

Fact Finding Trip to Yangon, Myanmar

Jan 22-26, 2010

By Michael Yam

What do cherubic-faced innocence and age-old experience have in common? They are both parts of our world that can still seem to meet each other's needs. The need for love and understanding on one hand, and the need to fulfill God's will on the other.

I had to remind Sam he had an early flight to catch the next morning and that he should turn in for the night. We had chatted way past midnight and that was the first time I had spoken at length with Samuel Thang when I put him up for the night. He was here in Singapore in August 2009 for an Eagles Seminar that I learned of Sam's work in Yangon. He was also here earlier in June when he attended the PP church camp.

Sam spoke about the orphanage he had set up to house and provide for abandoned children (47 of them at last count). He had since legally adopted all of them as his own for convenience sake. Sam is also leading a church whose worship he is trying to steer closer to the New Testament pattern. Though he has some way to go in this, I have no doubt that his participation in a brotherhood "Back to the Bible" Seminar in Yangon and the June Camp in Singapore last year had started him on the road "back to the Bible". The opportunity to see for myself the work that Sam is doing came when this fact-finding trip to Myanmar was mooted.

Day 1, Friday - On Arrival

Sam met us at the airport and we had lunch back at Traders Hotel where we were booked to stay. Joining us were 2 of his church associates Nathan and Beckham Thian Sang. Nathan, like Sam, had studied in a Bible college in India and as a result, also speaks excellent English. Sam had arranged in the evening for us to meet his "children" in a park together with his wife Mercy and 2 of their own children.

Evening came and we were brought to the Seinn Lann So Pyay Garden that overlooks Inya Lake. The lake is lined with playgrounds, eateries and greenery, very pleasant for strolls and family picnics. On entering the grounds, all the 47 children, aged between 5 and 15 years, who were all lined up along the pathway greeted us with warm handshakes and bright smiles that melted our hearts. It was love at first sight. Their cheery dispositions belie their less fortunate backgrounds they come from. If there was any hint of a troubled past, it certainly did not show on their faces.

We sat in a circle just by the water's edge with the sun disappearing fast over the horizon. After the children had sung a few songs and a prayer led by Sam, brother Henry introduced the PP team and then addressed the gathering. Later the children were given a soft toy each, courtesy of Rosie, Boo Chye and Jenny Kwa. It seemed to me that it takes very little to put laughter and joy into their lives. I was told this was their first visit to a park. Their joy was certainly contagious.

Having dinner alfresco by the lake was just so wonderful. The adults were seated at the dining table while the children ate their box meals seated on mats. The food was just great, matched only by the ambience of dining beside the lake at twilight. I felt our hosts spared no effort in making us their honoured guests.

Day 2, Saturday - Medical Mission

Saturday was scheduled for the children to be examined by brother Boo Chye. We set out to the North of Yangon after breakfast on a 1-hour ride to the orphanage. On the way there we picked up Winsome Vertannes, a lady who is a member of the Than Lyin Church of Christ, whose home also serves as their meeting place.

The scene that greeted us when we arrived at the orphanage was like that of a farm community, set in 10 acres of rice paddy, fruit trees and vegetable patches. Amenities are basic. Beside the living quarters is the kitchen cum mess hall. Toilets facilities were built with the help of the German Embassy. The children again lined up to greet us, their faces filled with laughter and beaming with joy, playful yet very well behaved.

A room was selected for consultation and the older children helped carry tables and chairs to set it up. Paul and Ivy Lee were tasked to do the registration and some of us entertained the children while waiting their turns to be examined. While Winsome acted as interpreter, Kok Hin had his job as a crowd controller made redundant as the children needed very little supervision. The older kids were always looking out for the younger ones. Surely they are every Singapore mother's dream. The children were overjoyed when gift packs of stationery we had brought with us were given out to them, courtesy of Ee Kai and Florence.



The day turned out to be long and the heat, energy sapping. Villagers in the vicinity too came to be treated as word got around. Boo Chye was running a one-man-show,

treating patients and dispensing medicine at the same time. How we wish we had a couple of nurses to assist him. Tired as we were, we felt all the effort was well worth it, knowing that the children had been cared for. When we broke for lunch, only one third of the children had been examined. Sam's mother who is an excellent cook prepared lunch with the children helping out in every way they can, even swatting flies at the dining table while we ate in the open under some foliage. Their thoughtfulness is spontaneous. Their response to our every need is instant. Obviously Sam and Mercy had taught them well. In appreciation, we were given a gift of a "longyi" each (Burmese traditional sarong). After the last patient was seen and Boo Chye had finished his paperwork we left, anxious of what dinner may bring. You see, Sam had promised to host us to dinner in the evening at a palace!

Yes, a palace it was, truly a majestic sight to behold. The Karaweik Palace is a unique restaurant built in the style of the royal barge used by Myanmar's former kings, over the waters of Kandawgyi Lake, a large park. We enjoyed dinner with Sam, his wife Mercy and their extended families.



Day 3, Sunday - Worship

We left the hotel in our Sunday best to worship with Sam's congregation, a ten-minute drive from the orphanage. Church is a simple thatched roof structure with rows of wooden benches on a bare dirt floor. Behind it is a shed housing a pair of pigs, a pair of cows and a pair of goats that had just given birth to a kid. It's like Noah's Ark in the making. Two outhouses stand distinctively some 15 metres away, one of which whose bamboo floor gave way when one of us tried to use it. I will not name him or her, whose modesty is at stake.



Brother Henry shared the lesson at the Bible class hour while Sis. Ivy and Nat taught the children. At worship brother Cheng Chong preached a message centred on how we should follow close to the word of God. Sam was the translator both at Bible class and worship. How pertinent I thought the message was as this congregation is trying hard to pattern itself closer to the 1st century church. There was no song leader but we never sang out of tune nor missed a note. I smiled when a young boy seated beside me at worship kept thrusting his song book my way, running his index finger across the page, not realising I do not read nor understand Burmese. We had good fellowship followed by lunch. I am sure Sam and his family served us the best food from what little they had and we were absolutely touched by their hospitality.

In the evening we had the opportunity to meet up with brotherhood Christians when we were invited to Bible class at Winsome's house. Her home also serves as a place for worship for the Than Lyin Church of Christ, a church with over 50 years of history. Henry shared an off-the-cuff lesson on "How to Start a House Church".



Day 4, Monday - Seminar

After an early breakfast we picked Winsome up again and headed north for the church, the route which by now had become a familiar one. This whole trip was originally planned as a fact-finding mission but a seminar was included when Sam requested for one. Apparently Sam had wanted his friends and acquaintances to learn more about the true church of the Bible. He had invited many preachers from various denominational backgrounds together with those from local brotherhood churches to the meeting. Including our team of 11, I counted 62 persons in attendance.



The topic of the seminar presented by Henry focused on how to unite churches according to the pattern of the 1st century church. This he did in a most excellent and convincing way, in simple terms and with many diagrams “*that they may be instructed in the way of God more accurately*”. I can sense a lot of interest being generated and I am sure this seminar will start the fire for church leaders to steer their flocks back to the Bible. Individual discussions continued even after the session had ended with many participants exchanging contacts to keep in touch.

A sumptuous lunch was prepared and served to all participants. Sam certainly did not spare any effort to show Christian hospitality even though it takes much to feed the 62 of us together with the many children. We said our goodbyes as we left the church for the last time. Sam presented us with an ornamental parasol each to remember our trip by. The children swarmed around our van as we drove out the driveway, waving us off.

Day 5, Tuesday – Trip home

While on the plane home we were still throwing ideas around in how best we can help Sam, his “children” and the church there. The physical needs at the orphanage and church are basic, some of which includes a regular water supply, proper toilets, paved access roads which I was told turns into rivers of mud in the rainy season, a constant electric supply to counter the frequent outages. (We have since donated a generator to meet that need). Spiritual needs can only be fulfilled with time and the right nourishment. There is so much potential in this work and I am throwing you, the church at PP, a challenge to take it up and run with it.

Someone asked who our Most Valuable Team Member was. How I wish we can clone both Henry and Boo Chye and send them off to Myanmar, to China, India, Philippines And the mission ran so smoothly it was easy to forget that Deacon Paul was behind all the planning and logistics.

Footnote: Members of the team to Myanmar include Henry and Nat Kong, Deacon Paul Lim, Ooi Boo Chye, Teng Cheng Chong, Paul and Ivy Lee, Victor Soh, Ng Ee Kai, Lim Kok Hin and Michael Yam.

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Sermon in the “Manger” Teng Cheng Chong

Thanks to the generosity and support of the PP Myanmar Team, I was given the privilege of delivering the message for Sunday, 24 January as a guest speaker.

It was an extraordinary and unique experience for me in many ways. To begin with, it was my first overseas sermon. It was given to a very “mix” audience within earshot of a delightful pair of cows, a pair of pigs, goats and a bunch of houseflies in my face clamouring for my attention. The holes in the attap roof of the auditorium provided welcomed ventilation and I was never nearer to Mother Nature standing there on the bare clay floor.

The attentive audience was awe-inspiring, even though they may not have understood a word I said. However, I am certain that God’s message was delivered as Sam, who

was our wonderful host, had acted as the interpreter. Seeing the spontaneity of the Myanmar children and the natural friendliness of the adults was a very humbling experience for me.

After this experience, I must never again complain about whatever deficiencies I may find in our own auditorium in PP. I have also learned that whatever our personal circumstances and difficulties may be, we must make time for God's Word.

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A Doctor's Observation *Ooi Boo Chye*

The children at the "orphanage" were remarkably well behaved and obedient. During the medical examination, the queues were orderly and hardly anyone struggled or cried while being examined. Dermatological conditions were quite common in these children. Apart from this, they were generally healthy, well nourished and appear well adjusted. One feature that stood out in this group of children was the joy in them. They were always smiling and cheerful. Each of them most likely had a difficult or traumatic past although some may be too young to remember. Yet they were able to show us what true joy under difficult circumstances is. Indeed, we can learn from these children what the bible teaches in Romans 5:3 "rejoice in our sufferings".

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Passion For the Truth *Paul Lee*

On Monday 25 morning, following brother Henry's lesson on New Testament Christianity and the Unity of the Church, I had an opportunity to talk to a young man from the north-westernmost region of the Chin Tribe which borders the Indian sub-continent. Through our conversation, I found out that Simon received word of our visit with Sam and the seminar on NT Christianity. He was so passionate about attending the seminar that he was prepared to travel by the only means he knew to Yangon. First, he had to walk 2 days, resting only at night from the border to the river that flows to Yangon. There, he took a riverboat down to the outskirts of Yangon that took another 2 days. On reaching the Yangon border, he hitched a ride on a bus for 1 day to reach the city where we gathered.

At first I couldn't believe that one would go through so much just to attend a church gathering. It was only after I met up with another young man, Cyrus (also of the Chin tribe) who is attending a bible school 10 minutes away from Sam's house that I realised that indeed, that was how they travel to Yangon. Such passion in seeking the truth reminds me of our Lord's words in John 4:23 which reads 'Yet a time is coming and has now come when the worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.'

Both these young men I spoke to separately were glad they came to the meeting to hear brother Henry's succinct explanation of the need for 'Christians' to abide by the truth that is clearly laid out in the Bible without addition to or subtraction from it. They came away convinced that much of what they have learned (predominantly from the Anglicans) needs to be reviewed in the light of New Testament teachings on God's

commandments in the Bible. This led me to recall what the scriptures says in *Isaiah 55:11* 'So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it'.

It is my prayer that the footprint we left behind on this first mission trip to Myanmar will open doors to the multitude of fervent hearts there who are so keen to seek the truth.

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Suffer the Little Children *Ivy Lee*

"Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the Kingdom of God." Mark 10:14



Visiting Sam's 'orphanage' gave me a better appreciation of this passage. The children there are so young, yet they are so rich in spirit! As soon as we arrived to meet them, we were touched by their sincerity, graciousness and thoughtfulness. They greeted us with BIG SMILES and warm handshakes. They sang with great enthusiasm and listened attentively. They were incredibly well behaved, but most of all they always put others before self, anticipating our every need. On one occasion, slippers were put together to form a mat on the ground when they realized I didn't have a chair to sit. On another, a suitcase was quickly moved by a child to a shady spot when it was left under the sun. A boy would give up his only piece of dried apricot to a younger one who missed out because he came late. At mealtimes, these tireless kids would stand behind us to shoo flies away, while we tucked into the generous spread of food. These children have so little in their unimaginably deprived lives, yet they gave so much in their tireless effort to please and serve. I'm truly humbled and enriched by this experience.

Children of God *Ng Ee Kai*

The orphanage was started in March 2004. There are 45 children (which exclude 2 younger ones belonging to Sam Thang) at the orphanage. The ages of these children ranges from 4 to 16 years and they are mostly from the same ethnic group, Chin State. Before these children were put in the Home, many of them do not have a place to stay. They would have ended up in Buddhist temples, or would be living on the streets today.

Some of the children's parents have died due to diseases and the Nagis Cyclone. Others have re-married and decided to leave these children to fend for themselves. Through the dedication of Sam, these precious children are provided with basic needs; food and a safe shelter where their education and physical well-being are being taken care of.

Just like these children, it was a gentle reminder for me that our need for spiritual food and protection were also provided, as our cry goes up to heaven and our loving Heavenly Father always hears and answers our prayers accordingly.

From this experience, I feel I have gained a unique 'achievement', - opportunity to allow myself to get in touch with a whole new world. The fact that I was able to make this small step forward and to spend precious moments with these children had overwhelmed me with this wonderful sense of gratitude and modesty.

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Reflections *Victor Soh*

The most memorable part of my trip was to see a little boy, 8-year-old, Mou Ya's face literally lit up with a big smile when I showed him the picture in the camera playback mode. I had snapped the picture just a little earlier.



The whole trip for me can be summed up by that smile – of how eager and enthused the children were when they met us for the first time. We received so much love and were made to feel so welcomed. While the children do not have much in terms of possessions, they possess the most precious thing of all – the exuberant joy in their hearts. It reminds me of what our Lord Jesus said of young children – *“that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”* (Mark 10:14)

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Meeting Joseph *Henry Kong*

It was a pleasure meeting a man after my own heart, Joseph who served as a preacher for a large denominational church in Myanmar. After being posted to Yangon for two years, the leaders of the denomination wanted to post him elsewhere. He had already built good relations with the local church and converted many Buddhists. So he did not want to be reposted. The leaders subsequently relieved him of his position and he had to move out of their church building to a rented house. Samuel Thang, who was single at that time, helped and supported him. Joseph is now in the process of establishing a New Testament house church in Yangon at that location. The “back to the Bible” movement is alive and well, and active in many places in Yangon.