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## Frontier Internship in Mission

### **GLBT people's struggle with their gender and cultural values**



*By Paddy Noble*

MORE THAN ONE MILLION PEOPLE died from starvation or overwork in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, whose leaders attempted to create an agrarian utopia in this southern Asian country. Hundreds of thousands of educated middle class people were tortured and executed in special centers. The fall of the Khmer Rouge regime did not bring justice. Additionally, a legacy of the US-Vietnam war—which also engulfed Laos and Cambodia—was the devastation of the land, striking poverty, deep-seated mistrust, and countryside lethally filled with antipersonnel mines. FIM has responded to the missionary challenges posed by this reality by undertaking two internships in Cambodia. The first one, carried out by Emma Leslie from Australia between 1997 and 2000, focused on landmines.<sup>1</sup> The second internship, undertaken by Paddy Noble from New Zealand, grapples with the issues of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people's rights.

Recent controversies on human sexuality within churches—particularly the rift created inside the Anglican Communion by the ordination of a gay bishop in the USA—and the problems of homosexual and transgender people within all of Christianity, show the importance of approaching this issue with a sound theological perspective to inform the process of moral and spiritual discernment. In this respect, considering the weight of tradition and religion in the Asian context, Paddy Noble's internship is within the “frontier” and experimental approach that has been a distinctive feature of FIM.

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<sup>1</sup> Following her re-entry time in Australia, Emma returned to Cambodia to work with ACT (Action Conflict Transformation) a local NGO dealing with issues of poverty, conflict, abuse, and human rights issues.

The method adopted by the internship, rather than focusing on the traditional question: What does Christianity —the Bible, tradition, and ecclesiastical authority— teach about sexuality, brings a complementary perspective into the picture. What does our experience of human sexuality say about our perceptions of faith —our experience of God, our interpretations of Scripture and tradition, and our ways of living out the gospel? This is an important dialogical approach based on the assumption that theological perceptions are conditioned by sexual experiences and sexual experiences are perceived and interpreted through cultural and religious lenses.

Cambodia is largely conservative on issue of sexuality, although this is slowly changing. The growing rate of HIV/AIDS has forced a more open debate; new attitudes towards sex are emerging. In Cambodia the most unheard voices are those of GLBT people. In this context, Paddy’s internship contributed towards empowering GLBT people in Cambodia, among his own Maori people back home in Aotearoa, and other indigenous people in Asia and the Pacific.

Paddy’s internship responded to three main questions: Is it possible to create an indigenous GLBT theology that echoes the stories of our GLBT ancestors? Can these stories ignite and reaffirm positive images and ideas for indigenous GLBT people today? Can Christianity finally accept theological arguments and theories of GLBT peoples as an integral part of their own faith journey? His internship was hosted by the Cambodia Student Christian Mission (CSCM), the local movement affiliated with the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF).

### **A methodological indigenous approach**

Paddy’s methodology was based on an indigenous approach to action research that is purely indigenous. It contradicts the traditionalist research approach that reinforced European colonialism around the world. This methodology revolves around subjects claiming the importance of identity as indigenous people but also affirming the important contribution that indigenous GLBT people make in their respective societies. Testimonies intersect with ‘claiming’ because they both have an oral aspect, using the power of story telling as evidence to a particular type of audience. Paddy asserts that “in a safe situation, empowering indigenous GLBT people’s testimonies is a powerful tool of affirming who we are and finding strength in the solidarity of our commonality.”

Another key element of this methodology is story telling. “In my work situation in the Cambodia Student Christian Mission, we always try to incorporate the personal life stories of people to help us find meaning as young students. Story telling is a tool that empowers and helps us find our place in the world.” Celebrating survival, according to Paddy, accentuates the degree to which indigenous peoples and communities have successfully retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity. Paddy’s methodology also included a biblical hermeneutics from a GLBT perspective that seeks other ways of viewing and understanding gender as a means of empowering people.

In his meetings with CSCM members, Paddy explored student communities’ understanding of GLBT people. Following a conversation in which one CSCM member mentioned the presence of *kteuy* (transgender in Thai) in a borough of Phnom Penh, they began considering how Cambodian people perceive and stereotype GLBT people. “This information helped me to analyze words, which reflect some of the attitudes

Cambodian people have towards GLBT people. This was one of my most profound insights about how a different culture would label GLBT people. It gave me a chance to find out more about Cambodian culture,” said Paddy.

This analysis served yet another purpose. “Both the CSCM students and I were learning from each other and breaking down the walls between us and assumptions we had of each other. That enabled us to respect each other and to reach some kind of understanding of what it means to talk about issues concerning gender differences pertaining to GLBT people in a cross cultural situation.”

### **Facing a conservative theology**

Paddy contends that “the understanding, practice, and use of theology in Cambodia are as abstract as the political system.” He argues that the largest influence comes from a conservative brand of Christian theology imported from neighboring Asian countries and missionaries from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, China, and Korea. This theology emphasizes individual salvation and reinforces patriarchal attitudes. Many Christian leaders are men who continue to enjoy power and male dominance, leaving little space for church people to address gender issues. Although he doubts that churches will address the issue of gender disparities in the near future, he acknowledges that “some circles within the churches are willing to view God through the different perspectives of the people.”

An assessment of the internship shows that Paddy raised awareness of gender disparities in Cambodia and found ways to address these issues as part of the ongoing program of the CSCM and other organizations based in Cambodia. He also worked in villages to initiate discussions and storytelling about gender issues within these communities. The storytelling methodology has been emphasized as a means of getting people to share and learn from these stories and to reflect on ways things could have been done better.

Paddy’s work also helped to increase HIV/AIDS awareness among student communities in Cambodia, especially awareness of the plight of people living with HIV/AIDS and the need to overcome stigma and discrimination.

### **Being Maori in Cambodia**

As in many other internships, Paddy was confronted with the question of how to live out his identity in a different cultural milieu. To express it in his own terms, “The question for me was, ‘how can I be Maori not in Aotearoa New Zealand but in Cambodia?’ Cambodia is a country that is a world away from the reality I come from as a Maori person back home. I’m not an artist, but to help me cope with this I started drawing Maori art murals, something that is abstract and indigenous. I love drawing koru patterns, curls, spirals, seas, waters, abstract people that look like lizards; *taniwha*.<sup>2</sup> This gave me meaning, even more so in Cambodia! Many of the people in Cambodia saw me as a foreigner from New Zealand that had more money and ability than they did. Over time, they started to know me and the layers start to come down. They learned that I am Maori, which is very different from being just an ordinary New Zealander. They learned about my struggle with my gender as a gay man, which also shed light on the situation. They also learned that I had some understanding of their

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<sup>2</sup> In Maori mythology, Taniwha are beings that live in deep pools in rivers, dark caves, or the sea.

culture and reality because there were some nuances that connected the Cambodian reality to my reality. There were also some stark differences.”