



global mission

Embracing Myanmar culture



The Going Global group took part in the Tahan Theological College annual Fun Fete, which is held over two nights and attended by around 6,000 people. Women were encouraged to don the dress of various local ethnic groups for the fun fete photography booth.

Dressing up in traditional Myanmar dress and having their photo taken by curious locals was a first for a group from Auckland's St Columba and Forrest Hill Presbyterian churches on their recent mission to Myanmar.

The group of five young adults and two leaders travelled as part of the Going Global programme from 28 November-13 December 2017. They were supported by the Presbyterian Church's Global Mission through the Rice Bowl Mission, says Bruce Dixon, an elder at Auckland's St Columba Church. Bruce, along with Fiona Whyte from Forrest Hill Presbyterian Church, co-led the trip.

"We spent time sharing in the life of a local community, introducing our young people to a different culture and to their peers, and leading them on a spiritual journey," says Bruce.

Bruce and Fiona jumped at the chance to help the five 18-25 year-olds – Nicola Froud, Daniel Choi, Sarah Lawry, Stephanie White and Molly Pottinger-Coombes - learn about the culture of Myanmar.

The group flew into Yangon where they spent two days acclimatising and meeting with representatives from the New Zealand Embassy, as well as World Vision staff, who provided an insight into the development work each is doing in the region. They also met with two Catholic nuns who run a teacher training programme.

"We managed a bit of sight-seeing with a visit to the famous Shwedagon Pagoda, the largest and most sacred Buddhist pagoda in Myanmar," says Bruce.

From there it was on to Tahan/Kalaymyo, a region in the north-west of the country, where they were invited to visit by the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar's Tahan Theological College (TTC). The visit coincided with TTC's Christmas/end of year celebrations including the annual Fun Fete, which is held over two nights and attended by around 6,000 people. The group spent a number of days helping to prepare – setting up facilities such as stalls and display areas – and also actively participated. This included performing the Christmas carol, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, and Nicola Froud, a flautist, played *Silent Night* to the appreciative crowd.

A fundraising opportunity saw the group dress in local costume and charge a modest fee to be photographed with locals. "Western tourists are still a bit of a novelty in Myanmar so they loved having their picture taken with us," says Bruce.

All proceeds went back to TTC, as did funds which the group raised before they left for the trip.

"This money was used to help purchase a van for the TTC," says Fiona Whyte, who worked with the group to organise a range of fundraising activities.

"Activities were undertaken both collectively and individually and ranged from an all-you-can-eat pancakes and movie night for \$5, which raised \$284, to gardening, washing windows, tree chopping, house cleaning, and house and cat-sitting," says Fiona.

Their respective church families were also "incredibly supportive", she adds.

"They really got behind the group, as well as our missions committee. We're thankful for the many donations which helped us meet our target."

Nicola Froud says she was "dying" to be part of a Rice Bowl Mission, having been too young to travel with a 2013 delegation to Myanmar when she was 17 years old.

"We were all very certain that we were meant to be there - I only have to look at the rate of my fundraising prior to the trip to see God's hand and intentions all over this," she says.

"One of the best parts was when everybody wanted to pay for photos with us, we were just so different! It was a way that we could be truly useful. I had gone in with the expectation of some big emotional or spiritual experiences, as we sometimes hear reported from mission trips, and was surprised to find God in the daily, in the rhythm and heartbeat of the place, in the mundane and in the gentle nature of the people in Myanmar."

Nicola says for her it was a hugely successful trip and she'd love to go back on another mission. "I would go back a little less naive about what it means to travel in Asia, a little less wide-eyed!"

Sharon Stephenson [Spanz](#)