

I HAVE A DREAM ...

- Mr. Martin



Education is widely recognized as key to national development. Because of this, education is packed with potential, making it an important component of our society. An increase in access to quality education is important to socio-economic growth, productivity, increased individual earnings and reduced income inequalities. The poorer the standard of education, the narrower is the outlook of the people. The more that education is fostered and pursued, the more humanity flourishes.

In the precolonial period, all schools in our country were in Buddhist monasteries. The monk educated the people. Early British observers claimed that Burma was the most literate state between Suez and Japan, and one British traveler in the early nineteenth century believed that Burmese women had a higher percentage of literacy than British women.

Once Yangon University, established on December 1, 1920 (almost 100 years old) was one of the most prestigious university in Southeast Asia and the top university in Asia attracting students from across the region. Political leaders such as Bogyoke Aung San and U Nu, U Thant (The Third General Secretary of the UN), were its alumni.

However, those days were unfortunately long gone under the military regime. Now Yangon University was ranked 7221 in the global ranking in July 2019. It is just a place that simply hands out degrees to graduates. The latter no longer meet the academic qualification. It seems that University degree is just a piece of paper and nothing more.

Today, teaching methods in school, college and University are focused more on test results than learning, more on rote memorization than student-centered teaching. The government schools strictly follow an exam-oriented education system; teachers write the lessons on the board and the

students copy, memorize so that they may write in the exam as exactly as possible what they were taught in the class and score high marks. This lack of freedom of thinking at the government schools (which constitute more than 98% of all schools) causes there to be many youths less creative than those few lucky ones able to start at private schools. Most parents could not afford to send their children to those private school. The students do not have a chance to learn basic life skills which they are supposed to.

Students are forced to study to get enough grades, distinctions and marks in High School to be able to qualify to apply for top universities. Most youths were forced to choose professions based on their matriculation exam marks. Parents who were born and raised in the complete isolation for about six decades give wrong guidance to the children which eventually leads to wrong people in wrong places across the whole country. In fact, most of the brightest students are doing what they don't love since they couldn't go against their parents about what university/profession they want to choose. So, for many young people their degree has nothing to do with their career.

In the meantime, many young people have to leave their school and work to support their family because of the economic hardship in the country. Of course, poverty is a leading cause in student dropouts across the country. At the present, in Myanmar, it is supposed that one in five young people ages 10 to 17 go to work instead of school.

Although basic education is officially free, many families in poor and remote areas cannot afford additional exercise books and stationery, uniforms and other expenses for their day-to-day schooling. Besides, it has been a traditional practice in most government schools that money is demanded from the parents for building maintenance, buying furniture like benches, desks etc. The more children they have, the more they have to pay. When parents have to pay a considerable amount of money demanded by school, this largely contributes to the student's dropout rate. These are the present conditions of the education we have in this country. It is sad but true!

The good news, on the other hand, is that the government has been implementing a wide range of reforms of its education system since launching its 2016-2021 National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), which targets nine areas of education and is the government roadmap for education reform. It is based on the fundamental principle that everyone has the right to learn. In this regard, the government doubled the investment in education increasing the access to education and improving the standard of teaching, although the effectiveness of this positive action is still quite limited. One of the NESP's main goal is to improve student achievement through improved teaching and learning which could be achieved through 1) re-designing and launching new basic education curricula 2) greater investment in teacher education etc.

Attempts were made and have been made to reform the education system we practice today. Hopefully changes are coming slowly and steadily. However, the questions still remain like -

- ❖ How long would it take?
- ❖ As a church or as a Christian community, 'What can we do in order to promote the education of the people and to get this back on the right track again?'
- ❖ What are the roles of the church in this matter?

The church, in fact, needs to actively engage in this matter for the success of God's precious children, the future leaders of the church and the nation as well. The church itself is a teaching institution. But the church is nowhere near to that reality on the ground in this community. Generally speaking, the church's contribution in the development of education is very limited actually, at the moment. For the Presbyterian Church in Myanmar, all that we have is Theological College which is basically religious institution. That's it!

Growing up in the PCM, my opinion is that now is the time that the church should extend her mission for the sake of God's children. In addition to *evangelizing*, the church needs to recognize that this is 'God's Call' and that we can play a greater role in the education of His children by transforming religious institutions we have into more inclusive institutions. The church has to

acknowledge that the provision of formal education is a necessity, especially for people living in rural and remote areas. The church at least should find a way to cooperate with the government or the local schools for the greater good. Our children have the potential for learning; they are very active in their learning; they have ability to learn, to grow, and to progress.

To achieve this, we must start with a crystal clear vision of what we are trying to achieve. The church needs to address as much as possible this mission project and how important this is for the future of the church and the nation. At the same time our priority should be human resources, skilled or trained teachers; training teachers for the education system we are going to practice. In this regard, we'll surely need to cooperate with our brothers and sisters from all around the world.

Let's stop blaming others for what we are today. Let's not be discouraged by what had happened in the past. What has been done, has been done. Let not our hearts be troubled for what we are today or by looking at what we have had to go through with what we have. Let's just start and move forward with what we have by holding on to faith, looking up to God and the rest will take care of itself. It doesn't ever matter how big the challenge is – for we know God, who never leaves us, is always there for us. In fact, every single child not only from Christian community but from Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and other community deserve an education which is far better than the present one in this country.

I have a dream that one day our children will go to school which is run by the church and is accessible for the poor where religions and beliefs, different cultures and traditions are honored and respect.

I have a dream that one day our children will go to school where they can freely express their feelings, raise questions and do not afraid to make mistakes.

I have a dream that one day our children will go to school where they are prepared for life not for exam and where they have opportunity to learn basic life skills which they could apply to everyday life and skills they need for future career.
