

Holding UPF and FFWPU Interfaith Peace Blessing Festivals in Cambodia

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Despite his intense schedule, Rev. Hajime Saito traveled from Battambang to Phnom Penh to pick me up. At 8 PM, we left the airport and took Road Number Five to Battambang, Cambodia's second largest city. In four and a half hours, we covered three hundred kilometers on the busy international road connecting Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam to Bangkok, Thailand.

On arrival in Battambang, the size of the FFWPU center struck me. "Welcome to the Battambang regional headquarters," Rev. Saito said. The building is much bigger than the national headquarters in Phnom Penh. Sunday service and public meetings take place in a clean, spacious hall. After sleeping three hours, I awoke to the sound of holy songs. Vibrant young people were in the hall starting the day with 5 am Hoon Dok Hae. "We have sixty young people in Battambang," Rev. Saito explained. "When people attend Blessing Ceremonies, we do follow up with the parents and their children. Almost every new member in Battambang joined our church after the parents received the blessing. They study the Divine Principle and attend two-day, seven-day and twenty-one-day workshops. Many are students in Battambang University, three hundred meters from here."



We had breakfast with Hen Hut, the local FFWPU leader, who joined our movement in 2007. He and his wife have two children. He teaches English at the university. He has blessed 486 couples; 430 have

completed the three-day ceremony. "Hen Hut is an expert at guiding VIPs to become regular members," Rev. Saito comments. "He is gifted at convincing them to attend our services and to tithe. Today and tomorrow, he will be our MC."

Already, members in Battambang Province have held over forty 430-couple Blessing Ceremonies. Around fifty percent of the couples have completed the forty-day separation and the three-day ceremony. These couples attend home-group events and worship services bi-weekly worship services in public places.

They do some form of tithing. They view the blessing ceremony as the core activity to restore the nation, along with establishing the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace and the Inter-religious Association for Peace and Development. "We teach parliamentarians to receive the blessing," said Rev. Saito. "The blessing campaign is the best way to know their constituents; religious leaders know how the virtues taught by religions are empty without stable families."



Battambang, a model being studied

Various stakeholders -- Cambodian Unificationists, Japanese and Korean Unificationists who attain their tribal messiahship in Cambodia because the follow-up is serious,, a network of local political and NGO leaders who have attended Asian Leadership Conferences, have received the blessing and see the blessing as vital for local and national development -- treat the work in Battambang as a pilot project.

After a quick lunch with the Japanese couple who will officiate the blessing ceremony in the Moug Ruessei District on a property owned by the Cambodian People's Party, we go there. The banner has "Interfaith Peace Blessing Festival" in Khmer and in English and bears the UPF and FFWPU logos. Under a colorful tent our members erected overnight, couples are patiently waiting. Many women wear their traditional khmer sampot; some husbands are in their best attire. In the pre-program, a dynamic speaker relaxes and instills confidence in the couples. Suddenly, everybody stands respectfully as three Buddhist monks enter near the stage. The program starts with a lecture about the three blessings, the Fall and True Parents' restorative role. The ceremony took almost two hours, combining our Unificationist rituals, prayers by a Buddhist monk, a Muslim imam and a Christian pastor, speeches, and other moments.

With the playing of the Cambodian national anthem, the gathering of these humble rural people suddenly becomes noble, solemn. True Parents urged us to see the blessing ceremony not as a church event but as a national one and as registration in Cheon Il Guk. We enter the kingdom of God as families, but it should be at the national level. This point is even clearer in light of Cambodia's national motto, "nation, religion, king." Khmers see the nation as a common spiritual legacy symbolized by their parental figure, the king. They might see True Parents as the parents and monarchs of humankind.

Fast sex versus sex fasting

After all couples have drunk the holy wine, Chong Pet, the vice-minister of rural development speaks. He often travels from Phnom Penh to Battambang to address the couples. He is the tribal leader of 681 couples. Among them, 432 have completed the three-day ceremony. His speech reminds the couples that

right after the ceremony the forty- day separation period starts. The translation I hear for a Khmer expression he uses "sex fasting," for sexual abstinence. Whereas foreigners often go to Cambodia for casual, fast sex, this commitment to "sex fasting" is interesting. Some people respond to Chong Pet's exhortation by laughter or shouting.



Before the holy water sprinkling and recitation of vows start, a special session takes place, which can be seen only in Cambodia. Heng Monychenda, the director of Buddhism and Development, is well known here. This former Buddhist monk (1980-97) holds Harvard University master's degree in public administration. After paying his respect to True Parents, Heng Monychenda asks which couples had the Khmer Rouge married by force. A few couples raised their hands and came onstage.

How did you meet your wife? Heng asked a husband.

I was forced to marry her, he answered.

What if you had refused?

I would not be here to answer you. It was "love" or death?

Forced marriages are one more tragedy of the Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979). Heng Monychenda has studied these couples' circumstances and offers "group therapy" during our Blessing Ceremonies. They speak in public and express their feelings. This accomplished scholar helps simple people speak and laugh in public. Each man and woman would say something. One can feel a profound humanity and dignity emanating from them. Though many forced marriages ended tragically, these couple tell us something profound about human relationships.

I love my wife; she is everything to me, says an old man.

Well, you drink a lot; don't tell a lie, says his beloved.

I used to drink; that's true, but less now, because I am getting old. Even when I drank, I could not stop loving you.

Another man, his face wrinkled, missing many teeth, speaks. Suddenly, tears come to his eyes and he shouts in a passionate voice:

You young couples here, you received a nice blessing today. My wife and I never had a wedding party. We lived like animals for years; even animals live better. But let me tell you something: My wife and I are still together. Though Cambodian couples look smart nowadays, how long do they last?

Can you tell me?

After this, the ceremony reaches its climax. People receive the holy water, and hear the sound of Father's prayer in Korean, sometimes covered by the Khmer translation. Father's blessing prayer makes many couples; this ceremony may be a turning point in their lives.

The three couples who demonstrated taking the holy wine come back onstage to perform the indemnity stick ceremony, and then all the other couples perform it. A group photographs followed, and then a professional catering team served a delicious banquet.



The next day, they will hold a similar ceremony, with about the same number of people. Cambodian members guide everything in both ceremonies. Rev. Saito is present, but discrete. He speaks only a few minutes, relating an anecdote of Father's life. At the end of the second ceremony, I see him starting a Khmer dance with young members. Later on, he explains to me, "Our human responsibility is to give the blessing, but the core of the blessing is the three-day ceremony. This is when God directly works and starts to guide people. If we never try, it never happens. If it starts to happen, the providence enters a new stage."

Following the second ceremony, we went by road to Phnom Penh where I met Peter and Matsumi Schmitat at the national headquarters. (see Cambodia's Winning Team) The next day, Rev. Saito and Sophal Chamroeun, the national leader, bring me to the National Parliament Building in Phnom Penh, where we meet Ouk Damry (Blessed in 2009 at Sun Moon University) and Pen Panha. I also discover the city of Phnom Penh. I enjoy the well-preserved old colonial town and its large avenues with many trees in full blossom. When we arrive at the island of Ko Pich, I ask the driver to slow down. In front of me, I see a modern replica of some areas of Paris' eighth arrondissement, the most expensive quarter of the French capital, near Champs-Élysées. Suddenly, I see it! Phnom Penh's Arc de Triomphe, almost completed. Thinking of the blessing ceremony in the rural area the day before, I see that while we conduct the internal movement to restore the nation, some areas of the country seem to thrive externally.

This impression of external excellence is confirmed when we meet Ly Chheng and his staff in his office. Ly Chheng is a construction industry magnate. The Beltei Group, which he founded, now has four branches -- Beltei Construction, Beltei Education, Beltei Tour and Travel and Beltei Charity. Ly Chheng discovered our movement when True Mother spoke in Bangkok in 2017. "Your capacity to bring together political leaders, religious leaders, scholars and many young people is like a dream come true. We need that here," he said. His son, the group's vice-chairman, attended UPF's International Leadership Conference, last February in Seoul. The father and the son seem to be among the righteous, prepared people in Cambodia.

Having reached the top in construction, Ly Chheng knew that something was missing in his life. He felt a calling to invest in education and built twenty-one schools in Phnom Penh, from elementary schools to high schools. His passion for education finally led him to build Beltei International University, a beautiful building equipped with state of the art technology. With six faculties, it has become a source of national pride. Ly Chheng' priorities have changed, from building towers to building people of character and vision. The man looks busy and yet serene. True Parents tell us about the roles of teacher, parent and owner. Ly Chheng is living his life as a teacher with vision, a parent with righteousness and a creator with a strong sense of national responsibility.