

The Opening of Cambodia

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July 1991 - July 1994

Introduction

This is a short narrative which deals with the opening of Cambodia. It is written from an eyewitness viewpoint. When I arrived in Bangkok on June 28, 1991, the fortunes of the Church had fallen to a low ebb. The Church had serious problems with the Thai government, and the missionaries had to leave the country every 90 days to renew their visas. Not recounted here are the apostolic blessings left by Elders Neal A. Maxwell and Russell M. Nelson on Sunday, June 7, 1992, in Bangkok. However, if there was a turning point in the fortunes of this latter-day work in Southeast Asia, this was a key in my estimation. On Sunday, June 7, 1992, at the Bangkok district conference, both apostles were in attendance and both left apostolic blessings during the meeting. It is significant that the opening of Cambodia and initiatives in Laos and Vietnam made noteworthy headway after the blessings of these special witnesses of Christ. In addition, these blessings had almost immediate impact in Bangkok on the unsettled political situation at this critical juncture, and the missionary visa problem requiring them to leave the country periodically was resolved within two months after this visit. This led to an increased missionary force in Thailand, the opening of six new Thai branches and another district, as well as the events which I recount here.

PART I

A Blessing in Cambodia

April 30, 1993

On the morning of Thursday, April 29, 1993, Elder John K. Carmack of the Seventy and member of the Asia Area Presidency, Sister Shirley Carmack, President Larry R. White and Sister Janice K. White of the Thailand Bangkok Mission, as well as Vichit (Vic) Ith, a Cambodian member living in Thailand, traveled to Phnom Penh, Cambodia on Thai Airways. In my view, this trip had its genesis on January 17, 1993, when at a missionary zone training meeting for the Thailand Bangkok Mission in Udonthani, Thailand, I had the impression that we needed to press forward with our efforts in attempting to place missionaries in Cambodia and Laos. This was influenced, in large part, by a meeting with Elder Carmack and the couples, Elder Lamar Bateman and Sister Helen Bateman and Elder Stanley Steadman and Sister Mavis Steadman on January 5, 1993, when we had dinner together prior to their trip on January 6 to Hanoi, Vietnam to commence work there as welfare missionaries.

During the missionary meeting in Udornthani on January 17, I told the elders and sisters of seeing these four missionaries and Elder Carmack off at Don Muang Airport on their way to Hanoi. I asked them to begin to pray that we might be able to open the work in Cambodia and Laos. At the conclusion of the meeting, Elder Paul Peterson offered the benediction and because he failed to mention this matter in his prayer, I called him back and asked him to pray again, but this time include this goal in his prayer. The next day, a very interesting thing happened which I believe was in direct response to this supplication.

As I rode to the airport in the hotel van to return to Bangkok, I met a minister from the Assembly of God Church who lived in Vientiane, Laos, named Michael Williams. He told me a great deal about the operations of his church in Laos. Once we arrived at the airport and checked in, I sought him out, and we spoke further. Our time was very short, and he told me only a little of his efforts in Laos. I said a prayer that I might have the opportunity to speak with him further. After we arrived in Bangkok, Reverend Williams approached me as we waited to retrieve our baggage from the flight and asked if we could share a taxi into town. It was during this portion of our visit that I learned about his church's efforts in Cambodia which impressed me even more than what he was doing in Laos. There appeared to be full religious freedom in Cambodia. As a result of this experience, I wrote a letter to the Area Presidency apprising them of my experience and the information I had received.

Shortly afterwards, with prior approval from the Area Presidency, I began to attempt to schedule a trip to visit Cambodia. As I discussed the matter with Brother Ith, he opened doors for us. On April 2, 1993, I received a fax at the Sino-Thai Building where the mission office was located approving our visas to be granted upon arrival at the Pochendong Airport in Phnom Penh. Apparently, Brother Ith's aunt, Deputy Director of the Department of the Americas of the Foreign Ministry of the State of Cambodia, Mrs. Meassaem Dany, had helped expedite these visas based on a call she received from her nephew.

After a rather bumpy arrival on the dated runway at the Phnom Penh Airport on April 29, I was struck by its small size and the large, white U.N. helicopters of Russian manufacture parked on the broken and crumbling runway apron. The airport was in a severe state of disrepair. It had only two immigration booths and no formal booth for customs, just a crude wooden counter. Things were chaotic. Everyone was pushing and shoving to submit their visa application. After the application was submitted, everyone clamored to get in the "crowd," I couldn't call it a line, to receive the stamped approval. We quickly made it through customs and passport control, receiving our visas with no trouble. Vic Ith's uncle, Kavouth Huy, a U.N. employee, walked our passports through immigration. After we cleared customs we entered the very tiny reception area which was packed cheek-by-jowl with a mass of people meeting the arriving passengers. This situation combined with tropical heat and humidity caused us all to sweat profusely. We were met by Brother Ith's relatives, Mrs. Dany, and her husband, Mongkol Kem, both officials with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We traveled to the Sofitel Cambodiana Hotel, directly across the street from the Foreign Ministry building. We rode in a Foreign Ministry car driven by Mrs. Dany's husband.

On the day we arrived, we were unable to conduct any official business even though we arrived at a fairly early hour. However, in the afternoon we visited the National Museum which contained a number of stone carvings and bronze art pieces. It was a red stone building constructed in 1916 by the French. (Cambodia was a French colony until 1954). Elder Carmack was not feeling well, so Sister Carmack, Janice and I went. At the museum we met a woman who spoke French. Fortunately, I remembered some of my high school and college French and was able to listen to her explanation about the artifacts and translate for Sister Carmack and Janice.

The next day, Friday, April 30, we had an appointment in the afternoon with the Deputy Vice Minister of the Foreign Ministry, Long Visalo. This left us with some time in the morning to become better acquainted with Phnom Penh. Accordingly, we drove to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Prison Museum which had formerly been a school. There we had a very sobering experience.

On the way to the museum, we obtained a good idea of what the city was like. It is of French design, having formerly been a French colony, with some very wide, tree-lined boulevards and a number of attractive monuments, not all of French origin. The massive Independence Monument consists primarily of a huge, red sandstone statue consisting of a number of "nagas," the multi-headed snake creature which by legend protects the Buddha. Some streets are reminiscent of Hanoi. New Japanese cars, many of them four-wheel drive, Toyotas, and Nissans, were in abundance. They were uniformly white in color and had large, black letters "UN" emblazoned on the sides. There was little traffic other than this. We did see several large, open, ten-wheeled military trucks patrolling the streets with armed military police sitting in the back. I remember seeing 10-12 Indonesian soldiers sitting back-to-back in the rear of one of these trucks. We also saw U.N. soldiers from Canada, Pakistan, the Netherlands, the United States and other countries in our hotel and around the town. The United Nations peace-keeping troops were present to maintain order pending a nationwide election. There were a few motorcycles and, of course, many cyclos, the pedicab with the driver in the back and the passenger in the front, and a few private automobiles, but the city seemed quite sparsely populated although large in area. It was dilapidated and in poor repair, but we were told it was in much better shape than in earlier years after it had been abandoned by order of the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

I was struck by the poverty of the people. Unlike the roadside stalls in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, which have carts made of metal and glass, the vendors of Phnom Penh had only dirty wooden stalls. Gasoline was sold and dispensed from cans and bottles alongside the road. Many of the roads were not paved. The personal appearance of the people was very humble. Many were poorly clothed. Cambodia seemed to be in the lower ranks of the third world countries.

At the Tuol Sleng Genocide Prison Museum, we were first greeted by the sight of 14 white cement graves. This was the final resting place of the 14 people who were undergoing torture and killed by the fleeing Khmer Rouge as the Vietnamese "Liberators" arrived in 1979.

This former prison, converted from a school, was a depressing place. On the ground floor there were a number of small rooms which had been partitioned from the classrooms. In each room was a metal bed frame. The beds had been there since 1979, and of course, they were quite rusty since they were really nothing more than metal bed frames. The blood stains of the 14 killed on the beds were still on the floor. Upon the arrival of the Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge simply hastily slit the throats of their prisoners and fled.

As we toured the prison we learned that typically prisoners were strapped to the metal bed frames which served as their torture platforms. They were then beaten, electrocuted and afflicted by having wet rags placed on their faces until they nearly suffocated in an effort to secure confessions. On the school swing set outside, we saw a depiction of how people were suspended on ropes over the metal crossbar with their hands tied behind their backs. Their heads were lowered into buckets of water until they were close to drowning. They were then lifted out, revived and thrust into the water again for further torture to elicit information.

We proceeded through the prison and found several rooms with hundreds of photographs of the victims taken before they were killed. They were often entire families. Brother Ith noticed the pictures of several people he knew. One photo was of a rocket scientist, an expert in rocket propulsion. In an effort to save his family, he returned to Cambodia from France. When he arrived at the airport, he was immediately imprisoned and killed within a few days. We also saw poignant letters of confession from two westerners, an Australian and an American, who had been at the prison and had confessions extracted from them, no doubt, by torture. They were also victims of the mass extermination which took place at the prison and elsewhere.

In another room, we saw a large pile of clothing which was the clothing of the victims. In the final room, there was a large map of Cambodia constructed of bones of those killed by the Khmer Rouge. Several thousand people had died in this school transformed into a prison and chamber of horrors. It has been "made over" into a memorial to those who were executed. Also on display were murals depicting the torture of those who were sent to the country-side. Some of them were buried alive, others simply worked to death. Shockingly, those who administered the torture were young boys between the ages of 10 and 15.

We were also told that on some occasions men and women were lined up across from each other and were assigned to be married with no freedom to choose. Our visit was a sobering experience and proved appropriate preparation for our meeting with Long Visalo at the Foreign Ministry.

After our visit to the Genocide Museum, we traveled to the Foreign Ministry. All five of us proceeded into a room that was furnished in what I can only describe as a dated, quasi-Chinese style. Long Visalo came in after we arrived. Mrs. Dany, Vic Ith's aunt was also there. Elder Carmack introduced us, and Mr. Visalo launched into a long tirade against the Khmer Rouge telling of their depredations. Elections were scheduled for May 23-28, less than a month away, and he acted as if we had a vote. I could not disagree with his sentiments about the Khmer Rouge, but wondered why he was telling us. He asked us what we proposed to do in Cambodia. Elder Carmack answered directly that we were interested in establishing our Church and humanitarian projects to benefit the Cambodian people. Mr. Visalo responded that there was freedom of religion in Cambodia and that if we complied with Cambodian law, we were free to come. We left the meeting encouraged.

After our visit to the Foreign Ministry, we visited Vic's boyhood home. It was occupied by a Cambodian general and an AK-47 automatic rifle was in the corner of Vic's childhood bedroom. The mango trees around the home which were small when Vic was a boy were now large and heavily laden with green fruit.

Vic was in a poignant mood at our little meeting later that evening. He told us that when the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh in 1975, that his father went out to meet them because he knew the Khmer Rouge leaders. In fact, he told his cousin and Vic's aunt, Mrs. Dany, to wait for him at the large Independence Monument and that he would shortly return. He was never seen again. Vic said he had always wanted his father to be proud of him and perhaps helping the Church enter Cambodia would be something that would bring this hope to fruition more than any other thing he could do. He wept as he spoke.

Before the meeting, I had given Elder Carmack my written account of the June 1992 apostolic blessings of Elders Maxwell and Nelson in Thailand which had brought such miraculous results. I asked whether as a member of the Seventy he could do the same thing for Cambodia.

At the end of our meeting, we all kneeled and Elder Carmack offered a Priesthood blessing on the land. He prayed that there would be spirit of compromise and reconciliation similar to Elder Maxwell's blessing the year before in June 1992. I remember hearing these words, thinking of Long Visalo's tirade and wondering how a calm election and any spirit of compromise was possible with the Khmer Rouge being involved.

Events proved the power and efficacy of the blessing. Miraculously, the election in May took place with much less violence than expected. Even more miraculously, the party of Hun Sen, the party set up in power by the Vietnamese in 1979, was turned out in favor of Prince Ranariddh Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC party. We held our breath to see if Hun Sen as the sitting prime minister might repudiate the entire process. However, he did not; a spirit of compromise and reconciliation did prevail. In fact, Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen formed a coalition government with the Prince as the First Prime Minister and, and Hun Sen as the Second Prime Minister, an almost unthinkable result. The

Khmer Rouge did not disrupt the election to the extent anticipated and, although there was some violence, many knowledgeable people, including Vic Ith and Harry Nesbitt of the Rice Institute in Cambodia, were shocked at the outcome.

The election was also positive for the Church because Vic Ith became a special advisor to Prime Minister Ranariddh and was able to help the Church with recognition, visas, and advice.

We were seen off at the airport on May 1 by Mrs. Dany and her husband. At this time, I learned that she had been an exchange student in the 60's in California in the home of a Mormon family named Jensen. She said she enjoyed meeting us and hoped that we would come and visit again because we were "sweet" people. I told her that I thought we would be back.

PART II

The Work Begins

On Tuesday, December 7, 1993, the Area President, Elder K. Carmack, and I flew from Bangkok to Phnom Penh to investigate the possibility of obtaining legal recognition or registration for the Church. Vic Ith, the Cambodian member of the Church who was also a financial advisor to Norodom Ranariddh, First Prime Minister, for what was now the Kingdom of Cambodia, traveled with us.

Elder Carmack was scheduled to arrive on Cathay Pacific flight 716 in Bangkok from Hong Kong at 10:45 a.m. I arrived at the airport at about 11:05 a.m. and was happy to see that the plane had landed ten minutes late at 10:55 a.m. I waited for him for some time, but he did not exit. I became concerned when he did not come into the arrival hall and called my office twice. He had not called the office. Finally, over an hour after the plane arrived, he came into the arrival area. He told me he understood the itinerary to mean he was to catch the flight on Cambodian Airlines leaving earlier, but when I did not appear at Gate 43 for the Cambodian Airlines flight, he called my wife and determined that I was waiting for him at the airport. (We were to leave on a later flight at 2:30 p.m. on Kampuchea Airlines, SK Air.)

Once we finally met, we drove and picked up Vic Ith's ticket at the mission office and drove to the mission home under construction for Elder Carmack to inspect.

We traveled back to the airport and met Vic, but as I opened my briefcase, I could not seem to find the tickets. I ran outside to try and catch Sakdaa, the driver, but of course he had already left. I came back and checked my briefcase and found that I had moved the tickets from one place to another in my briefcase and that they were there after all.

When we arrived at the boarding gate, Elder Carmack discovered that he had left a notebook containing critical information at boarding gate 43 when he had attempted to meet me there earlier. I managed to speak with the gate people in Thai, and they tracked

down the notebook. I ran to the other side of the airport, retrieved the notebook and returned before our flight left. It almost seemed as if there was something trying to hedge up our way, given the problems with my being unable to find the tickets in my briefcase and the near loss of Elder Carmack's notebook.

Our flight was rather inconsequential, although I sat next to an orange-robed monk who abided by his dietary restrictions against not eating in the afternoon by having only fresh milk. I carried on a conversation with him in Thai, and he told me he was going to Cambodia to teach some monks there. When I asked him what he was going to teach them, he indicated he would teach them Bali, the Buddhist scriptural language.

When we arrived in Phnom Penh, we were shown to the VIP lounge and a person named "Hak" (Sam Rithy Duong Hak) from the Foreign Affairs Ministry obtained our visas for us. We did not have to take our bags through customs because Hak did it for us. We then checked into the Cambodiana Hotel. It was really too late to do anything that evening. I read president's letters and had dinner with Elder Carmack and Vic. (I did receive a message from the office that Elder Suchade and Elder Dobson were having a slight disagreement. I called the office to see what I could do, but the matter seemed to be resolved.) After dinner, we went to Elder Carmack's room and discussed plans for the next day and had an evening prayer.

The plans outlined for the next day were to go to the opening of a new school which was to be presided over by Prince Ranariddh, the Prime Minister. In the afternoon we were scheduled to meet with the Secretary of the State from the Ministry of [sic] Cult and Religions.

We left the hotel at about 7:00 a.m. and traveled to the First Prime Minister's residence. We were part of a twenty- to thirty-car cavalcade that drove to a place called Saeng, that seemed quite some distance out in the country. It was about an hour's drive, although it was only about 25 miles. The road was quite bumpy, and it was only a single lane. People lined the roads to greet the Prime Minister. We were quite far in the back of the procession, so I do not know exactly how they greeted him, but it was impressive to see many students dressed in dark trousers or skirts and white shirts or blouses as we passed. Other members of the local populace also lined the streets waving flags. Phnom Penh was much busier and alive than it had been in April. The successful election in May had apparently made many people more desirous of living in the city.

After stopping along the way at two FUNCINPEC party headquarters of the political party of Prince Ranariddh, we finally arrived at the school at Saeng. There were 2,000 to 3,000 people present. Prince Ranariddh and his wife, as well as the officials, took their seats under a raised pavilion. (Ranariddh looks and acts a lot like his father, King Sihanouk, obviously a help to him.) Elder Carmack and I followed and stood in the back of the audience with Vic. We later found out that we had been noticed by the Prince who asked Vic who we were and what we thought of his speech. He talked about religious freedom and tolerance. It appeared to me he was probably talking primarily for the benefit of a group of Muslims who were also present. Interestingly, we stood on the grounds of the Buddhist temple as we listened.

He also spoke about developing the country economically, about working on public works projects, and periodically asked for oral responses from the people. He asked if the teachers were mean to the students, and the students responded "yes" in a loud voice. He later told Vic that this was to get them to speak out. As stated previously, he also talked about religion and how religions were free to operate as they chose. After some cheering, the significance of which I did not understand, at the conclusion of a rather lengthy speech (about 45 minutes), he toured the school which had been built. We got quite close to the Prime Minister, and I saw that clearly Marie, his wife, noticed us.

We drove back into Phnom Penh, which took us another hour and at that time made contact with Wayne Wright who was working for "Cando," a non-profit assistance organization operating in Cambodia. Wayne, a 25-year-old member from California, had previously served in a Cambodian speaking mission in the United States. He spoke Cambodian quite fluently. Elder Carmack knew the family. Brother Wright's father was serving as branch president of a Cambodian Branch in California. We had lunch, and Elder Carmack and I discussed how fortuitous it was that the Prince had talked about freedom of religion -- just how fortuitous we would not really realize until later.

After lunch, we walked to the Ministry of [sic] Cult and Religions, and were greeted initially by a not too hospitable man named Krouch Sary, Chief of Cabinet for the Ministry. He showed us into the room with the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Cult and Religions, Hien Vanniroth. We met him for about a half an hour. We presented him with the book Gospel Principles in Cambodian as well as excerpts from the Book of Mormon and a short, written introduction to the Church. Elder Carmack and Vic explained about the Church in Asia. Elder Carmack noted that we have a presence in six to eight countries in Asia with couples serving in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, India and China. He also noted that we could provide assistance in the nature of medical advice or English teachers and that we could send four to six retired couples to help in some way. Elder Carmack stated that English and agriculture were areas in which assistance could be rendered most readily.

Secretary of State Vanniroth noted that there was full religious freedom in Cambodia and that in fact the Prime Minister had spoken about this very issue at the dedication of a school he had attended earlier that day. He also said that he had lived in Long Beach for about ten years. Elder Carmack indicated that this was quite a coincidence since he had been a regional representative for the Church over the Long Beach area for several years. Vanniroth had worked in the coroner's office in Long Beach. Vanniroth explained how to apply for formal recognition for the Church. He indicated that if we would submit a letter it would be acted on quite promptly. He also indicated that we needed to have a resident Cambodian to act as a liaison. The Chief of Cabinet was brought into the room. He also gave instructions about how an application could be made and, although he had not been very friendly at first, he seemed to warm up to us as he took the lead from the Secretary of State.

After our meeting, we commented among ourselves as to how fortuitous it was that the head of the Ministry of Religion had been present at the school dedication where the Prime Minister made the issue of religious freedom one of the subjects of his remarks.

This visit resulted in a follow-up trip by Elder John K. Carmack and Elder K.Y. Tai on January 11, 1994. They submitted an application for recognition in English, but were later told it had to be translated. I was able to take care of the Cambodian translation in Bangkok. Brother Vic Ith later took it to Vanniroth, and on February 28, I received word by telephone from Brother Ith that our application had been approved on February 26. Shortly thereafter I received a FAX'd copy of the documentation. Events moved quickly after this. Elder Carmack told me after being informed about recognition, that he had approval to send a couple to Phnom Penh. He later asked me to escort them into the country.

On March 23, 1994, I accompanied Elder Donald C. Dobson and Sister Scharlene Dobson from Bangkok to Phnom Penh as the first missionaries assigned to Cambodia. Elder and Sister Dobson had been transferred as missionaries from Madras, India. Vic Ith and another member, Philip Beard, were at the airport to greet us. We stayed at the Hawaii Hotel, a bit more economical than the Cambodiana, and on Sunday, March 27, the first meeting of the Church in Cambodia was held at the hotel. Fifteen people were in attendance, including six members and nine investigators. The members were: Elder and Sister Dobson, Dennis Lifferth, Wayne Wright, Sister Neary Chandalaa, a Cambodian member, and Brother Nghia, a Vietnamese member from Saigon. Talks were translated into the Cambodian language by Wayne Wright. The Joseph Smith story and the message of the restoration were preached. Copies of the Joseph Smith testimony in the Cambodian language were given to the investigators.

On the 1st of April, the couple moved into a home at 21 Norodom Prolonge and began holding regular Sunday services with Wayne Wright translating.

On May 9, Elder and Sister K.Y. Tai and I traveled to Phnom Penh and Sister Pahl Mao, the first Cambodian member in the country, was baptized by Elder Dobson in a metal font beside the house at 21 Norodom Prolonge. Brother Wayne Wright confirmed her and Elder Tai and I both spoke at the service. Forty-five people, mostly Pahl's neighbors, including her parents, were present. The hymns sung were a little weak due to the fact that none of the Cambodians in attendance knew the songs. Sister Mao was the only Cambodian member present.

On May 10, documents were submitted with the Foreign Ministry to create a non-governmental organization so that a welfare project could be sponsored.

On May 27, Elder Ronald E. Oswald and Sister Dawn Oswald were transferred from the Thailand Bangkok Mission to Cambodia. By the end of June, as many as ninety-eight people had been in attendance at Sunday services and four North American, Cambodian speaking elders had been selected to assist with the work in Phnom Penh in light of the fact that Wayne Wright had left, and there was no one who could teach in the

Cambodian language. The couples were teaching English at the Ministry of Religion three times per week as well as at home and the prospects were very bright, contingent upon continued political stability.

As I finished my assignment as mission president and returned home in July of 1994, after an eventful three years, the scripture that then-Elder Ezra Taft Benson quoted and which was related to me by my mission president, Brent W. Hardy, in 1968, shortly after I entered Thailand with the first group of elders to serve in that country remains with me and seems to echo across the years.

And they shall go forth and none shall stay them, for I the Lord have commanded them.
(Doctrine and Covenants 1:5)

Truly, this scripture was realized in the events surrounding the opening of Cambodia. In 1991 the Church's status in Thailand was tenuous; yet, in three short years, not only had the Lord's work expanded in Thailand, but it had also spread to a neighboring country. Surely, no power can stay the inevitable expansion of the Lord's work and when adversity strikes, it is only an opportunity for the exercise of faith and for the Lord to work miracles.

Opposition and adversity for the Church, instead of causing discouragement, should engender optimism, for it is merely a precursor and portent of future expansion and growth. As Brigham Young said:

The Kingdom will continue to increase, to grow, to spread and prosper more and more. Every time its enemies undertake to overthrow it, it will become more extensive and more powerful; instead of it decreasing, it will spread more, become more wonderful and conspicuous to the nations, until it fills the whole earth. (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 1, p. 203, April 6, 1852)

The opening of Cambodia is one small chapter in the volumes written and yet to be written detailing and recounting the saga of the rolling forth of the Church to nations of the earth. It was a great privilege to have played a small part and to have been a witness to these historic events.

December 1994

Postscript: On August 8, 1994, four North American elders arrived in Phnom Penh, having been transferred from Cambodian speaking missions in the United States. They were Elder Richard W. Henderson from Raleigh, North Carolina (California Anaheim Mission); Elder John T. Smith, Jacksonville, Florida (California Fresno Mission); Elder Jamie T. Hipwell, West Point, Utah (Massachusetts, Boston Mission) and Elder Brian W. Strong, Abotsford, British Columbia, Canada (Washington D.C. South Mission). As soon as they arrived via Bangkok, and before they could unpack or eat lunch, they commenced teaching investigators. During their first month they baptized seven people.