



Almost 1677 metres (5500 ft) above sea level, the Leith Valley Presbyterian Church team join with others for a photograph at Myanmar's Tedim Church. Team members are, from left, Rev Helen Harray; Helen Crossley; Fiona Cooper; Debbie Griffiths; Jason Eberhart-Phillips; team leader, the Very Rev Richard Dawson; Alan Paterson and Mal Crossley.

Leith Valley on a mission in Myanmar

As a deep stillness settled over a world struggling to contain the greatest health threat of our times, a team from Dunedin's Leith Valley Presbyterian Church reflected on a recent mission trip to Myanmar.

The team of seven, led by Leith Valley Church minister the Very Rev Richard Dawson, spent 6-22 January in service to our Church's partner in mission, the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM).

Joining Richard were Mal and Helen Crossley, Jason Eberhart-Phillips, Alan Paterson, Debbie Griffiths and Fiona Cooper.

Tasked with several objectives, team members first linked up with Global Mission's Helen Harray and her husband Wayne, who have been working with the PCM since 2018. They are helping redevelop a farm in the grounds of Kalaymyo's Tahan Theological College, situated in a relatively underdeveloped area nudging the Chin State. Helen, who is an ordained Presbyterian minister, is also teaching English at the College, and it was there that another strand of the mission trip unfolded.

The team worked with Helen and Wayne for nine days, says Richard: “We provided practical help on the farm, and worked to help Helen set up her assessment of students for the coming year. We were busy for most of the time... I personally spoke at about five meetings and gave five lectures.”

They also visited the Myanmar Vision Preschool in the southern city of Yangon - the preschool uses the foundation of Te Whāriki, the New Zealand Early Childhood curriculum - and travelled to the country’s capital, Naypyitaw, for a visit with Myanmar’s Second Vice-President, Henry Van Thio. Henry and his family are former Leith Church parishioners.

“This was a wonderful visit, and an opportunity to let Henry know that there is still significant support for all his hard work as Second Vice-President,” Richard says. Henry’s wife, Anna, studied her PhD at Otago University. The team spent valuable time with the family, and while there, Richard preached for Anna.

Alan Paterson delighted in seeing the developmental progress made in the Chin state under Henry’s watch. “Henry had an authority and dignity that was truly inspiring. Our support for Henry and his family was worth all the time and investment Leith Valley Church had offered,” he says.

Richard, who was last in Myanmar in 2017, also found things have improved, both in terms of roading and infrastructure, and in terms of travelling around the country. “There seems to be a lot of work and economic stimulation going on.”

As much as they prepared for the trip beforehand, team members found there were still surprises in store.

Jason Eberhart-Phillips noted the central place organised religion took in the lives of Myanmar’s population. “There are extreme income disparities between us, different ways we eat and dress, and contrasting expectations we have for our futures,” he says. “But perhaps the biggest difference is the real presence of God in everyday lives of people there, as compared to the lived experience of most New Zealanders today.”

His view was echoed by Debbie Griffiths, who expressed surprise at the differences in worship between young and old, and how the society – and the church – appeared more like New Zealand in the 1960s. “Everyone had some kind of religious belief, unlike in New Zealand, and they respected each other’s beliefs.”

Fiona Cooper’s greatest takeaway was the appreciation and respect from the people of Myanmar, the lengths they would go to just to work, and the energy and life evident in young people. “I taught a class of 40 five-year-olds for three hours and was amazed at their ability to speak English and their eagerness to learn.”

Mal Crossley describes the achievements made by Anna and Henry as a highlight of the trip. The very warm welcome the team received was also a highlight explains Mal: “I would say a big thank you to our Church for allowing the trip to go ahead, and to all team members for pulling together.”