

An Overview of Christian Missions in Myanmar

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Published in www.GlobalMissiology.org April 2016

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Introduction

Myanmar is known to foreigners as the 'Golden Land' not only for its golden pagodas but also for its rich natural resources. It is a country boasting emerald green rice fields, a multitude of tropical flowers and fruits and brilliantly painted temples. It is known as the Union of Myanmar (in Burmese language "*Pyidaungsu Myanmar Naing-Ngan*"). The country is located in South East Asia bordering the People's Republic of China on the North East, Laos on the East, Thailand on the South East, Bangladesh on the West and India on the North West. It covers an area of 261,228 square miles. The land area stretches 1,280 miles from North to South, 578 miles from East to West at the wide parts of the boundary. Myanmar is mountainous and drained by four major rivers, Ayeyawaddy, Chindwin, Thanlewin and Sittaung.

Purpose of This Article

The purpose of this paper is to provide our readers an overview of Christian missions in Myanmar from the perspective of native Burmese of the co-authors who are currently serving on the faculty of Tahan Theological College and Seminary, Sagaing Region, Myanmar.

Overview of the Country of Myanmar

Name of Myanmar is a representation of the nation. The English version of Burma or Burmese was in vogue for over a 100 years of colonial subjugation. Burma may have been derived from the word *Bamar* which connotes one of the major ethnic races living in harmony to be what they are and what they stand for in unison. The name of Myanmar, intrinsically and historically, has a wider application. With its official change of name in 1989, the term Myanmar indicates the country and the nationals (*Myanmar Perspective 1997, 84*).

Buddhism is the central value of the country, and people of other ethnic groups and religious background often feel marginalized. Ethnic languages are rarely permitted to be taught in government schools. Many people secretly cross the borders to work in Thailand, India, China and Malaysia. Thus many young people find their profession in

foreign countries to work as immigrant workers who later become refugees and are sent to Europe and other Asian countries to settle there with their families. However, their illegal status in those countries makes them even more vulnerable.

Myanmar is composed of 135 national races of which the main ethnic groups are Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. As of January 2015, the population of Myanmar was estimated to be 54,532,967 people. This is an increase of 1.08% (584,798) compared to the 2014 population of 53,948,169. Due to external migration the population declined by 16,724. The sex ratio of the total population was 0.972 (972 male per 1000 female) which is lower than its global rate.

In terms of national climate, Myanmar enjoys three distinct seasons; hot summer, wet rain and cold winter. The climate in the southern part is influenced by the southwest monsoon, rains from May to October. The rains are most intense between June and August. This is a time of high humidity. The months of October to February are typically cool and dry. In the north and mountainous areas, the temperature is substantially lower all year long. The climate differs from place to place due to the differences in geographical situations. For instance, central Myanmar has an annual rainfall of less than 40 inches while the Rakhine Coast is about 200 inches. The average high temperature in central Myanmar during the months of March and April is 110 F (43.3 C) while north Myanmar is about 79 F (36.1 C).

The Context of Burmese Culture

We may consider its culture as indigenous, Pre-Buddhist, Buddhist and post Buddhist culture. In this culture, the means of living include hunting, fishing, planting and breeding. For successful yield of their production activity, natives of the country not only rely on their own effort but also the assistance of super natural powers. Hence they worship and propitiate the spirits for protection and favor. Thus *nat* or 'spirit' worship or animism pervades the daily life of the people. Ancestor worship along with animism is very common in the country.

Veneration for elders and forefathers play an importance role in the affairs of the family not only during their life on earth but also after death. It is common to consult

astrologers in order to find out their future life. When a child is born, a horoscope of the child's birth is made because it is the child's astrological document by which its future is predicted. Most Myanmar people have their own horoscopes which they take to the astrologer for consultation based on their needs.

As in other Buddhist countries, people regard the head as the highest part in the body. You should never deliberately touch other people's head or pat a child on the head. Also the feet are regarded as the lowest part of the body. Therefore, you don't point your feet at somebody and you take your shoes off at every opportunity. No shoe wearing rule is applied even at a ruined pagoda. At one time this restriction caused a war between the Burmese and the British.

Myanmar costume consists of a *longyi* or sarong, an *eingyi* or shirt and *apaweingyi* or jacket and a pair of slippers for men, and *ahtameinor* skirt and *eingyi* or blouse and a pair of slippers for women. Some official and ceremonial occasions require a *gaungbaung* or a headwear for men and a scarf for women. Unlike Western culture, there are no family names among the people in Myanmar. Men and women, parents and children, married couples and single people cannot be differentiated by their names. Women keep their maiden names upon marriage, and a child can have a name which bears no relation what so ever to his parents' name. A Myanmar name can have one, two or more syllables.

The people in Myanmar mainly eat rice and curry. Curry dishes are generally chicken, meat, fish, prawns or vegetables or a mixture, cooked with a liberal admixture or spices, pepper, onions and cooking oil. Rice is the staple food at all meals.

Life expectancy at birth is one of the most important demographic indicators for them. Total life expectancy at birth for people of Myanmar is 65 years old. This is below the average life expectancy of the global population which is about 71 years old according to the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations.

Social System in Myanmar

Family is the basic and important element in Burmese society. There is no social discrimination on the basis of birth, origin, and gender. The only gender discrimination is found in some aspects of Buddhism. For instance, women are not permitted to sleep in the monastery and religious monument; to step on the sacred sites; to touch the monks or to enter monkhood.

A mother has precedence over the father when children pay their filial homage to the parents in an ordinary Myanmar family. Because the mother bore children in her womb, nursed, suckled and raised them, the children owe a great deal more gratitude to the mother than the father. Therefore, children pay homage to the mother first.

Marriage is universal and has religious, legal and social significance. The majority of marriage partners are by choice and a few are arranged. Dissolution of marriage is allowed but not encouraged. Although polygamy is permitted by Buddhist religion or law, monogamy is the more general form of marriage. Widow's remarriage is tolerated.

In Burmese tradition there are many sayings about women's position and dignity: woman's word cannot reach up the gates; woman's words are similar to the horns of a female with people never danced at the sound of a female *mithuns* horn which means decisions have never been made at the women's suggestions; woman can destroy a country. It is an obvious fact that both religion and culture have marginalized Myanmar women's position and dignity in society and in religious spheres (Our Theological Journey, 135).

Buddhist teaching restricts women's participation in its practice of religion. Males can become monks but not females. Women can become a nun, however, its spiritual position is much lower than that of monks. Monks possess great power and influence as a result of their merit. All women must be reincarnated as men before they are eligible to become the Buddha. A Buddhist woman cannot be an ordained nun but can be a *Thila Shin* whose status is much lower than that of a monk. Buddhist practice also restricts women from participating in some ceremonies and altering certain parts of the temples. Women cannot apply gold leaf to the Buddha statue.

Tradition has taken for granted that women are born to take responsibility of household and insists they honor and respect their husband in all aspects. In rural communities, girls are not encouraged to go to school. They drop out of school more than boys because they are not worth the expense of an education. They are confined to family life only after their marriage.

Understanding Burmese Religion

There has been full freedom of worship for followers of religion since the ancient times. Hence many different religions were practiced in this country. Although full freedom of worship can be practiced Buddhism is the favored one more than other religion. Buddhism is believed to be practiced by 89% whereas Christianity is practiced by 6%, Islam by 3.8%, Hinduism by 1% of the population. Christianity has not spread widely and is still considered to be an alien religion in the central plain.

People preferred to be a Buddhist in order to become an authentic *Bama* (Burmese) since non-Buddhists are considered second class people. In the Buddhist' perspective, being a Christian and a Westerner are not very different. Christianity is still associated with colonization and thought of as a foreign religion. Therefore it is not easy for believers to witness to the Bama because: first, Christianity as a minority religion is vulnerable; second, converted Buddhist families find it difficult of stay faithful to the church because of the wide spread mistrust of Christians; and third, Christians have not found a way to communicate the gospel in a way that Buddhists readily understand.

The Myanmar government continues to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas. The government has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized private schools and hospitals which were mostly affiliated with Christian religious organizations. Christian groups have brought in foreign clergy and religious workers for visit as tourists, but they have been cautious to ensure that the government did not perceive their activities as proselytizing. The government has allowed some members of religious groups, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

Day Saints (Mormon) to enter the country in order to provide humanitarian assistance or English language training to the government officials.

Since the 1960s Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulty in importing religious literature into the country. All publications, religious and secular, remain subjected to control and censorship. It is illegal to import translation of Bible in indigenous languages. The government occasionally allowed local printing or photocopying of limited copies of religious materials, in indigenous languages without prior approval by government censors.

Virtually all organizations are required to register with the government. Not too often the government does exempt 'genuine' religious organizations from official registration; however, in reality only the registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts. These requirements lead most religious organizations to seek registration and obtain permission from the government if they want to have activities such as religious education or charitable work, etc. Their religious affiliation is indicated on a government issued identification card. Myanmar citizen are also required to indicate their religion on official application forms such as a passport.

Some Christian groups are troubled with obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions. Government authorities often refuse to give permission just because they claim the churches did not possess proper property deeds. It is extremely difficult to access official land titles due to the country's complex land laws.

History of Christian Mission in Myanmar

The existence of a Christian community in Myanmar can be traced back to the early 16th century. The first Christians who arrived in Myanmar were the Roman Catholic missionaries who came in 1554 to serve the Portuguese mercenaries. But they were rejected by the monarch and the people of that time. The proper history of Christian mission goes back to the appointment of two Italian Catholic priests in 1720. It was estimated that there were approximately 2,000 Christians who scattered all over the country by the last quarter of the 18th century.

Baptist Mission in Myanmar

The Protestant Mission was pioneered in 1807 by the English Baptist Missionaries, Richard Marden and James Charter, who came from Bengal (Serampore) in India to see the possibilities of a mission in the country. Marden did not stay long in Myanmar and was replaced by Felix Carey, son of William Carey. He and Charter studied the Burmese language, translated extracts from the Old and New Testaments into Burmese and compiled a Burmese dictionary and grammar. The London Missionary Society sent three more missionaries, Pritchett, Brain and the one whose name was not known.

After Brain died of illness, Pitchett abandoned the mission and left the country. Charter too gave up the mission activity and left for Ceylon. Only Felix Carey remained in the land of Myanmar. Carey married an Anglo-Burmese woman, the daughter of Portuguese father and Burmese mother, and had two children. He was offered a position in the government affair to serve as a physician and a negotiator with England in India by the king of Myanmar Bodawpaya. Carey eventually gave up his missionary career and entered into the service of King. He moved out of the mission house in Yangon and left for Ava where the King lived. With his departure English Baptist Mission work was terminated.

The most successful mission in Myanmar was the American Baptist Mission (ABM). The first American Baptist Missionaries in Myanmar were Adoniram Judson and his wife Ann, who arrived in Yangon on July 13, 1813. His primary mission was to convert Burmese Buddhists, living in Lower Myanmar. After six years from his arrival Judson saw the first convert, 'MaungNaw' from the Burmese Mon mission field. He hoped for more Buddhist converts and established a strong Burmese Church. However, he could not get many Burmese Buddhists as he expected. Judson moved to Mandalay in 1824 with Dr. Jonathan Price to approach the King. The war broke out between Myanmar and England around that time. Judson and Price were arrested and sent to prison where they waited for execution. After one and half year of prison, they were released to become interpreters in peace negotiation between the Myanmar King and the British authorities.

Judson returned to Yangon and went to Amherst to establish a new station for mission and evangelism. The reason for moving his mission station from Yangon to Amherst and Moulmein was to reach the Karen (Kayin) and Mon tribes in Lower Myanmar. He stayed there from 1831 to 1835 to visit and preach at Karen and Mon villages located north and east of Moulmein. The first Karen convert 'KoThaByu' was baptized in 1829. Judson realized that mission among Karen might be more successful than the mission for the Burmese Buddhists in the Lower Myanmar. The mission was extended to, SGaw-Karen in 1828, Pwo-Karen in 1836, Pa-o in 1838, Karen hill tribe in 1853, Ashochin in 1856, Shan in 1860, Kachin and Lisu in 1877, Chin in 1899 and the Naga in 1953.

The following are statistics of Baptist Christian in Myanmar in year 1991: Karen Baptist convention 352,539; Kachin Baptist Convention 286,923 Zomi (Chin Baptist) Convention 184,183; Burmese Baptist Churches Union 253,376. These statistics reveal some difficulties of mission to the Buddhists. There are some members who are not Burmese by their ethnicity but speak Burmese as their language in Myanmar Baptist Churches Union. This phenomenon caused us to raise the question of why Burmese churches are smaller than those of the others? In answering this, let us review Judson's mission approach and find a new mission strategy for the churches in Myanmar.

Judson's Mission Approach

Judson used various means in his approach to mission, such as literacy, personal evangelism, educational mission and medical mission. Judson and his wife learned first Burmese language from a Hindu Scholar who left in July 1815 and later he found a new teacher, 47 years old Burmese native U Aung Min. In October 1816, George H Hough, a new missionary from America, arrived in Yangon with a printing press and a typewriter. Judson began to translate the New Testament into Burmese in January 1816. He also produced pamphlets, religious tracts, and booklets for his mission.

He completed his translation of the entire New Testament into the Burmese language on July 12, 1823. This printing of New Testament was completed on December 19, 1832. The translation of entire Bible into Burmese was completed on January 31, 1834 and the first copy of the whole Burmese Bible came out of the Press on December

29, 1835. The first printing press used in Myanmar was the gift of the English Baptist Mission at Serampore. This was set up in Yangon by Hough. When the first Anglo-Burmese War began, Hough took this press back to Calcutta where Judson's Burmese Dictionary was printed under the supervision of Mr. Wade. Judson also produced English Burmese dictionary which was completed in 1843. His commitment to literature was one of his great achievements to bring the gospel to the Buddhists. He noted Burmese were reading people.

As mentioned earlier, the first convert among Burmese was MaungNaw who became a Christian in 1819 just six years after Judson's arrival in Myanmar. Judson won MaungNaw only and then changed mission strategy from 'courtship model' to 'servant hood model.' As he arrived in Myanmar he practiced the 'courtship model' in his missionary work. His mission target was to win the Burmese King in order to convert him to Christianity. He hoped that the conversion of the King would pave the way for the people to become Christian. Judson also hoped that if he built a friendship with the King he would be free to spread the gospel in the King's empire. However it did not happen as he expected. One major reason he failed to do that was some difficulties he experienced in carrying out the Bible from the mission house to the people's hands as he met them on a daily basis. He isolated himself from outside contact. Knowing this failure, he changed his mission strategy from the models of courtship to servant hood.

It is true that most of the Christian missionaries who came to Asia failed to learn Asian culture and its context. Judson learned Burmese culture and wore a yellow gown in Yangon to indicate that he was a religious teacher, as were the yellow gowned Buddhists priests. He built a small *zayat* (public gathering) in Burmese fashion near public road where pedestrians and visitors could stop and hear the gospel. The '*Zayat*' then become a place where he could converse with visitors. He held first worship service at '*Zayat*' on Sunday, April 4, 1819 and fifteen adults and some children came for worship. Judson had so many visitors at the '*Zayat*' that he did not even have time for study. Even though Judson changed his mission approach he did not gain many converts from Buddhism. As he remarked later, "To gain a convert from Buddhism is like pulling the tooth of a tiger"

(Henry Park Cochrane, *Among the Burmese*: New York: Fleming H. Revel company 1904, 211).

Judson and the Baptists missionaries began focusing on education in mission activities. They established mission schools. Baptist Mission Day School for boys and girls was established in 1820 by the missionaries with the help of a woman Ma Min Lay who was the tenth Burmese convert and the first Burmese woman convert. Before the Christian Mission Schools were introduced, Buddhist monastery schools had been established accepting only boys. Girls were not allowed to study with boys at the monastery schools. The first Christian school was co-educational and radically different from that of the monastic schools.

In addition, some schools were specialized ones which met only the rainy season, teachers and students had a tour to the villages for their practical work during the dry season. Notable public education began in Tenasserim in 1833. Mr. Bennett of the mission press in Moulmein started a government English school around that time. This was the first government school in Myanmar approved by the missionaries.

Judson was happy to see the opportunity to have a Christian influence on the students of this school. Mr. Bennett became the founder of government schools who first cared for the moral and spiritual welfare of his students. The Christian teachers carefully refrained from using class hours for religious instructions. After two years a Chinese student asked for baptism and it so stirred up the community that Bennett had to resign from the position of school head since baptism is against the will of the educational authorities.

George Hough, second American Baptist missionary succeeded Bennett as head of the Moulmein school. He devoted much of his time to the preparation of vernacular text books. Soon after Bennett's withdrawal from the government school, the mission opened its own Burmese Boy's Boarding School with Hosea Howard in charge. In addition, there were seven other Baptist schools in Moulmein and Amherst areas.

An article in the *Calcutta Review* for 1847 gave high praise to mission efforts in education: "Too much praise cannot be bestowed on the labor of the American Baptist Mission in the education department. Their schools are far superior in every

respect to the government schools at Moulmein and Mergui and are producing among the Karens very remarkable effects...”

Finally, there are notable results from the medical mission approach. The first medical missionary was Jonathan Price who arrived with his wife and daughter on December 13, 1821. For the lack of medicine in those days, the doctor’s wife died just five months later. To improve the treatment of disease the King was always looking for the person who had scientific knowledge.

Ava’s King Bagyidaw commanded Price to come to see him. As accompanied by Judson, Price arrived in Ava on September 27, 1822. The King was very much impressed by Price’s medical skills and requested him to stay in Ava, the capital city of Myanmar. Medical work became one of the great contributions of early missionaries in Myanmar and medical practice was a great instrument of evangelism at that time.

Five years after the British took Upper Myanmar, the first Baptist medical work began in Namkham in Shan States in 1890. A nurses’ training school was also opened to prepare the nurses in order to work where there was no medical doctor. Medical doctors and preachers work together in carrying out Christ’s benevolent message to the people by treating their disease. Under the Baptist four places; Hsipaw, Mongnai, Namkham and Kengtung with Baptist dispensaries and hospitals were established. The medical work was extended to Chin Hills in Haka when E.N. East reached there in 1902. There are also Baptist dispensaries or small hospitals in the Kachin Hills. They received enthusiastic cooperation of both Animists and Christians in the surrounding area at Bawm Wang in the Triangle area.

Some Anticipated Challenges

Myanmar Professor Din once asked a question: “Can a Burmese Buddhist be a Burma Buddhist Christian?” Christianity had been introduced since the 16th Century in Myanmar, yet the Christian population is only 6% of total population. What is wrong with the Christian mission to Buddhists land? God’s mission is never wrong. But the

way or the method of doing God's mission may need a new approach. Traditional way of evangelism in Myanmar may not be effective.

Burmese Buddhists who were defeated by the British colonialists look upon Christianity as the religion of the invaders and are not willing to accept it. They believe that the Western imperialists practiced the 'three M's' approach in invading Myanmar. They first came as merchants, then as missionaries and finally conquered with their military power. The Burmese Buddhists also considered the tribal Christian as instruments of the colonialists.

The Missionaries came to Myanmar as teachers and preachers not as students. They hesitated in learning Burmese culture and its context. Burmese Buddhists have been so deeply rooted in their culture such as "to be a Burmese means to be a Buddhist and vice versa." They listened silently when Christians preached about the love of Jesus Christ. But it was difficult for them to change their religion. As Judson mentioned, "To gain a convert from Buddhism is like pulling the tooth of a tiger." The challenge of Christian missionaries in Myanmar is how to instill the gospel message in the mind of the Burmese while removing their negative attitudes toward the religion and culture of the gospel.

Buddhists in the country appreciate Jesus' morals and his spiritual teachings, and they have shown their deep reverence to Him. The cultural and faith-traditions of Buddhist neighbors is very crucial in presenting Christ in the land of Buddhist. Judson and his fellow American Baptist missionaries realized that conversion from Buddhism to Christianity in the context of Myanmar had caused risk to life, suffering and being looked down on by their Buddhist relatives. Religiously speaking, they are labeled as stooges of a foreign religion.

The history of Christian mission to Myanmar tells us that the traditional Western missionaries introduced their superior Christian faith to the Burmese, but the Burmese had a deep faith in Buddhism that made them resist Christianity. For Christians, Christianity is the truth and the best of all religions. The Christian God is the only true God. But the Buddhists experience their Lord's (spirit *nats*) presence in their daily lives and believe their Lord protected them from the invader's hands. So they oppose the

Western imperialistic and superior Christianity. What the Burmese really need is a Lord to protect their country, their people and their lives.

Obviously, mission in the colonial era has a thick Western accent. The gospel must be reformulated so that it comes through the local people with a local accent. In the 1960s, the former socialist government expelled all the missionaries, demonetized people's money and nationalized all mission schools, hospitals and other non-religious institutions. In order to get rid of Western ideals and accessories, the Myanmar church needed to deconstruct all its Western modeled thought forms and reconstruct them in the Myanmar way. Church life in Myanmar was predominantly Western oriented, especially in its theological expression, form of worship, structure of church organization and strategy of mission reach out. After all missionaries left Myanmar for their home lands, Christians in Myanmar became a product of 'missionary compound' mentality that looks to the West alone for a model of life.

The traditional law of Christian faith is: hear it, believe it and receive it. On the other hand, Burmese understanding of faith is: taste it, experience it and believe it. Ann Judson once shared the traditional gospel with 15 to 20 Burmese women. Some responded by saying that they preferred to spend eternity in hell with their families and ancestors than to spend it in heaven by themselves. Life after death is not a crucial issue for the Buddhists people. Their priority lists in life are community life, communion with supreme beings, their relatives and friends. There are some challenges to be obtained from the Buddhist' perspective:

(1) Christians in Myanmar have not found a way to communicate the gospel in a way that Buddhists readily understand. Therefore, we need to find a way to distinguish clearly between the teaching of the gospel and some Western accessories of Christianity. We must show grace and love in action.

(2) To make the gospel accessible, it must be presented in Burmese thought forms of life. This does not mean compromising the Truth; rather it is being sensitive in presentation when providing evangelism tract.

(3) Poverty, sickness, separation, alienation and deprivation are rampant among the people of Myanmar. The immediate needs of the people include: Where can they

find the next meal? How can they avoid sickness? How do they get a job? How do they escape oppression?

(4) Until the Church understands the Buddhist mindset, they will not be able to play a significant part in the culture of Myanmar.

(5) All missionaries and expatriate Church leaders left Myanmar since 1962. Thus the training of national leaders for the churches is crucial to bringing the kingdom of God to the country.

(6) There are no employment agencies. Many people leave the country to work in neighboring countries. Installing Job Training Centre or Multipurpose Training Centers would be helpful to provide employment opportunities to young people in Myanmar and abroad for their life's career.

(7) Burmese Buddhists are hospitable and generous by nature. Charity is a very strong value in their worldview and its ministry therefore to the Buddhists can be one of a good means of evangelism.

(8) There are many social development programs established by the intellectual Buddhists. Being involved in social work as a Christian is acceptable service for the Buddhists.

(9) Churches in Myanmar, geographically remote and politically isolated, have long felt the pain of isolation. Christians in the country need to cooperate with churches abroad in witnessing gospel to the Buddhists.

(10) Medical work and educational ministry in small villages are still an effective means of evangelism to the Buddhists.

(11) Pray for the government to allow freedom of religion so that the church will be deeply involved in mission and evangelism to the Buddhists.

Role of Theological Education in Myanmar Mission

Theological Education is training and formation of ministry to the church. It aims at a theological formation and a ministerial formation. Its purpose is not trying to accumulate more and more theological knowledge and to produce learned theologians.

Beyond learning and knowledge of theological education, it must be formed the mind of Christ by the ministry of Christ in each individual. The ministry of Christ means what he himself spoke, “I came not to be ministry unto but to minister.” Theological education needed to be involved and aimed at a new life formation in each individual for forming the mind of Christ.

Theological Education and the Church

Theological schools are instruments of the church and its ministry. The teaching at colleges and seminaries must meet the local needs and their expectations. The curriculum of these schools must be revised occasionally to meet the need of the people in the church. Theological educators at the school are involved in the ministry of the church so they have to know the life of the people in the church. Therefore, the school may belong properly to the church and it may not exist independently from the church. The church must be the one who establishes, maintains, and governs these theological institutions. In conclusion, the school and the church must be knit together so that each can contribute distinctive roles to the formation of people for ministry.

The theological institution while belonging to and governing by the church, due to the nature of its ministry as a prophet, it is neither involved directly in the church politics nor administrative responsibility. It should be in the role of ‘a voice cry in the wilderness’ to the church. These schools need to acquire the skill of being a prophet that has both the ability and the credibility of guiding the church in order to do this. This means that it needs to know how to push the church forward what the people in the church can accept and understand.

Another aspect of the theological institution is to serve as a think tank for new ideas to provide critical evaluation on the nature and direction of church’s life and work by evaluating whether or not they are theologically and Biblically sound. This requires a wisdom which is earned by knowing the church deeply and a wisdom that comes from God.

Today much of theological education is understood in functional term, skill formation and training. The problem currently occurs in Myanmar is that many seminary

graduates have not worked for the churches as they are not trained by the churches. A substantial change in approach is needed which will do justice the priesthood of all believers. All members of the church need to think theologically to build bridges between the world and the Heaven in the contemporary world. They need to be enabled to calculate their faith. Hence the whole people of God should be equipped in the whole counsel of God. It should not be forgotten that the church is the first institution (Matthew 16:18) and that all the other institutions are to be in the service of the main institution which the Lord creates through the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Social and Cultural Context

The following is a list of some similarities between Christianity and Buddhism we have observed:

- Christianity is a matter of salvation by faith in Christ. Faith is present in all forms of Buddhism.
- Both Christ and Buddha became models of faith for their followers: Christ by his death and resurrection, but Buddha by his enlightenment.
- Both Buddha and Christ stood firm in refusal of temptations of lust of the flesh and eye and pride of life.
- As the Christian inherits the sinful condition, so does the Buddhist inherit his suffering according to his *Karma*.
- Buddha and Christ each renounced worldly wealth and power and each was tempted: Buddha by Mara, Christ by Satan. Buddha experienced the *Dharma*, but Christ experienced God's will.
- In Buddha's analysis, deliverance from the disease of *Duokkha* lies in the cessation of Karma, in enlightenment or Nirvana, which can be achieved by the practice of the noble eightfold path. Christianity is a revealed religion and the goal of liberation from sufferings through salvation is given by a divine revelation of Jesus Christ.

- God, in Buddhism, is the loving God who shows the path of Nirvana to mankind. In Christianity, God is described as ‘Lover.’ The love of God is manifested in Jesus and He died on the cross for the salvation of the mankind.

A theological seminary must train the people of God to read the social, cultural context of mission. There needs to be thought on how to be responsible citizens when the tradition in many seminaries have been withdraw from the secular world. The whole subject matter of theological education is the triune God. The focus should be on personal growth in holiness. We cannot ignore the characters on the altar of academic excellence nor academic excellence on the altar of character. It is always contextual as it took place in the concrete situation. Thus theological education in Myanmar should take into account its religious, political and social context. Above all, theological education cannot be separated from the mission of the church and the theology of mission.

Further, a theological seminary curriculum must focus on context. The context of Myanmar is religiously, politically and socio-economically pluralistic. What should be the goal of theological training in this pluralistic religious society? Should we insist only on evangelism and ignore inter-religious dialogue? How to train the students to appreciate the culture while they upholding indigenization? Seminary curriculum could include the list of subjects, detailed course outline with requirement of reading, assignments and evaluation criteria. It also should be related to its context by addressing to the issue and bring out the solution.

Socio-economic context in Myanmar is also pluralistic. About 70% of the population lives in rural areas and agriculture is their main economic means to live. Country’s economy is primarily based on agriculture and 36 % of GDP comes from this sector. Poverty is wide spread in the country despite visible improvement happened in urban areas. A total of the country’s 40 % population is without access to health services, safe water and sanitation. This situation is also responsible for the increasing number of economic refugees into neighbor countries.

Theological Education in Myanmar

Seminary students pay much attention to their teacher’s life style and like to imitate them even after graduating from the school. Teachers are the role models for

their students. By being involving in society, teachers can make their teaching meaningful and mobilize the students in their ministry. Therefore, teachers must be involved in local churches, as well as the socio-political and economic problems of the society. Their involvement includes the local community challenges not only the intellectual thinking and skill of theological reflections but also its own spirituality.

However, the first seminary was founded at Monhla in Upper Myanmar in the 1770s. The primary nationals were trained, and it took 23 years before two Burmese, Joseph MaungGyi of Chaung U village and Andrew Ko of Chantha village were ordained. This seminary later developed as an educational institution composed of two departments. One department taught secular subjects such as grammar, rhetoric, and mathematics while the other taught theological classes such as philosophy and theology. This second department was known to the ‘missionary college.’

The American Baptist missionaries came in the early part of the 19th century began training programs which combining Bible instruction and real life applicable training. The first formal school was begun in 1836 in Tavoy. The subjects taught in there were general exposition of the Bible, beginning astronomy, geography, chronology and outline of church history. Public health and medicine, arithmetic and English classes were added later.

This seminary was later relocated to Yangon area. There were Karen Theological Seminary (KTS) and Burman Theological Seminary in 1890. The Burmese Women’s Bible School (1893) and Karen Women’s Bible School (1897) were added on the Hills of Yangon. Myanmar Institute of Theology, the largest seminary in Myanmar, began as the Anglo-vernacular Department of Karen Theological Seminary. The Church of the Province of Myanmar (Anglican) began mission in the 19th century in Myanmar. A catechist school was opened in 1883 and St. Peter’s College was started in 1893 in Toungoo for training Karen pastors. Presently two Anglican seminaries exist, namely Emmanuel College in Mohnyin and Holy Cross College in Yangon (Anna May Say Pa 1996).

Role of Presbyterian Seminary

Presbyterian churches were founded in the 1950s by Mizo people in Kalay and Kabaw valleys and some revivalists in the Chin Hills. For the lack of leaders in the church, they made a request to Mizoram Presbyterian Church in India to send them pastors to take care of the new born Presbyterian churches in western Myanmar. After ten years ministry in there, Rev. Lalthanga and his family were dispatched by the Mizo Presbyterian Church but returned to India due to the difficulties of getting permanent residency in Myanmar.

The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar was desperately in need of leaders in the church. Tahan Theological College was founded in 1978 by the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) in order to meet these needs. The PCM dreamed to have its own Seminary since 1975. A piece of land with a small house was purchased at the heart of Tahan in 1977 for a seminary construction by substantial assistance from United Presbyterian Church in the USA (now PCUSA) and Reformed Churches in Europe.

The school started with 7 students and 3 full time teachers on June 6, 1978. This college is owned, supported and governed by the General Assembly of the PCM. Though the school was operated by the PCM, it did not intend to serve only this denomination but rather aimed to serve every churches in Myanmar. The policy of the school clearly mentions in its admission policy not to discriminate any individual based on his race, color, sex and denominational affiliation.

Mission Approach in Myanmar Today

Jesus came with a holistic mission that is oriented toward the satisfaction of basic human needs, including the need of food, love, housing, clothing, physical and mental health and human dignity. Love for God is inseparable from love of neighbor. As John 20:21 says, “As my father has sent me, so I also send you.” Sending people is the most important concept in mission. As Lesslie Newbigin taught, mission is to participate in the work of the Triune God and is truly about the activity of God in which people called to participate it. He also gives a very simple but meaningful definition of mission as

“mission is the explosion of Joy” (Newbigin 1989, 116). When there is a Joy in one’s mind, he cannot resist sharing it, then it explodes as mission activities.

The following five points could be summed up as core tasks of mission: To bear witness to the truth that we found in Christ; (2) to serve the people without any discrimination; (3) to seek righteousness and Justice; (4) to build a caring Community; and (5) to look after the created order (these involved in stewarding the material resources of creation).

Suffering Theology of Myanmar (PyithuDuokkha)

In The Four Noble Truths, the heart teaching of enlightened Buddha, *duokkha* is the first noble truth, ‘the noble truth of suffering.’ It means that life is nothing but suffering and pain. The word *duokkha* directly presents to the *Pyithu* who suffers the most in a life of poverty, sickness, separation, alienation and deprivation. Myanmar was under military dictatorship from 1962 and the consequences are repression and human rights violations and loss of resources.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a ban on all imports from Myanmar for the abuse of human rights and repression of democratic opposition in Myanmar. Many young people left home country and stayed illegally in other countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, etc. to find employment opportunities. There are immediate needs for the Myanmar people: “Where can I find the next meal? How can we avoid sickness? How do I get a job? How do we escape oppression?” They are not able to think about what will happen to their future lives when they die. Rather they desperately need a Lord who can help them and communicate with them in their daily lives.

Burmese Buddhists are hospitable and generous by nature. Charity is still a very strong value in the Burmese Buddhist worldview. Nowadays there are many more social development programs established by the intellectual Buddhists. They engage in all the social work that missionaries once initiated and native Christians carried on. Buddhists even provide free funeral services, and many monks and lay Buddhists have been giving their lives for social work and political betterment that Christians have not yet done.

Nevertheless, people keep consulting the *spirit-nats* and seeking different kinds of extraordinary powers for their daily activities. Their actual spiritual need is the assistance of the power from supernatural beings in order to escape from this suffering world and to experience protection for their health and wealth.

Witnessing to the Truth in Myanmar Context

According to Andrew Kirk, bearing witness means both the verbal communication of the apostolic gospel and visual demonstration of its power to bring new life and hope to human relationships and communities (Kirk 1988, 435). As David Bosch says, witnessing to the truth is best seen as a subject of mission. Mission is the church sent into the world to love, to preach, to teach, to hear, and to liberate. All Christian missionaries must bear witness to the truth in actions as well as with words if they are genuine missionaries (Bosch 1991).

The mission activities among Burmese Buddhists were not as fruitful as it should be while the work among the hill tribe animists was more fruitful. American missionary Judson, once gave an illustration to the work among the hill tribe and Burmese-Buddhist.

There were two men having earthen ware Jars. One Jar was empty while the other Jar was filled with earth oil. When two persons were offered fresh, sweet and pure drinking water, the one with empty Jar accepted with great Joy while the person with earth oil was unwilling to replace his earth oil with the pure drinking water. Because he placed great value of the old earth oil which had been there in his earthen jar from the time of his forefathers. Even when he was willing to change his earth oil with pure and fresh drinking water, the smell and the oily grease remained there and caused the fresh drinking water to stink (Sowards and Sowards, Burma Baptist Chronicle, 133).

From the very outset, Christianity was an alien religion to the people of Myanmar due to the significant factors: the identification of Christian mission with colonialism by the Burmese people; negative attitude of the missionaries towards the religion, culture and the people. The fundamental challenges of Christian mission as the challenge in Myanmar today is therefore how to acculturate the Christian gospel to remove this alienation of Christianity in the country. In post-missionary period, under the former socialist military government began in 1965, the churches become limited

both in resources and trained personnel to engage in active mission among non-Christians. The lack of trained leader was the hardest blow for the churches.

Leadership Training

The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar established Tahan Theological Seminary in 1978 with the purpose of training for its ministers. PCM church was founded in 1956 by laymen in the Chin Hills and Kalay Valleys in the west of Myanmar and came into existence as the result of indigenous initiative without missionary operation. Three years later the Church requested Mizo Presbyterian Church in India to send a Pastor to take care the new born Presbyterian congregations in Myanmar.

The Mizo Presbyterian Church sent Rev. Lalthanga and his family in 1959. But he experienced obstacles to staying in Myanmar as a socialist government system was introduced at that time. He returned to India after 10 years. The PCM was desperately in need of national leaders in the church. In order to educate the church leaders, the church operated synod preachers' training program as a correspondent class. When Tahan Theological Seminary (later became a college) was founded the synod preachers' training program (now called lay Theological Studies) which was available by the care of the seminary. This program is very successful to the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Planting Churches

After the 1988 student uprising in Rangoon that went national, the ruling power of the country was passed on to the younger generation of generals by the senior military Junta liberalized the economy and opened door of the country a little bit. Taking advantage of this situation, different foreign agencies came into the country beginning in the early 1990s. Many Christians who wanted to plant churches came in different forms such as businessmen, language teachers, workers in NGO, etc. These foreign missionaries made great efforts in planting new churches by helping church building constructions and opening teaching institutions. Mission became the most profitable business attracting many young Christian workers. Their planted new churches in the towns and villages are not

converted Christians but moving from the established churches. Thus some mainline churches separated and formed new churches in order to get aid from overseas.

Presbyterian Church of Myanmar did not separate because of these ways of planting new churches. It firmly stands to bear witness of the truth and keep unity in the nation. These churches took the gospel to rural areas and their mission was very successful in the remote areas. Eventually, churches were able to produce more than 100 new convert members from the animism and Buddhism annually.

Serving His People

Myanmar has beautiful stories about missionaries' service to human beings. The American Baptist missionaries opened a hospital in Moulmein in 1918. Many patients were treated in a spirit of hospitality. The government nationalized all private hospitals, teaching institutions but Christian leprosy hospital in Moulmein did not nationalized in 1962. The Hospital was operated by the churches in Myanmar under the umbrella of Myanmar Baptist Convention.

Anglican missionaries also established Deaf and Dumb School and the Self-Supporting Karen Baptist Churches founded Christian Blind School. These two institutions have not been nationalized by the government. Presbyterian Church of Myanmar launched a physical healing ministry. Since there was a great deal of unrelieved suffering in local areas, a clinic center for the local people under the care of recognized physician was very crucial. Thus Agape Clinic was founded in 1989 by the PCM and it contributes to the local people as malaria is rampant in most areas in Myanmar. About 43,780 patients were treated at this clinic in 2014 alone.

However, people of Myanmar live in poverty even though the country is rich in natural resources. Myanmar may be regarded as the poorest countries in the world. Problems of poverty, sickness, separation and alienation are rampant among its people. The immediate needs of the people include: Where can I find the next meal? How can we avoid sickness? How do I get the Job? How do we escape the oppression? The Burmese people need the Lord who can help them and communicate with them in their present life.

Jesus hates injustice and neglect of the poor. He chose as his manifesto a passage from the book of Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and the recovery of the sight of the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save the people” (Luke 4: 18-19). Christian mission has always two priorities of proclamation and service by telling the people good news of Jesus in order to satisfy their spiritual hunger and meet their needs in practical ways. Charity ministry to the Buddhists can be a good means of evangelism.

Conclusion

In this paper we provide our readers an overview of Christian missions in Myanmar from the perspective of native Burmese historically and descriptively. One Myanmar proverb states: “Two brothers were walking down the road when one found a grain of corn. He picked it up, put it between his teeth and broke it in half. He gave one half to his brother and said ‘if I only have one grain of corn I must share it with my brother.’”

There is hope that the lives and communities of Myanmar people would be transformed for the ministry to the poor in the country. Orin Hatch, then ranking Republican member of the Finance Committee in US Senate, mentioned on its committee web site: “I am quite hopeful about the change taking place in Burma. The Burmese people have suffered for much too long under the yoke of poverty and oppression” (July 20, 2012).

Today Myanmar Christians are facing the problems of partial religious freedom, economy crisis and exploitation. Myanmar church leaders and foreign agency leaders have to take these challenges seriously:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like the sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field (Mt 10: 36 – 38).

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