

## **“In Myanmar the Future Is Now”**

A letter from Barry Dawson – Myanmar

Jubilant shouts pierce the night skies over Myanmar. Euphoric crowds, overflowing the streets of Yangon, cheer with a staccato chant, “Time for change! Time for change!” Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who had endured nearly two decades of house arrest while unflinchingly serving as the iconic leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Party, announces the good news that the NLD has scored a landslide victory in the first free elections since 1990, when the ruling military junta had nullified the NLD’s electoral triumph.

Now, even though the country’s constitution stipulates that the military is guaranteed 25 percent of the seats in parliament, the NLD’s margin of victory was so overwhelming that it has won the necessary super-majority to control the new government.

In this land once known as Burma, but now proudly called Myanmar, the will of the people has been declared resoundingly through the ballot box. Celebratory hands, raised heavenward, reveal index fingers still stained with the purple ink that provides unmistakable proof of voters’ participation in democracy. That night in November marks a watershed in the long history of this land that sits strategically at the crossroads between China and India, whose combined population makes up nearly one-third of the world’s inhabitants.

November 8, 2015, will go down as a defining moment in the history of Myanmar, but also, in the ancient Greeks’ understanding, it is a *kairos* moment, a unique, *carpe diem* moment boldly seized by people hungry to hear their voices blended harmoniously into a national anthem of justice, peace, and dignity for all. It was a moment when people came to understand that in Myanmar, the future is now.

### **God’s Future is Now for New Graduates of Tahan Theological College**

During the first week of March we traveled to the northwest corner of Myanmar to participate in the graduation festivities at Tahan Theological College (TTC), a ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM). Perhaps the most poignant parts of graduations are the seldom-told backstories, the softly whispered hopes, the silent prayers that lie deep within God’s call, the moments when one agrees to go and do and be what the world needs and what your heart wants to give.

Since we had enjoyed extended conversations with several of the students during a previous visit to TTC, we already knew some of the challenging backstories that had brought this special group of people to this culminating, photo-op moment with cap, gown, and diploma-clutching joy.

Before starting their studies to become pastors, Christian educators, or missionaries, some of these students had chosen to move to Malaysia or Singapore as migrant workers in order to bolster their families’ finances. Each time a semester began or ended, some

students had to travel two or three days by motorbike and van between their remote home villages and the TTC campus. Numerous graduates had faced the challenge of severe financial hardships, scrimping to pay the \$500 annual charges for tuition, room, and board. All had to adjust to not being able to study late into the night, even if they had class assignments due the next day, because the generators that supply electricity to the campus are shut down at 10:00 pm.

Knowing some of these stories enabled Shelly to offer a compassionate prayer of thanksgiving for the graduating class. Realizing some of the personal obstacles that TTC's newest graduates had overcome and the unrelenting contextual challenges that would continue to confront them in their Christian service, Barry delivered the commencement address to the Class of 2016, exhorting them to dare to believe and dare to hope that, in the power of the Risen Christ and through the in-breaking reality of the kingdom of God, "God's future is now."

### **God's Future is Now for Flood Rehabilitation Efforts in Myanmar**

From late July through early August 2015 devastating floods and landslides affected more than 1 million people in Myanmar, inundated more than 1.2 million acres of agricultural land, and destroyed more than 15,000 homes. During one of our 2015 visits to Myanmar we visited some of the hardest hit-areas.

In the town of Kanan the PCM pastor told us that in their congregation alone 19 families' homes had been swept away by raging floods, while another 10 families had their homes rendered unusable. In the Kalaymyo area Rev. Ling Zaw, General Secretary of the PCM, showed us acres of riverside rice fields that were completely washed away by the floods, resulting in loss of livelihood for scores of citizens.

In the aftermath of those shocking losses, we have worked with our PCM partners to help them obtain emergency relief funds from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and rehabilitation funds from Presbyterian World Mission to rebuild two churches. We give thanks to God that the PC(USA) worked collaboratively with our PCM partners to bring some signs of hope to flood victims in Myanmar whose future is now.

### **God's Future is Now for the Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar**

Each time we travel to Myanmar we are struck by the wide-scale human need (Myanmar is #148 out of 188 countries on the 2015 Human Development Index) and by the resilient faith of our mission partners in the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. While facing daunting challenges and coping with very limited resources, they faithfully send out more than 70 missionaries to remote areas, support microfinance projects, and provide vocational skills training for women's economic empowerment.

In a very low-income area of Kalaymyo the PCM shares the healing ministry of Christ through the understaffed and inadequately equipped Agape Hospital. Not far from that hospital the PCM's Child Development Center (orphanage) provides loving care, educational opportunity, and spiritual nurture to more than 40 children and youth. The faithful mission work of the PCM continues to be a source of deep inspiration to us,

because their laser-focused ministries share the hope of the Risen Christ and joyfully proclaim to the people of Myanmar that “God’s future is now.”

Barry