



A time of firsts: teaching English in Myanmar

Petra Malcolm is the first Presbyterian missionary to serve in the Chin region of Myanmar.

Petra became interested in Myanmar because her mother worked with refugees in Nelson. At Victoria University Petra wrote essays and research papers about the country.

Now she is there, the first Presbyterian Church missionary to serve in the Chin region. She is also the first teacher from an English-speaking country to work in the town of Mindat; there are no other westerners there. Other teachers from various denominations have stayed for a few weeks in the town where Petra expects to be for a year.

She is teaching English at a school run by the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar, which is attended by students who are Christian, Buddhist and Animist.

Her accommodation is in a church office while a girls' hostel is being built.

"I've got my own bed and mosquito net. I shower outside with a bucket of water. Luckily I have a western-style toilet with a key. I have to walk about 100m to get to it." She eats with the students in the school dining hall.

Petra attended St John's Presbyterian Church while she was a student in Wellington, and went to Myanmar with a group of Presbyterian young people in 2011.

She had been teaching geography and social studies in Auckland for three-and-a-half years when she decided to seek a change. "You tend to rely on the



Petra Malcolm teaches English to students who are Christian, Buddhist and Animist at a Presbyterian Church of Myanmar school in the town of Mindat, Chin region of Myanmar.

same teaching methods after a while, so I thought that by going part way round the world I would be challenged," she says.

She thought of going to teach in an international school where she would be paid. "But then I realised that I wanted to make more of a difference. I see service to others and bringing life to communities as a huge part of Christianity."

When she contacted Global Mission co-ordinator Phil King in the school holidays, he said there were opportunities in Tuvalu, Samoa and Myanmar.

"I didn't know what to expect at all," says Petra. "I didn't know the age of the students, what I would be teaching or whether there would be a curriculum to follow. So I just turned up and got told when I got here.

"The first two weeks I was trying to figure out what they knew and what they needed to know – which was quite different! They have got relatively okay vocabulary, but when it comes to listening to someone from an English-speaking nation, they struggle. A lot of the students are quite shy; they are embarrassed to try to speak English. Writing is difficult for them because a reliance on rote learning means they are not encouraged to construct or create the English language," says Petra.

Her students are in Standard 9 and 10 and aged 15-16. The older ones are sitting the all-important matriculation exams, and she has one class of 54 students including those repeating the exam as well as those

about to sit it for the first time. They have another English teacher: "So it's my job to build up their language capability so they can go beyond the simple sentences they have learnt by rote."

Petra's younger class has a government textbook to work through. "It's quite complex and requires a relatively high level of English," she says.

At university, Petra studied how to teach German. "The difference is that teaching German you know the students' first language and the target language, but here I only know the target language. But it is possible!"

She is just starting to teach one-and-a-half hour night classes six days a week to adults – which Petra believes is more daunting than teaching teenagers. And she herself is learning Burmese.

Petra is not paid, though she has a \$2000 grant from the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar provides accommodation and food. "All I am spending money on is data for my cell phone. There is no wifi," she says.

She plans to stay in Mindat for a year, but she can only get a 70-day business visa, so she will have to leave the country about every second month and apply to re-enter.

"That's fine," says Petra. "I'll go and see another part of South East Asia."

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