

Everyone has something to give and something to receive

Walking with our friends: how can we journey together?



January 2011 members of PCANZ & PCM in Tahan

Over the past 4 years the PCANZ has been developing an Overseas Mission Partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM). First established through two friends, one from New Zealand and the other from Myanmar, has now grown to the church to church partnership we have today.

Primarily based on relationship and the fact that we are all equals and all children of God each and every one of us has something to give and something to receive.

After travelling to Myanmar in 2007, I could see and experience for myself that I personally had something to give, and to receive from these beautiful people I now call family.

Part of my involvement with PCM latterly has been leading team trips to Myanmar, spending time with women's groups, students and church leaders, learning from them and encouraging them in the work they are doing in their communities. We've also established the *Rice Bowl Fund*, where through regular donations from individuals and churches we are able to support the PCM in establishing income generating projects designed to help the church minister to its communities in word and deed. The fund also provides aid and relief in times of devastation as well as offering scholarships that have a particular focus on empowering women within the local church. This is particularly significant in a country and society where women are oppressed.

Myanmar, a country of more than 50 million people (also known as Burma), was once known as the rice bowl of Asia, rich in natural resources. For the past 60 years the people have suffered under a cruel military dictatorship leaving most struggling on subsistence wages at best.

With an average income of \$30 US per month it would be easy to think that our financial aid would go a long way. And, it does. But is this the solution?

Bryant L. Myers, in his book *Walking with the Poor*, says

“Poverty is not alleviated primarily by money but by the restoration of relationships; the poor and the non poor, the poor and social environment, political and economic structures, the poor and the earth, the poor and God. Partnership is a means of facilitation in healing these relationships.

Bryant’s views are significant and consistent in our experience and have been formative in guiding our partnership thus far.

From our experience we believe that, Partnership is where everyone has something to give and to receive. Partnership is mutual (not paternal, colonial, abusive or dependent). Partnership precedes programmes.

Authentic relationship transcends all descriptions. The only basis for authentic relationship is our mutuality and equality as people made in the image of God. Through Jesus Christ there is no rich or poor. We are one!

After his first visit to Myanmar in 2007, Andrew Norton, in his study leave report “Establishing Overseas Mission Partnership” describes ‘Mission’ as both evangelism and empowering aid. “We seek opportunities where we can offer practical and tangible help and also share the life changing message of the gospel.”

Andrew also describes ‘Aid’ as the giving of the necessities of life that people cannot provide for themselves, and ‘Development’ as partnering with people that they may stand on their own feet and not be dependent on hand outs.

Consistently and across the visits of several teams, we have found the people of Myanmar to be a very humble and generous people. They are hard working, intelligent and resilient. The PCM’s slogan is to ‘stand on its own feet’ (Ezek 2.1)

So can a relationship with the poor really be equal when there can be such inequality in material terms? Perhaps not, if that is the only standard of comparison. And similarly, to our shame, if faith and mission were the criteria. We would surely be the poorer.

This was highlighted when students at the Tahan Theological College, asked me what percentage of New Zealanders attended Sunday worship. In their State it is 80%. In another conversation a lecturer asked why does the West need God when they have everything in back up plans – governments who can provide in times of natural disasters and community service providers.

In Myanmar Christians (and those of other faiths) must rely on God for their daily bread (rice).

It is in the practice of faith and care for one another that we can learn a lot from our brothers and sisters in Myanmar.

But, of this we can be sure “rich and poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all”
Prov 22.2

But is friendship enough? Of course not! Jesus calls us to look after the poor, “for I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of your brothers of mine, you did for me” Matthew 25.35-40

It’s through the *Rice Bowl Fund* that we are able to financially provide assistance to those needing food, clothing, shelter and support in sickness. It’s through our face to face visits we are able to provide encouragement, prayer and support to those who are imprisoned by the country and society they live in.

Our relationship with the people of Myanmar is about being present; it’s about sitting down to a cup of green tea and listening to each other’s stories. It’s about meeting them where they are, in dilapidated homes with no electricity or running water. Even if you’re not able to meet their needs today, it’s not hard to be a friend. The people of Myanmar, like other people isolated from the world by their cruel governments, long to know that they have not been forgotten.

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In the movie, *The Soloist*, Steve, a Los Angeles Time’s columnist, desperate for a new story for his meets homeless and mentally ill, street musician – Nathaniel. Attracted to this incredible gifted young man Steve is drawn in to helping Nathaniel, cleaning him up, and giving him what Steve thought he needed. Struggling to know how to overcome a multitude of issues and at the point of giving up, Steve’s wife said “you may not be able to solve all his (Nathaniel’s) problems, but you *can be his friend*.”

Friends care for one another. If your friend had nothing to eat, would you feed them? If your friend had no place to sleep, would you shelter them? If your friend was in trouble would you not do anything and everything in your power to try and help them?

So what does partnership with the church in Myanmar look like when our own brothers and sisters are in desperate situations?

I was extremely humbled the day after the second and more destructive of Christchurch’s earthquakes when I received even more frequent messages from our friends in Myanmar, expressing their deep concern, offering their prayers and asking how they could help. And, as I met with them in March, against the backdrop of Japan’s devastation, they continued to ask about Christchurch and the welfare of their brothers and sisters in New Zealand. More than conversation they gave me an envelope containing US\$1,200, equivalent of NZ\$70,000 to them, to give to the PCANZ’s Christchurch churches.

I hesitated to receive it knowing the cost and sacrifice. The PCM’s former General Secretary, the Rev Dr Lalengzauva, said “Angela, what little we have we must still give to those in need and at this time it is our brothers and sisters in New Zealand that are in need.” This is our partnership in action.

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Angela Norton first visited Myanmar in 2007 with her father the Rev Andrew Norton. So impacting was the experience that she has returned six times and is now the PCANZ's part time Myanmar Partnership Co-ordinator. Angela attends St Columba at Botany Downs in Auckland.

For more information on the mission partnership in Myanmar or the Rice Bowl Fund, please contact Angela at myanmar@stcolumba.org.nz

Recommended reading material on partnership with the poor:

Walking with the Poor, Bryant L. Myers

New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor, Scott A. Bessenecker

When Helping Hurts: How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor... and yourself, Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert