

Report on a visit to Myanmar

29 November – 10 December 2017

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Aims

- To learn more about the districts of the Methodist Church of Upper Myanmar (MCUM) and meet their chairs
- To have discussion about the difficult requirements of the grant making processes of the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) as they affect MCUM
- To open the Wesley Ecumenical Research Centre at the Myanmar Theological College (MTC)
- To learn about the depth of the recent changes in the country and the implications for the Church
- To meet the new General Secretary of Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) and our former SALT student, now programme officer for mission, Revd Simon Van Lal Chhuanga

Background

The Methodist Church of Upper Myanmar and the Myanmar Council of Churches worked under hostile restrictions for many years and the church has suffered more than its fair share of divisions, splits and indiscipline. There are currently five Methodist denominations, the latest split coming when the 'Wesleyan' Methodists formed their own denomination in 1996. MCUM follows the British tradition, proud of the missionaries who founded it and the current partnership; it continues to use the English words for its infrastructure: Society, Circuit, District and has Chairmen and Executive Committees.

Government elections that took place in 2011, resulted in Aung San Suu Kyi taking leadership in Parliament, after 18 years of house arrest, although the army is still guaranteed at least 25% of seats and retains control of significant ministries. Many say this means there are two governments. There is now a freedom of speech, which did not exist during my last visit in 2012. The Irish Methodist World Mission Partnership (WMP) has taken the lead on our partnership with MCUM over the last two years and will do so for one year more. This has been very successful in many ways both in Myanmar and in Ireland. The MCUM President visited Ireland early in 2017 and representatives of Methodist Women in Ireland visited Myanmar just a month before me.

As my visit was an in depth look at most of the MCUM districts, I have decided to offer more detail than is usual in these reports and am happy to expand on issues, if you wish to know more.



Yangon

Rev. Dr. Lal Muana (Former Conference President), Rev. Myo Chit (Yangon Circuit Superintendent), Mr. Ta Mawia (Yangon Society Steward) and Revd Simon Van Lal Chhuanga welcomed me at Yangon Airport. Simon kindly took me to Shwedagon Pagoda - a beautiful 'must see' in Yangon - the picture shows but a tiny fraction of a huge area with a deep sense of prayer and devotion. The Buddhist context of this country is fundamental to its culture and its social life, as well as its politics.

I met the Yangon Circuit in the evening to hear of a wide range of work supported by the three societies, including

- a PLWHA drop-in
- a mission field (6 hours drive away!) with a children's nursery, 70 children and 3 teachers
- small scholarships to secondary school students
- the women's association runs a micro-finance scheme which mainly funds pig rearing and vegetable selling,
- an after school club which runs every day from 4 until 8 with 40 attending

Myanmar Council of Churches hosted me the next morning. The new General Secretary, Revd Palmerston, was keen to discuss the situation in Rakhine State. The Pope was in Yangon at the same time as I and so this was a topic with considerable profile. As I was also to discover later at Methodist Theological College, Myanmar people find it difficult to appreciate the simplistic picture painted by most of the western media and Aung San Suu Kyi is as well supported as ever. Historically 80% of MCC funding has come from overseas partners and MCC says it doesn't 'compete with the denominations for funding within Myanmar'. However, international 'development' partners can now work directly with local churches and organisations in the new open climate so MCC is looking for 'mission' partners to continue its pioneering work supporting and challenging the churches.

Part of the grant from MCB is used to offer small scholarships to Christian university students (only about \$100 a year!) which demonstrably encourages them and also builds up qualified Christian leadership in churches and Christian organisations. Christians are still discriminated against in some professional areas, though it is getting better.

MCC also offers capacity-building courses for the member churches in areas such as finance, project management, political ethics, religion and law, etc. taking workshops around the country.

It was good to see Simon putting his SALT experience to good use as programme officer. He expressed deep thanks to MCB for his study opportunity and we had a good discussion about his work in inter faith dialogue. I hope to make connections with the work in Sri Lanka.

Mandalay District

In the afternoon I flew north to Mandalay and was met by the President of MCUM, Revd Hrankaptluanga. He accompanied me on my travels for the whole of the remaining period of my visit.

The next morning I met with the leadership of the Mandalay District, its Chair, Revd , the minister of Wesley Church, a former President who I know well, Revd Zaw Win Aung and leaders with responsibility for the Youth, Women's and Training departments.

Mandalay District has 12 ministers serving 12 societies, having over 900 members. The relaxation in some restrictions has led to an increase in the numbers of fundamentalist preachers from the US and Canada. The district is responding by seeking to bring 'new blood' to its own evangelism by instituting a new two-year training course for evangelists. There is also a plan for a children's home, its sustainability supported by an agricultural project a proposal for which has been agreed with the WMP in Ireland. The Women's Fellowship of MCUM, which was encouraged and assisted by WMF to join the WFMUCW, is now participating enthusiastically; it will host the South Asian seminar in January. Pictured is the youth and children's centre built with a grant from MCB and an extensive row of shops built by one of the circuits on the boundary of its headquarters, the old missionary compound.



Our discussion revealed opportunities for partnership such as:

- the summer children's English camp, an annual district event for 6-14 year-olds in the summer holidays (March to May) a volunteer from MCB for a few weeks would be most welcome (hotel accommodation is the only option and it will be hot!).
- Local preacher training is also at this time and an invitation is offered for someone to offer a week's training during April.
- As ever, there are requests for exchange with MCB youth.

The Korean Methodist Church is developing a relationship with MCUM.

There is one missionary in the Mandalay area, and two replacement MCUM church buildings are being funded by KMC.

Then it was back to the airport for the flight westwards to Tahan, which was my base for a few days.



Tamu District is a three-hour drive from Tahan towards the Indian border

and that was my next district visit. District Chair, Rev Lalpianglawma, fortunately speaks excellent English and gave a great PowerPoint presentation. Tamu is in Chin State, where there is a comparatively high number of Christians, maybe 45%, among a total population of 115,000, and a plethora of denominations. This Methodist District is 150 miles from top to bottom and has 14 congregations grouped into 5 circuits with 8 ministers and about 4,000 members. The District has started two mission fields



with a missionary in each and currently 33 converts. Mission here usually begins by establishing a children's nursery offering education to all. The Synod has just decided that a new mission field is to start next year in Rakhine State where there is so much need and tension. The District has taken steps over the years to buy rice fields, labour is then provided by church members and when the rice is sold the income is used for the mission work. The latest field was just bought with £17k from the Irish Methodist WMP. I visited it, as you can see, and saw that the harvest had just been completed, stubble burnt and quick-growing greens such as mustard leaves will be sown now until the next season of paddy is planted in June. The majority of funds for mission, however, continue to be generated by a 'handful of rice'. Each time a church family sits down to eat they put a handful of rice aside to give to the church; it generates a huge amount of money, which all goes to mission work.

The next item in the presentation had me sitting up in my chair! In 2002 my predecessor, Christine Elliott, visited the District and was impressed by a plan to begin a health ministry. A grant of £10,000 was subsequently agreed by the World Mission Fund and a vehicle was bought to start a mobile dental health clinic. I heard that every month since then, using funds from the District



budget, the mobile clinic has been on the road, (including in the 'mission fields') treating thousands of patients, of all faiths, free of charge with dental and general health care delivered by a committed church member, Dr Sang Khama (pictured). All thanks to a small grant 15 years ago!

Tahan District is the largest and on **Sunday morning** I attended the first service at Vengpui Church in a fine new building (complete with underground car park) financed by local contribution. A full church of about 400 people enjoyed the standard MCUM order of service but with contributions from the youth choir and the women's choir. As the first hymn was set to the tune 'Cwm Rhondda', I had the perfect intro for my speech! As usual, I mentioned that the Prayer Handbook has us



praying for MCUM on the 16th day; not for the first time I was asked, 'Oh, has it changed?'

Letpanchaung District is an hour's drive on unmetalled roads from Tahan, it separated from Tahan District in 1985 and now has 3 circuits with 11 societies, 9 ministers and 2732 members.

Revd Lalchuanmawia, District Chair gave a concise presentation about the District's work. It is largely supported by the profit from rice fields – two were bought with grants from the World Mission Fund and one by a friend in Singapore. Here too, children's nurseries are a means of outreach into the community; there are three in the town, one is under construction in Changezawl (which I had visited on the way back from Tamu) and the aim is to build one in all 11 societies. Each has three teachers and 60-100 children. The nurseries seem well run with enthusiastic governors and happy children.

Another source of funding for mission is the 'handful of rice' principle.

There are two mission fields, established in villages further out of town. Each has begun outreach by sinking a well and offering water to villagers. Again it is hoped to create a nursery, in one place 15 children already gather in the missionary's house, in the other there are hopes of starting a hostel for secondary school students.

As well as visiting three nurseries, I was taken to the 'Boaz' rice field, the one bought by a contact in Singapore, the WMF ones being too difficult to reach on this occasion. Revd Sawma commented, 'One of the best things you have done for us is the rice field project.' It is certainly a model copied by most of the districts now, with rice fields or other agricultural projects providing finance for the church's mission.



Revd Van Lal Mal Sawma has just returned from a two year MDiv course at Candler in the US. He is now a circuit minister and took a high profile during my visit; his district chair said they were all proud of him.



Wesley Hospital is in Tahan and I paid a visit to this powerful Methodist institution. The Director, Dr Than Bil Luai, who I last met briefly in London in 2013 as well as on my last visit to the hospital in 2010, was effusive in his welcome. He called a staff meeting and gave a presentation detailing support for the hospital from British Methodism since 1986. A tour around the hospital revealed huge progress: computerisation of records and dispensing, a waste water treatment plant, new x-ray machine and a water purification and bottling plant (pictured) – the latter with help from the Irish Methodist Development and Relief Committee.

A question and answer session raised possibilities for:

- Volunteer professionals to work at the hospital for short periods
- MCUM to submit application for one of the doctors to pursue further training as the hospital prepares second line leadership

because being a private hospital doctors cannot access training in government institutions in Myanmar

- Partners who can help with telemedicine.

Tuesday was taken up by a succession of meetings at Tahan District Offices. The first with Tahan District leaders, who asked questions about:

- Methodist constitutions – could someone from Britain come and talk about the British Constitution to assist a process of changing the MCUM constitution?
- Sexuality and how to disagree within the Church.
- Scholarships – these are highly appreciated in MCUM and there were a lot of questions.

Tahan Institute of Theology currently offers a Certificate and Bachelor course in theology. As the government schools improve and opportunities for overseas work and study increase, student numbers are falling. The faculty is now quite well qualified and have good ideas for some new one-year courses for students to follow in the one-year gap that is inevitable between matriculation from school and starting university, possibly civic education and English. This would require a new classroom or two. They have obtained funds from Korean Methodist Church for a new college chapel (pictured) and moved a house from the District office compound for the Principal but would need funds for building further. The rice field provided by WMF continues to provide 5% of their budget.



Hakha District Chairman undertook a days' journey to see me. He presented the District's position very clearly and starkly. There are nine District Staff (Chair, Women, Youth, etc.) and the District has running costs of 17m kyat. The salaries of the 15 ministers and lay pastors add up to 20m kyat. The tithes from the members do not cover this and salaries are not always paid. Irish Methodism made a grant of £6,400 for the development of a herd of Mithun, a type of cattle only reared for meat or wedding gifts and in much demand. A comprehensive report seems very positive about the progress and the prospects such that they will make a good case to Ireland for a few more female cattle. The Chair also presented a very sound proposal for a further project to cultivate grapes. This like the Mithun makes good use of expertise available among church members, provides employment and increases the likelihood of a sustainable District.

Homalin District Chairman also came to Tahan to see me. Methodist Church Ireland gave a grant of £12k which was received in June 2017 and 25 acres of land was purchased. A full report has been provided, detailing the purchase and planting of 2,000 teak plants, 6 acres of rice, a building is being built to rent and the remainder is in a fixed term bond while the ground is being cleared for the bamboo operation. It is all very organised. The profits will all be ploughed back into the project as the District works towards self-sustainability. There is much to do; minister's salaries are very low, about £55 per month. This is one of the old districts and used to be 7 days travel from Mandalay, it can now be done in one day (just). The District has a Christian College offering an LTh course after which suitable candidates can go to the Methodist Theological College in Mandalay.

Rezua District Chairman came to Tahan too. Rezua is the youngest district having been split off from Hakha in 2002. It has 3 circuits, 10 societies and 1010 members served by 5 ministers. It is a poor area of subsistence farmers and daily labourers. A little support from the Conference enabled them to put up a two-room building, each half of which is rented out. While there is no capital in the District, they have had the idea of building a hotel, since, being close to the India border there is a lot of through traffic; a very adventurous idea. One minister from Rezua is supernumerary in Tahan serving a migrant community from Rezua enabling them to worship in their own language.



Mindat District is an eight-hour drive from Tahan but it was worth the journey up into the South Chin hills – only really opened to foreigners within the last two years. It is a young district; although Methodist missionary work began here in 1972 it did not become an autonomous district until 2000. It now has 33 societies, 2923 full members and 4937 on the roll. District Chairman Revd Kok Thang gave a good presentation.

Mission is at the heart of things and there are 7 Mission Centres with an evangelist in each, leading activities such as fishing, hunting, secondhand clothes sales and medical care to express God's love for the community. Their orphanage houses 16 children who are alone because of the death by accident or disease of their parents, medical care being beyond the reach of many. Relief is still being offered after the disastrous floods of 2015, remarkably the church has built two bridges and some 'motorbike roads' as

its contribution. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is a need here, people have food but need to plan things like escape routes. In 2013 the WMF gave a grant for an income-generating project, growing and selling 'elephant-foot yams'. In this the fourth year, once the crops were sold in Mandalay for export to China and Japan, the project yielded 2.3m kyats (about £1600) and next year they hope for between 3 and 5 million. One limiting factor has proved to be the price of manure. Their Victoria Bible School has trained many people, Sunday school teachers, evangelists, lay pastors and local preachers. Demand is exceeding supply.

In answer to the question, 'Why is the church slowly growing here?' I was told that it is down to 'Good pastors', both lay and ordained, of course. They work together, have an annual retreat and times of fasting and prayer.

Methodist Theological College (MTC) is in Mandalay and shares the headquarters compound. There are currently 57 students, 18 studying MDiv and 34 BTh. Numbers are rising again, 70 is the maximum that can be accommodated. Year One has 16 students, equally male and female from all denominations, most are from poor rural areas. There is a route for those who did not achieve matriculation into the LTh course, which, with an additional 5th year, can become a BTh.

I was asked to formally inaugurate the Wesley Ecumenical Research Centre and duly cut the ribbon on what the college hopes will be a national resource. Offers of partnership were invited in the form of:

- Books about Wesley and Wesleyan theology which can be sent in small parcels of up to 5 books by post c/o the Conference Office
- Offers to run seminars/workshops on Wesleyan theology especially social engagement
- Visiting the Centre for periods of study of up to a month.

The college has a good and lively faculty very keen to raise the profile of social engagement and go out to the churches. Its main building is 80 years old and in need of replacement, with some capital there could be scope for income-generation project in the form of building shops along the edge of the compound facing the road, they could introduce liberal arts programmes. There are donations from churches in several districts and part of the MCB grant to MCUM goes to the college.

An excellent discussion covered:

- The need to promote social engagement
- Christian ethics and politics
- The immature response of the West to the Rakhine State catastrophe
- The two governments currently running Myanmar
- The five Methodist Churches in Myanmar – Free, Wesleyan, Evangelical, Lower (UMC) and Upper (British tradition)
- Connexionalism
- The influence of lay church leaders on church politics.



MCUM Conference Office was my final meeting. We had discussions about the grants streams and reporting requirements in some detail. We ironed out some of the misunderstandings about the current year's application and reporting.

MCUM has a ministry to migrant workers in Malaysia in cooperation with the Methodist Church Malaysia and we discussed the possibility of an NMA application in relation to this. Oshikpin is the Conference mission field, 400 miles from Mandalay but overseen by the Mission Secretary. KMC gave 100m for a nursery building and missionary house. The missionary and 2 nursery teachers have 36 children attending. The new Conference Office building is well under way.

This was an important visit. Visiting five districts and meeting with the Chairs of the remaining three districts has deepened and widened our partnership and built on the good work achieved by my colleague in Ireland, Tim Dunwoody, and the World Mission Partnership of the Irish Connexion. Many aspects of our support have been clarified at conference and district levels and the complexities of the Myanmar context have been explored.

I am deeply grateful to the President of MCUM and other staff members who were unstinting in their hospitality and care for me during this long visit. Thank you.

*Steve Pearce
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