

CAMBODIA

FROM THE 'KILLING FIELDS' TO THE MISSION FIELD

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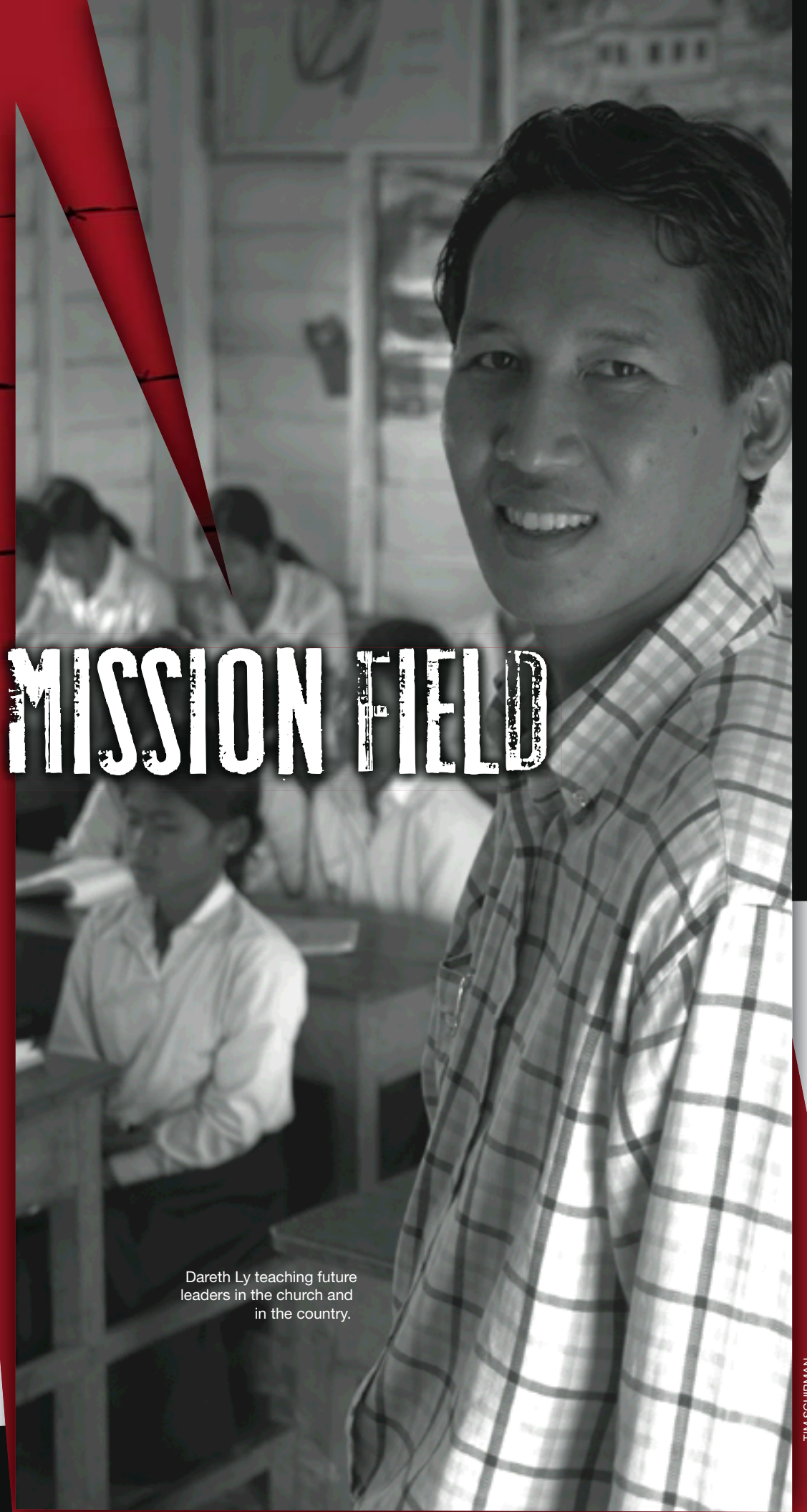
by Kirk Noonan

On the edge of a rice paddy, soldiers bound the hands and feet of four boys. As they did, one of the boys sobbed. Another's chest quietly heaved as tears raced down his cheeks. The other two showed no emotion. Encircling them were hundreds of other rail-thin boys too weak and scared to put up a fight. Starvation, forced labor and torture have a way of doing that to kids.

Dareth Ly, then 9 years old, stared at the bound boys. They were his co-laborers and co-sufferers. More importantly, they were his friends. Now they were going to die.

"The Khmer Rouge soldiers wanted to instill fear in us so we would give them complete obedience," says Dareth, now an Assemblies of God missionary to Cambodia. "They were killing for the sake of killing and were intoxicated by power."

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Dareth Ly teaching future leaders in the church and in the country.





After being separated from his family when he was 7 years old, Dareth was sent to the Khmer Rouge-run labor camp where he spent his days digging irrigation ditches and building dikes in rice paddies. It was a man's work made worse by lack of food, little rest and long hours under the grueling sun.

Even worse were the sadistic soldiers who indiscriminately abused, tortured and killed the boys. Depending on the day, the soldiers would choose a handful of boys and pull out their fingernails and toenails with pliers or try to decapitate them with razor-edged palm fronds. The cruelest moments occurred when soldiers executed the boys.

"Don't turn away," the soldiers commanded the boys not chosen to die. "Or you will join your friends."

With no remorse and with machine-like efficiency, the soldiers pulled clear plastic bags over their victims' heads. The thin plastic adhered to the boys' moist faces, outlining their tiny mouths and noses. With each gasp for air the bag became tighter on their faces.

Within minutes they were dead.

Satisfied temporarily, the soldiers sent all the witnesses back into the rice paddy to work again. Tomorrow, they promised, more boys would die.

SUFFERING

About six years earlier, Dareth had lived with his family in Kâmpóng Cham province on the border of Vietnam. As with many Cambodian villages, Dareth's was home to peasant farmers who worked the land tending rice paddies, growing coconuts, and fishing streams and lakes. After the U.S. military began bombing the area, Dareth's mother, Yee, fled with him and his sister for Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city.

With no money and nowhere to stay in Phnom Penh, the family lived on the streets. For Dareth, only 3 years old, life on the streets was the beginning of a harrowing journey that would take him to the brink of death, test his resolve and transform his life. Along the way, he'd also develop an insatiable desire to share the gospel with Cambodians and train them for leadership.

KHMER ROUGE

While his mother made and sold cakes, Dareth and his sister, Sreng Hok, roamed the city scrounging for food. Three square meals and playing with friends weren't even in their thoughts. Their sustenance and fun came in the form of chasing down bags of rice dropped from U.S. military planes. When they found bags that had broken open on impact, they'd scoop up as much rice as they could carry before adults shooed them away.

"I didn't understand all that was happening in my country," says Dareth. "I was only concerned with finding something to eat."

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As the family struggled to survive, Cambodia's infrastructure was imploding. Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge, and his soldiers were bent on turning the country into an agrarian communist utopia. To do so, they battled relentlessly to overthrow the government. When they finally did in April 1975, Cambodians celebrated in the streets, thinking the civil war was over and peace would prevail.

As its first act in power, the Khmer Rouge drove everyone out of Phnom Penh, telling them falsely that Americans planned to bomb the city.

Pol Pot envisioned a Cambodia untouched by Western civilization and capitalism. To achieve that, he believed he needed to kill the educated people, move the noneducated to the countryside, dismantle families and rid the country of currency, religion and private land ownership.

With thousands of others, Dareth's family left the city and walked to a remote village. There the Khmer Rouge herded everyone into military trucks for a 24-hour road trip without food or water. Upon arrival in Pursat, a village in northern Cambodia, the family members were separated.

"All of us were sent to labor camps," says Dareth. "I was frightened, but knew if I didn't go along the soldiers would hurt or kill me."

THE KILLING FIELDS

In the first few months at the labor camp, nearly 1,000 boys lived in captivity with Dareth. Each week the population decreased as boys, 7 to 11 years old, died of starvation, sickness, exhaustion and torture. Dareth stayed alive, he explains, by obeying orders, working hard and eating insects, roots and grass.

"Sometimes you get so hungry anything looks edible," he says. "Back then I thought if it didn't kill me I'd eat it and live another day."

After four years of captivity Dareth's resolve to live remained high, but physically he was waning. Each day he and the 30 boys who were still alive were dragged into the rice paddies though they were too weak to work. For the boys, the only questions to be answered were when and how they would die.

One day mortar rounds rained down on the rice paddy. Dareth and the other boys crawled into a hole. When they emerged two hours later, their captors had fled. Unbeknownst to Dareth and the other boys, the Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia to eradicate the Khmer Rouge. "We didn't know what was happening, but those of us



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CINA CANADA



who were able walked to a nearby village,” he says.

The village was deserted, but the boys found food to eat before moving on to a provincial village where they met up with more labor camp survivors.

As families and friends reunited all around him, 11-year-old Dareth slumped to the street, wondering if his mother and sister were alive. Within minutes a 30-year-old woman knelt down next to him and asked him his name, where he was born and who his parents were. When he answered, she embraced him and told him she was his father’s daughter from a previous marriage.

“It was a providential meeting,” says Dareth. “In the midst of all the chaos my half sister found me.”

Though freed from the labor camps, Dareth and his half sister were far from safe.

ESCAPE

Because Pol Pot had dismantled the government, no law or authority existed. Even worse, people had no food and no hope that the situation would improve. When a rumor circulated that Thailand was accepting Cambodian refugees, Dareth and his half sister decided to make the trek despite the threat of bandits, Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge soldiers, and land mines.

“I wondered if I should wait for my mother,” says Dareth. “But I thought she could be dead, so I decided to go.”

With about 100 people, Dareth and

his half sister began walking toward Thailand. Leaders decided it would be safest to walk at night and hide during the day. Because most everyone was malnourished and weak, the group moved slowly.

“We were skin and bones,” says Dareth. “We would walk two or three steps and stop, then walk two or three steps and stop again.”

Sometimes soldiers passed nearby, and everyone tried to hide. To protect the group, some mothers were forced to suffocate their crying babies. Land mines took the heaviest toll on the refugees.

“People would step on land mines and have limbs blown off,” says Dareth. “Some people survived the blasts but were too injured to go on.”

By the time they crossed into Thailand, the group had dwindled to 25 survivors who were placed in a refugee camp. Eventually, Dareth and his half sister were moved to another camp in Bangkok. From there they were put on a plane and flown to Minnesota.

After a few months, Dareth’s half sister moved to Boston. Dareth was placed in child protective custody until Judy Essling, who attends Summit Church (AG), in St.

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TO SUFFOCATE THEIR CRYING BABIES.**



Paul, took him into her home and raised him as her own.

“I went to church with her three times a week,” says Dareth. “At first I didn’t know what to think, but the people at church showed me love beyond what words can communicate.”

To deal with his old life, Dareth repressed memories of everything good and bad about Cambodia. Yet he couldn’t control the nightmares about his childhood.

At church he became involved in the youth group and found a sense of belonging. At a weekend Bible retreat, he committed his life to Christ. “Several months later I realized the nightmares had disappeared,” he says.

As he grew in his faith, he promised God his future and ambitions. After high school he enrolled at North Central University in Minneapolis. Though he wanted and was willing to serve in ministry, he never considered going back to his homeland.

“Cambodia was never a thought,” he says. “I had convinced myself that in order to move on with my life and fit into American culture, I had to forget about Cambodia.”

But in the early 1990s peace talks prevailed in Cambodia, the fighting stopped and the country opened to the world.

Steve and Jacque Sullivan were among the first Assemblies of God missionaries to reside in the country. The Sullivans, who previously served in the Philippines, were from Dareth’s home church in Minnesota.

Steve Sullivan wrote to Dareth and asked him to come on a short-term missions trip. After initially balking at the offer, Dareth relented.

His life would never be the same.

GOING HOME

“As soon as I set foot in Cambodia, I was in shock,” Dareth says. “The memories of my mother and sister came rushing back.”

He searched for his mother. At the village where she was born some people reported she was alive, while others speculated she was dead. Within days he learned of a woman who might be his mother living in a tiny village. Determined, he set out to find her.

Upon his arrival he approached a woman sitting in front of a hut. She eyed him, then turned away. Dareth was not surprised. The last time she had seen him he was a boy — now he was a 23-year-old man. When someone explained to the woman that Dareth might be her son, she pulled herself up, embraced him and sobbed.

At noon the next day Dareth watched his sickly mother pour her only cup of rice into a boiling pot of water, prepare it, then limp out of the hut toward three religious leaders. She bowed before them, offering the rice. They accepted it and chanted a brief prayer.

When Dareth asked his mother why she had given away her only food, she told him she

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wanted to die and be reincarnated.

“I asked God to do something,” Dareth says. “The Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, ‘Jesus died on the cross. Now you need to give your mother and the people of Cambodia that message of hope.’”

It was a divine moment for Dareth, he says, but he hesitated to accept it. Upon returning to Minnesota, he married, started a family and settled into his occupation as a counselor in a Minneapolis group home.

Though he tried to forget about Cambodia, he dreamed of it often and felt burdened for the people. Finally, in 1995 he applied to Assemblies of God World Missions for missionary appointment to Cambodia.

Generally nationals have not been appointed as missionaries to the country of their birth. So, Dareth assumed he would be rejected and his burden for Cambodia would subside.

It didn't. And AGWM leaders notified Dareth that they would welcome his ministry.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Today, Dareth works to train Cambodians as leaders not only in the church, but also in the country. He serves with his wife, Thida, and their three daugh-

ters — Sophie, Sabrina and Saidah. Recently, Dareth led his mother in the sinner's prayer. He's praying many more Cambodians will commit their lives to Christ.

“My main goal is to spread the good news,” he says. “I believe the future of the country is in Jesus Christ. Because of that, we train leaders and pray their hearts will be transformed so the things of this world do not tempt them. We're training leaders who will live ethically, judiciously and honestly. When you talk about leaders here, you're talking about our future.”

To facilitate the training process, schools have been established in villages where no schools existed. Assemblies of God churches and Bible schools are teaching adults about Jesus and how to lead effectively.

Dareth drives past the “killing fields” where he almost died as a child. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians were killed during the Khmer Rouge regime.

Instead of being bitter about his past, Dareth has gladly embraced his future.

“What Satan intended for evil, the Lord is using for good,” he says. “It's an honor that God allowed me — a kid who survived the ‘killing fields’ — to be a part of His plan for the people of Cambodia.” **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN is associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



AGOs

OF
SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.
“There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God's forgiveness.
“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
Romans 10:13

B. Believe in Jesus
(put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.
“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

If you would like someone to pray with you concerning your decision to follow Jesus Christ, please contact the church indicated on the back cover or call:



1-800-4PRAYER

Assemblies of God National Prayer Center