

Report to ABCUSA Board of General Ministries  
and  
International Ministries, ABC and  
American Baptist Home Mission Societies  
by the General Secretary, ABCUSA

February 2015 Mission Visit to Malaysia, Thailand and Burma

Beloved in Christ,

I shall try to not repeat what you have already received in the report the mission team to Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia has crafted for its follow-up visits to the White House, the State Department, and the UN, as well as the report I drafted to the World Relief Committee.

First, I wish to express my deep appreciation for the ministry of Stan Murray, who is retiring as IM's area director for Burma. His sensitive leadership is well respected by our brothers and sisters in Burma. Likewise, I want to say thank you to Florence Li, Rothang Chhange and Aundrea Alexander who as AB Home Mission Society staff have directed our response to the influx of refugees from Burma and have worked closely with the emerging conventions in the US. Likewise, Duane and Marcia Binkley have been critical to our efforts at Central Seminary to respond to the issue of pastoral training and support for the refugee communities. All together, ABCUSA, IM and ABHMS have provided a critical and full response to Burma through the ABC Commission on Refugees from Burma. This joint-work illustrates collaboration at its best on an issue that spans our division of mission labors. **The work of the ABC Commission on Refugees from Burma will continue to be critical for several more years until the nationwide ceasefire and political peace talks bear fruit of a true democracy where all are equal and free, and the large influx of refugees ceases.**

Having said this, the rest will be a more general pastoral report with some recommendations from my perspective.

First of all, I cannot begin to recount the privilege it is as General Secretary to be the embodiment of such a wonderful family of God and respected tradition as the American Baptist Churches. The fact that leaders such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Minister U Aung Min, US government and UN officials, and the Chief Minister of the Kachin State (who is one of the few non-Baptist Kachins) would gladly give an hour or more of their time to meet with our delegation speaks so highly of our international reputation resulting from our advocacy for human rights and religious liberty in Burma and our active work on behalf of refugees from Burma. When we entered the meeting room of the US Embassy in Yangon, Ambassador Mitchell remarked, "I have so many staff here with you because we know how important Baptists are to Burma."

Along the way, I was told that our visit as General Secretary of ABC and team members was being reported through a wide range of video and radio media both inside and outside the country. The presence of the General Secretary of American Baptist Churches carried great symbolic significance of our commitment to the country of Myanmar both to those within and without the church.

Among the Baptist Christians and other Christian communities of Burma there is great respect for our long history of mission beginning with Anne and Adoniram Judson and continuing through the Sixties when all missionaries were expelled from Burma. There is also deep gratitude for the active role ABC has played in the present in welcoming refugees and helping

them find their way in this new and very different land. In one small hamlet we visited in the Chin Hills fully 1/3 of those who gathered to welcome us raised their hands when asked if they had children in the US. Time and again, people thanked us for welcoming them into our churches and for the assistance we have given to the forming of strong congregations. They were so glad to hear that their children are making good contributions to the churches and to our country.

Our visit was particularly important in the Kachin State. There have been a few well-placed leaders in the Kachin Baptist Convention who were agitating for KBC to affiliate with SBC rather than ABC. Our visit, our expressed concern for the abuses of the military and our call for peace with justice has turned the tide the other way now. While in the Kachin State we met with the families of the two young Kachin women who were brutally raped and beaten to death. Our call for a fair and transparent investigation both there and in our meetings with Minister U Aung Mln of the Union government and with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was reported widely. We received high praise as well for our advocacy regarding human rights and religious liberty issues within Burma and Malaysia. Our voice for peace with justice was hailed by the Baptists of Burma.

While the violence in the Middle East and North Africa captures world attention, little is read or heard of the ongoing issues of violence against the predominantly Christian ethnic groups in Burma. What one hears now is a rightly placed concern for the plight of the Royhinga community of Burma but it should not be to the exclusion of the violence and discrimination also experienced by Christians there. The ABC voice keeping these issues before our government, the Union Government of Burma, the BWA and the ecumenical movement is a critical one.

**ABCUSA should maintain its efforts in advocacy for religious liberty and respect for human rights in Burma and Malaysia. ABCUSA should explore new aspects of this effort such as advocacy with US corporations doing business in Burma to promote equality and human rights through their hiring and other practices. This effort would be similar to the churches' advocacy with businesses during the apartheid era in South Africa. In so doing, we would ask them to use their considerable influence to promote respect for human rights and equality for ethnic peoples in Burma.**

We were pleased to meet with leaders of the peace effort of the Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) which is the premier Baptist seminary in Burma. They have a robust program that focuses on interfaith dialogue with Buddhists and to a lesser extent Muslims. They recognize that Burma will not be at peace as long as the minority religions are treated as second class and members of those faiths are restricted in positions they can hold in government and elsewhere. To their credit, MIT reached out to the dominant Buddhist community with the request for dialogue. With extensive training received from the Mennonite University in Harrisburg, VA, the seminary is actively training its students in peace-building and has been holding workshops on domestic violence, and religious-based violence across the Baptist Churches.

Having said this, one cannot appreciate the courage such efforts have taken, especially their outreach to the Muslim community which is both despised and feared by the people of Burma. Even in the Christian community, we heard much fear of a Muslim take-over of Burma if the Royhinga were given equal rights. **ABC through our Committee on Christian Unity and Interfaith Relations should find ways to learn from and contribute to the efforts of interfaith dialogue in Burma. Perhaps the model that is being pioneered with the Baptist churches in Israel for a peace conference jointly supported by ABCUSA is one avenue. Certainly Dan Buttry's visits are important in teaching skills and practices that are critical to the church's work of peace-building and reconciliation.**

**International Ministries might also wish to explore how ABC can cooperate with David Tegenfeldt and Rev. Dr. M Tu Hkawng of Kachin Theological College and Seminary in their creative work in multicultural education with Kachin children and youth. They are building a foundation within them for living in peace with people of other faiths in a multicultural Burma.**

Drug addiction is a rising epidemic in the Kachin State and there is little response to this scourge at this time. KBC does support some work in this area, but quite frankly, they are overwhelmed dealing with the ongoing surge of IDP's. In our visit with the Chief Minister of the Kachin State, I raised the question as to whether he would welcome the assistance of ABC missionaries who have been involved in combatting the drug trade in Thailand through introducing replacement crops. Likewise, the Rev. Florence Li spoke of the drug rehabilitation programs created in Hong Kong by Harold Schoch where she worked for a time and offered to make a connection with those programs if desired. The Chief Minister said he would welcome both. **The openness of the Chief Minister of the Kachin State to assistance by ABC agricultural missionaries experienced in creating replacement crops is a door of opportunity for IM to explore.**

Throughout our mission team's journey, Paul and Gail Aita were listening attentively to the needs of the educational institutions such as the Kachin Theological College and Seminary and Union Theological College and Seminary in the Chin Hills. Their report will have details to offer in this regard as well as the needs related to the training/education of pastors and missionaries. **The swelling number of retired clergy and educators from the Baby Boom generation will be a valuable resource in helping meet some of these needs. ABC needs to up our game in the recruitment and deployment of volunteers who wish to do kingdom building work domestically and internationally.**

A critical part of our visit was our interaction with political and other leaders concerning the cease-fire talks, the longer-term political peace dialogue, and the upcoming elections. It was a thrill to be welcomed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Laureate. Our meetings with her, Minister U Aung Min who heads the Union government's team in the ceasefire and peace negotiations, and our ambassador to Burma, Robert Mitchell were rich learning experiences as well as opportunities to express our perspectives and concerns as American Baptist Churches. In addition, I was asked to travel to Chiang Mai prior to the team's arrival in Bangkok to meet confidentially with the General Secretary of the Kachin Independence Organization and the General Secretary of the United Nationalities Federal Council which is an organization of the several ethnic entities negotiating the Nation-wide Cease Fire and Peace talks.

Aung San Suu Kyi and Ambassador Mitchell both expressed the importance of the upcoming elections in October-November, 2015. **I offered that American Baptists would be glad to send volunteers to monitor the elections as we did in South Africa.**

As noted in the report to the World Relief Committee, the Chin Hills are the Appalachia of Burma with many of the same factors at work in each that have produced crippling poverty, poor or no education and inadequate medical care. The Chin State is the only state in Burma with no government sponsored college or university.

In addition, in the southern Chin State there is a concentrated government supported and sponsored effort to convert Christians to Buddhism. Their main approach is the establishment of tuition free boarding schools that recruit Christian youth. We saw one such school in Matupi. What struck me most was that it was surrounded by barbed wire. In the past several years there

have been many reports of Christian youth being forcibly detained in these schools when they resisted the insistence that they embrace Buddhism and sought to continue to practice their Christian faith.

**There is an opportunity for IM to partner with the Chin Baptist Churches USA in their mission efforts in the Chin State together with the Myanmar Baptist Convention and the Chin Baptist Churches of Myanmar. The Chin Baptist Churches USA are actively involved in development, education and evangelism efforts in the Chin State. Partnering with them would enhance their efforts and reinforce the unity of Chin Baptists in the US with the American Baptist Churches.**

During my visit to northern Chin State in 2013 and this visit to the southern Chin State, we either met or learned of visitors from the Norwegian Baptist Churches. **IM might wish to explore how Norwegian Baptists are serving or preparing to serve the Chin Hills and consider cooperative efforts as has been our longstanding practice in Thailand.**

As General Secretary, it has been a God given privilege to be the first American Baptist in a half century or more to visit the Chin Hills. There and in the Kachin State the welcome I received was an overwhelming expression of love for the American Baptist people. Everywhere our team went, I was asked to pray blessings upon the people. People would reach out to touch me, letting their hands linger on my face or clothing as tears flowed from their eyes. Countless times, older men and women would come to me pronouncing benedictions upon me. Churches on our route but not our itinerary begged that we might stop if only for 15 minutes so that they might see us and be prayed for. So our journey lengthened each day as like the early apostles we went from church to church encouraging them in faith and good deeds. To them, our visit as the General Secretary of American Baptists was a powerful testament that they do not face their struggles alone. And to me it was a powerful affirmation of the promise of Philippians 1:6 - "He who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."