

Burma Refugee Commission

2016 Report to Board of General Ministries

October 21, 2016

The Burma Refugee Commission met twice in 2016, once in the spring (April 18) and once in the fall (October 20). We miss Roy Medley's presence and advice, but we are glad that Susan Gillies is on board as interim general secretary. Susan has had a few phone conversations with the Commission members and has met a number of visitors from Burma at the Mission Center.

Of all the Burma diaspora concerns, the focus is currently on the fragmentation of the existing partnership between the Karen congregations and the Euro-American congregations. As members of respective Karen congregations grow more independent, they have a desire to form their own church. Thus, a few have found new locations for their members and some also seek membership with the Karen Baptist Churches USA. Their decision to depart from the "host" church has created uneasy feelings between both sides of the language groups. Uncounted ministry plans and church resources, especially from the English speaking church, have changed dramatically.

Rev. Jonathan Glass-Riley from Lakewood Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio had invited Saw Ler Htoo and Florence Li to his church on March 1-2 to meet with both congregations.

Rev. Michael Ford from Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester and Rev. Flint Miller from First Baptist Church of Moline, IL joined the Commission meeting held at the ABC Mission Center on October 20 to share their experiences related to the issues of fragmentation.

Rev. Bill Englund of First Baptist Church shared his experience with Florence via a phone call and an article. Bill is comforted that out of the fragmentation, FBC of St. Paul is affirming that both the English and the remaining Karen members will worship together as one church. More constructive partnership ideas were shared at the Commission meeting so as to lift up the partnership relationship between the two language groups.

Saw Ler Htoo and Leslie Turley visited the Chin, Karen and Kachin refugee committees in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in September. They found that the local "Rela" (civilian armed force group to round up undocumented individuals) has threatened and violated people's human rights. There are over 60,000 diaspora people of which the majority of them are Chin and not registered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There are arrests, fear, and hopelessness among the diaspora people. They

urge American Baptists to advocate for them at the U.S. State Department and with the UNHCR.

Saw Ler Htoo visited Rev. Robert Htwe, chair of the Karen Refugees committee in Mae Sot, Thailand. Rev. Htwe coordinates the refugee camps for all types of affairs, including resettlement and lately, repatriation of the refugees back to Burma. Refugee residents are unwilling to return to Burma due to “lack of trust” of the Burmese government and its resettlement plan to house them in apartment buildings and to provide factory jobs, despite their preference for farm lands and rural lives. There are still 150,000 refugees in the camps. Repatriation is processed through UNHCR in Thailand and it is a big challenge to resolve that issue. Advocacy is sorely needed.

Last but not the least, Rev. Dr. Hkalam Samson, General Secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention in Kachin State, Burma sent a letter to Florence for circulation to the denomination and ecumenical bodies about continuous military attack by the Burmese army. There are over 120,000 internal displaced persons (IDPs) in Kachin State and the Burmese government has cut off humanitarian relief to the Kachin Independent Army controlled IDPs areas. The Kachin Alliance in the U.S. wrote a letter to President Obama in September requesting that he not lift the economic sanction until the peace process is reached and military related enterprises have subsided. Susan Gillies wrote a follow-up letter to President Obama urging him to comply with the Kachin Alliance’s request.

Jeff Woods prepared a survey with the regions about the diaspora churches in the U.S. The Commission members also provided feedback to the survey.

ABHMS, with Florence Li, Saw Ler Htoo and Ronald Charles Nunuk, sponsored the first Burma diaspora youth consultation on October 20-22 in the Mission Center. There were 25 people represented by the Burmese, Chin/Hakha/Falaam, Karen, Kachin and Zomi. The consultation aims to find common grounds and concerns of youth ministries among respective groups and aids in envisioning future collaborative efforts for youth ministries and for fostering future leaders.

Joan Friesen and Leslie Turley will be part of a delegation traveling to Thailand and Burma in February 2017. As part of that trip, Roy Medley (and his wife Pat), Florence Li (tentatively) and others will visit UNHCR in Thailand to hear about and advocate for the repatriation situation. The delegation will also visit the Chin State.

The Commission will request an advocacy meeting with the U.S. State Department and the U.N. in the Spring of 2017.

Submitted by:
Rev. Florence Li