

**BOARD OF GENERAL MINISTRIES
MISSIONAL RESPONSE GROUP**

NOVEMBER 8-9, 2012

**Crowne Plaza
King of Prussia, PA**

Response Group Members present: Duh Kam, Roy Medley, Perla Belo, Shirley Fair, Ray Jepson and Tasha Wilson; Danny Jack and Jim Thomason were not able to be present. Guests: Florence Li, Duane Binkley (by phone on 11/8); Saw Ler Htoo (by phone on 11/8, present on 11/9).
Recorder: Cathy Brubaker

Thursday, November 8

New developments/debriefing

Rev. Florence Li, Asian Churches Strategist (ABHMS) and coordinator of the Burma Refugees Task Force (BRTF), reported on the national situation in resettling Burmese refugees. The BRTF has worked since 2007 to respond to the influx of Burma refugees admitted to the U.S. for resettlement. Over 80,000 people of various ethnic groups have been resettled in the U.S., 30,000-32,000 of which are connected to a host ABC church and seeking relationship.

There are 270 Burmese groups presently identified, but that number continues to increase. These people groups are spread over 130 cities and areas around the country. There are 30 ABC regions currently assisting in some way with resettlement, each having between 1-2 congregations they are working with directly. These groups typically form their own congregations or connect with another ABC church; they come into relationship using different models.

Florence shared with the Response Group a month-by-month written journal report of highlights of work with Burmese refugees, from January 2012 to November 2012. The full report is attached to these notes.

Rev. Rothang Chhangte, who has been working as ABHMS' liaison for Burma refugees for the last three years, is now serving as Director for World Aid for BWA. Two coordinators, one Karen and one Chin, will be hired by ABHMS to serve alongside Florence and Task Force members to continue the work with diaspora communities. Duane and Marcia Binkley, who are serving ethnic Karen, Chin and Kachin refugees who seek legal immigration, are also partnering with Central Baptist Theological Seminary to organize training classes for pastors and church leaders as well as maintaining relationships with Baptist organizations in Thailand and in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. ABWM has also played a significant role along with the Task Force related to the status of Burmese women. Florence noted that there will be a meeting in Syracuse next week to plan a process for going forward.

Florence shared inspirational stories of two Chin churches in Indianapolis: 1) Chin Evangelical Baptist Church which held a building dedication of its 2.2 million dollar building project on October 27, with 1.2 million dollars in down payments raised by the Chin members of the church and 2) Zophei Christian Church, which held a ground breaking ceremony on October 28 for its 2 million dollar building project.

Florence also reported that Indiana Chin Baptist Church is anticipating the start of its 2.5 million dollar building project as soon as the city code and other legalities are in order.

A documentary about the diaspora community is currently being planned, with the hope that the documentary might be showcased during the Mission Summit. Duh Kam, Florence, and members of the BRTF have applied for a Palmer Grant. Aundreia Alexander, ABHMS, who is assisting with the production of the documentary, wrote a proposal for a Thiel (?) grant, and has received \$20,000.

Reporting from Chin and Karen communities

Rev. Dr. Duh Kam , General Secretary for the Chin Baptist Churches USA and Rev. Saw Ler Htoo, Executive Secretary for the Karen Baptist Churches USA, both reported from their respective Burmese communities.

The Chin Baptist Churches USA began to organize in 2004 (as the Chin Baptist Church of America), although more effectively in 2007. Currently there are 58 Chin churches in membership, well organized to carry ministry to its own people in Burma as well as to assist refugees here. There is currently \$84,000 in the relief fund, which provides the Chin refugees with a sense of security/life insurance.

The 4th biennial conference of CBCUSA was held at Indiana State, Indianapolis on July 6-8, 2012.

Over \$100,000 was raised for this gathering. The event was for over 3,000 Chin in the Indianapolis area. The young people, through electronic media, made it possible for people from Burma to view the sessions live and to participate from their homeland. Duh was recently elected as the full-time general secretary of Chin Baptist Churches USA, and will have an office in Indianapolis.

Duh shared concerns facing the Chins related to sharing of church space, but noted that most refugees are doing better as a general rule. Some having homes and are beginning to “reach for the American dream.” He noted that the U.S. government has recently taken steps to work with Burma. President Obama will be visiting Burma November 19-20. Political reform needs to take place so fighting will not continue; the nation needs to strive to become united as one nation, one country.

Rev. Saw Ler Htoo (by teleconference) reported that the Karen Baptist Churches USA began in 2009 and now has over 13,000 members, 7 regions and 67 Baptist churches, and will be receiving three additional churches yet this year. They are currently working with churches to apply for 501(c)(3) status.

KBCUSA conducts annual youth conferences and leadership training, supported mainly by the Burmese Refugee Task Force. The Karen Baptist Convention of Burma maintains a strong relationship with ABC and has recently partnered with Central Baptist Theological Seminary to initiate theological education to assist Karen speaking pastors and church leaders to better lead their congregations here in the U.S. Classes were held at Ft. Wayne Baptist Church in Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

KBCUSA is involved in networking with other ethnic churches/organizations in the U.S., including Kachin and Karenni organizations. The Karenni have over 80 churches in fellowship, 3 with over 500 members each. Most churches in the south are connecting with Southern Baptists.

A visit to Burma and Thailand is being planned at the invitation of Karen Baptist Theological Seminary to join their March 2013 convocation. While there, Ler hopes to visit the Kachin state and Karen refugee camps in Malaysia. He shared concern about the situation of Karen in Burma camps. There is a letter being written to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regarding the treatment of Karen, and Ler shared his hope that ABC will join in support of this letter.

Issues of training in church service and organization

Rev. Duane Binkley, who (with his wife Marcia) serves ethnic Karen, Chin and Kachin refugees who come to live in the U.S. as legal immigrants, reported via teleconference.

There are 9 refugee camps in Burma. The government has not allowed new applications for entrance into the U.S. since 2005. The number of Karen entering the U.S. is already tapering off and is expected to slow down and come to a trickle within the next 2 years. The flow of Chin refugees, since the UNHCR is trying to clear their backlog, will probably remain steady for the next 2 years.

Burma has a new prime minister, replacing former prime minister (now president), Thein Sein. There are 130 major language groups recognized in Burma and a lot of minority groups struggling for freedom and autonomy. As far as repatriation, emptying refugee camps remains a problem. Non-government organizations (NGO's) continue to work on the Thai-Burma border for humanitarian relief and are beginning to think of a time when refugees might return home. The hope is that internally displaced persons, still wandering and hiding in Thailand, be taken care of first. It is estimated that there are 1-1.5 million people in this category. The reality of the situation, however, is that rice farmers sent back have no other training and their land has now been used for other purposes. There is also deep concern related to the prevalence of land mines and to whether there will be homes to return to.

On September 14-15, the first Foundations Judson Communities classes were held at Ft. Wayne Baptist Church. This is the first of a 10-part program to be taught in the Karen language. Currently, classes are only available in the Ft. Wayne area and in the Karen language. (The pastor of the Ft. Wayne church is formerly from Nagaland and is interested in also beginning educational programs in Ft. Wayne for Naga.) There is hope to be able to find enough student interest in other areas also and attempts to make the education as user friendly as possible, perhaps offering online courses and Skype so others can participate from a distance. There is interest in starting a program in Utica, NY and also interest expressed by some in Minnesota.

Time was provided for questions and further discussion.

Roy reported on a meeting with a group of 10 Burmese pastors from the Atlanta area in September, a group looking for ways to do theological education. The largest groups in the Atlanta area are Chin, but there are also Karen and Kachin and some smaller ethnic groups. Discussion continued related to how ABCUSA might broker a meeting to bring the established churches and newer churches together. Roy expressed interest in calling a meeting to look at these issues. He mentioned that Dr. Doug Stowers might be willing to assist. It was decided to continue to explore this possibility.

Concern was expressed related to the difficulty many Burmese find in qualifying to take a class at a seminary. Some have degrees from Burma, but most are not recognized in the U.S. CBTS does recognize and permit entrance into degree programs, with classes often being conducted in the evening and with students coming from off site. Some online classes are already offered, but a number of online classes have to be limited, unlike traditional classes. There needs to be much consideration on how to coordinate all of this, about funding and possible scholarships. Tuition runs between \$7,000-8,000 per year at Central. Bacone College has a full scholarship program available.

President Obama's visit to Burma

As the session concluded, the group discussed President Obama's upcoming visit to Burma on November 19-20, and whether it might be helpful to submit a letter to him prior to this visit, requesting that he address critical issues. A decision was made that the response group will draft a letter at tomorrow's session.

Friday, November 9

Letter to President Obama

The response group reviewed Roy's November 28, 2011 letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, which addressed human rights violations in Myanmar, prior to her December 2011 trip to that country. The following letter (under ABC president Ruth Clark's and General Secretary Roy Medley's signatures) was drafted and approved by the response group to be presented to the Board of General Ministries for possible action:

Dear Mr. President:

As the Board of General Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA, the most culturally diverse denomination in the United States and Puerto Rico with a membership of 1.3 million members and 5,200 congregations, we are writing to you regarding our deep concern for the people and country of Myanmar.

Our ties to Burma date back nearly two centuries to 1813 when Adoniram and Ann Judson landed in Rangoon as the first American missionaries in the country. Their pioneering work has left an enduring legacy. Baptists now constitute the largest Christian group in the country with 1.5 million members convened in 18 language and regional Baptist conventions. We continue to relate to the Myanmar Baptist Convention and support it financially and spiritually through our International Ministries division. Our General Secretary, along with other denominational leaders, has frequently visited Burma, Thailand and Malaysia. The denomination created a national Burma Refugees Task Force to coordinate our response to the Burmese diaspora including advocacy with the U.S. State Department and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The congregations of our denomination have been actively participating in the resettlement of over 80,000 refugees from Burma since 2006.

While we are encouraged by some of the political reforms in Myanmar (particularly the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the increased diplomatic relationship between Ambassadors, the visit from President Thein Sein to the United States, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to

Myanmar in 2011), we continue to be gravely concerned by human rights violations, particularly as they pertain to ethnic nationalities.

We hope, in your visit, you will address the following concerns with President Thein Sein, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and other political leaders to urge the new government of Myanmar to:

- End the armed attacks on civilians in the Kachin State and other parts of the country;*
- Cease the military use of rape, forced labor, torture, religious persecution, destruction of churches, razing and burning of villages, confiscation of land, forced displacement and killing of ethnic nationalities;*
- Declare a nationwide ceasefire, release remaining political prisoners, and pursue more vigorously a meaningful peace and political dialogue process with representatives of all the ethnic nationalities and the democracy movement led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other distinguished leaders;*
- Allow internally displaced people, as they desire, to return to their home villages and land with sufficient support and relief in order to re-establish their life with security. We are especially concerned that the land mines be cleared;*
- Allow those who are living as refugees outside of Burma, having fled from violence, to return as desired to their native land or be able to explore alternative living options in a third country.*

The minority people of Burma desire freedom, the right to self-determination and the right to live in peace within their country. Thus, any political and economic engagement without an end to the human rights abuses will be hollow. The minority citizens of Burma will continue to distrust the government.

We will keep you in our prayers as you travel to Myanmar and meet with its leaders. May God go ahead of you to prepare the way and give you wisdom.

AMO Relationship

The group reviewed current Associated Ministry Organization (AMO) agreements and the ABCUSA Bylaws in order to determine whether this might be a logical approach for maintaining relationship between ABC and Burmese organizations. The status of an AMO agreement with Burmese organizations would be in addition to the relationship which currently exists between each organization and ABHMS, IM, and the ABC caucuses. BGM would provide the denominational relationship.

There have been ongoing conversations already with NEC related to this possibility. Additional conversations with other ABC caucuses would also need to take place. The question is whether this is the right connection or whether a another form of relationship might be better suited.

Ler Htoo noted that the Kachin see three options: 1) become a new (separate) Baptist denomination, 2) be an ethnic grouping of our churches , or 3) become a network

Duh Kam noted that he would review CBCUSA bylaws to see what ramifications might exist related to relationship. He confirmed that the CBCUSA would like to establish a formal relationship with ABCUSA and that it is helpful to have possibilities/options presented. He will bring this information to their March 2013 trustee meeting.

Discussion continued around how this relationship might present itself, and what the ramifications might be. It was agreed that ABC wants to honor each organization as its own separate convention, with its own general secretary and non-profit status, to reaffirm and hold them closely in relationship, yet honor their independence as a separate organization.

Questions also arose related to how much the various Burmese ethnic groups cooperate together. There are generally two areas of cooperation: through the Burmese Task Force (denominational commission) and through the Asian Caucus. However, dialects/political/cultural differences make it not easily possible/feasible. Duh encourages ethnic groups to form their own churches, although the relationship between ethnic groups is good. There are some mixed congregations, but not many. Concern was shared in the response group for making sure that everyone feels invited to establish relationship. Duh and Ler are working to provide names of all leaders so information might be received by all.

There was strong agreement that the work with the Burmese is a wonderful example of cooperation within the ABC family: ABHMS working with resettlement issues; IM working with refugee camps on Thai/Burma border; ABCUSA working with policy and advocacy.

Following this discussion, it was

Agreed: To propose a Summit Gathering which will include leaders from Chin, Karen, Kachin and other groups, along with leaders from ABCUSA, IM, ABHMS and ABCUSA to come together face-to-face to present possible scenarios for relationship, share commutative thinking and to hear concerns.

Cathy Brubaker will facilitate a date scan for a February 2013 conversation (1 hr.) related to what the Summit meeting might look like.

Biennial plans

The Judson celebration is scheduled for Saturday night, June 22. Duh Kam and Ler Htoo both serve on the planning committee. There is much effort in making sure that all ethnic groups feel welcomed/invited. We may need to be sure there is a place held where areas of cooperative ministry among the Burmese are highlighted.

The Missional Response Group meeting was adjourned.