

## EDUCATION: NEW MEN AND WOMEN

When Laos became Communist in 1975, men in high level government positions under the former regime, were sent to re-education camp. They spent ten hours a day in forced labor and another three to four hours listening to lengthy lectures extolling the virtues of socialism. The purpose of these lectures and the purpose of "re-education" in general, is to make new socialist men of "capitalist" leaders and representatives of the former regime.

One of these men was KP, a committed Christian, and a member of the national church executive committee. KP was sent to re-education camp because of his position with the former government. During his eleven years in re-education camp he remained faithful to the Lord. He lived his life for Christ and spoke out for Him, holding Bible studies in his small hut. Before long a number of his fellow inmates became Christians, and on several occasions KP took them to a nearby stream to baptize them. In a situation where members of the former regime were being re-educated to be new socialist men, KP was giving his fellow inmates an opportunity to be truly new men--men and women who are alive in Christ!

Because he had been in a re-education camp, KP had difficulty finding a job after his release. Again he trusted God with this new challenge. God ultimately provided him a job with one of the international agencies. In this position he has been given a unique opportunity to travel throughout the country. On his travels he is able to seek out churches to encourage them and their elders. KP has let nothing move him from serving the Lord.

## SHEPHERD FOR THE SHEPHERDLESS

Pastor BT carries a heavy burden. As pastor of the evangelical church in Laos' capital city of Vientiane and as leader of the national church, his responsibilities are many. He is one of less than half a dozen church leaders who have had any Bible school training. Over 85 percent of the trained Church leadership fled Laos when the Communist regime took power in 1975.

The most frequent comment heard from believers within Laos today is that they are as "sheep without a shepherd". The clearest example of this leadership crisis is illustrated by regular reports of Christian Hmong families, who, because they have been cut off from Christian leadership for so long, have gone back to spirit worship. The Church does not have the personnel, leaders, or power to keep these people within the fold. When families find themselves totally cut off from other believers for many years, they often find it difficult to weather the crises they face in their lives, particularly if they encounter a number of serious ones. Many succumb to the pressure of the society around them and return to spirit worship. While their reversion to spirit worship may be understandable, it is not justifiable, and weighs heavily on those concerned about the Lao Church.

Because of these and many other indications of a serious need for leaders for the Church in Laos, BT sees his most important role as that of seeking ways to provide training for new leaders. One of his ideas has been to hold three seminars each year, in Vientiane, for village elders. Because of the small number providing training and the limited space for housing, each village elder is limited to one training session per year. Though this training is far from adequate, it is the best possible solution at the present time.

These training sessions, initiated and led by Pastor BT, include both formal teaching and informal question and answer periods. Some of the villagers' questions indicate just how much they have to learn and also how they are seeking to relate their faith to practical matters of their lives. For example, one elder asked if Christ would be able to find Christians at the resurrection if their graves were not marked with crosses. BT responded by explaining that crosses are not for those who have passed away--God will find them wherever they are--but for the living. The cross testifies to Christ's resurrection from the dead and the resurrection of all those in Christ.

BT and the other church leaders must hold down full time jobs in addition to their church responsibilities. Though his burden often grows heavy, BT is still fully devoted to the work of the Lord. He says, "I thank God that even though many of the Church leaders are not here, God has chosen new leaders, and the people are still faithful to God."

## STANDING FIRM IN LAOS

Protestant Church leaders and elders in Laos have stood firm in the midst of very difficult times. With many of their friends and colleagues leaving for the "good life" overseas, SV and others relate that it has not always been easy to stay. To leave would have been easier. Settling in another country they could have good jobs, security, and a good education and promising future for their children. But Laos is where they feel God wants them, and that is where they have decided to stay.

Not only do SV and the other leaders have the pull of the "good life" overseas, they also have the push of a very difficult life in Laos. The Lao People's Democratic Republic, a Socialist government, and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (the Communist Party which ultimately runs the affairs in Laos), are intent on making new Socialist people of everyone. This concept of the new Socialist man is totally anti-Christian and anti-God. Because of this, SV and the other believers know they must always be very careful what they say and do.

In Laos even simple survival is very difficult. Laos has one of the lowest per capita incomes anywhere in the world at just over \$100 per person per year (by comparison, the US has over \$14,000). While a great deal of malnutrition is not evident in Laos, everyone is struggling just to live. This year's drought has intensified the problem. People must work more than one job. SV is no different, and must work full time to support himself and his family, devoting his off-duty times to the work of God. A few months ago, all the money he had saved, along with his few valuables were stolen. Yet SV and the other church leaders, who shepherd their flocks, continue to struggle to make a living. They are still standing firm.

Pastor SV has seen many of his Bible school classmates and other colleagues well-supported as pastors of large churches in North America. The church abroad has made contemporary heroes of these Lao church leaders who have fled their country, praising the courage and faith it took for them to leave their country, as indeed it did. Yet SV and the other leaders long to know that the church abroad knows about and cares for them. Does it not occur to anyone that among those who have chosen to stay are some unsung contemporary heroes of the faith?

In spite of the pull of a "good life" overseas, and the push of an anti-Christian society, and a very difficult life at home, SV has chosen to stand firm with his flock in Laos.

## GOD'S POWER IN WEAKNESS

The power of God at work within the Church is most clearly evident through the transformed lives of new believers in the midst of the weak Lao Church.

One Hmong family from PKK village had a very sick 13-year-old boy. As spirit worshippers, they went to the village shaman. He began by trying trances and rituals, then had them sacrifice a chicken. The boy got worse. He then had them sacrifice a pig; still the boy's condition did not improve. They next sacrificed a water buffalo; still the child got worse. By then the family was destitute of both money and hope. The shaman had tried everything he knew. As a last resort the family went to the closest hospital--three days walk away. The medics there said the boy was too far gone; that they could do nothing for him. The parents were frantic with grief, and asked if there were anything they could do. The medics suggested taking him to the largest hospital in the country--Mahosot Hospital in the capital city of Vientiane. Miraculously the boy survived the eight-hour trip. Again the doctors at Mahosot Hospital informed the family that they had brought their son in too late--that they could do nothing at this point.

Some other people in the hospital suggested that they call the pastors from the church to pray for the boy. But the family said that they worshipped spirits, and felt that someone from another religion could not help them. In the end, since the boy did not seem likely to survive anyway, they called the Protestant pastors and asked them to pray for their son. The pastors did pray for him and he was miraculously healed.

The family returned to their village rejoicing that their son was alive. Two weeks later they sent word asking the pastors to visit their village. They explained that they had seen and experienced the power of God--a power far greater than that of the evil spirits. They wanted to be a part of this power. The pastors shared the Gospel with them and the entire family accepted Christ. Before returning to the city, they asked the pastors to publically destroy all their spirit worshipping paraphernalia.

The healing of this boy truly indicates the power of God working in the midst of the weak Lao Church.

## STAYING BY THE STUFF: FRUIT OF MISSIONARY LABOR

Last summer World Concern's representative to Laos received permission to visit one of its remote southern provinces for the first time. At the end of a day's work visiting potential project sites there, he decided to seek out the local church with the help of his central government counterpart. After making a number of inquiries, they were finally directed to the church building. It was a weekday and the church building was empty, so they asked a boy out front if he knew anyone connected with the church. He directed them to a house behind the church where they found three of the church elders. They were able to visit with them for about two hours.

On the day he left that town, the World Concern representative went back to the church alone in the early morning for a precious time of prayer with those men. They told him that his visit was the first contact they had had with any Christians outside their province in over 11 years! Though they had had no missionaries, or even other national believers to encourage them, these men and the church group there have remained faithful to the Lord--a powerful testimony to the fact that the labor of earlier missionaries has not been in vain. Missionaries to Laos have indeed planted a strong church, able to remain faithful to the Lord even in the face of years of separation and government persecution.