



Rice Bowl Mission projects growing

The Church's partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar is going from strength to strength, and is a testament to the power of personal relationships.

Many people experience reversals of fortune, but few are as dramatic as that of Henry Van Thio. A worker at the Balclutha freezing works, Henry was in Dunedin with his wife Anna Hluan, who was studying for a PhD in Theology, when landmark elections were announced for Myanmar (Burma). He decided to stand, and in late 2015 found himself vice-president of his newly democratic country.

The Rev Helen Harray and her husband Wayne had befriended the couple and decided to make Myanmar one of their stops that year on a six-month exploration of where they could best express ministry in another country.

"Everything seemed to fall into place with Myanmar," says Helen, "so we approached Rev Phil King to see what opportunities might be available."

The Harrayes accompanied Global Mission coordinator Rev Phil King on another visit to Myanmar in March this year to look at a specific project at the Presbyterian Church's Tahan Theological College, in the Sagaing District bordering the Chin State. One of the least developed and poorest areas in the predominantly Buddhist country, the Chin State's almost 500,000 inhabitants are 85 percent Christian.

Tahan Theological College is seeking to be more self-sufficient. There is land for gardens and livestock, which Wayne – a civil engineer and farmer – would develop and manage. The food would feed the 140 students and potentially become a source of income. Helen is keen to teach, and to empower women.

"There is any amount of work to be done in the Bible College and, further afield, existing projects that need oversight, or



With staff from the Tahan Theological College, Rev Helen Harray and husband Wayne look at land in Myanmar to develop and manage.

new ones to develop," she says. "There are so many opportunities."

And a few hurdles yet to jump before they can leave Dunedin in October for the new adventure. The Harrayes need business visas for their anticipated three-year mission, which are a pre-requisite for renting accommodation in Myanmar and keeping costs affordable. Funding is being sought through a first-of-its-kind partnership between the Council for World Mission (CWM), the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) and the Church.

In their late 50s, the Harrayes expect to be living for the first time in a tropical country, with language, culture and climate challenges. They will likely be the only Europeans in Tahan/Kalaymyo.

For Phil, the visit in March was the first opportunity to see up close the projects the Rice Bowl Mission has been funding in the Chin State for over a decade. The region has been off-limits to visitors until very recently.

"I took loads of photos," he says. "One of the key things for me is to communicate well with our donors, so they can see the money is being well spent."

The long-term partnership has been so successful that Phil was also presented, at a meeting in Tahan with the PCM, with a lengthy list of new projects to consider, totaling \$200,000. Aside from development and income generating projects, the Rice Bowl fund supports

scholarships and disaster relief. Phil says he is keen to see resources being directed to capacity building rather than physical buildings.

"I think training and education should become our primary focus," he says, "and the members of the Myanmar Support Group, who help to decide on project funding, get excited by projects that help develop independent thought in young people," says Phil.

Under military rule, all freedom of expression and thought in Myanmar was discouraged and punished. The national youth department of the PCM last year led political education seminars to help young people to think critically, funded by the Rice Bowl Mission.

Presbyterian Youth Ministry is partnering with Global Mission to lead a young adults "Going Global" programme to Myanmar in November/December this year. Designed as short-term cultural exchanges with partner churches, this year's Myanmar programme is being planned to give university students the opportunity to participate once their exams are over. Applications have already closed, but there are other Going Global programmes still available. To view these, and to read the latest Mingalaba newsletter on Rice Bowl Mission projects see www.presbyterian.org.nz/national-ministries/global-mission

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