

Bringing Christ's Love to Laos

It's the world's most heavily bombed country per capita, the "poor relation" of Southeast Asia. The average income is perhaps \$40 a month. Old people have no pension to look forward to and young people must pay "under the table" if they hope to get a place in university. Many in the countryside depend on subsistence farming.

Nothing is wasted—not even heads and hooves, blood and entrails of butchered animals. Shampoo is sold in individual packets for those who can't afford a whole bottle. Even some of the 260 million bombs that were dropped on the land have been made into fences or house stilts.

The Communist regime that took control of Laos in 1975 has fostered close ties with neighboring China and Vietnam. In an attempt to weaken clan loyalties, the government banned the use of surnames among some people groups and only the Lao language was taught in schools. Even large groups like the Khmu and Hmong had no written language or books in their own language until perhaps the last 20 years.

Yet most people continued to follow the traditions of Buddhism mixed with spiritism. "Spirit houses" outside homes or affixed to trees bear the food and drink offerings of the faithful, and are just as omnipresent as Communist flags.

When their initial attempts to quench Buddhism failed, authorities chose to accept it as culture rather than religion. Temples are everywhere, and in some places monks take in orphans and teach local boys [not girls] how to read and write.

Each morning thousands of saffron-robed monks hit the streets to beg for food and alms. Notes one pastor, "Some temples

outside the city have no monks and people are happy because they don't have to feed them every day. Sometimes people ask me how much they need to pay to accept Jesus! One obstacle for young people coming to faith, however, is their parents' fear that no one will keep the tradition of offering food for them when they are deceased."

The Lao Evangelical Church is very much government-controlled. Foreigners are allowed to attend one of the three registered churches in the capital, but usually not in other areas. Some pastors have no formal training and tend to preach their own gospel; salvation by works is often emphasized since that fits with the party line. Other pastors get their theological training in Thailand and, back in Laos, quietly start underground churches.

"The Lao government says it's OK to be a Christian, but in fact it's not true," states Pastor S. "They tell me I have to have permission to visit a village or build a church, but they never give permission. The government tells everyone that Christians are American tools, that you're not a proper Lao citizen if you believe, and that pastors expect to sleep with other men's wives or daughters.

"The police don't like it when we Christians gather together," he continues. "There are pastors in jail right now. Some leaders have fled to Thailand. Four churches were closed in one province. We are watched. Last year they took me for interrogation by the provincial officer many times. Once a meeting was interrupted by four police in uniform, who just stood there. But we still worship, still pray whether they like it or not. We are also training and encouraging young students and sending them out."

The Khmu people group, once animist and then Buddhist, have been the most responsive to the Christian message, glad to be released from the demands of witch doctors. "They are the gate," affirms a pastor in the north, "but it is our dream to

reach every tribe, every group with the gospel—not just the Khmu. We also want to bring hope to people in need by teaching them how to help themselves, how to make their farms thrive and develop new products.”

Meanwhile, poverty drives many girls in Laos to sell themselves, or forces their parents to sell them. Hundreds of thousands are lost in Thailand’s sex trade. OM leader Michael* observes that destitution is also a factor in the country’s very high abortion rate, even among Christians, even though it is illegal except in extreme cases. “It’s a method of birth control,” he says. “The sanctity of life doesn’t exist in a lot of Buddhist countries; since you get reborn, it’s no big deal.”

Michael and Karin* moved to Laos about seven years ago with Mercy Teams International (MTI), OM’s mercy arm in South East Asia. After language study in Vientiane they crossed the northern mountains to a city where they taught English and helped to establish a day care center. This center has had a great impact on both children and staff and is now being run by a local believer.

Stepping away from MTI and relocating to the capital as the leader of OM Laos in 2010, Michael began his own business. But his primary goal—one that makes a lot of sense in this country—is to use business for transforming lives, both physically and spiritually. In March this year he hosted a basic training course for entrepreneurs that he hopes to offer as a regular ministry.

Laos is still very much pioneering territory for OM. Over the last four years Michael has welcomed short-term “Out of the Comfort Zone” teams; in the future it is possible that Asia Challenge Teams (ACT) will spend longer periods in the country. He is also enlisting Laotian staff who are passionate about reaching their own people.

“Character is more important than skills,” Michael stresses when he talks about the kind of team he needs. “We can use all kinds of professionals—we even have a ‘food engineer’ in the pipeline to help non-government organizations here—but they have to know God is calling them and be willing to live out His compassion. The fact is that few have ever heard the name of Jesus in Laos.” He pauses, then adds: “We want that to change.”

**Names changed*