Alumni Serving Around the World: Chris Seawright

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Chris and Heidi Seawright are serving as missionaries in Cambodia with Gospel Fellowship Association. Chris is a DBTS alumnus (M.Div., 2002). The Seawrights have two children: Rachel (age 2 yrs.) and Isaac Martyn (age 3 mos.). He recently shared his perspective on serving as a missionary.

How did the Lord work in your life and in Heidi’s life to call you and prepare you for missions service?

My preparation for missionary service began at my salvation as a 9-year old. My unsaved, military family was living in Puerto Rico at the time, and it was through a missionary that was reaching out to the military that I came to Christ. For the next three years we worshipped and served in this missionary church. In high school, I had the opportunity to go on three summer mission trips with my youth group. The Lord used those trips to increase my burden for missions. In college I was still unsure of the Lord’s leading in my life. I thought the Lord was leading me into Christian education as a Math teacher, but after a summer mission trip to Kenya, East Africa, in 1996 (after my senior year at Bob Jones), the Lord made His will clear to me by changing my desires and giving me a desire to be a foreign missionary. A few years later, at Mission 2000 at Inter-City Baptist Church, the Lord used a message by Dr. Mark Minnick to press upon my heart (and Heidi’s as well) a desire for pioneer missions.

The Lord used a missions conference in the fall of 1997 at our church, University Baptist in Clemson, SC, to give Heidi a desire for foreign missions. In 1999, Heidi went to Papua New Guinea as a short-term missionary assisting a church planter. Her time in Papua New Guinea further confirmed that foreign missions was God’s will for her life.

How did your time in seminary aid in your preparation for that task?

I will better be able to answer this question in a few more years as I reach a point in my language training when I will have more and more opportunities to preach and teach God’s word in a cross-cultural setting. I can confidently say at this point, though, that I will never regret my time in seminary at DBTS. The skills and tools I gained in seminary will greatly help me with my future ministry as long as I continue to rely on the Lord each day. Going to seminary has given me a solid foundation upon which to build and has forced me (in a good way) to think through issues, philosophy, and doctrine ahead of time.

What have been the greatest challenges during these early days of missionary preparation and service?

One of my greatest challenges personally is dealing with all the corruption that is prevalent in both the government and in many of the churches and Christian organizations here in Cambodia. People regularly lie, cheat, and steal in order to advance their cause (which, in most cases, is to
get more money). This is true just as much in professing Christian circles as it is in the secular culture. What is most amazing to me is that dishonesty is not condemned, but rather, praised as being clever or smart. To tell the truth is to be weak and unwise. Every day I see this corruption played out before me in the people who run my language school. They are corrupt to the core, yet I know that I must respond to them in a Christlike manner. This takes a lot of meekness which, at times, is very difficult for me.

**What have been the best resources and approaches for working through those challenges?**

Regarding this particular challenge, reading books on cross-cultural ministry has helped. I have also talked to other missionaries who have been on the field longer than I. I am learning to trust a sovereign God who is completely just and will judge all men righteously one day.

**What are the most helpful lessons you have learned about the Christian walk and gospel ministry?**

In addition to the lessons already mentioned above (*meekness* and *trusting God*), with an indigenous philosophy of ministry, I have also learned that I need to be careful to be balanced and learn how to exhibit *compassion* towards the *Khmais* and their physical needs and at the same time be careful not to cause them to be dependent on me. The patron-client mentality is very strong here in Cambodia. I want to help people (show compassion towards them) but do it in a way that will be best for them in the long run.

**What have been the biggest surprises to you during your language training and cultural adaptation on the mission field?**

There haven’t been any major surprises in our **language training**. I believe linguistic school adequately prepared us for our future task of learning a language. Of course, there are many things you can’t truly learn until you have experienced them. We knew ahead of time that it would be a lot of work and that it would definitely take more than one year to accomplish. As they told us in linguistic school, you have to humble yourself to become like a little child again in order to be effective in learning a new language. At times, this has been difficult. Here are some language study tips that have greatly helped me.

1. Don’t underestimate the importance of listening first before speaking. I have found that listening is both the most important and, for me, the most difficult of the tasks in language learning. Don’t be forced into speaking too quickly. Take the time to listen first, just like little children do when they learn a language.
2. Internal motivation is more beneficial in learning a language than external motivation. What I mean by this is that one should take charge (the initiative) of one’s own language study. Your “teacher(s)” should really be more like a “helper”—someone from whom to get the language. You set the agenda and pace.
3. Get out and practice as much as possible. Talk to regular people who don’t speak any English. Force yourself to listen and speak in your target language.
4. Use variety and be creative for your own sake. Employ multiple ways of using the language at the same time. This will keep you from getting bored.
5. Ask tons of questions about the language, but never ask “why” concepts are expressed a certain way—most of the time the teachers don’t know “why.”

6. Don’t feel like you have to completely understand a given word’s usage, meaning, etc. in one day. Give yourself time to observe how the word is used in various contexts.

Concerning cultural adaptation, we have had some surprises. Some things we knew academically beforehand, but now we know first-hand, and I am sure we will experience even more in the days ahead. We have read some good books on cross-cultural ministry and adjustment that have been a great help to us in understanding why people do what they do, think what they think, etc. The hardest thing to discern is to know what things are good, what things are wrong, and what things are just “different” in the culture. Even though the U.S. is quickly degenerating toward pagan culture, there are still many major principles and practices in American culture that have been greatly influenced by centuries of Gospel proclamation and its strong Christian heritage. Since the historic impact of the Gospel on a country like Cambodia is much less profound, these values and concepts, so foundational in American culture, are strikingly absent from their culture. For example, lying is quite acceptable here and even encouraged in order to save face or in order to advance in a given job. This would, of course, be a segment of Cambodian life that is wrong. There are also many things in the Cambodian culture that are not tied at all to a particular biblical principle and would just be “different” from what we as Americans would believe and practice. These are the things we must learn to adjust in our thinking and practice. We must learn not to call them “wrong” but just “different.”

What are the most encouraging opportunities available to you on the mission field?

There are three specific aspects of ministry I am eagerly anticipating.
1. I am looking forward to doing the work of an evangelist and preaching the Gospel to people who have never heard a clear presentation of the truth-claims of biblical Christianity. This has been a particular burden of mine for many years.
2. I am looking forward to a Bible teaching ministry where I can pour my life into faithful men who will be able to effectively teach their own people. My heart is for these men and to see a genuine work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.
3. I would love to have a part in translating and writing Christian resources in the Khmai language that would benefit Khmai Christians throughout Cambodia.

What would you want to share with young men praying about or preparing for missions service?

1. We greatly need more church-planting missionaries with solid theological training and a proper philosophy of missions and ministry.
2. Begin to think through your own personal philosophy of missions by reading good missions books, asking many questions of veteran missionaries whom you respect, and discussing missions philosophy with other seminarians interested in missions.
3. Don’t underestimate the importance of language in missions. Language, I believe, is one of the most significant aspects of ministry on the foreign field. Purpose that you will learn your target language and learn it well. Do everything you can to prepare for this task by going to a good linguistic school and taking your language studies now seriously (Greek and Hebrew). Make sure
to set time aside once you arrive on the field to concentrate all of your energies on language study. Be careful not to jump into ministry too quickly and thus hamper your language skills in the long run. Many missionaries who jumped into ministry too quickly have told me that they regret it now. Even after many years they are still struggling with the language, and therefore their ministry is limited. Don’t fall into this trap.

4. Realize that a missionary is different from a pastor. That is not to say that a missionary never does pastoral work, but a missionary with an indigenous philosophy of missions is primarily an evangelist and a teacher. Having said that, you must think about ministry differently from what you have observed from your pastor(s) in the States.

5. Take advantage of any experiences you can get overseas serving with missionaries who have an indigenous philosophy of missions.

6. Finally, the needs here in Southeast Asia are overwhelming. There are many parts of Southeast Asia that have never been evangelized. This may be the next place of God’s special working. Seriously consider this part of the world—Bangkok (6 million people with less than five fundamental missionaries) and the areas recently hit by the tsunami (Indonesia, Sri Lanka). We are also praying for four more like-minded families to come and join our team here in Cambodia.