

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Cambodia

Population: 15.46 millions (#69 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 181,035 square km. Cambodia is located in Southeastern Asia and borders Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and the Gulf of Thailand. The climate in the country is tropical, with plains occupying most of the country covered in rainforest and jungle, much of which is swampy. The Mekong River enters Cambodia from the north and exits to the southeast into Vietnam before emptying into the South China Sea. A large, shallow lake with swampy coastlines named Tonle Sap is the primary geographical feature between the capital city of Phnom Penh and the second largest city of Battambang to the northwest. A few small islands near the coast of Cambodia in the Gulf of Thailand also belong to the country. Flooding is the primary natural hazard, whereas deforestation and strip mining are environmental concerns. Cambodia is administratively divided into twenty-four provinces and one municipality.

Peoples

Khmer: 97.6%

Cham: 1.2%

Chinese: 0.1%

Vietnamese: 0.1%

Other: 0.9%

The population is homogeneously Khmer. Chinese and Vietnamese are concentrated primarily in the capital, Phnom Penh. The Cham were targeted by the Khmer Rouge along with the Chinese and had their numbers significantly reduced.

Population: 16,449,519 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.48% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.47 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 62.7 male, 67.9 female (2018)

Languages: Khmer [Cambodian] (94.8%), Chinese languages (3.0%), Cham (1.2%), other/unspecified (1.0%). Khmer is the official language; 27 languages are spoken. Only Khmer has over one million speakers (15.6 million).

Literacy: 80.5% (2015)

History

The powerful Angkor Empire occupied what is today Cambodia between 900 and 1200 AD. The French colonized Cambodia in the late nineteenth century and controlled the region until World War II when the area was invaded by Japan. Following World War II, France regained jurisdiction until independence in the early 1950s. A communist regime named the Khmer Rouge overtook Phnom Penh in 1975 under Pol Pot. For the following several years, an estimated one to three million people in the country were executed or died from starvation or exhaustion due to ethnic cleansing and the implementation of radical communist ideology. The Khmer Rouge was driven out by the Vietnamese in the late 1970s and 1980s. For the following decade and a half Cambodia suffered from political instability between the Khmer and Vietnamese. A stable government was elected in the late 1990s. Since this time, Cambodia has enjoyed increasing peace and stability. However, in the late 2010s, political instability occurred between competing political parties. Eventually, in 2017 the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) was banned for at least five years, and the country became a one-party state in 2018.

Cambodia is home to many temple sites build in the twelfth century, such as the famous Angkor Wat temple complex. Many of the tourists come to Cambodia to visit Angkor Wat and similar sites.

Culture

Buddhism and the Angkor Empire have heavily shaped Cambodian culture. Social views on wealth and its public display have changed rapidly since the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Wealth is generally displayed through jewelry or clothing. Rapid industrialization continues to increase materialism. Etiquette is deeply related to the Khmer language. Ethnic tensions between Khmer and Vietnamese are high. Fish and rice are important food staples. Bonn Om Teuk, a boat racing festival, occurs annually on the Mekong River. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are lower than most countries.

Economy

GDP per capita: $4,000 (2017) [6.69% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.582 (2017)

Corruption Index: 20 (2018)

Most of the economy centers on textile exports. For example, two-thirds of exports consisted of textiles in 2017. Strong economic growth has occurred, with GDP growth rates seven percent or higher since 2000. Nevertheless, the economy is weakly developed. Most are underemployed. There is a shortage of skilled labor and diversification in the economy. Approximately half the population works in agriculture, whereas approximately 20% of the population works in industry and 31.5% of the population works in services. Services constitute 41.9% of the GDP, whereas industry and agriculture account for 32.8% and 25.3% of the GDP, respectively. The countryside remains very poor and isolated from urban, wealthier cities. Primary agriculture products include rice, rubber, corn, vegetables, nuts, and silk. The area around the second largest city Battambang is the most productive for agriculture, and rice can be grown year-round due to easily accessible water for irrigation. Other natural resources include gems and wood products. Tourism, garments, construction, and agriculture activities constitute the primary industries. China, the United States, Singapore, and Thailand are the primary trade partners.

Corruption is perceived as widespread and a serious detriment to society and the modernization of the economy. There have been some reports of government, police, and military authorities participating in illicit drug trafficking. Money laundering remains a serious concern. There has been no measurable improvement with the reduction of perceived corruption within the past decade.

Faiths

Buddhist: 97.9%

Muslim: 1.1%

Christian: 0.5%

Other: 0.5%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals* – 240,196

Latter-day Saints – 14,725 – 28

Roman Catholic – less than 10,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 3,392 – 39

Jehovah's Witnesses – 1,156 – 16

*Evangelical numbers according to Operation World place the percentage of Christians much higher than other estimates.[1]

Religion

The population is homogeneously Buddhist. Other religions comprise less than five percent of the population – and most of these religious minorities are Muslim or Christian. Islam is primarily practiced by the Cham people who live around the city of Kampong Cham. Christianity is practiced by less than 2% of the population. Most Christians appear to live in Phnom Penh and other major cities. Native to the northeast, the Phnong people are predominantly animist and account for 0.28% of the population.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. Government does not permit religious discrimination. The official religion is Buddhism, and the government recognizes Buddhist holidays and promotes the religion. Non-Buddhist religious are not permitted to proselyte. Religious literature from non-Buddhists groups may only be distributed in religious buildings. Legislation requires meeting places for religious purposes to be registered with the government albeit the government does enforce violations of this requirement. A place of worship must have a minimum capacity of 200 people and support at least 100 members of the congregation, whereas an office of prayer requires at least twenty-five congregants to operate. Religious groups must register with the government to operate. Only Buddhism can be taught in public schools; other religions may be taught in private schools. Few societal and government violations of religious freedom have been recently reported.[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 23.8% (2019)

Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, **Poipet, Preah Sihanouk, Sisophon,** Ta Khmau, Kampong Cham, **Kampong Speu,** Kien Svay.

Cities in **bold** do not have congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Six of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Fifteen percent (15%) of the national population lives in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

The first Cambodian members of the Church were baptized in the United States in the 1970s after emigrating due to war in Southeast Asia. In the late 1980s, a French doctor shared copies of the Book of Mormon with a few Khmer colleges in Phnom

Penh and donated a few others to local education institutions. In 1991, there were eight full-time missionaries who taught in Khmer in Boston, Massachusetts among the Cambodian population.[3] However by the late 2000s, there were no Khmer-speaking congregations in the Northeast United States. Missionaries who have served in the region report of hundreds of inactive Cambodian members.

Legal recognition was granted to the Church in Cambodia on March 4, 1994. The first Church representatives in the country were senior missionary couples who served in humanitarian and service efforts. At this time the senior missionaries in Cambodia were not allowed to proselyte. The first Church meeting in the country was held on March 27, 1994 in a hotel. The first convert baptism in Cambodia occurred in May 1994, and congregations were created shortly thereafter.[4] President Hinckley visited Cambodia in May of 1996 and dedicated the country for missionary work. President Hinckley spoke at a special fireside with 439 in attendance, half of whom were not church members. In July 1997, the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission was created from the Thailand Bangkok Mission.

In 2016, the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission divided to create the Vietnam Hanoi Mission. In 2018, Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve visited members in Phnom Penh.[5] That same year, the Church announced a temple for Phnom Penh.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 14,725 (2018)

Church membership totaled 200 in 1995, 2,136 in 2000, 7,465 in 2005, and 10,530 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 12%–63% between 2001 and 2004 and declined to 2%–9% between 2005 and 2009. In 2010, the annual membership growth rate increased to 18.2%, but declined to 3-6% for most years in the 2010s. Church membership reached 13,349 in 2015 and 14,725 in 2018.

The majority of the growth of the Church over the years has taken place in Phnom Penh. Rapid membership growth has generally occurred initially after the Church organizes its first branch in a previously unreached city, but membership growth rates usually slow substantially thereafter. For example, in Battambang the branch experienced rapid growth during the first year and a half of its operation. In April 2005, membership in the branch reached 150 and had outgrown their rented building used for Sunday Church meetings.[6] By July 2005 the first five missionaries were called to serve missions from the branch, and membership had risen to 170.[7] However, membership growth has appeared modest in Battambang in the 2010s.

In 2018, one in 1,117 was nominally a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 10 Branches: 18 (September 2019)

The first district was created in Phnom Penh in November 1995, with three branches (two Khmer-speaking and one Vietnamese-speaking) and over 200 members. By the end of 1997 there were three Khmer-speaking branches and one Vietnamese-speaking branch. A fifth congregation was organized by 1999.[8]

Congregations began to be established outside of the capital city in the 2000s. The Church organized its first branches in Ta Khmau and Kampong Cham in 2000. A Vietnamese-speaking district was created for the three Vietnamese branches in Phnom Penh in December 2001, and the Khmer-speaking district was divided in December 2002 to create a second Khmer-speaking district in Phnom Penh. The Church organized its first branches in additional cities during the early 2000s such as Kien Svay (2003) and Battambang (2004). A fourth district in Cambodia was created in 2005 in the city of Kampong Cham, where there were three branches. The number of branches in Cambodia increased from five in 1999 to 11 in 2000, 12 in 2001, 14 in 2002, 16 in 2003, and 20 in 2004.

The Church organized its first branches in Siem Reap and Kampong Thom in 2007. In 2009, two new branches were created in Cambodia. An English-speaking branch, named the Phnom Penh 13th Branch, was created. Also, the Battambang Branch divided into the Battambang 1st and the Battambang 2nd Branches. In 2010, Battambang became its own district with a mere two branches. In 2011 and 2012, several new branches were organized in Phnom Penh. The Church created the Phnom Penh Cambodia East District in 2012. In 2014, the Church organized its first two stakes in Cambodia on the same day in Phnom Penh, namely the Phnom Penh Cambodia North Stake and the Phnom Penh Cambodia South Stake.

Slow congregational growth also occurred during the 2010s outside of Phnom Penh. A second branch in Ta Khmau was organized in 2011. A third branch was created in Battambang in 2013. A second branch was organized in Siem Reap in 2015, and Siem Reap was organized into its own district the same year. Member groups operated intermittently during the 2010s in additional cities such as Baku, Neak Loeang, Pursat, and Skun. However, none of these member groups appeared to operate as of late 2019 per reports from returned missionaries.

The Church discontinued the Vietnamese-speaking district in Phnom Penh in 2017 due to the emigration of Vietnamese members. One of the three Vietnamese branches also closed. Another Vietnamese-speaking branch closed in early 2019. By late 2019, there was only one Vietnamese-speaking branch in Phnom Penh, and the Vietnamese language program in the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission closed. By late 2019, there were two stakes and four districts in Cambodia.

As of June 2011, there were four Khmer-speaking congregations in the United States, consisting of three congregations in California (one ward and two branches) and one branch in Utah. The first U.S. Khmer-speaking ward was organized in Long Beach, California in 2005. However, by late 2019 only two Khmer-speaking congregations operated in the United States: one in West Valley City, Utah and one in Oakland, California.

Activity and Retention

Low member activity was the main impediment that delayed the creation of stakes in Phnom Penh until 2014. Nominal membership growth became increasingly uncoupled from congregational growth in the mid-2000s. The number of branches increased from fourteen in 2002 to twenty-four in 2009, while nominal membership more than tripled, indicating that most new members were not retained. The average number of members per congregation increased from 194 in 2000 to 439 in 2010 and 508 in 2018. Most branches in Phnom Penh had between 100 and 200 active members in 2011. In September 2009, sacrament meeting attendance in the Siem Reap Branch was reported to be around 130, double the number from a year before. During the 2009–2010 school year, 603 were enrolled in seminary and institute.

The Church has reported attendance figures at several large meetings or conference. Over 900 members attended a meeting with Elder Dallin H. Oaks at the Phnom Penh Cambodia South District center, whereas 400 members in other locations joined the conference by audio links from other meetinghouses.[9] Combined attendance for the creation of the first two stakes in Phnom Penh in 2014 was 1,237.[10] Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles addressed over 2,000 members in Phnom Penh in 2015.[11] Returned missionaries reported that nationwide sacrament meeting attendance increased from 2,200 to nearly 3,000 between 2012 and 2014.

Information obtained from returned missionaries who served in the mid to late 2010s noted the following number of active members per congregation as follows: Siem Reap [one of the two branches] (115), Teuk Thla (100-110), Chbar Ampov (100), Kien Svay (100), Toul Sang Ke (100), Ta Chamkarmorn (90), Teuk Laak (80-90), Kampong Cham branches (40-90), Pochentong (80), Tuol Tom Pong (80), Battambang branches (70-90), Khmau branches (70-80), Steung Mean Chey Wards (60-110), Pochentong (60-95), Tuol Kok (60), and Chaktomuk (40-60). In 2019, returned missionaries reported that most wards have between 100 and 150 active members. At the time, most branches appeared to have between 75-125 active members.

There were approximately 500 convert baptisms in the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission in 2018, most of which occurred in Phnom Penh. In the 2010s, the mission generally baptized between 500 and 700 converts a year. Returned missionaries noted that full families regularly join the Church in Phnom Penh. Estimated convert retention rates one year after baptism were typically 30-40% during the 2000s per return missionary reports.

Nationwide active membership is estimated to be at least 3,000, or 20% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese (traditional and simplified characters).

All Church scriptures are available in Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese (traditional and simplified characters). The Church has translated many priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, audio/visual, family history, and scripture materials into these languages.

Meetinghouses

The first Church built meetinghouse was dedicated in 2004 to be used by all three districts in Phnom Penh for large meetings. During 2008, at least two new chapels were built in Phnom Penh. A district meetinghouse for the Phnom Penh Cambodia North District was dedicated at the end of May. A meetinghouse for the Phnom Penh 4th and 11th Branches was dedicated later that year in the southeastern portion of the city. In 2019, there were thirteen meetinghouses in Cambodia – six of which were in Phnom Penh. One of the meetinghouses in Phnom Penh is utilized by five congregations.

Health and Safety

Cambodia has a high risk for the spread of infectious disease; 0.5% are infected with HIV.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted significant humanitarian and development work in Cambodia. There have been at least 276 projects completed by the Church since 1985, including Benson Food initiatives, clean water projects, community projects, emergency response, immunization efforts, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.[12]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys religious freedom. There have been no barriers in regards to the Church's operations in Cambodia. However, legislation regarding the use of spaces for worship services may pose challenges for outreach expansion if there are not enough members or investigators to meet these standards of at least twenty-five congregants to obtain government permission. Nevertheless, this requirement does not constitute an insurmountable barrier for expansion. Missionaries do not report proselytism restrictions.

National Outreach

Thirteen percent (13%) of the national population resides in cities with a ward or branch. No other major city in continental Southeast Asia has as widespread of a Church presence as Phnom Penh given that the average ward or branch has approximately 120,000 people within its geographical boundaries. There are also several branches that meet in communities on the outskirts of Phnom Penh such as Sen Sok and Chbar Ampov. The Church is only accessible by Cambodians living in or around Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom. The remaining large cities lack a Church presence, including Preah Sihanouk on the coast and Sisophon near the Thai border. About half of the approximate 16.5 million Cambodians live in a province that does not have a congregation. Even in the provinces with a church presence, most have hundreds of thousands of people in unreached areas. The majority of Cambodia's population is rural, which presents logistical challenges to reach vast geographical areas with lower population densities. The Church has yet to establish a presence in rural communities.

The Church operates a Khmer version of its official website at https://www.lds.org.kh/. There is also an English language version of the Church's official newsroom site for Cambodia at https://www.mormonnewsroom.org.kh/. The Church's official website for online proselytism, ComeuntoChrist.org, has yet to be translated into Khmer. Online resources can help reach areas of Cambodia where there is no Church presence. Illiteracy poses a challenge to reach some areas through written materials.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The Church in Cambodia has grown rapidly with low convert retention and member activity rates. During the decade of the 2000s, membership increased eightfold, and the number of congregations increased nearly five times. Membership and congregation growth has slowed dramatically between 2006 to present. One reason for the slowdown in growth has been mission leadership devoting more time and resources to preparing members of the Church in Phnom Penh for a stake to be created instead of adding as many converts as in prior years. Following the creation of the first stakes in 2014, the Church in Phnom Penh struggled with consistent church attendance in many wards for the first couple years following the operation of stakes. Problems with inactivity appear to continue to delay the advancement of the Phnom Penh Cambodia East District into a stake as the district has tried multiple times to become a stake without success as of late 2019. Inactivity and convert attrition are also problematic outside of Phnom Penh. The division of the Battambang branch was delayed until the summer of 2009, notwithstanding rapid numerical membership growth, due to challenges of low convert retention and difficulties with leadership development.

Poverty produces challenges for retention when individuals join the Church in hopes of material improvement. In Kampong Cham, where many members joined at least partly due to strong church welfare programs, only about 50 of the 390 members in one branch attended Church meetings in the late 2000s. Problems with recent converts and activity linked to their dependence on welfare monies is not unusual among many other nationalities in Southeast Asia in their home countries and in the United States. It can be difficult for missionaries and leadership to discern whether there are those learning about the Church for the right reasons, especially if they struggle financially.

Another key factor in the slowdown has been prior practices of quickly baptizing who were not regularly attending church before baptism and who lacked other gospel habits and subsequently did not become and remain active members. A focus on ensuring the proper teaching of prospective converts and requiring that necessary life changes be consistently implemented and firmly established before baptism will be essential to decrease avoidable convert losses. Unfortunately, there has been no measurable improvement with convert retention rates during the 2010s based upon approximately one dozen surveys completed by returned missionaries from the Cambodia Phnom Penh Mission. Compounding inactivity problems and the centers of strength policy has dissuaded national outreach expansion in favor of rectifying these issues and helping improve

self-sufficiency among membership. Recently returned full-time missionaries have also observed concerns with active membership becoming socially entrenched in their wards and branches, and demonstrating little to no interest in member-missionary participation.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The homogeneously Khmer population poses few challenges for ethnic assimilation due to a lack of ethnic diversity in most areas. Language differences and ethnic tensions between Khmer and Vietnamese contributed to the establishment of language-specific congregations and districts in Phnom Penh. However, most Vietnamese Latter-day Saints have since moved away from Phnom Penh. Integration of the Cham people into congregations may be challenging due to the large differences in culture, language and religion.

Language Issues

The large range of ecclesiastical materials and all Church scriptures in Khmer and Vietnamese allow potential outreach for all but a small fraction of the population. Outreach among the Muslim Cham and small, isolated tribes speaking native languages will be challenging as the Church has yet to begin outreach in these locations. Illiteracy poses difficulties for use of written materials.

Missionary service

In 1997, there were seventeen missionaries serving in the country. Earlier that year, the first missionary from Cambodia was called to serve from in Idaho. The number of missionaries serving in the country increased to twenty-four by the end of 1998. In 2004, the number of missionaries serving in the country had risen to about one hundred, half of whom were Cambodian. While Cambodians tend to serve in greater numbers than other Asian nations, Cambodia does not appear self-sufficient in its missionary force. A modest number of Cambodian youth have served missions in Cambodia and outside the country.

Leadership

With the exception of the English-speaking branch, all wards and branches appear to be led by local Cambodian members. The majority of Cambodia's population is under the age of thirty. This creates challenges for fellowshipping young converts while limiting those who can lead congregations due to their age. However, many youth converts who remain active later become pillars of strength as they live the gospel, serve missions, and marry and raise families in the Church. In the late 2010s, returned missionaries noted significant progress with leadership development, especially in Phnom Penh, which likely influenced the decision to build a temple in Phnom Penh. Most members have access to Church Education System (CES) programs designed to strengthen the testimonies and establish a doctrinal foundation. Senior missionaries serving in the Siem Reap and Kampong Thom Branches reported in 2009 that the seminary and institute programs were available for members of the Church in these remote branches for the first time, preparing many youth to serve missions. The Church has also appeared to fill top local leadership positions without overreliance on Church employees to staff these callings. For example, of the six men who comprised the two first stake presidencies in Cambodia in 2014, only one of these presidency members was a Church employee.[13] However, no Cambodians have appeared to serve as mission presidents, temple presidents, area authority seventies, or general authority seventies.

Temple

Cambodia is currently assigned to the Hong Kong China Temple district. Periodic temple trips are subsidized, as most members would not otherwise be able to afford the travel expenses, but still require member sacrifice. The Church announced plans to construct a temple in Phnom Penh in 2018. However, construction has not begun yet as of late 2019. The temple will likely be a small temple that will service Cambodia and Vietnam.

Comparative Growth

Both Mongolia and Cambodia have experienced similar history regarding the establishment of the Church, its rapid growth, and size of their current Church membership. The Church in Mongolia has seen higher retention and higher rates of missionary service than Cambodia, notwithstanding Cambodian immigrants in the United States being taught long before missionaries were serving in either Cambodia or Mongolia. Cambodia is the country in mainland Southeast Asia with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population.

Like Mongolia, Cambodia has a very small Christian population. The majority of Cambodian Christians belong to mainline Protestant denominations. Other missionary-oriented Christian churches have small memberships in Cambodia, although various Baptist and Evangelical groups reported rapid growth from the mid-1990s to the present with church-planting approaches. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has reported slow growth in the past decade with only six official churches in the country and approximately 3,400 members. However, Adventists also maintain thirty-three small congregations in

Cambodia. The number of active Jehovah's Witnesses and Witness congregations have doubled in the past decade. Witnesses maintain a smaller presence in Phnom Penh than Latter-day Saints. However, Witnesses operate in more cities than Latter-day Saints despite only 1,156 active members nationwide.

Future Prospects

The establishment of stakes and the announcement of a temple in Phnom Penh during the past decade signal maturation in local leadership and some sustained improvements in increasing numbers of active members. In the near future, focus from mission and area leaders will likely center on preparing Cambodian leadership to meet the responsibilities of staffing and operating a temple and helping the remaining district in Phnom Penh to become a stake. However, the lack of successful national outreach expansion since branches were organized in Kampong Thom and Siem Reap in 2007 indicate considerable concern regarding the Church's long-term success with taking advantage of opportunities for growth which are often time-sensitive. The closure of member groups in several locations in recent years suggests failures for leadership to become adequately developed in these areas without full-time missionary support. Despite these frustrations, regular consideration for the opening of additional cities and provinces to missionary work is desperately needed to help sustain Church growth and adequately reach the Cambodian population, of whom 87% reside in locations without a Church presence. Given a homogeneously Buddhist population and a one-party government, religious freedom conditions may worsen in the coming years to the point that the expansion of the Church into additional cities and provinces may become very difficult. Social entrenchment of active members in wards and branches is another concern that may indicate future deceleration in growth due to growing disinterest in member-missionary participation. A self-sustaining Cambodian full-time missionary force and Cambodian members directly involved in the expansion of the Church into additional areas of the country appears greatly needed to help reverse trends of slowing growth. Moreover, high standards for convert baptism are also needed given the Church in Cambodia's chronic challenges with member inactivity and convert attrition which appear primarily rooted in the duration and quality of pre-baptismal preparation. The development of teaching materials tailored to those with a Buddhist background appears needed to better convey the Latter-day Saint gospel message to the understanding of most Cambodians.

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