

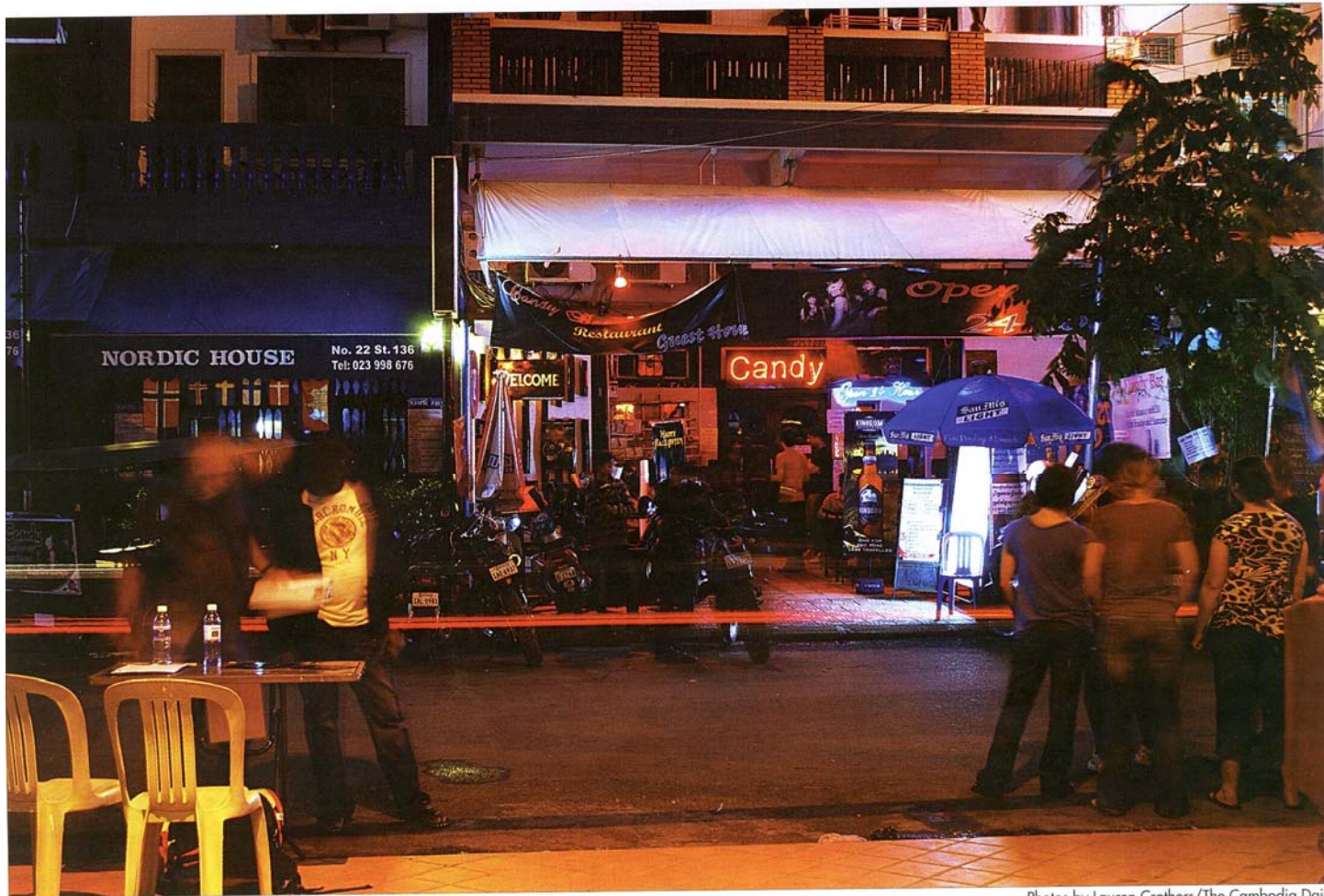


# RED LIGHT FAITHFULS

Evangelicals embrace Phnom Penh's sinners

By ANDREW BURMON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY





Photos by Lauren Crothers/The Cambodia Daily

A Western man and a Cambodian woman walk along Street 136 (previous page). John Yoder chats with a passerby outside Candy Bar on Street 136, as a cluster of his fellow MST Project volunteers stand ready to talk to men emerging from girlie bars (above).

Jesus must have worried Mary sick, staying out late in all the wrong parts of Judea with all the wrong sorts of people. His buddy Matthew—future publishing career pending—was a tax collector, a profession viewed more or less on par with prostitution, the rumored career of Jesus' confidant Mary Magdalene. His first followers were the seedy people who lived along seedy strips of bars and brothels.

Jesus might have felt very comfortable in Phnom Penh, not so much in the NGO-dominated districts but on the streets that stay up late, where men, some here solely for this purpose, will go out tonight looking for a prostitute or a bar girl to take home. Most of these men will succeed. But before they do, some will stagger up Street 51 and some will stagger down Street 136, where John Yoder will be waiting, thinking about his savior's proclivities.

"His biggest beef was with religious people," says John of Jesus. "He never minded people who'd made mistakes."

In every sense, John is the bigger man. He laughs easily—giggles rise from his feet, resonate in his belly and burst quite suddenly out from behind his beard—but he's serious about love. He describes the MST Project, his street ministry, as a way of rescuing fallen Western men by offering them an opportunity to step away from the central-casting cliché of the aging lecher, the sexpat.

The MST Project—the name stands for Men and the Sex Trade—was founded several years ago in Bangkok, where a group of preachers took to the city's red-light districts in the hope of educating male tourists about the dangers faced by the Soi district's working women, and perhaps win a few converts

on the side.

Every other Friday, John and his largely Pentecostal team of roughly 20 break into three groups. One group sets up a table outside Heart of Darkness, another across from Candy Bar. The third team stays behind at a church center and prays, not only for the success of the street team but also for the men whose names the MST workers text back to them.

Prior to game time, everyone involved takes a few hours to engage in spiritual self-reflection. The notion here, John says, is to make sure that no one hits the streets "with anger in their heart" so the ministry can focus on love rather than judgment, the purview of their higher power.

Outside the bars, the MST team stands behind a table emblazoned with a scarlet question mark, a sign ambiguous enough to solicit interest, then distributes questionnaires and tries to engage passing men in conversation. The point is to provide an alternative source of affection for the men. Many of them, John and his coworkers point out, are simply lonely.

This seems to hold true. Some of the conversations prove unexpectedly long and unexpectedly frank. Men share their spiritual autobiographies and John listens patiently. Of course some men are dismissive. They didn't come to this part of town to talk about their feelings.

But still, most simply walk away. Pastor Ann Greve, whose number the MST volunteers hand out to interested parties, has never received a call from a man approached on the street. But John insists that minds do change. MST's brochures include a testimony from one saved man.

"Once we were done, she ran to the bathroom, locked the



The point back then was to save people from going to hell. Now we are just asking them not to go to the brothels."

—JOHN YODER, A VOLUNTEER WITH MEN AND THE SEX TRADE STREET MINISTRY

door, and began to softly cry, while I continued to feel an overwhelming sense of shame and guilt for what had transpired. That night was the beginning of the end of that kind of lifestyle for me. Today I am a new man, with a new life and a new hope—a hope that is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ."

"Our Ministry is unique because it is not about numbers, but about reaching out to a part of the population that has been rejected by many community organizations," John says. He uses a vaudevilian zinger to describe the situation:

Jesus happens upon a group of villagers stoning a man for stealing bread. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," cries Jesus. A minute passes as the villagers pause to consider this challenge, then a single rock flies from the back of the crowd and hits the thief in the face. "I wasn't talking to you, mom," says Jesus.

There is no dearth of sex-trafficking oriented NGOs in Phnom Penh but few if any reach out to the Western men who are often perceived as fueling the trade in young women. This may not seem like a problem but John says it shows a lack of imagination and the persistence of a social stigma.

Of the 141 arrests for debauchery and indecent acts made in the last seven years, 26 percent of the suspects were Cambodian and 13 percent were Asian men, according to Joerg Langelotz, project assistant at Action Pour Les Enfants, an NGO that combats the sexual exploitation of children by Westerners.

But in a survey conducted by the Christian charity World Vision in 2001, a group of people living in Phnom Penh's red-light districts estimated that nearly 50 percent of foreigners seen taking home young girls were of Chinese, Japanese or Korean ethnicity, and experts are quick to point out that the demand driving the most reprehensible sectors of the sex trade is often Asian and often domestic.

In this year's annual trafficking in persons report, the US State Department claimed that at least one obviously harmful practice was a predominantly non-Western problem: "The sale of virgin girls continues to be a serious problem in Cambodia, with foreign (mostly Asian) and Cambodian men paying up to \$4,000 to have sex with virgins."

None of which is to say that Western sex

tourists do not need to be monitored. But engaging in unjustified racial profiling can do more harm than good, according to Steve Morrish, an Australian detective who runs the anti-trafficking NGO SISHA. He says the arrest record shows organizations putting the cart before the horse.

"I think there are a number of NGOs that see Western men as the main issue, which is tremendously misinformed," says Mr Morrish. "I'd prefer that Khmer women worked at the bars if they have to prostitute themselves because it offers a potentially safer environment. In the worst-case scenario, that is the best case."

Mr Morrish points out that most of the brothels catering to pedophiles are in Tuol Kok, away from the strips frequented by the MST team, and that many of the hostess bars are female-run.

The MST Project's volunteers lean toward realism when discussing the importance of shutting off the girlie bars' "barang" tap.

"We aim for these men because they speak English and because we honestly believe we can change their hearts," says Frank, who volunteers for the MST Project and asked that his last name not be shared for fear of harassment from both the male expatriate and NGO communities. "They may not be the ones getting abused, but they still need love in their lives."

That their presence and the testimonies they provide to their congregations may focus attention away from more pressing issues, such as the trafficking of children, doesn't seem to bother MST's volunteers, because they are engaged in a zero-sum game with sin. As John says, "stopping one man is enough."

But choosing which man can be tricky.

On her blog, an MST volunteer named Kelly who had recently arrived in Phnom Penh, identified a bar on Street 136 as a brothel, saying, "It's advertised as a 24-hour bar and guesthouse but once you see it its purpose is obvious."

Such an assertion might not have any basis in fact.

"When I first got here, I was told the girls in the bars were indentured servants, chained to beds," says Steve Nyirady, who used to work in the nonprofit sector and now owns a number of Phnom Penh bars and restaurants. "It's really not like that... I've never heard of a girl being forced to work, and while they may not be proud of what they do, the work helps them

support their families."

According to Mr Nyirady, bar work might be less than ideal, but it helps some women—many of whom are divorced or separated and thus perceived as tainted—support themselves and their families. While it seems unrealistic to conclude that every woman canoodling with the hostess bar regulars is doing so of her own volition, the opposite conclusion is equally far-fetched, he says.

John and Frank have a hard time buying this. They both maintain that life in what they call "red-light districts" shouldn't have to be any woman's choice. They are both honest about their lust, and they've asked other MST volunteers to be as well. Before volunteers are allowed to join the street teams, they are broken into same-sex groups in which they discuss their urges.

"We talk honestly about our weeks, even what we've seen on the Internet," says John. "If someone isn't ready, they can say that it is not a good week and stay behind."

Frank explains the unusual situation his ministry puts him in with coy fatalism, saying that MST even encourages men to engage in masturbation—"a hard choice given the ease of access to sex," he admits.

Jesus is the selling point. Frank and John both believe that the acceptance of Christ brings a level of satisfaction that sex cannot, at least in the long term. They also believe that finding a longer-term partner is important. John recently married to younger Khmer women, a fact that







he jokes about uneasily.

"I think it was an arranged marriage, but not by me," he laughs. "When I arrived in Cambodia, my wife was working in the house where I was staying. I guess they'd told her I was coming and she moved in."

Everybody needs something, but as John has come to understand, having predictable desires can be embarrassing.

This may account for the negative reactions Frank and John sometimes receive on the street—a man insisting on taking their photographs, another laughing at them from across the street.

"People assume we are like the street preachers who berate people. But—believe me, I used to do it—that isn't us," says John. "We don't want to force Jesus on anyone, just bring him into their lives. We aren't waving Bibles."

All the representatives of the MST Project are careful when they talk about what they do, very much because they don't wish to be misidentified as a fundamentalist group. John, who was a street preacher in the 1970s, is quick to draw a distinction between what he used to do and what

the MST Project does now.

"The point back then was to save people from going to hell," he says. "Now we are just asking them not to go to the brothels."

The other volunteers seem to follow John's lead, though he admits that the occasional overzealous newbie may step out of line and threaten damnation. Far from placard-wielding pulpits, the MST Project's volunteers look like passable advertisements for clothiers Gap or J Crew.

"Excuse me," they say. "Would you like to take a survey?"

They pass out papers that ask men to describe themselves and take a position on prostitution, a response that quickly creates an opportunity for conversation.

Because their goal is to keep men out of brothels, the volunteers will not walk away from these talks, even if they drag on for hours, even if they are contentious, even if they are accused of God-bothering.

According to Heidi Hoefinger, a social researcher who spent years among Phnom Penh's prostitutes, the MST Project is probably no more

or less moralizing than the other organizations that provide assistance to sex workers.

"Save us from our saviors" is a common slogan among sex workers, according to Ms Hoefinger. She says the alliance of Christian abolitionist groups with the "very colonialist Western development community" has created an atmosphere where advocating for sex workers' rights sounds like heresy. Prostitutes may be lectured, rather than receive concrete assistance.

"Moralism is dangerous—particularly when one group or another is pathologized as 'good' or 'bad,'" Ms Hoefinger wrote of both John's work and the work of many of Cambodia's anti-trafficking NGOs.

The MST Project does bring a rigorous morality to the streets, but in their view it is a morality that was born in a similar place and embodied by a savior more open to sinners than to righteous preachers.

It was Jesus, after all, who entered the temple in Jerusalem and faced down its leaders, saying, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."

A young Cambodian woman stands on Street 136, a popular destination for western men looking to meet Cambodian women (above left). A group of women talk with two Western men outside a bar on Street 136, near where the MST Project's volunteers set up their booth every other week (above).

## **Don't Believe Everything You Read (Clarifications and Misquotes)**

Over all I was pleased with the way our reporter, an admitted agnostic, represented Jesus in this article and myself as well. As an organization, we prayed that God's glory would come shining through and ours would be diminished (John the Baptist – John 3:30) and I think that was accomplished here. The article shows Christ's love for those that are often put aside by the religious people of his day and presently, and the love that we have for those we encounter on the streets is genuine, and not just a ruse to chock up numbers.

I was however, either misquoted or misunderstood in different parts of this article, and below are just some of the bigger mistakes. I will not use this document to refute the statistics offered by other sources in the article, only to say that being in close fellowship with brothers and sisters who work all day in the muck and mire of the sex trafficking industry here (rescue and restoration), I do have disagreements with much that was said.

John Yoder, Featured MST Project Cambodia Volunteer

1). I care about people going to hell (just had a discussion about that with one of the men I talked to last Friday) and my desire is to see them come into a relationship with Christ, not just stop going to brothels. Just making a distinction between the 'hellfire and brimstone' street preaching I did in the seventies compared with what we're doing now.

2). I don't know how the reporter took a story from the Bible that has to do with a prostitute about to be stoned, which fits with the work we're doing on the streets, and changed it to a man accused of stealing bread, but it wasn't the way I told it. Actually, we first shared the story seriously with him to point out Christ's comparison of everyone's sin to the sin of the woman who was condemned to death. Later during the interview, reflecting on the fact that all three of us came from Catholic backgrounds, I told him a joke my mother shared with me about that same story (since Catholics believe Mary was perfect too), and unfortunately he used that version in the article.

3). In Frank's defense, he never said anything about MST Project encouraging men to masturbate instead of having sex with a prostitute. I had actually related a story that MST's founder had told us about a man he encountered in Bangkok who said his activity had nothing to do with wanting intimacy or love, it was just plain sex, and nothing more than sex, at which Chris challenged him; "That being the case, there's a much easier and cheaper way to accomplish that". The man then had to admit that having some sort of intimacy was important after all. Andrew missed the entire point.

4). I never said anything to the reporter to imply that this was my ministry, though you get that impression reading the article, quite the contrary. I told him that others were in charge, but weren't able to do the interview. I'm not sure where he got the info on MST Project's founding, but it wasn't from us.

5). Not sure what 'Godbothering' is, but we only continue conversations if the person we're talking to seems interested in continuing, which is many times. We don't follow the men as their walking; just invite them to our table. Long conversations are not used as a means to delay activity as the article seems to imply, but are sincere efforts to let the man speak everything that's in his heart.