

# Rice Bowl

## MISSION



Global Mission's Myanmar Newsletter

August 2022



## 2022 PCM Partners' Roundtable

### Singapore 2-3 August 2022

#### Presbyterian Church of Myanmar Partners Roundtable Meeting

In August Global Mission Director Phil King attended a meeting with ecumenical church partners to discuss the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar's mission in their current challenging context. This was hosted by the Council for World Mission and included representatives from churches in Ireland, USA, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. At this meeting we heard from the three PCM delegates there, and their reports are summarised in this newsletter.

The situation in Myanmar remains troubled. While the world's media attention has largely focused on the war in the Ukraine and other issues that have caught the public interest, the people of Myanmar have continued to suffer under a violent military junta. Most recently, the junta executed four democracy activists who had protested against the coup and who have now paid the highest price for their resistance. One of those executed was a former member of parliament. More executions are expected.

Resistance to the coup began as a civil disobedience movement with many workers refusing to turn up to work for a military government. This has continued but has now also turned violent and throughout the country there is strong resistance to military rule which invariably evokes a violent response from the military. So the country exists in a state of unease with civilian militia groups and Peoples Defence Forces (PDF) pushing back against the junta in many different regions throughout the country. *Read more inside ...*

## The Current Situation in Myanmar

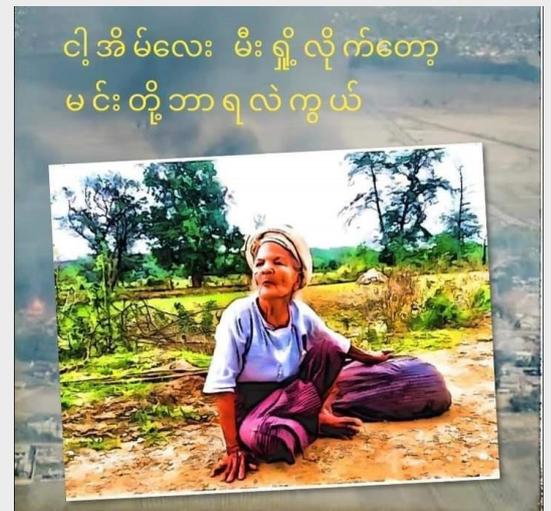
(Continued from front page) ... The Tahan-Kalaymyo region and the Chin State where many Chin people live, and where the majority of Presbyterian Church of Myanmar members live is one of the areas where resistance is very active. So we often get messages to say fighting is taking place nearby, even in the town itself, and that church staff and families are sheltering in their homes or workplaces until the gunfire has ceased. On occasion, nearby towns are attacked and houses burnt. This usually happens when the Myanmar army (Tatmadaw) is retaliating or looking for members of the local PDF. Innocent lives are regularly caught up in the conflict and we often hear stories of civilians being killed and injured. Even at the time of writing, more brutal deaths of young people have been reported in the Chin State. The junta has extended the state of emergency until at least 2023.

With many citizens remaining committed to the civil disobedience movement, household incomes have been seriously affected. Alongside this, inflation is spiralling with the Myanmar currency falling to historic lows, and prices soaring. Petrol for example was recently selling for five times its normal price in Tahan, and supply was extremely limited.

It paints a bleak picture. However the resolve of the population seems to be firm – they don't want to live under a military government, and so they are enduring hardship in the belief that they will prevail.



A village in the Chin State burns; and a woman in the southern Kalaymyo region cries, "What have you gained when you burnt down my house?" The Myanmar military routinely set villages on fire as a tactic to suppress local resistance to the regime.



### Map of Chin State and location of Tahan/Kalaymyo

This map is of the Chin State in the northwest of Myanmar (it has been shared previously). Understanding the map will help to explain some of the challenges facing people in this region since the coup. Tahan/Kalaymyo is in the Sagaing region on the eastern edge of the Chin State. The Mizoram, where many Chin people also live, lies to the west across the Indian border. Since the coup a lot of people have fled their homes and become Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) within the Chin State; some have gone to the Mizoram; others to Tahan/Kalaymyo. The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar formed a Crisis Committee and has been providing food and shelter for the IDP's that arrived in Tahan. The southern Chin State (in green) is where many of the most serious problems are. South of this is the Rakhine where the Rohingya live. They have also suffered terribly from the junta and over 800,000 fled to refugee camps in Bangladesh, to the west.

## How have we been able to support the PCM during this crisis?

So all of this has naturally changed the nature of our partnership. No one can visit Myanmar and the normal rhythms of life have changed dramatically. However our support has continued and over the past year Global Mission has been able to get funds through to the PCM to help with a range of projects. These have included:

- ◆ Digital scanner and support for Agape Hospital
- ◆ Covid pastors relief – stipend support for pastors and their families in the Chin State who were unable to be paid due to the twin crises of Covid-19 and the military coup
- ◆ Staff salary support for PCM General Assembly and theological college staff
- ◆ Nurse aid training scholarships for nurse aid students
- ◆ Tahan Theological College female students hostel extension
- ◆ Tailoring training programme – despite reduced opportunity, this vocational training course has still been able to function giving women skills to grow their household income.

## International Support Network

Another important role we have had has been advocacy and prayerful and moral support with other partners. Global Mission has been part of an international group of partner churches meeting with Presbyterian Church of Myanmar leaders regularly via Zoom and coordinating support. The group has been a supportive voice for the PCM throughout this time, and contributed funds for Covid -19 vaccinations for PCM pastors and members, oxygen generators, and facemasks. See over the page for information about the partners meeting in Singapore and ways in which we hope to continue supporting the PCM going forward.



## High Inflation

These photos contrasting the difference in the price of petrol illustrate the spiralling inflation in Myanmar. The photo on the left shows what the cost of petrol was two years ago. Recently it was as much as 500% higher. Costs fluctuate so it will not necessarily stay that high, but naturally this kind of price increase has a severe impact on the ability to meet everyday costs. Food and other basic items are all affected by this. The PCM has formed a Covid and Crisis Committee to try and help meet the needs of the most vulnerable and many church and community members support one another in times like this.

## Womens Mission Stories

In collaboration with the PCM, the Council for World Mission has produced a book entitled "Our Voice Will Not Fade Away." This book tells the stories of several PCM women leaders. One of these is Pastor Cherry who visited New Zealand in 2018 as a guest of the PCANZ. In her story she recalls her visit and in particular she mentions an occasion when she was prayed for by PCANZ women ministers and leaders. She said this was especially encouraging for her. It was a warm affirmation of the value of our partnership with the PCM and of the contribution we have been able to make. Online readers can download the book here, <https://bit.ly/3AwOPaJ>. It will give readers a fascinating, if at times challenging insight into life in Myanmar, particularly for women and those who follow a call as leaders in the church. Cherry's story is the first chapter in the book. Women's Secretary Sangi has also written an excellent contribution—recommended reading.

If reading a printed version of this newsletter, you can find the book on the Global Mission section of the PCANZ website, [www.presbyterian.org.nz](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz)

## OUR VOICE WILL NOT FADE AWAY

Presbyterian Church of Myanmar



Published by Council for World Mission

## PCM Partners Roundtable Meeting

As mentioned on the cover, in August Global Mission Director Phil King attended a meeting with international church partners to hear about the current situation in Myanmar and discuss the church's mission in the midst of these challenges. The reports of the three PCM delegates are summarised here.

### General Secretary Rev. Ramthanga

Myanmar suffered badly from COVID-19 and PCM lost many of its members and ministers. The coup "doubled the suffering of the people of Myanmar." All aspects of life have been affected by these two crises. The PCM issued a statement of "Standpoint and Attitude" opposing the military coup on February 8, 2021, the first political statement that the PCM had ever issued. The junta cut off transportation, communication, food supply, cash flow, and fuel in some regions. Christian populated places were among the most vulnerable regions. Some Synods were unable to support their pastors salaries. The church organised the "Covid and Crisis Response Committee" with the hope to include support for the victims of the Spring Revolution. This committee organised care for internally displaced persons (IDP's) at the Tahan Theological College campus and elsewhere. The need for this may occur again as the military continues to attack and burn villages. With financial support from partners, the PCM provided vaccinations for staff and are now doing the same for church members.

### Rev. Ling Zaw, Tahan Theological College

Rev. Zaw shared that the college has attempted to use zoom for its theological education, albeit with some struggles due to technical issues and poor internet accessibility. The academic year for 2021/2022 was cancelled due to the ongoing resistance to the military coup. For example, here is a message posted on the College's Facebook page in June:

#### **Special Announcement 15 June 2022 Wednesday**

*Due to recent gun firing and shelling near TTC, there will be no class for all programs in 16 -17 June 2022 and all classes are expected to be able to resume on 20 June 2022. All the students are strongly advised to stay safe.*

Understandably, many issues are being faced by the students and school as a result of both the pandemic and coup. Students are in need of physical help, spiritual comfort and financial assistance while the school is facing a variety of other challenges; lack of staff quarters, lack of a full-time English teacher and the college's farm project being delayed. To adapt, the college has opened up its campus for basic education such as vocational learning since 2021.

### Womens and Youth Secretary Hming Sangi



Sangi highlighted that the pandemic and coup has affected the running of various courses. The womens contribution to the PCM is decreasing overall due to the ongoing conflict. Many women in the Chin State especially have been displaced, particularly in Hakha/Thantlang and Victoria Synod (*see map on page 2—Victoria is in Mindat*).

The womens department has been trying to help community children who suffered at home during lockdowns and to help children's education with online teaching, but these classes have sometimes been hampered by an unreliable electricity supply.

Sangi also shared the youth report. In general young people in Myanmar are not attending a formal government school, but some are still attending informal educational or vocational courses. There are challenges from both government pressure and the People's Defence Force (PDF) regarding the re-opening of schools. There has been a common feeling among many community leaders who are opposed to the junta that if public schools and universities function, it will serve to legitimise the junta. So most have remained closed.

Due to the Civil Disobedience Movement the normal rhythms of work and education are not in place and as this extends on, the youth have nothing to do and this leads to social problems. These problems are increasing – as an example, the use of drugs is very common now. This is a change which has become more commonplace recently. Even military personnel are involved as suppliers of drugs and this is having an unhealthy influence on many youth. The vacuum caused by the loss of education is becoming a problem and there is a need for education and vocational training opportunities for young people. Mental health concerns are high due to young people experiencing prolonged lack of contact with friends and family and the loss of the normal everyday routines and environments that help children and youth to flourish.

## Summary Outcomes of Partners Roundtable Meeting

The meeting concluded with each partner church agreeing to work together with the PCM on the following:

- Highlighting the Myanmar issue globally – and initially look to the World Council of Churches assembly to do this
- Theological Education – ecumenical partners to look into helping TTC with e-learning and e-libraries
- Strengthening the PCM healthcare system with the relocation and development of Agape Hospital
- TTC scholarships and development projects
- Supporting the empowerment of women and youth; addressing social issues
- Mission projects for consideration by partners

Global Mission will continue to follow up on these projects and provide funding when priorities are decided. So ongoing donations for the mission of the PCM will be welcomed.



*Phil King with Hming Sangi, Rev. Ling Zaw and Rev. Ramthanga of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar at the Partners Roundtable meeting in Singapore.*



## Laptop for Rev. Ling Zaw; and Family Bereavement

One small thing we were able to do was provide a laptop for PCM pastor and TTC lecturer Rev. Ling Zaw for his work. This was bought with funds donated from Otaki-Waikanae parish and presented to Zaw at the meeting in Singapore. Rev. Zaw is a former General Secretary and Moderator of the PCM and visited New Zealand in 2018, visiting and preaching in several PCANZ churches.

Tragically, when Zaw returned to Myanmar he was informed that his son Mal Sawmzuala (Zaw Lar) was seriously ill in hospital in the Philippines with liver failure. Zaw Lar was studying music on a scholarship provided by the churches in Scotland and Ireland. Rev. Zaw was summoned by doctors and soon after his arrival Zaw Lar died of liver failure. He was 26 years old. It was a very sad and sombre note on which to end the partners meeting. Please pray for Rev. Ling Zaw, his family, and the PCM community as they mourn the sudden and untimely loss of Zaw Lar, who was a very talented musician. He had hoped to lecture in Christian worship music after graduation. It is a heavy loss to bear.



### Some Projects Continue Despite the Circumstances

Although it has been difficult for the church's programmes to function normally, some have been able to continue within certain limits. The vocational tailoring training programme managed to complete another course. Women from the Chin State were not able to attend but local women from Tahan and Kalaymyo benefitted from the training. They are seen below wearing the clothes they have made. This course gives them support, encouragement and skills that enable them to contribute to their household income.



And although the nurse aid training course has been disrupted by the coup and also faced increasing costs, two PCANZ-sponsored students are currently studying in this programme. They will graduate in January. Dawt Nei Par (left) and Lalrawng-bawli (right) are doing well in their studies, and are grateful for the sponsorship which will give them an opportunity for a career they would not otherwise have had.



Let us continue to keep in mind the people of Myanmar who are suffering under a brutal and unjust military regime. While there seems very little we can do to help, they are extremely grateful for our moral support, our prayers, our advocacy for their freedom, and our financial support. It means a lot to them to know that their Christian family around the world remembers them and upholds them in prayer. Please continue to remember the Presbyterian Church and all citizens of Myanmar who long for a restoration of their democratic freedoms and rights.

**Thank you to everyone who financially supports our partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.**

**Donations are always welcome and allow us to achieve more.**

**Online donations can be made to 02 0500 0086963 10. If making a new donation please send an email with contact details for receipts to [katrina@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:katrina@presbyterian.org.nz)**

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