelical Church (KEC).⁴⁷ We arrived in March 1974 to be mentored by the small C&MA team that had returned to Cambodia in 1970, having had to leave in 1965 when visas were withheld from North American missionaries. Apart from one small church-plant, the KEC was the only denomination affiliated to the C&MA which had pioneered alone in this country for 50 years. The five OMF workers slotted into youth ministry alongside Cambodian leaders and I taught, under Cambodian leadership, at the Takhmao Bible School.

During the years 1975-1990, the church in Cambodia had to go underground, but those who survived the Khmer “Holocaust” kept up their fellowship through social events, weddings and funerals etc. conscious of their shared identity as one Church. In the refugee camps, where groups of Christians came together for worship and Bible training, they continued to identify with the KEC, even though other groups, like the Southern Baptists and OMF, also worked among them.

Already, in the 1980s, the Neo Apostolic sect started to infiltrate the Cambodian underground church and some church leaders were attracted to the benefits on offer. Ecumenical groups, with a “social theology” got their national Protestant and Catholic churches recognised by the Communist government in 1990, and in so doing introduced another strand to Christianity in Cambodia – the church situation was starting to become more complicated.

In 1993, the constitution of Cambodia allowed religious freedom. Hundreds of NGOs from the West were welcomed in for the reconstruction of the country and the major evangelical denominations saw the door open to them. Some were sensitive to the local culture, having had experience in other countries like Thailand and Indonesia, but most seemed to lack insight as to the Christian message they were actually presenting. They flaunted their four-wheeled-drive vehicles, expensive housing and rich lifestyle. In those days few spoke Cambodian and I

⁴⁶ OMF International Handbook, November 2006, Chapter A: “Purpose and Principles” page 10

⁴⁷ See Don Cormack *Killing Fields, Living Fields* (2nd edition rev.) 2000, Monarch Books

was called on to translate for sermons. The hints I dropped about appropriate body language and cultural approach seemed to fall on deaf ears, much to my embarrassment; however the Khmer Christians were more tolerant, excusing them from taking off their shoes and sitting on the floor mats like everyone else.

A few Christian workers met together from prayer every week from 1990 to 1993 at the OMF house on Samdech Pann Street, and there we learned to value each other's diversity and genuinely welcome those who had come with the goal of building up, not fracturing, the Body of Christ. I certainly appreciated Steve Westergren's gracious attitude to the many newcomers, even when it meant that the C&MA would no longer be at the forefront.⁴⁸

Today there are many interdenominational ventures, such as the Fount of Wisdom Publishing House, TEEAC (Theological Education by Extension Association in Cambodia) and Phnom Penh Bible School, where our help and expertise is needed. I see most Christian workers from abroad concentrating on the "company" and its success – the needs and goals of the organisation they are with. Where have we gone wrong? God sees the whole Church as His people, bound together as one under God's Fatherhood, made possible through Christ.

⁴⁸ At that time Steve Westergren was country director of the C&MA in Cambodia.

Change of fields from Laos to Cambodia

When the Lord convinced me I was to go to Laos to serve Him I thought of it as a life-long call. As He gently shut the door of the Bible school in Savannakhet to me after nine years, I saw it as an opportunity to pursue my interest in developing a theological education by extension programme, similar to that which I had seen in 1979 in Kenya where my brother-in-law, Keith Anderson, was writing study materials. His students, most of whom were already leaders in their congregations, wanted to study in their local setting without being displaced to a Bible school far away. I had brought a course produced by the Evangel Press in Nairobi, entitled “The Shepherd and His Work”, back to Laos with me. Although the political situation was deteriorating with increased encroachment by Lao communists, we could still reach the main churches in Savannakhet province.

During my home assignment in 1973, I received a letter from OMF International Headquarters inviting me to consider a change of field to Cambodia. This country appealed to me as I had visited in 1963 with the Dunant family, but since 1970 Cambodia had been in the throes of a bitter civil war between the US backed government and the communists, who had gained control of large areas of the countryside. I realised that I needed a clear indication from God that he wanted me to move on to Cambodia at this critical time. I asked advice from friends on the mission field who knew me well – Isaac Scott, the Thailand OMF director, and Armand Heiniger, former head of the Mission Evangélique au Laos. They, and others, affirmed that moving on to Cambodia was indeed God’s will, thereby dealing with my excuses that I would not be able to learn another language like Khmer or adapt to a new country at my age. Students graduating from Cambodian high schools to Takhmao Bible School, where I was to teach, had a good knowledge of French enabling me to start teaching in that language while I learned the new one – this was another strong indication to me of the rightness of the move.

I was to work under the national Khmer church and Pastor Reach Yea, its president, and to fill a little of the gap in theological teaching left by San Hay Seng, the director of Takhmao Bible School. After 10 years he was going back to finish his training at Zamboanga in the Philippines. Two C&MA workers, who with their wives had returned in 1970, taught their courses in Khmer as I was told I would do in my second year – I would have to learn quickly. But we were all evacuated early in 1975, and I continued learning the language in the refugee camps in Thailand.

Looking back, I praise God for that eventful year in Cambodia, when good relationships were formed with local Christians, some of whom welcomed me back again in 1990. During those first weeks I remember an overwhelming sense of joy at being in God’s will and being kept close to Him during all the physical dangers. “I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Psalm 34.4 New International Version

Evacuation from Cambodia and Laos

“Didn’t you find it hard to say good-bye?” Is a question I am often asked, and to which I find it hard to reply honestly on the spur of the moment. Perhaps I am not as emotional as one lass I met who cried all the way home after leaving all her friends behind in Cambodia, not sure she would ever get back there. In my big good-byes I have always been optimistic, hoping for an “au revoir” – until we see each other again.

January 1st 1975 was the beginning of what turned out to be the last offensive around Phnom Penh. We “celebrated” the arrival of the New Year with multiple rocket attacks on the city by the Khmer Rouge instead of the normal firecrackers. In Laos we had survived several dry season offensives, so I was faintly optimistic at that stage that our evacuation from Phnom Penh would be temporary, and that with the onset of the rainy season in May, it would be safe to return. When the time came to leave at the end of February, a group of church leaders and other Christians gathered to see us off and out of danger, no doubt relieved to have us on our way. As we waited in Bangkok we heard news from the last few refugees escaping to Thailand and our concern for the safety of our brothers and sisters in Christ grew. It was to be many years until we heard what had happened and some of their stories could be documented by Don Cormack in his book *Killing Fields, Living Fields*.⁵⁰ When we eventually saw some Cambodian Christians who survived, it was like meeting those brought back from the dead.

Four months later, in June 1975, I was back in Laos and having to say good-bye all over again to many Christian friends there. This time I realised I would not see them for many years as the communists had already taken control and a lot of their propaganda was strongly anti-Christian. I had made the journey from Bangkok to help the missionaries pack up and send on boxes of their belongings to their home countries – an extraordinary story of help under threatening circumstances.

A Lao friend accompanied me on a bus trip to an area near the Cambodian border in order to contact Cambodian refugees who were extremely poor as the border region of Cambodia had already been under Khmer Rouge control for five years. Half way there, the bus was stopped by communist soldiers. We were made to get off and listen to their propaganda being told, among other things, that in North America many people lived under bridges. I prayed fervently that I would not be taken away for questioning, but the only remark made about me was that I wore a Lao skirt.⁵¹ We were able to fulfil our purpose and talk to the refugees who related to us the horrendous conditions of living under the Khmer Rouge.

My Lao friend eventually brought her family to Thailand and I saw her again in France several times before she died, a good-bye that had indeed become an “au revoir”. Other Christians remained steadfast in their faith in Laos and I have been able to make several trips from Cambodia to visit them since 1995, always coming away more encouraged by their tenacity and love for the Lord.

Tragic as the events of 1975 were for Cambodia and her people, and difficult as it was for me to say goodbyes first in Phnom Penh, and then a few months later in Laos, these evacuations were not as personally significant for me as one that had taken place over a decade earlier.

I had only been in Laos a couple of years at the time and, along with the Dunant family, had got to know some tribes-people living near the Lao-Vietnamese border. One, a man called Nai Aprang, had inherited a Gospel of Luke from his father, who, although himself illiterate, had bought it from a Lao evangelist many years previously and treasured it ever since. One day when everyone else was at a wedding, I felt God prompting me to take a Bible to the Aprang family. The Viet Cong were advancing rapidly along the Annamite mountains towards our area and we had been told to prepare ourselves for evacuation. As I heard the guns pounding in the distance I developed 'heart' symptoms which I tried – unsuccessfully – to alleviate with an injection. It was the stress of the situation. I set

⁵⁰ *Killing Fields, Living Fields* by Don Cormack, (2nd edition rev.) 2000, Monarch Books

⁵¹ A Lao skirt is like a sarong, but with a decorative border

off, however, on the 11-mile ride towards the Vietnamese border, praying for safe passage, only to have a puncture just out of town! I prayed that if my puncture repair held I should continue. Rather unusually it did, so I went on to arrive with the family at dusk, much to their surprise. We retired late that night after I had passed on all the information needed for them to get started on the Old Testament.

Next morning I returned to Takong where we were based and resumed packing. In the evening Jean-Jacques came for me, collected some of his belongings, and we got the regular bus to Savannakhet next day. Once there, however, the Dunants recalled that there was a large (and valuable) stock of medicines at Takong so they set off in a borrowed jeep to retrieve them while I, meantime, looked after their daughter Anne. Once again our prayers for safe travel were heartfelt.

Jean-Jacques and Georgette came back to Savannakhet unharmed as God graciously watched over them. They told us of meeting up with a French Roman Catholic missionary who had been in the country since 1940, right through the Japanese occupation, and who was not afraid of meeting the Viet Cong. He did meet them later that day near Takong and, sadly, his body was returned to the French authorities a few days later. We praised God for our deliverance.

I could never forget this experience. I felt that, in His grace, God had put His mark on me so that I might be spared to continue to serve Him in Cambodia and Laos for the next 45 years.

Working with refugees

If you had asked me before 1974 about seeing myself working with refugees, I would have laughed at the idea as impossible, yet this is exactly what I did from 1975 to 1989!

When I returned to Bangkok after those last few months in Laos, I wondered what God wanted me to do and in which part of Thailand to continue serving Him. A C&MA worker from Cambodia, Andy Bishop, had travelled to the Thai/Cambodian border and found refugees filtering into the country having escaped from the Khmer Rouge. He challenged us ex-Cambodia workers to be involved in evangelism and relief aid. So I asked the Lord if he had something for me to do helping the refugees.

Soon I was able to meet some refugees coming to the French Embassy in Bangkok seeking asylum in France and I was even asked by the Embassy staff if I would like to help register them. A Roman Catholic priest, Father Venet, organised a network to help thousands find a refuge in France. Norm and Marie Ens of the C&MA stayed in Bangkok following up contacts until the end of 1975. When they returned to Canada I was asked to take over the Cambodian literature stocked in Bangkok which consisted of Bibles at the Bible Society, and tracts and books at the C&MA. Booklets like "Journey into Life" by Norman Warren, which Don Cormack had brought with him from Cambodia, were reprinted in Bangkok and distributed to refugees who were eager to read something positive in their own language.

"Living Water", a Bible course translated by the Pentecostals from Thai into Cambodian, was found in a church in Chantaburi, waiting to be shipped into Cambodia. We reprinted many thousands of copies and, even today, the course is still widely used in Cambodia. In the early years we also reproduced the certificate presented to those who completed the five lessons and it was one of these that enabled Ling Lebrun to track me down 14 years later.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) staff were always looking around for volunteers to meet the physical needs of refugees as many had fled with only the clothes they were wearing. Our first clothing distribution was to children in the small camp alongside the Buddhist Temple in Aranya Prathet at Christmas 1975, thanks to the generosity of a Chinese Christian lady in Bangkok. Our small wooden house overflowed with sacks of clothes donated to the UN for the Australian Darwin disaster that were no longer needed. Some financial donations came to OMF specifically for the refugees so we were able to buy second-hand jackets and jeans, and socks and shoes from the thriving Thai market. Each person tried on their shoes, but even so, some refugees arriving in Canada in the freezing winter were wearing flip-flops! No doubt they found shoes uncomfortable having been unused to wearing them before. How grateful I was for Mrs Pany, a Thai girl whom I had known at the Bible school in Laos, who came and lived in our house with her 10 year-old daughter since her marriage to a Lao had broken down. She was the "bargainer" for our purchases and a comforter and witness to the Lao refugees.

Françoise Merry, who had worked in the Swiss mission in Laos, joined Mrs Pany and further developed contacts in the camps. I often regretted the huge quantity of time and energy that went into this clothing programme, but without it, the Thai authorities and the UNHCR would have barred our access to the camps and detention centres as regulations tightened. As it was, our presence was welcomed; the International Committee for Migration even organised a ticket on Air France for me along with a group of Cambodian refugees going to France. This helped me to observe what needed to be taught in the orientation talk I gave to each departing group, talks in which I took the opportunity to explain about Christianity.

In the evenings in the early years I was able to draw together groups in the detention centres and teach them Christian songs with the violin, and also provide Bible studies. It was hard to keep the balance between relief work and spiritual input, but Sundays were a precious time of gathering together those interested in a time of worship.

It was at this time that I lost my violin – the one my parents had bought me when I was 14, the one that had survived many rough trips and evacuation from Cambodia and Laos. It was 1978 and I was

on my way to a Sunday meeting with a suitcase of clothes to deliver to a group of Cambodians leaving Bangkok next day. When I arrived, I paid the driver of the three-wheeler taxi having seen the Cambodians load up the suitcase. I thought the violin was there too but after the clothes distribution, no violin was to be found – it had gone off in the taxi, never to be seen again. By this time I was playing in various chamber groups as a necessary relaxation after the stressful work with refugees who were streaming through Bangkok. So the violin was a great loss and, even though other violins were kindly donated to fill the gap, they were not the same. However, I visited Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in 1995 and bought a similar looking battered French violin for \$500. Now that it has been renovated, I feel it is just the right replacement for that first one. We learn to trust God for our treasured possessions, and when He sees fit to remove them, then we look to the ultimate treasurer rather than to what He has given us.

When Mrs Pany moved to work with another missionary in North West Thailand, we needed help with the practical relief work and with evangelism so Miss Praphin joined the refugee team. A Bangkok lady of Chinese origin, she had a gift for personal evangelism and even included Burmese prisoners in her work. Her tireless visiting of refugees, especially in hospitals as well as prisons, was a tremendous encouragement to me. I had to learn to adapt to her way of thinking – it was not always easy for me to understand where she was coming from – but we grew in respect and love for each other over the years as our friendship deepened. This was really precious as I later found myself the only OMF worker left on the refugee team.

Responsibilities for our parents

On my home assignments the OMF council reminded me more than once that I needed to look for a home to be my base in the UK. My sister Ruth and her husband returned from East Africa in order to assist his mother who was becoming more frail and after she died, my parents moved into her flat in Bexhill, Sussex. It was a wise move as they could no longer cope with the garden at their home in Pembury, Kent.

I did consider a flat next to my parents in Bexhill, but my brother-in-law dissuaded me from buying it as the expenses for renovation and upkeep were beyond my means. In 1994 my father had reached the age of 95, and my mother was 86, and as they realised they could no longer look after themselves adequately, I made plans to retire from Cambodia to help them. During that time Keith and Ruth were in Essex, and then in a busy parish near Gatwick, visiting them most weeks on their day off.

I said farewell to friends in 1994, who were already used to seeing me take my major holiday every year to be with my parents. On arriving in the UK I found that they had, on doctor's advice and with Ruth and Keith's help, moved into a residential care home not far away, first for a trial period and then as a permanent move. It was God's timing as my father frequently lost his balance and was falling quite often. He had not broken any bones, but it required two people to help him to his feet again. Their move meant that I was able to return after a few months to Cambodia, and as they kept their flat, I was able to stay there on annual visits of six to eight weeks over the next few years. My parents remained willing for me to return to Cambodia each time. During these visits to the UK I saw my parents daily, apart from during deputation visits, and had time to renovate the flat. It also became the stop-over place for two families visiting their mother in a nursing home every month. They were grateful not to have to pay for bed and breakfast accommodation, and I was glad for them to be in the flat regularly. After my parents died the flat was made over to my sister and I, and I was able to pay back my sister's share. By this time I was 67 and only five years later I needed a permanent base as I returned from Cambodia for medical reasons. God had provided exactly as needed.

God spared my parents until a great age. Each time I left, my expectation was to meet them next either "down here" or "up there", as "to be with Christ", where they were longing to go, "is better by far".⁵² My father went to heaven aged 97 and my mother followed five years later in March 2001, having longed for the day she would rejoin my father and be with Jesus.

In the East, parents expect to be cared for by their children, and in the Bible "honouring" our parents includes their comfort in old age. I am grateful to Ruth and Keith for much practical help, particularly to Keith for taking the power of attorney and other financial responsibilities for them. It is only as we shared the task of giving support to our parents that we could continue in our ministries right up to official retirement.

⁵² Philippians 1.23 New International Version

Change of plans

When God changes your plans unexpectedly and you face an uncertain future, what happens next? God can be trusted to show you the way ahead.

After my mother died I was very uncertain about whether or not to return to Cambodia after retirement. Should I look for a different ministry at home in the UK, or move to work in France among the many Indo-Chinese settled there? During that home assignment I read with great interest Rose Dowsett's book *The Great Commission*.⁵³ Through this, God confirmed my call to return to Cambodia in order to help to disciple new believers and train them to lead others, especially outside the capital, Phnom Penh.

I accepted the kind invitation to stay with the Lebrun family in Takhmao, a provincial capital 11km away from Phnom Penh. Using their guest room as my base I was able to travel to the provinces easily. I planned to return home every year to look after my flat and to strengthen my support base. Health-wise I was strong and active, riding my 50cc motorbike around Phnom Penh and undertaking arduous journeys by boat and taxi to places on the Lao-Vietnamese border. One year, I went to Australia and visited five Cambodian churches and various friends. I gradually realised I was slowing down, thinking that age was catching up on me as I had passed the 70 mark, but towards the end of 2005 my abdomen became more and more uncomfortable. In late January 2006, a doctor sent me for an ultrasound scan which showed up tumours of the ovaries and elsewhere. Ling Lebrun took me to Singapore for surgery which confirmed the diagnosis of ovarian cancer with secondaries. I had to accept that a return to Cambodia was out of the question.

Ling and her husband, Jean-Luc, went out of their way to ease my return to the UK by bringing my violin, computer and papers to Singapore. Next decision: where to have chemotherapy? Medical insurance would have covered the cost in Singapore, but the consensus was that the best on-going support would be back in the UK. Three weeks after surgery I was pronounced fit enough to travel, provided I had an escort. In God's provision again, I was able to travel with Dr Sue Pickard and her husband, David, who were returning to the UK after the inauguration of the new OMF General Director in Singapore⁵⁴ and a visit to their family in India.

Although I accepted the poor prognosis early on, I found myself wondering about my future, especially during the time of chemotherapy when I felt weak and vulnerable. Fear of the future would dominate my thoughts and in those night hours when I could not sleep or even concentrate, my thoughts turned to pray for others. I learned to cling to God's promises and read through the book of Psalms, greatly strengthened by such verses as:

He delivered me from all my fears. 34.4

Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days. 39.4

With my God I can scale a wall. 18.29

Hide me in the shadow of your wings. 17.8⁵⁵

Through this time of uncertainty and struggle, God showed me how I could share my experience with others, something that does not come easily to me as, since childhood, I had learned to suppress my emotions in an effort to maintain harmony in family situations. So I took opportunities to give short messages, often based on Psalm 73.21-26⁵⁶. During this time of uncertainty my heart was grieved; I

⁵³ Rosemary Dowsett *The Great Commission* 2001, Monarch Books

⁵⁴ Dr Patrick Fung, the first Asian General Director of OMF

⁵⁵ New International Version

⁵⁶ Psalm 73 New International Version

²¹When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,

²²I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.

²³Yet I am always with you;

you hold me by my right hand.

²⁴You guide me with your counsel,

could not be “joyful in hope”⁵⁷ as I could not see what God was doing with me. On my own, I was “senseless and ignorant”⁵⁶ ignoring, in fact, that God had in His sovereign will allowed this radical change of plans. This was to show me, and others through me, that He is guiding me at this time and, more importantly, preparing me for glory. The human touch is there too – God assures me He is with me night and day and takes care of me during each 24-hour period, holding me by my right hand.⁵⁶ Certainly my flesh is failing with the advance of the cancer. My heart and mind often waver and falter, but God truly is the strength of my heart and my portion, a vital part of my life forever. I have never needed Him so much as now and He draws me closer to Himself through this new experience.

At such times, God provides fellow-sufferers to give mutual encouragement, help and support. A Dutch paediatrician, Diny, whom I had known since refugee work in the 1980s in Thailand, came to visit me one Sunday in January 2006 when I failed to turn up at the International Christian Fellowship in Phnom Penh. Seeing my state of weakness and discomfort, Diny told me I had some difficult decisions ahead. I laughingly replied that it was up to the doctors, but she rightly supposed a cancer condition behind my symptoms. Just two months later, Diny herself was admitted to hospital with pneumonia and, on investigation of further symptoms, they discovered the same type of cancer at the same stage as myself. Over the months we have been able to share our experiences by phone, and in January 2007 we met up briefly in Phnom Penh when Diny very helpfully described the possible progression of the disease – very illuminating and reassuring as we look past the suffering to “glory”.⁵⁸

and afterward you will take me into glory.

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

⁵⁷ Romans 12.12

⁵⁸ At time of writing Diny is still in Holland after saying “goodbye” to her family three times – she is close to heaven.

Goodbye to Cambodia

A year after I had left for surgery in Singapore, during this return trip to Cambodia in January 2007, I had to say the hardest goodbyes. Feeling weak with low energy levels I wondered how I would cope with farewells and special receptions. I wanted to give my testimony of how God had enabled me to face my illness, yet not to dwell on my health problems. How thankful I was that He enabled me time and again not to break down, but to concentrate on His goodness and mercy following me all the days of my life⁵⁹.

The OMF team graciously encouraged me with many thoughtful words and deeds, assuring me of their love and prayers in a superb “Friendship Book”, presented to me at a welcome lunch. The special prayer at the joint prayer meeting on the day of my departure sent me on my way rejoicing⁶⁰ rather than weeping. Many Cambodian friends prayed and hoped for my recovery so that I could return to work, but they could see I was still unfit and unable to help, except with long distance checking of literature and music.

A highlight of that month was a thanksgiving service organised by church leaders at the oldest C&MA church in Phnom Penh. Dr Diny, also paying her last visit to Cambodia, was able to join me and give her joyful word of exhortation to look forward to heaven – much nearer to all of us than we are from each other in our different countries. Many present from different denominations, knowing that neither of us was likely to make any further visits to Cambodia, gave glimpses of how God had honoured our work in the past. It was a most moving tribute to the love of Christ among us, that cut right across racial and denominational differences.

⁵⁹ Psalm 23

⁶⁰ Acts 8.39

After-word

Returning to Bexhill in poor health in February 2006, I realised again God's great faithfulness to me in providing my flat. As an extra blessing, God has sent a retired London City Mission worker, Sheila Prosser, to be my neighbour. She is someone who not only shares my vision for God's Kingdom, but also has a similar outlook on money-matters and life-style.

I asked God what was left for me to do as His servant. He confirmed in my heart that prayer, even prayer mobilisation, and outreach to Asians should be my priority. With e-mail it has been possible to renew links with missionaries from OMF and other missions. I also remembered many requests to write down my missionary experiences over the years, but it was another matter entirely getting down to the task as my energy ebbed away so quickly. I began with the story of God preparing me for the mission field, and then with the suggestion to reflect on issues of relevance to new workers in Cambodia, the rest of the project took shape.

I am very conscious that "I" has appeared far too often, a natural hazard of writing from personal experience. How many times have I cautioned language students to avoid using "I" where possible as it grates on Asian ears! So I am guilty of the same thing and ask your pardon if it has grated on yours.

Time is running out, like the sand trickling through the neck of an egg-timer. But God has perfectly timed these last few weeks of writing to enable me to complete my part of this project. I close with profound thanksgiving to Him who gave me enough strength to finish the work.

*'Tis Jesus the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home,
We'll praise Him for all that is past,
And trust Him for all that's to come.⁶¹*

⁶¹ Second verse of the hymn: *How good is the God we adore*, words by Joseph Hart, 1759, a hymn sung regularly by OMF workers.

Abbreviations

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| CIM | China Inland Mission |
| C&MA | Christian and Missionary Alliance |
| KEC | Khmer Evangelical Church |
| TEEAC | Theological Education by Extension Association of Cambodia |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commission for Refugees |

Important dates

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 1934 | Birth |
| 1939-1951 | School |
| 1944-1945 | Evacuated to St. Helens, Lancashire |
| 1951-1954 | Royal College of Music |
| 1954-1956 | Teaching in Keswick, Cumbria |
| 1956-1958 | Bible School in Lamorlaye, France |
| 1958 | Applied to CIM/OMF Candidates Course |
| 1959 | Sailed for Singapore |
| 1959-1973 | Laos |
| 1974-1975 | Move to Cambodia |
| 1975-February | Evacuation from Cambodia |
| 1975-August | Evacuation from Laos |
| 1975-1990 | Cambodian Church underground |
| 1975-1989 | Working with refugees in Thailand. Met Ling in refugee camp |
| 1990 | Return to Cambodia |
| 1993 | Ling finds Alice in Cambodia |
| 1994 | Parents move to residential home |
| 1996-September | Father dies aged 97 |
| 2001-March | Mother dies aged 93. Retirement |
| 2002 | Return to Cambodia |
| 2003-2005 | Yearly visits to Laos |
| 2006 | Surgery in Singapore |
| 2007 | Visit to Cambodia – meeting with Dr Diny |