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Intentional Faith, Prayer and Community

Hannah Gallant

Andrews University, hannahg@andrews.edu

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Courtesy Ye Lim Kim

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▲ Clockwise: The Puerto Rico mental health mission trip team poses for a group photo; Ye Lim sat in the airport with her team as they waited for their flight; Ye Lim spoke about physiological properties in the brain that make individuals more susceptible to addiction after traumatic events. She always needed a translator because she could not speak Spanish; The Puerto Rico mental health mission trip team poses for a group photo in the airport.

Courtesy Ye Lim Kim



INTENTIONAL FAITH, PRAYER AND COMMUNITY

► By Hannah Gallant

Freshman honors students crowded into the Western Heritage classroom. One particular student, Stephen Erich, pulled out his pocket-sized notebook and a pen. As he listened intently to Professors Markovic and Jerončić co-lecture on early church history and theology, he wrote down statements he wanted to remember.

This was his first time being around people his own age who were interested in these topics, and he wanted to have the exact words in front of him when he met them again that night in the residence hall. For Stephen, freshman year at Andrews University was revolutionary.

Out of the Western Heritage classroom came numerous late-night conversations with friends. Soon Stephen found himself meeting with a small group to pray in the mornings. At one point, he and a group of friends read the book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, by Shane Claiborne. The book told the story of a community in Philadelphia that has a shared neighborhood where they are committed to building up the people around them, sharing a rhythm of worship and eating together on a daily basis. Reading this story and being able to discuss it with friends was one of Stephen's first experiences with the idea of an intentional Christian community.

"We wanted to find ways to intentionally build our lives around our faith instead of just adding faith into whatever lives we were already living," Stephen explains.

By the end of his first semester, he recalls talking with some friends about student mission work. One thing led to another, and the next year Stephen found himself teaching English in Bangkok, Thailand.

"While I was there, I started looking for something more to do. I joined a non-denominational ministry that was focused on foreign, Western men who would come to Thailand for the wrong reasons," says Stephen.

The ministry met in a tailor shop next to a red-light district, and members would pray every evening from around 7 p.m. to approximately midnight. Some would stay and pray while others would go out on the sidewalks to meet people and engage in conversation.

The idea was that the men the ministry worked to reach were really looking for a deeper kind of love and fulfillment. Consequently, the ministry tried to connect the men with whom they worked to a hometown or local church. "That was the hardest I had ever prayed, especially with a group," Stephen recalls.

After returning from Thailand, Stephen got back into normal student life. While completing his undergraduate

business degree, Stephen stayed involved in local ministry. He taught kindergarten and served as an administrative assistant at a church plant, Harbor of Hope, in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

In 2013, one of Stephen's friends connected him with the planning team for the Summit on Social Consciousness, "The Sale of Innocence: 2013 Summit on Sex Trafficking," happening on the Andrews campus. He was able to participate in the event, which led to his later involvement with a local offshoot project focused on human trafficking in Cambodia.

Following the completion of his undergraduate degree, Stephen was contacted by ASAP Ministries about going to Cambodia for three years. He spent a week in serious prayer before he accepted the call.

"The clearest time that I was certain that I was following God's will was when I went to Cambodia," he reflects. "I had asked God that when I made the right decision he would give me a huge sense of joy. And when I decided to go, I felt joy."

Stephen spent the first year in Cambodia getting to know the country, culture and mission. "It was really eye-opening to me to see how the church organization operates, especially within the mission field," he explains.

During that year, he also worked with a Cambodian man named Rotha to lead a training program that taught powder coating [a metal coating using dry powder and heat] and computer skills to eight Vietnamese students from the Adventist Vietnamese school in Phnom Penh.

While there, Stephen started a small group Bible study with Khut Ney, his roommate, who was a pastor and assistant Youth director for the Cambodia Adventist Mission. Originally, the group was made up of mostly Seventh-day Adventists. Soon, though, they invited some Buddhist friends. Out of that group, Stephen began giving two individual Bible studies. "It was at that point I realized small groups are not just a nice way of encouraging each other," he says. "They also can be a way of reaching out to people when it might be hard to bring up subjects in other ways."

Toward the end of his first year in Cambodia, Stephen helped apply for a grant to gain funds to build a vocational school. After receiving part of the grant, the Cambodian mission began building the school. The principal oversaw most of the construction, while Stephen

kept track of the receipts and finances. Construction finished about six months later, and the hunt for teachers began. The school started off with lessons on motorbike mechanics and cellphone repair. During his last six months in Cambodia, Stephen spent his time recruiting students and further developing the program.

Following his return to the United States in July of 2017, Stephen started his MBA at Andrews University. When asked to reflect on his experiences, Stephen said, "The things that I've volunteered with, I love doing them. They give me a sense of fulfillment. Those are the things that have turned into jobs for me. When it comes to student missions, it's no different over there than here. I still have the same struggles, personality traits and the same fear of talking to people about Jesus. That doesn't disappear just because you go to another country."

Soon enough, another volunteer opportunity came into his life. In March of this year, Cindy Knaff, also a member at Harbor of Hope and the manager and coach at Life RX, the local Berrien Springs CrossFit gym, approached Stephen about coordinating a monthly worship program at the gym. Stephen was not yet a member at the gym, but for him this was another moment of clarity like his decision to go to Cambodia. Just the day before he had been thinking about how much potential there was for a spiritual community at Life RX.

The resulting program, Faith RX, meets the first Friday of each month for potluck and an informal worship time. "With Faith RX, our goal is to apply the CrossFit elements of exercise in community to a worship program," Stephen explains. We don't want to just talk about our faith, we want to be changed by actually doing it. We want to exercise our faith as a group, sharing with each other and deepening our relationships within the context of what Christ is doing in our lives."

Like Stephen's undergraduate group of friends, the prayer ministry in Thailand and the small group Bible studies in Cambodia, this CrossFit worship experience is another attempt at forming an intentional Christian community.

In recent years, research has identified an increase in loneliness in the United States, an increase that some even refer to as epidemic. Stephen sees these intentional efforts at Christian community as vital in reversing this trend. More than that, he believes they are the only way to be a faithful witness to the gospel. "The way American



Courtesy Stephen Erich

▲ Stephen poses with his roommate, Khut Ney, who was a pastor and assistant Youth director for the Cambodia Adventist Mission.

society is set up right now, it's really hard to unintentionally run into someone that you know. You only see them on Sabbath unless you decide to intentionally visit them throughout the week. And when you live 30 minutes away, who can make time for that?" he says. "The problem with that is we never get the chance to practice loving people when we don't want to be around them. Whenever we don't want to be around them, we just leave. This prevents our characters from developing and causes us to lose out on an opportunity to demonstrate Jesus' supernatural love to the rest of the world."

His hope is that Faith RX will give people an opportunity to purposefully deepen their relationships within the community and become comfortable talking about their faith with those they see on a daily or weekly basis. Stephen says, "The awesome thing about incorporating church and a worship experience into CrossFit is that in the gym people see each other two or three times a week. No one comes and does things by themselves. There's a coach, and everyone exercises together. People are already getting to know each other on a basic level, so adding or cultivating a spiritual atmosphere within this context of CrossFit workouts kind of enables the close community I have wanted, without making people move closer together."

In addition to fostering the local community here in Berrien Springs, Stephen also realizes how important an intentional Christian community is when doing missionary work. When reflecting on his time in Thailand, and especially Cambodia, he admitted that it was difficult without someone with him. The last year had been especially hard after Khut Ney left for the seminary at Andrews University. It taught Stephen that he would need strong social support if he were to go as a missionary again.

"Jesus sent people out two by two," he states. "My background is in business, and businesses that start with more than one founder are far more likely to succeed. In church planting, it's really important, too. If you are going to unreached areas, it's harder to model what Christian life looks like in community if you're the only one."

Building a vibrant Christian community takes more than just people. It also takes prayer and faith in God. So far, Stephen's life has been an exercise in trusting God to show him the next move and the next step.



Courtesy Stephen Erich

▲ Stephen with people from the community in Cambodia.

"Looking back, I can see how each step led to the next," he explains. "I haven't made any major life decisions at random, but I also haven't known where I was going to be for more than about six months at any point over the last ten years. It has been a natural progression that I couldn't have engineered myself, but it's been way better. Sometimes I just laugh and wonder and ask God why He's letting me do all this."

This attitude has stayed with Stephen through his undergraduate years, his mission work in Thailand and Cambodia and his current ministry with Faith RX. Although he is not completely sure what will happen after he finishes his master's degree, he knows that he can trust God to work it out, step by step.

Stephen's advice to those on their own individual journeys with God is: "Do what you've already been doing — what you love to do — with even more prayer, intentionality and patience; maybe someday you'll make a living from it. In the meantime, try to prioritize personal connection so that you don't get lonely, and enjoy the infinite pleasure of knowing God personally. In the end, He is the One who makes life really worth living, and He is always there." ■

Hannah Gallant, IMC student writer