

Report from the Myanmar Mission Unit Coordinator to the General Assembly 2024

At the time of writing the MMU has 7 members, two Lay Missionaries, one deacon and 4 priests. Our Deacon Francis Xavier Nbwi La Aung is a transitional deacon. Hopefully he will be a priest by the time of the General Assembly. We come from five countries, one from Ireland two from Korea two from the Philippines, one from Chile and one from Myanmar. We are all located in Myitkyina city in Myitkyina Diocese in Kachin Land in north east Myanmar.

Our Lay Missionaries were supposed to return to Banmaw Diocese. However the security situation is such that it would be impossible for them to live there at the moment.

Background:

The Columbans worked in Kachin Land from 1936 to 1979. In 2015 the Myanmar Mission Unit was established. Neil Magill was here before that and set up a higher education Center in Mandalay. In July 2023 he decided to return to Ireland for health reasons. The Columbans have deep roots in Kachin Land and the people are aware of the contribution that the Columbans have made to the development of the both Myitkyina and Banmaw Diocese. Banmaw Diocese was established in 2006 from Myitkyina Diocese. Columban Lay Missionaries have been in Banmaw Diocese since 2008.

The situation:

At the time of the last GA in 2018 Myanmar was a very hopeful place as people were coming to terms with relative freedom and democracy, after elections in 2015, and the opportunities it opened up. That hope was extinguished on Feb 1st 2021 when the military seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. She now languishes in prison, along with most of the elected government, and the country faces ongoing chaos. The future has been stolen especially from young people. Formal education has suffered greatly. Many young people who can, do not want to study in universities that are run by the military. Thousands have been driven from their home.

In October 2023 a number of ethnic armies started an offensive against the Burmese military. At the time of writing (Nov 2023) they have had considerable success; they have captured some towns and cities. The fighting seems to be spreading to different parts of the country. There is conflict in many parts of Kachin state. So far Myitkyina

is safe. A local priest said it is very unlikely the war will come to Myitkyina. In many ways life goes on as normal in the city. The price of everything has risen dramatically. Rice and basic foodstuffs have tripled in price making what was a very difficult situation for the poor even worse. These days it is difficult to get fuel. The Columbans have reached out to 83 families who were driven from their village recently and have been able to supply rice, cooking oil, salt and onions.

JPIC/IRD:

This as you can imagine is a very sensitive area in Myanmar. We are not free to speak openly about the situation here. However there are still opportunities to promote the society priorities. Kurt is our JPIC/IRD coordinator. He has been involved in many initiatives to animate the laudato Si movement and to promote dialogue and interaction between various religions including a group called religions for peace. We have plans to hire a local person to help us with this ministry.

Other Ministries:

We have decided in consultation with the Bishop of Banmaw and with the Myitkyina Diocesan leadership that our two LMs Cata and Michael will be appointed to Myitkyina until December 2025. The situation in Banmaw does not allow for them to return there not or for the foreseeable future. They are discerning possible ministries.

Eamon is working with recovering drug addicts and alcoholics in the Rebirth Rehabilitation Center set up but the Diocese. The center now has a vocational training program.

Kurt has set up the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina and has a very active group of young people who facilitate many programs for youth. He has also set up the Student Learning Resource Center which offers a 9 month program preparing young people to find work. There are 80 residents in the center at the moment.

Jehoon is director of the Diocesan Family commission and offers various formation programs to parishes. He is also spiritual director to the Pre major Seminary. He will return early next year to Myanmar after studying in Korea for a year.

Rafa is chaplain to a church run orphanage. He also offers formation to the volunteers who assist at the orphanage.

Cata and Michael are discerning what their ministry will be.

Through the Columban Overseas Aid Fund (COAF Australia) we support rural education in the most remote areas of Myitkyina and Banmaw Diocese allowing the most disadvantages students receive an education.

Vocations/Formation:

There are vocations here and groups like the Jesuits, Salesians, Dominicans and others are not shy in recruiting. They invest local personnel in this ministry. This is one reason why we are requesting that Nbwi La Aung be appointed for a time to Myanmar, after priestly ordination. This will give us a local face and be a great help in promoting vocations. He will be able to travel and engage with local candidates much more freely that we can. Covid and the coup interfered with our ability to recruit and follow up with candidates. However we are now ready and enthusiastic to recruit people. We need to be creative and find ways to integrate them into the manila formation system. For example because of the situation they may not have finished their university degree but would be well able to negotiate the academic program in Manila. We need to find ways to allow them to join the formation program.

We are able and willing to host an FMA program.

At the moment there are 5 students from Myanmar in formation. Two just finished the spiritual year. Three are on FMA, two in Mindanao and one in Peru. We are very happy that Francis Xavier Nbwi La Aung became a permanent member of the Society and was ordained a Deacon.

We were expecting two ordinations. However one of our students Kyaw Zaw, during his pre-ordination retreat, was told that the Superior General and his Council were not advancing him to permanent membership. It was a great shock to him and to us. There is something seriously wrong when someone is advanced through formation for 9 years and is then refused at the last moment. How is this possible? We feel an injustice was done to Kyaw Zaw. It also damaged the credibility of the Columbans in Myanmar.

Personal Reflection:

Despite the present difficult situation we are able to stay here and to do ministry. Having a religious visa means we don't have to hide our identity. Myanmar is an ideal place for Columban Mission. We are a small group of Columbans, Lay and Ordained, men and women, from 5 different countries. Despite language and cultural

differences we are united in our desire to find creative ways to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ among a suffering people. It is a privilege to be here at this difficult time for the country of Myanmar. We are building on the legacy of the Columbans who were here before us. The presence of these early Columbans means there is a deep residue of good will towards the Columbans.

Eventually the situation will change and settle one way or the other. Which way it will go is yet to become clear. However we believe we can continue our mission here and promote vocations. We believe that it is now time for us to draw up a plan of action which we hope to finalize by autumn 2024.

I found the initial reading of the survey commissioned by the Society to be depressing. It came across as an entirely academic and secular exercise with no reference to or understanding of how faith defines how we look at everything. My initial temptation was to withdraw and not engage. However on further reading and reflection I began to feel motivated to discern a common new future for the SSC.

Recently we had the first Kachin Columban ordained a deacon. Please God early next year he will be ordained a priest. There are Columban vocations here. However we need to invest in finding and nurturing them. The Kachins have a strong faith and a connection with the Columbans we should not miss this moment of grace to offer young men the opportunity to join us on mission. Our vocation drive will not be limited to Kachins, we hope to promote throughout the country.

I was inspired by the article Trevor Trotter wrote in the July edition of Columban intercom. He was commenting on the visit of Tim, our society leader, to the region of Oceania. He was energized and was challenged by Tim to have a mind shift required of an "old white man" to see the Society of St Columban through the eyes of other members of the Society. For Filipinos, Koreans, Pacificans or Latin Americans they have seen their numbers increase. We can add Myanmar to that list now. Co-workers and Lay Missionaries now say, "we are all columbans". He sees the emergence of a new society. I see the MMU contributing to the emergence of that new society in the future. However we have to give Myanmar Columbans the encouragement and scope to grow in numbers.

The fact that we now have or are in the process of getting religious visas offers the opportunity to openly promote Columban mission and vocation. We also owe it to those who will be ordained from here in the not too distant future the chance to

have peers from Myanmar as Columbans. The goal is not as stated in the survey report to prolong the life of the Society of St Columban but to offer young men here the chance to join us on mission. The Columban Sisters have already committed to this. There is a sense here of a lack of enthusiasm for recruiting vocations among the general council. I certainly felt that at the IRMU. Rather than considering creative ways to facilitate vocations from Myanmar, I had a sense that the GC wanted to put the brakes on it. At one stage I was asked was it fair to accept people who are suffering trauma to join the society. We were founded at a traumatic time in Ireland. World war 1 was coming to an end, the country would have a war of independence and then a civil war. We are no strangers to trauma. The difference is we now have a formation program that helps us process them. We all have our traumas to deal with.

I feel hopeful that the future of Columban Mission in Myanmar is bright. A small group of committed missionaries with a deep faith in Jesus can make a big difference and attract others to join them. In Myitkyina we are not suffering great difficulties compared to people in other parts of the diocese and country who have been driven from their homes. The faith and resilience of people here is truly inspiring. Living with them, getting to know them and ministering to them is a great blessing for all of us. Having a permanent member from this place and the possibility of more joining him is a beacon of hope for the future.

Prepared by Eamon Sheridan, Mission Unit Coordinator
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