

South Asia Area Seminar Yangon, Myanmar February 2018



Generous and gracious hospitality were the hallmarks for the South Asia Area event held in Yangon, Myanmar 30th January to 5th February, and culminating in a field trip to Upper Myanmar. The organising committee, consisting of Area Officers, Unit Presidents and former Area Officers are to be commended on their meticulous planning which reaped such effective rewards.



A group of around a dozen young people had been carefully trained to act as worship leaders, stewards, technicians, and guides. Their huge commitment and attentive care of the guests in the midst of busy lives was greatly appreciated. Translation throughout was provided by Stanley, husband of the Area President, Margarette Mu Mu Than.

We stayed in the YMCA in Yangon, a large building with basic but very adequate facilities, which provided a meeting hall and rooms for workshops as well as a banqueting hall with stage that was ideal for the cultural shows. We were treated to traditional dances from Myanmar and India, including a bamboo dance performed by agile young people and a memorable song and dance act by two Burmese women aged 77 years.

We ate well. Rice was on the menu for most meals, supplemented by tasty soups, vegetables, chicken and beef and fish dishes and followed by fresh fruit. There was always plenty for everyone, in spite of extra local women attending the opening evening when many more than 200 women packed the hall.

Prior to the Seminar, the two Area Officers, and Unit Presidents from Myanmar, India and Sri Lanka met with World Officers for the Weaving Together Program. This was an opportunity to forge stronger relationships across the Area and hear the concerns and issues faced in each Unit. It was also a chance for Unit leaders to understand more about the global movement of which they are a part. As agreed at the World Executive in Chicago, last March, we used a resource called Ketso to share ideas and visions. This was a creative way of sharing that helped identify priority actions for the Area.

The Seminar itself began with a parade of banners preceded by the World Federation Tree of Life banner carried by the World President and World Secretary. The stage was beautifully decorated with yellow roses, which opened gradually during the following days. Margarette Mu Mu Than, Area President, welcomed us and spoke of the positive experience of working together with women from three different Units of Myanmar plus India and Sri Lanka in order to plan the event.



The Seminar theme 'You are mine' was taken from Isaiah 43:1 'I have called you by name; you are mine.' A retired Bishop, Daw Naw Say Kho, led two Bible studies. The first, on Genesis 11 (the story of Jacob) emphasised how effective leadership depends on our relationship with God. Like Jacob, we can turn negatives into positives through the power of God. Her second Bible study focused on Christ as our example as we seek his guidance and transformation leading to eternal life. Leaders from India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar led times of devotion. Dr Susan Thomas, Unit President of the Church of South India, spoke on Luke 14:10ff, the story of Jesus healing the crippled woman. She urged us to be freed from those ties that restrict us and to celebrate our life as liberated followers of Christ. Sarojini from Sri Lanka spoke on Luke 10 and the parable of the Good Samaritan to describe how we can all engage in acts of neighbourliness. She gave examples from the ministry in Sri Lanka where the Christians are the link between two ethnic groups, Tamil and Sinhalese. Supported by donations from other countries, they provide food, clothing and care for those in need through a project called SHALOM and provide homes for widows and orphaned children. Workshops provided information about the Independent Church of Myanmar, and the Women's Desire Campaign encouraging women to address the issue of domestic violence, value their bodies and protect themselves by learning self-defence techniques.

Reports from World Officers and each Unit provided valuable information and inspiration. As the World President, I gave a full report of the activities of the World Federation. In the absence of the World Treasurer, Ann Connan, President Emerita, explained the need for the WFMUCW funds raised through the membership levy and additional donations. She also told the story of how 'Thursdays in Black' came into being, originating in Argentina in the 1970s. The World Secretary, Mataiva Robertson, gave her personal testimony of her call to service and her experience of being supported by prayer through her recent illness. She introduced the three Helen Kim Memorial Scholars who



were in attendance: (left to right on stage with Mataiva) Rebekah Daniel, from India, had been unable to get a visa for Houston but had since then attended a course on Interfaith Dialogue through a Bossey Scholarship and now organises interfaith conferences herself. Ligia Istrate, who attended Houston as a HKMS, now serves the Federation as editor of the Tree of Life newsletter. Naw Mu Gay, HKMS 2011-2016, is now serving on the Bishop's program in lower Myanmar, supporting women and children.

The report from Sri Lanka described how the All Island Women's Fellowship encourages the participation of women in the life of the church, and offers strong support for mission, addressing issues of domestic violence and poverty, and providing health education and nurseries for children. The report from Methodist Church of India was given by Shilwiya Servand, President of the All India Women's Society. These women engage in issues of interfaith relationships, women's empowerment, supporting minister's wives and students in their faith journey, prison visiting and craft classes for income generation.

The Methodist Church in Myanmar is currently divided into three. Upper Myanmar relates to the Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland as a partner church. The women function as the Upper Myanmar Unit. The churches of Lower Myanmar are linked with the UMC of America. Over recent times there has been a split within this Lower Myanmar section. While the women have worked well together and there is a desire among many to be one Unit of Lower Myanmar, there is work to be done to ensure the official relationship with the WFMUCW is regularised.

Once the business of the Seminar was completed we were taken on visits outside Yangon. First, we went to a fish farm initiative, supported by the church to provide employment and fish for food. We went by bus to the river side where we boarded a ferry. Then followed a walk to some smaller vessels which took us upstream to the location. More sumptuous food awaited us beside three large lakes stocked with fish. We enjoyed the fellowship of this place and watched a demonstration of the fishing technique, with a net thrown over the side of a narrow craft.



A Methodist Church in Yangon was our venue for the closing worship with Communion after which we boarded the bus for our field trip to Upper Myanmar, travelling overnight beyond Mandalay and into the hills to Pyin Oo Lwin. Here we stayed in a hotel and attended a local church on the Sunday morning, visiting caves adorned with Buddha statues, a botanical garden and the Buddhist Temple in Mandalay.

This exposure to the culture and country of Myanmar was memorable and exciting. I am so very grateful for the opportunity to experience the charming hospitality of the Methodists of Myanmar. And yet in the background was the knowledge that the Rohingya people of Rakhine State, on the Western border are suffering greatly. More than 800,000 are now in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Others are in concentration camps in Rakhine State. They are not recognised as citizens by the Myanmar government, and are officially stateless. The word Rohingya has been officially removed from the lexicon of Myanmar. The people of Myanmar are fearful of repercussions if they speak out against this injustice. World Officers of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women have sent a letter to the Ambassador of Myanmar in London, urging Aung Saan Suu Kyi to instruct her government to see that justice is done for these Muslim Rohingya people according to recommendations of the commission set up under Kofi Annan.