

PURE RELIGION

I Am Not an English Teacher

To be frank, this was not what Dr. Ralph Francis, DDS, wanted to do. He had been a practicing orthodontist for 30 years in Nampa, Idaho, and when the time came to retire, he looked forward to serving a mission with his wife, Charla Mae. When they met with their bishop and stake president, they emphasized that they just wanted to go where they were needed.

That was why they were so elated when they received a call to serve as humanitarian service missionaries in Indonesia. Ralph would assist with a dental school there and would have the opportunity to train students as well as practicing dentists. Charla Mae would teach English. It was perfect.

Except that it didn't happen.

After the events of September 11, 2001, missionaries in Indonesia were reassigned to other areas for safety reasons. Elder and Sister Francis were also reassigned—to Cambodia.

Cambodia. Where the Church was relatively unknown.

Cambodia. Where there were no dental projects.

Cambodia. Where he was asked to teach English.

Perhaps, had he been assigned to teach English from the start, he would have been better prepared. But this was not what he felt qualified for, nor was it something he wanted to do.

"I am not an English teacher," he warned. But, because he was committed to serving the Lord wherever he was called, Elder Francis rolled up his sleeves and, along with his wife, began to teach.

The first thing he noticed was that it was harder than he had thought it would be. The second thing he noticed was that the more effort he put into preparing his lessons, the more he began to enjoy it.

"The students were so cooperative and polite," he says, "that I soon found myself trying very hard to keep ahead of them and prepare lessons that were meaningful and interesting. We had fun together, and they enjoyed correcting me as I would occasionally misspell a word."

Elder Francis soon found himself becoming so immersed in teaching English that the dental project development came to a halt. Teaching English was a significant and meaningful endeavor. Those students who could speak English were many times more likely to get a job. What was more, if they could understand and speak English, their earning power was considerably higher.

He tried teaching them to sing songs in English, which was a difficult task because of the culture's reluctance to sing in public. But Elder Francis persevered. "It got louder each day," he says, "and they began to look up and not down. Before you knew it, they were even doing some of the hand movements and liking it. After some weeks you could hear them humming the tunes as they walked down the halls of the center. Towards the end of the course, they were contending over which song to sing."

One day, one of his students approached him. "Thank you for coming to Cambodia," she said. "Things here are not so good. But knowing that there is someone from America who is willing to come here without being paid and help us change things for the better, makes all the difference."

To be frank, Elder Francis will tell you now that he couldn't be happier. He has discovered a love for the people and a love for what he is doing. "Writing dental projects," he says, "may be dull in comparison."

"This much I do know," he continues, "if a hard-hearted orthodontist can change, maybe the lives of those we teach can be affected as well."

