

Rice Bowl

MISSION



Global Mission's Myanmar Newsletter

November 2020



Members of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar pose for a photograph wearing their facemasks (well, almost all of them ... can you spot those who aren't?). Myanmar has adopted measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 and this has led to considerable changes in community life. Schools and churches have been closed. Below, the usually bustling markets of Tahan are eerily quiet, due to Covid-19 restrictions. The impact on the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar's churches and educational institutions has been significant and they are facing many challenges. Read about this, and some of the ways we have been able to support them, inside.





The Coronavirus Diaries: 'We Will Overcome This Hardship'

Van Lal Hming Sangi is the Women's Secretary of the Presbyterian Women General Conference in the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar and describes how the poorest have been impacted by the pandemic. This article originally appeared in the Church of Scotland's online magazine, Life and Work (lifeandwork.com) and is used with permission. While written in August, it gives some insights into the impact of Covid-19. Sangi refers to three projects we have financially supported—womens tailoring training, nurse aid training, and relief aid for the victims of war in Paletwa.

WHEN the Covid-19 pandemic started to spread worldwide, we were very worried that this will kill us (Myanmar citizens) all as the country is one of the least affluent with no advanced medical services. The eyes of the people look up to the government to give orders on prevention though local taskforces, lockdown, stay at home, and quarantine. We all are doing a very good job in prevention even before lockdown itself. We practised a stay at home policy as much as possible. Our country adviser Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself showed us how to wash our hands through our media. Six people have died till now including one PCM member from Yangon (*n.b. this article was written in August*). The positive cases are going down and there is no lockdown but quarantine is still continued strictly in every town.

Generally speaking, every life is affected by this virus even in a small town like the place I live. While lockdown (it was not total lockdown, people could go outside in an emergency and to buy food) was practised in the town, the vegetable vendors and daily wage labourers were mostly affected. Daily labourers do not have any income since all work was closed. The village council did some distribution of food to those who had no income. Even women vegetable vendors did not get income from their backyard vegetables, even though they were close in distance to the nearby local market, the village council duty chased them away and took all their vegetables. They were forced to go and sell their vegetables 10 km away from our town since the local market was shifted to a football ground there during the pandemic period. Since most of the vegetable vendors are mothers and old ladies, they could not go to that place since they have no vehicles. Now the situation is calmer and life became more normal from July 2020.

One difficulty we face is local conflict: conflicts between the Myanmar Army and Arakan Army, (a separatist militant group) are affecting civilians in two region - Rakhine State and Paletwa township (Chin State). During the Covid-19 pandemic time, civilians (many are our church members) could not get any care. While the government was announcing a stay at home policy, these civilians were driven out of their homes. Their homes were burnt, the villages were destroyed. At Hmawbi (near Yangon), they built one displacement shelter and those forced to flee stay there. If one is affected by Covid-19, all will be affected. In the name of the Myanmar Council of Churches, Ecumenical Women's Work (MCC-EWW), we sent emergency relief funds to support them.

During the lockdown period, the women's basic tailoring training was affected. Since those young women (10 women) are mostly from Chin Hills, they could not continue their course and stayed at our town. As this course gave young women skills which often allow them to gain employment in an existing business or develop a cottage industry at home, enabling them to supplement the family income, we tried to complete the course. They were hosted by church women members during lockdown. Despite a delay, the course was completed. But four trainees who had to travel to the Chin Hills faced a 21 day quarantine upon their return home.

The women desk also runs a one-year programme for young women to do nurse-aid training every year. We usually sponsor four young women from different synods. But currently there is only one student able to take part due to the restrictions on travel and education caused by Covid. The previous batch (four students) also could not complete their course till now as they stopped the course during lockdown, but have been able to restart and are hopeful of completing their course this month.

We hope and believe that if we fight this challenging pandemic together with obedience, we will overcome this hardship and the normal lives will come soon. We have come to realise from this Covid-19 that the most important people are those who provide basic needs – those whom we called the least, the smallest and the voiceless and who have never been paid attention to by the rich and authorities!

Sangi has also recorded an excellent short video describing the impact of Covid-19 on Myanmar and the PCM. This can be viewed at https://youtu.be/4lzzD_88sP8

Nurse Aid Students Graduation

Sangi manages several of the projects that we have funded over many years, and is very accomplished in giving feedback. She recently sent this report on the completion of the Nurse Aid Training course:

Greetings to PCANZ in the name of Jesus Christ!

PWGC Nurse-aid training, 4th Course successfully finished their training. Due to Covid-19 their training was delayed for two months and they continued again for two months. Wesley Hospital authority conducted a short closing service on 25th August 2020 and each of them got their certificate. Due to the social distancing restrictions, they could invite no more than 30 people to the graduation function. Therefore, members of the PWGC unfortunately could not go to their function.

Our students who completed nurse-aid course within this year are –

- 1. Miss Lalhmingchhuangi (Changelzawl, Phai Synod)*
- 2. Miss Hlu Shwe (Matuiimnu, Victoria Synod)*
- 3. Miss Elizabeth Lal Hlawn Kim (Sehkan, Chin Synod)*
- 4. Miss Van Biak Kil (Letpanchhaung, Chin Synod)*

Miss Lalhmingchhuangi and Miss Elizabeth Lal Hlawn Kim passed with distinction and Miss Lalhmingchhuangi got the third prize. Thank you once again for supporting women in the church. We hope that many more women will get social security and be saved from economical hardship.

Vanlalmingsangi

Women Secretary, Presbyterian Women General Conference





Support Given to PCM Pastors to Cover Loss of Income Due to Covid-19

Recently, Global Mission Coordinator Rev. Phil King held a conversation with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar's General Secretary, Rev. Ramthanga (pictured), via Zoom. The following notes summarise the conversation and give some indication of the concerns facing the PCM. As a result of this information, we sent funds to cover pastors salaries in the rural synods for two months. As the future remains uncertain, we will keep in contact and respond to further concerns as we are able. Thank you for your donations which add to the support we are able to give to our partners during their time of need.

Kalaymyo (the large urban centre of the Chin population, and where the PCM General Assembly office is) and Mindat in the Chin State have had positive cases of Covid-19. Until recently, markets were open. But as of early October, they have been told to go into a harsher form of lockdown. In the market, some goods are cheaper as they cannot be exported; others are more expensive (e.g. imported goods).

Covid has had a range of impacts on the PCM – there are still no church services, and offerings have therefore been lower. Financially, there are no reserve funds. As budgets are dependent on annual income, next year could be a problem for the national budget due to lower contributions being received from the synods. The more economically independent (Phai and Chin) Synods can meet expenses but the others are struggling. The synods recognise the need to be more united than they were before, as small synods can't meet their expenses, and some have expressed the idea of combining together. The synods decide how much pastors are paid. Some pastors have not been paid for 3-4 months. But the GA is not responsible for their salaries and has no reserve funds anyway.

At this stage they are unsure if they can hold their General Assembly next year.

The CWM gift of grace (a grant from the Council for World Mission) was distributed to every synod earlier in the year. It was mainly used for relief aid and for meeting the salaries of synod employees.

Tahan Theological College is holding online classes — and other funders overseas have been helping with their needs.

In Paletwa and the Rakhine, rice is very expensive. They are cut off in terms of information, and can't report back because there is no reliable connection. (This is an area suffering from an internal war mentioned in Sangi's article on the previous page, and where we sent funds for emergency relief earlier in the year).

Wayne and Helen Harray are currently based in Wanaka and working from home. They are in daily contact with their students and staff at Tahan Theological College in Myanmar. Helen is taking online classes (all students are studying at home, which is difficult for those who lack ready access to reliable technology) —and Wayne continues to oversee the work on the College farm. It is still unclear when they will be able to return, but in the meantime they are keeping in regular contact and making the most of available technology to keep their work going. You can keep in touch with their news on their blog: www.helenharray.com, or email them; wayne.harray@gmail.com; helen.harray@gmail.com

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. Donations to the farm development project that Wayne Harray is managing, or personal support for both Wayne and Helen, are also invited. Online donations can be made to 02 0500 0086963 10, or send cheques to Global Mission, P.O. Box 9049, Wellington 6141. (If donating online please send an email with contact details for receipts.)

For more information contact Global Mission Coordinator Rev Phil King, phil@presbyterian.org.nz