Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation: A Missional Model for the Church in Myanmar

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ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND RECONCILIATION:
A MISSIONAL MODEL FOR THE CHURCH IN MYANMAR

Written by

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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

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ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND RECONCILIATION: A MISSIONAL MODEL FOR THE CHURCH IN MYANMAR

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
AREND A.C. VAN DORP
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ABSTRACT

Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation: 
A Missional Model for the Church in Myanmar 
Arend A.C. Van Dorp
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary 2019

Myanmar is a country of amazing ethnic diversity. Part one of this paper will explore Myanmar’s struggle for unity and harmony among its various ethnic populations. Since gaining independence from British domination, Myanmar has been plagued by ethnic conflict between the majority Bamar and the ethnic minorities, and to a lesser extent among the minorities themselves. These divisions are also apparent between the various church denominations. Not only is Christianity considered a foreign religion, but it is also fractured along ethnic lines, further complicating its image in the eyes of the Buddhist majority. This division creates additional obstacles when Bamar converts want to join a local church consisting primarily of one ethnic minority.

Part two will examine theological foundations for a biblical understanding of the church as a diverse but unified body of redeemed people. Key Bible passages focusing on the implications of this reality will be explored. This understanding is essential for the church in Myanmar to fulfill its mandate as a missional body, demonstrating God’s love in a fractured multi-ethnic society. Challenges to fulfilling this role will be examined, as well as initiatives that may lead toward reconciliation and diversity both within the church and in society.

Part three presents theological implications of an inclusive model of missional church in Myanmar. This model promotes reconciliation and embraces multi-ethnic diversity, creating a welcoming environment towards building a transformational community. To this end, students at the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology will learn what constitutes a missional church in the Myanmar context. They will be encouraged to introduce this model among the churches they serve. The process for introducing the missional church paradigm to seminary students through a mission course and relevant assignments will be presented in chapter six, followed by implementation steps and desired outcomes.

Content reader: Kim Zovak, DMin

Words: 297
To my wife, Jolinda, who has faithfully stood by my side and has given me the opportunity to complete this project. Her backing and emotional support have kept me going until the finish line. My utmost thanks to God, my heavenly Father, who gave me the grace and inspiration to persevere despite the obstacles.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my OMF leaders for allowing me to engage in this doctoral program, and for the support I received from them during this time. I am also grateful to my colleagues for their understanding during the times when I was less accessible to them because of my studies. To my fellow students in the Ministry and Leadership in Asian Contexts cohort, I enjoyed the journey together with you and I will miss you. Furthermore, I would like to express my deep appreciation to those Myanmar Christian leaders who, while remaining anonymous, agreed to be interviewed by me. Their insights and comments significantly deepened my understanding into the challenging conditions encountered by the church in Myanmar. Finally, I thank the Myanmar Christians whose faith and perseverance have been an inspiration during these past five years I have lived in your country.
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PART ONE:

COMMUNITY AND MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Missionary work in Myanmar has seen only limited response among the Bamar (ethnic Burmese) people, while the Karen and other minorities throughout the nation have shown much greater openness and receptivity.¹ Thus, the churches in Myanmar are overwhelmingly made up of ethnic minority people. Moreover, many churches are ethnoculturally delineated and predominantly consist of a single ethnic group. This ethno-linguistic demarcation between Myanmar churches creates a significant obstacle for others, who exist outside these ethno-linguistic groups, to join.² It also clashes with an understanding of the church as a universal body of believers from diverse ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds.

This cultural makeup of many churches makes it extremely difficult for Bamar converts to integrate into a church. Whereas in the larger society they occupy a dominant and privileged position, in the church they often find themselves marginalized, or at least

¹ After many years of hard work in the port city of Yangon, Adoniram Judson could count only a handful of Bamar believers. But not long after opening new mission stations in Tavoy (Dawei) significant numbers of Karen and other minorities had become Christians. Maung Shwe Wa, Burma Baptist Chronicle, ed. Genevieve Sowards and Erville Sowards (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 67–70.

² Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 210–211. This issue will be explored in more detail in ch. 2 “Denominational Division an Obstacle for Witness”, p. 31.
in a minority position. In order for Christians in Myanmar to break out of this isolation and make a significant impact in this largely Buddhist country, the church may need to abandon its strong ethnic identity and embrace a more inclusive ecclesiology.

The purpose of this project is to explore an understanding of the church as an inclusive, multi-ethnic fellowship, modeling a diverse, yet united community. This undertaking will require a rethinking of the nature of the church that is grounded in reconciliation between the various ethnic groups within the Myanmar church. Bringing Christians from various ethnicities together may in turn lead to a more inclusive community where people from all ethnic and religious backgrounds feel welcome.

Consequently, this project will engage in a biblical-theological exploration of essential characteristics of the church in the context of a pluralist society. These characteristics include the church as a community of believers who are both called out of and into the world, and the church as a body united in fellowship. Moreover, the church is a multi-ethnic mosaic that brings people together from a variety of ethno-cultural backgrounds. A number of key New Testament passages will be examined, drawing out the implications of reconciliation with God and with one another.

For the church in Myanmar to live out its calling as a missional community, it needs to embrace and demonstrate reconciliation, both within the church and in society in

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3 Samuel Ngun Ling, Christianity Through Our Neighbours’ Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar (Yangon, Myanmar: Judson Research Center - MIT, 2014), 45, 47, 51. “Since Christianity was, to a large extent, accepted by the ethnic minority groups whom the Burmans regard as ethically inferior to them, it was also difficult for them to accept such a minority religion.”

4 Throughout this study the term “the Myanmar church” will be used to refer to the national church or the churches in Myanmar as a whole.
general. Various internal challenges confront the church, such as disunity manifested in ethnic denominationalism; which hinders its witness by creating the impression of a fragmented community, reinforcing the perception of the church as a collection of monocultural communities. The clergy-lay division seriously hampers the role of church members by restricting ministry to those who have been officially appointed. Additionally, there is serious need for reflection on contextualization of the Christian message and traditions. More attention should also be given to developing a more outward-focused model of discipleship, which not only promotes individual spiritual growth, but also seeks to transform the community. These challenges, both separately and together, will require a thorough rethinking of what it means to be a church in a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

Recognizing the difficulty of cultivating such a radical change of heart, this project will focus on seminary students preparing for future ministry in the church. While their influence will initially be limited, they may eventually be able to impact the congregations they lead. Such a gradual change will hopefully result in a deeper and more lasting transformation than working through the existing pastoral leadership.

Part One of this project will examine how the present condition resulted from a combination of historical, political and religious factors. The second chapter will consider some missiological, ecclesiological and theological dynamics that played a role in shaping and molding the church into its present form. Part Two will set out to evaluate relevant theological contributions regarding the essence and mission of the church, particularly the implications for the church in a multi-cultural context. These findings will be assessed in light of a biblical-theological study of the nature of the church, its
redemptive purpose in the world and its calling to be a reconciling, unifying and missional community. Part Three will introduce a strategy to encourage churches to adopt a spiritual formation focus and embrace ethnic diversity, engaging the whole membership in contextualized ministry. This strategy will be presented to staff and students of the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology in Yangon, first at a post-graduate seminar and later as part of one of the academic courses. The aim will be to create awareness, understanding and appreciation of the missional church concept proposed in Part Two. Finally, the project will show the process used to evaluate the effect of the course on the participating students.
CHAPTER 1
COMMUNITY CONTEXT IN MYANMAR

Throughout its long and sometimes violent history, Myanmar\(^1\) has struggled to attain unity and harmony among its various ethnic populations. Even after gaining independence from British domination, the country has been plagued by ethnic conflict between the majority Bamar and the ethnic minorities.\(^2\) To a lesser extent there has also been ongoing tension and conflict among some of the minorities themselves.\(^3\)

The Post-Colonial Legacy

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar (or Burma, as it was formerly known when it was part of the British Empire) is not a homogeneous society. It resembles more a multicolor ethnic mosaic, or as Mikael Gravers characterizes the country as, “multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural contexts of the modern nation-state of the Union

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\(^1\) In this paper, “Myanmar” is used when speaking about the country after its name was changed in 1989 and “Burma” when speaking about the country before the change.


\(^3\) Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 202.
of Burma.”⁴ Ever since the country gained independence in 1947, it has struggled to maintain its unity. Until the British conquered Burma after three Anglo-Burmese wars in the nineteenth century, the country had never been a true unitary state.⁵ Most areas of the present-day Chin, Kachin, Shan, and Karen States were never firmly under control of the Burmese throne, while the Rakhine and Mon peoples only reluctantly submitted to Burmese rule under pressure.⁶

The Shan, living in relative isolation on the Shan plateau of Eastern Burma, used to enjoy a certain level of autonomy, depending on the strength of the Burmese rulers in the lowland areas. In exchange, they paid tribute to the Burmese Court.⁷ To the south on the Tenasserim coast lived the Mon, longtime adversaries and rivals of the Burmans. After the Burmese victory over the Mon by King Alaungpaya and the sacking of their capital Pegu (Bago) in 1755, the Mon were never again able to challenge Burmese hegemony.⁸ A similar fate befell the Arakanese of the Western Burma coastal region, after their defeat by the Burmese army in 1784.⁹ Like the Mon, the Rakhine never again were able to recover their independence, but to this present day they remain staunchly

⁴ Ibid., 201.
⁵ Ibid., 13–14.
proud of their ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{10} The Karen, living in the jungles of Eastern Burma and the Irrawaddy River delta, were never a military or political threat to the Burmese and preferred to keep to themselves, although they were often forced to work as serfs to their powerful Burmese rulers.\textsuperscript{11} Only with the arrival of the British and the conversion of many to Christianity were the Karen elevated from their subservient status, gaining some measure of respect and self-confidence.\textsuperscript{12} The Chin, living in the remote and inaccessible Western Chin Hills, were frequently harassed and raided by the lowland Burmese, but their isolation meant they were never fully conquered by them.\textsuperscript{13} The Kachin of Northern Burma were probably the most successful of all minorities in defying Burmese control. Their fierce resistance ensured their relative independence in spite of persistent efforts from both Burmese and Chinese to subjugate them.\textsuperscript{14}

Wedged between two superpowers, India and China, the rulers of the various kingdoms and territories in Myanmar have had to carefully position themselves throughout history in order to maintain a certain level of independence.\textsuperscript{15} This balance of power was drastically altered with the arrival of Western colonial powers in the region,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Thant Myint-U, \textit{The River of Lost Footsteps}, 71, 297.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 7, 246; Cockett, Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma, 132–33.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 206.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Thant Myint-U, \textit{The River of Lost Footsteps}, 195. Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 12.
\end{itemize}
starting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The eastward expansion of the British Empire finally resulted in the conquest of and control over all of present-day Myanmar.\(^{16}\)

Focusing on the colonial period of Burma is not to deny the long and fascinating history of this strategic country that forms a bridge between India to the West, China to the North, and Southeast Asia to the East and South. However, for the purpose of studying the history and present state of the church, the period of colonial rule has been the most influential factor. The reason is that, while British rule of Burma lasted less than a century, it left a lasting impact on the country, as it not only provided opportunities for missionary work, but also created a lasting aversion toward Christianity as a colonial religion.

**Buddhism and Other Religions**

According to Burmese tradition, the introduction of Buddhism dates back to the earliest days of the Buddha, when two traveling Burmese merchants brought back eight of his hairs which were enshrined in what later became known as the Shwedagon Pagoda.\(^{17}\) This is Myanmar’s most revered religious symbol, although the present-day structure is from a much later date, perhaps five centuries old.\(^{18}\) But it was not until the second century AD that Buddhism began to spread through Southeast Asia, primarily through trade connections across the Bay of Bengal with South India. Within a few


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 49.
hundred years, Buddhism had become the dominant religion in the city-states of the Ayeyarwady River valley.\textsuperscript{19} The historian Thant Myint-U calls this “the single most important development in Burma’s long history,” as it would determine Burma’s religious, social and cultural environment until the present day.\textsuperscript{20} When the invading Bamar came down from Nanzhao in Southern China and established their kingdom centered in Bagan along the Ayeyarwady River they adopted the Theravada (Hinayana) strand of Buddhism, constructing the largest collection of Buddhist pagodas in the world.\textsuperscript{21} Throughout the rise and fall of dynasties and kingdoms, Buddhism remained the principal unifying factor for the people of Myanmar. Whether centered around the Mon capital, Bago (Pegu), or later at Ava, near Mandalay, Buddhism provided each ruler and his people with the moral, spiritual and social frameworks to foster unity and cohesion.\textsuperscript{22}

It is evident that Buddhism has deeply influenced and shaped the Burmese worldview. According to missiologist Paul Hiebert, “our worldview is made up of our fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality. It is the way ‘things really are’ – the picture of the world that we perceive to be true for everyone.”\textsuperscript{23} Underlying our worldviews are different belief systems that “make explicit the implicit assumptions of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps, 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 51.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps, 56–57; Shway Yoe (aka Sir James George Scott, The Burman. His Life and Notions (New York: Norton, 1963), 173.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Paul G. Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 10.
\end{itemize}
the worldview within which they function and apply these assumptions to beliefs and behavior.” Consequently, the Buddhist belief in *karma* permeates the Bamar worldview to the point that every life experience is seen as a result of past actions or inactions.

Religion in this majority Buddhist country pervades virtually all areas of life. From the monks doing the alms rounds in the morning to the lay people earning merit by offering them food, from the throngs of worshippers visiting the numerous pagodas on Buddhist holy days to the pious individuals committing to several days of quiet meditation in order to attain peace of mind, daily life for most Burmese revolves around religious practices promising a spiritual benefit. For many Burmese, selling garlands and candles, erecting statues and images of the Buddha, or even engaging in fortune-telling have become a way of life, providing a reasonably adequate income in a country where a significant portion of the population still lives below the poverty line.

While most people acknowledge the Buddhist idea that one’s life is governed by (present and past) *karma*, they are also convinced that their lives are controlled by fate,

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26 Ibid., 94. Spiro points out that in original (nibbanic) Buddhism the central concept is knowledge. However, in the everyday experience of the average Burmese Buddhist knowledge as the way to enlightenment and nirvana has been replaced by meritorious acts. For most Buddhists the goal in life is the improvement of one’s karma, rather than its extinction.

luck and the activity of various spirits (*nats*) and other supernatural forces.\(^{28}\) As such, both Buddhism and animism (or supernaturalism, as some writers describe it)\(^ {29}\) attempt to deal with the problem of suffering by offering an explanation for suffering and by providing ways to alleviate or avoid suffering. Burmese animism manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as ghosts, demons, witches and what the Burmese call *nats*,\(^ {30}\) who are potentially harmful and need to be placated, or else may cause harm to human beings. While Buddhism provides an explanation for the origin of suffering, namely *karma*, which is the result of one’s good and bad deeds done in the past, it does not offer a way of escape from the consequences of this *karma*. It can only offer a way to prevent future suffering by eliminating the desire that produced the *karma*, and that led to the suffering. Supernaturalism however, not only gives a different explanation for the cause of suffering, but it also offers a way out of present adversity.\(^ {31}\)


\(^{29}\) Melford Spiro prefers the term supernaturalism over animism and uses it throughout his book, Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*.

\(^{30}\) According to Spiro, witches are humans, while *nats* are spirits. Ghosts, while similar to *nats*, are terrestrial, whereas *nats* appear in a non-human form. The latter are part of an elaborate system of thirty-seven *nats*, who are widely revered (and feared) in Myanmar. One common characteristic of these *nats* is that they died a violent death, and are therefore considered malevolent. Ibid., 41.

\(^{31}\) Interestingly, since animism blames evil witches, harmful *nats* or ghosts for one’s suffering, it removes the personal responsibility from the individual. He or she is merely the victim, having wittingly or unwittingly offended the spirit. In any case, people are able to remedy their predicament by making restitution through an offering or other ritual. Cf. Ibid., 4.
While most Burmese would consider themselves Buddhists first and foremost, their actual religious practices reveal that dealing with the supernatural is at least as relevant to them.\textsuperscript{32} Thus, they often engage in ceremonies designed to appease these spiritual forces. In fact, sometimes offerings and prayers can be made to \textit{nats} and Buddha images at the same festival or pilgrimage. Since the \textit{nat cultus} preceded the introduction of Buddhism in Burma, we may assume that many sacred places were originally \textit{nat} shrines, and only later became places of Buddhist worship.\textsuperscript{33} This process provided Buddhist legitimacy to the \textit{nats} and helped to show the primacy of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{34} Even though many Western commentators consider Buddhism primarily a philosophical (i.e. non-supernatural) belief system, canonical Buddhism explicitly affirms the existence of a variety of spirits, both good and evil. It even teaches that these spirits may be coerced and exorcised by the recitation of certain \textit{Sutras}.\textsuperscript{35}

Contrary, then, to some Buddhist intellectuals and to most Western critics of Burmese \textit{nats}, animistic beliefs as well as rituals are perfectly compatible with orthodox Buddhism, even with the Buddhism of the Pali Canon. Their alleged incompatibility stems from the false assumption that “pure” Buddhism is – or, at least in its original form, was – an exclusively ethical system, devoid of supernatural beliefs and rites.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{32} Spiro, Burmese Supernaturalism, 256.
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\textsuperscript{34} “Pagodas are always erected near a nat shrine so that people should not forget the Buddha even if they come to propitiate the nats.” Ibid., 250.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{35} “The \textit{pareitta} ceremony … which is still performed today in all Theravada countries, was already performed by the Buddha’s “right hand” disciple, Maudgalyayana (Weddel, 1911:572).” Ibid., 251.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 251.
\end{flushleft}
The recitation of *pareittas* to ward off evil continues to be an important function of Buddhist monks. In addition, some monks are famous as exorcists (*athelan hsaya*). The Buddhist rosary is often used as a talisman, and praying through one’s beads is deemed especially effective in warding off evil spirits. The yellow robe of the monk is considered extremely powerful, and the most effective way of escaping from attack by evil forces is to become a monk.

Nevertheless, there are serious incompatibilities between nat belief and practice on the one hand, and the Buddhist doctrine of karma on the other. The first conflict is doctrinal. Given the principle of *karma*, the propitiation of the nats is futile; they cannot harm a person whose *karma* is good, and conversely, if one’s *karma* is bad, he or she will suffer harm in some manner anyway. If, on the other hand, harmful spirits caused the suffering, one can contest rather than accept it, by placating the spirits. In short, the belief in nats allows the Burmese to avoid the painful consequences of a consistent belief in karma.\(^{37}\) When religious norms are inconsistent with personal needs, the latter will usually prevail, according to Spiro:

> In theory, those acts which increase one’s store of merit yield their karmic consequences in one’s next existence. However, when faced with trouble, the Burmese perform meritorious acts with the hope not merely of affecting their future karma, but also of altering their present karma. Although the latter, having been determined by one’s past actions, is unalterable in principle, the Burmese venerate relics, worship the Buddha, say their beads, offer food to monks, and so on, with the expectation that the good karma which is thereby accumulated will nullify the bad karma which is responsible for their present ills.\(^{38}\)


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 256.
The second conflict between Buddhism and animism is ethical. The two systems are diametrically opposed in various dimensions, as the following table by Melford Spiro indicates:\(^{39}\)

**Table 1. Differences between Buddhism and Nat cultus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>BUDDHISM</th>
<th>NAT CULTUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>moral</td>
<td>amoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensuality</td>
<td>ascetic</td>
<td>libertarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>rational</td>
<td>non-rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>serenity</td>
<td>turbulence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>otherworldly</td>
<td>worldly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Buddhism is, at its core, a moral system. Moral behavior in fact is the only way to acquire merit, which determines one’s karma and therefore one’s future. Nats, on the other hand, are indifferent to morality, so that “[t]he criminal who propitiates a nat will be the object of his favors, and the saint who neglects him will be the victim of his punishment.”\(^{40}\) Buddhism holds that only by eliminating desire will one attain nirvana, whereas the nat cultus is often an occasion for sensual gratification, even license.

\(^{39}\) A Comparison of Some Salient Dimensions of Buddhism and the Nat Cultus, Viewed as Ideal Types. Ibid., 258.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 259.
Furthermore, the Buddha arrived at his conviction by observation and logical reasoning: if desire causes suffering, then eradicating desire can eliminate suffering. Meditating on this truth leads to nirvana. In contrast, placation of the *nats* is motivated by fear, and spiritual truths are discovered by possession. Next, while the Buddhist ideal is characterized by serenity, the shamans are characterized by their frenzied dancing, wild gestures, shouting, and screaming. Finally, Buddhism’s orientation is fundamentally otherworldly, since the visible world is temporary, illusionary and marked by suffering. Salvation for the Buddhist is escape from this present existence. Animism on the other hand seeks to escape suffering by controlling the circumstances affecting our existence in this world.

It is therefore evident that Buddhism and animism are distinct, even contrasting, systems, each operating in its own sphere of life. The *nat cultus* focuses on the here and now, whereas Buddhism is primarily concerned with future outcomes, although its followers sometimes seek to achieve temporary goals as well. In all this, Buddhism is considered far superior to the animistic practices governing much of Burmese daily life.\(^\text{41}\) While animist values tend to be consistent with Burmese needs and drives, Buddhist values are more in line with their aspired values.\(^\text{42}\) This prompts the question as to why the two systems continue operating side by side, instead of one being taken over by the other. It would seem that animism provides a non-Buddhist solution for those needs that

\(^{41}\) Spiro, Burmese Supernaturalism, 273.

\(^{42}\) “For most Burmese, animism is a concession to human frailty; Buddhism is a striving for human nobility. Animism represents man’s natural fears and desires, Buddhism symbolizes his highest ideals and aspirations. Animism presents man as he is; Buddhism indicates what he ought to be (and can become).” Ibid., 273.
are ignored or prohibited by Buddhism, and thus allows Buddhism to remain insulated from imperfection. It allows the Burmese to seek remedies for their immediate needs through animistic means, while at the same time worshipping the Buddha and the monks as idealized objects of veneration.

These observations have implications for Christian ministry and for approaches to gospel communication in particular. In order to respond to felt needs of Myanmar Buddhists, it will be necessary to not only focus on their Buddhist beliefs and worldview, but also on their deeply held animist (supernaturalist) beliefs and practices. Cross-cultural proclamation of the Good News will need to carefully consider how to appropriately address both realities.

**Bamar Pride and Prejudice**

The history of Burma has long been characterized by the struggle of the Burmans to control the non-Burman segments of the population, and by non-Burman resistance to these efforts. During certain periods in history the Burmans succeeded in establishing a measure of control over the Shan, Kachin, Karen and other minority groups that make up Burma’s ethnic mosaic, while at other times these minorities were able to reassert a measure of autonomy. Under British colonial rule the Burmans lost some of their dominant role, as the colonial powers favored other ethnic groups with preferential

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43 The term *Burman* is used here to distinguish those of Burman ethnicity from other Burmese ethnic groups, whereas the term *Burmese* is mostly used to refer to the population of Burma in general or, at least, when no distinction between various ethnicities is made. Sometimes the term *Bamar* is used instead of Burman, both terms being considered synonymous here.

treatment. However, after independence, the old inter-ethnic tensions re-emerged.\textsuperscript{45} These continue to pose one of the most significant problems for the country, even after more than sixty years of independence.\textsuperscript{46} While Burma has sought to carve its own way into the future through the \textit{Burmese Way to Socialism}\textsuperscript{47}, the fact is that ethnic rivalry remains an important component in Burmese history, both classic and modern.\textsuperscript{48}

For hundreds of years, Buddhism has been at the heart of Burmese society. The monkhood touches virtually every segment of society and holds the people’s reverence. Pagoda shrines built to acquire merit dot the countryside in all areas and each village has at least one monastery. The number of monks and neophytes is commonly estimated between 300,000-500,000, or about one in thirty of all adult males. It might be said that Buddhism, in particular the monkhood (\textit{Sangha}), held together the religious, cultural and even political civilization of ancient Burma. It was the bond that connected the Bamar with the Rakhine, Mon and Shan populations. It is no wonder, therefore, that the arrival of Christian missionaries seeking to end these traditions, was seen as a threat to national identity and unity.

Historically, Burmese youth around the age of eight were sent to the monastery for schooling. These young \textit{kyaungtha} waited on the older \textit{upasin} and \textit{pongyi} at meals,

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 249.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 228.

\textsuperscript{47} The \textit{Burmese Way to Socialism} refers to the ideology of the socialist government in Burma, after the 1962 coup d'état, led by General Ne Win. It served as a blueprint to reduce foreign influence in Burma and increase the role of the military.

\textsuperscript{48} Osborne, \textit{Southeast Asia}, 278–79.
accompanied them on their morning alms-receiving rounds, drew water as needed and
cared for the monastic quarters in general. They also learned to read and write, and
memorized Buddhist commandments and Pali formulas used in pagoda rituals. These
traditions endure to the present day, and continue to influence and mold young Buddhist
men. The minimum period for ordination of a novice is one Lenten season, about three
months. Although most youth sooner or later return to life as a layperson, many stay on
into adulthood and some spend the rest of their life in the monastery.50

Buddhism in Burma however, also had strong political and nationalist overtones.
The famous monk Saya San had ambitions to become the next Burmese king and led the
rebellion against the British in 1930, and it took the colonial army two years to subdue
him and his followers.51 Widespread student-led demonstrations in 1938 and 1939 were
joined by thousands of Buddhist monks, highlighting the monks’ political and social
involvement.52

Students protesting military rule in 1988 were widely supported by Buddhist
monks.53 In 2007 the monks featured prominently in the Saffron Revolution, the name
referring to the color of the monks’ robes. While these efforts have been widely praised
as honorable initiatives, Buddhism in Myanmar also has a darker side, fueled by regularly


50 Cady, A History of Modern Burma, 58. These ideas will be further explored in chapter 2.

51 Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps, 209.

52 Ibid., 216.

53 Michael W. Charney, A History of Modern Burma (United Kingdom: Cambridge University
resurfacing racist nationalism. The Buddhist monk-led anti-Muslim demonstrations in 2012 are an example of this extreme nationalism, used by the authorities to promote national identity. While the 2007 Saffron Revolution sought to restore democracy to Myanmar, the 2012 protests were aimed at removing the most despised (and unrecognized) minority, the Rohingya, from the country.54

While government authorities occasionally acknowledge the country’s ethnic diversity, in general the Buddhist Bamar are considered the backbone of national identity.55 According to Aung Thu Nyein of the Vahu Development Institute, the Bamar majority has consistently prevented non-Buddhist minorities from occupying positions of authority, asserting that “[t]hey don’t have any written laws and regulations, but practically, in the military if you are a Christian or if you are a Muslim you won’t be promoted up to major ranks. You won’t be a senior leader in the military.”56 This statement underscores the delicate position of those serving in the army, who belong to


minority religions. There are also multiple reports of government attempts to convert Christian and other minorities to Buddhism.\textsuperscript{57} One method is by forcing children to attend state-sponsored schools where they receive Buddhist instruction, often with assistance of Buddhist monks. One such report, by the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), based on over one hundred interviews, details the following:

There are 29 Na Ta La (Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training) schools across Burma, primarily targeting ethnic and religious minorities. The schools function outside the mainstream, chronically underfunded education system and practice targeted recruitment of impoverished Chin who lack the means to pay for alternative schooling. Ethnic Chin make up one-third of students at Na Ta La schools where they are prevented from practicing Christianity and instead coerced to convert to Buddhism, primarily via the threat of military conscription. Students are often forced to shave their heads and wear robes of monks or nuns, the CHRO said.\textsuperscript{58}

Even in more urban areas with a mixed population, non-Buddhist students are often forced to participate in Buddhist ceremonies and rituals, and classes or exams are often scheduled on Sundays, particularly during Buddhist Lent.\textsuperscript{59} All in all, it may be said that Buddhism makes full use of its dominant position in society to extend its influence. It


\textsuperscript{59} This is an often-aired complaint within the Christian community. Some of these issues are merely a consequence of Buddhist traditions, such as the custom to move classes to the weekend, when a festival days fall on a weekday during Lent. However, such practices do create friction and resentment, when they affect the ability to attend church on a Sunday.
may not formally be the state religion intended by U Nu, but it operates as such in all but name.\textsuperscript{60}

Further, the 969 Movement\textsuperscript{61} takes its name from the Buddhist tradition of the Three Jewels or Trairatana, which are composed of twenty-four attributes (nine for the Buddha, six for the Dhamma, nine for the Sangha). It seeks to promote Buddhism as the dominant force in society and to combat the threat posed by Islam by, for example, boycotting Muslim shops and businesses.\textsuperscript{62} In another development, a few years ago Buddhist nationalist monks established the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (\textit{Amyo Batha Thathana Kakwe Saungshaukyay Apwe or Ma-Ba-Tha}). Under pressure from this Buddhist monk-led movement, parliament in 2015 adopted four religion and marriage laws that restrict religious conversion, inter-faith marriage and polygamy, and promote family planning.\textsuperscript{63}


\textsuperscript{61} The 969 movement is a nationalist movement, opposed to what its adherents see as Islam’s expansion in predominantly-Buddhist Burma.


Problematic Inter-ethnic Relations

The British discovered that, in order to rule Burma, they only needed to use direct rule in the Bamar areas, i.e. the central plains. The minority areas where the Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kayin and Kayah lived were allowed greater autonomy, as their loyalty was much less under dispute.\(^\text{64}\) This division would end up creating many complications when Burma became independent, due to ill feeling between the different ethnic groups. Ethnic tensions also arose as the British brought an increasing number of Indians into the country, many of whom took government jobs.\(^\text{65}\) Some of them became relatively wealthy by starting their own businesses. The less business-savvy Burmese were unable to compete with them.\(^\text{66}\) Resentment against these groups on the part of the Burmese persists to the present day.

After independence, fighting broke out on multiple fronts between ethnic rebel groups, communists, gangs, and anti-Communist Chinese KMT forces supported by the United States. The hill tribe people, who had supported the British and fought against the Japanese during the war, did not trust the Bamar majority and took up arms.\(^\text{67}\) The Communists withdrew from the government and instead opted to fight for their cause.\(^\text{68}\) Muslims from Rakhine State also turned against the new government, and even the Mon,

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\(^{64}\) Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps, 211; Osborne, Southeast Asia, 204.

\(^{65}\) Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps, 185.


\(^{68}\) Charney, A History of Modern Burma, 72–74.
long thought to have assimilated with the Burmese, turned against them.\textsuperscript{69} It took almost two years for the Burmese army to regain control over most of the country, although many of the border areas remained under the control of various ethnic armies.\textsuperscript{70}

When the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power in 1988, it introduced a new framework of 135 national races of Myanmar. This new categorization was introduced “as a direct critique and dismissal of the eight ‘big races’ – the Burmans, the Mon, the Shan, the Karen, the Kayah (Karenni), the Kachin, the Chin, and the Rakhine (Arakanese) – the major categories used during the colonial rule.”\textsuperscript{71} The choice of 135 groups may have originated from the languages listed in the 1931 British census. However, the decision by the SLORC to count all the different groups in each state and add them together resulted in counting some groups more than once if they were listed in more than one state. Moreover, the Bamar were counted wherever they live, while Kayin are only included in Kayin State, even though there are many Kayin living in Ayeyarwady, Bago and Yangon divisions.\textsuperscript{72}

The continuing struggle between the Bamar-dominated army and the various ethnic minorities is a clear demonstration of an ideological and existential battle to impose their own vision of the world, and to confirm their identity and cultural legacy.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 77.

\textsuperscript{71} Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 4.


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 5.
Mikael Gravers even goes so far as to say that “the conflict in Burma is not an inter-ethnic conflict but a protracted post-colonial conflict between the state represented by the military with its vision of a unitary nation state and ethnic groups struggling to obtain territorial and cultural autonomy as legitimate national entities.” Matthew Walton, writing in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, argues that Bamar people have enjoyed a privileged position in Myanmar society, akin to white privilege, even though many of them have also experienced a level of suffering at the hands of the military. However, “this shared sense of suffering itself blinds most Burmans to their own privileged position and to the discrimination and atrocities that non-Burmans disproportionately experience.” The Bamar therefore tend to downplay the suffering of the minorities, seeing themselves as equally victimized by the atrocities of the regime.

The social, religious and historical dynamics described in this chapter, such as the damaging legacy of colonialism, the pervasive influence of Buddhism, the dominant position of the Bamar, and the lasting impact of ethnic rivalries, together have created formidable barriers for the reception of the gospel among the people of Myanmar. Each of them separately poses an enormous barrier for establishing a truly indigenous church in this country. Together they reveal the daunting task awaiting the church in its calling to be a missional church in this context. This undertaking is further complicated by the internal challenges confronting the church in Myanmar, and will be explored in the next chapter.

74 Ibid., 8.

CHAPTER 2
MINISTRY CONTEXT IN MYANMAR

While Buddhism has dominated Myanmar for more than fifteen centuries, Christianity appeared only some three hundred years ago with the arrival of the Portuguese and other traders.\(^1\) Mostly confined to the foreign community, very few locals adopted the religion of these outsiders.\(^2\) Roman Catholic missionaries tried to establish themselves in Burma and expand the Christian community during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Finding themselves caught between opposing groups and factions, the missionaries often became the victims of their anger.\(^3\) Those turbulent years were


\(^2\) Wherever the Portuguese soldiers and merchants went, the priests followed their flock. Portuguese chaplains ministered to them by officiating at marriages and conducting baptisms for their children. The rich kingdom of Pegu began to attract the Portuguese from Malaya, who soon set up more trading stations in Mergui, Tavoy, Syriam and Bassein. The few Burmese who did embrace Christianity faced severe isolation and prejudice from their fellow countrymen, as is evident from this comment: “The few natives that became converts … were called Kalar, because in the opinion of the Burmese, they had embraced the religion of the Kalar and had become bona fide strangers, having lost their own nationality.” Paul A Bigandet, *An Outline of the History of the Catholic Mission from 1720 to 1887*, quoted in Kanbawza Win, “The Beginning of the Christian Mission in Burma - 1519-1813,” in *Christianity in Myanmar Conference*, ed. Kawthangvuta and Johnny Maung Latt (presented at the Christianity in Myanmar Conference, Bethany Theological Seminary, Yangon, Myanmar, 2002), 3.

\(^3\) Kam, “Christian Mission to Buddhists in Myanmar,” 52.
marked by continual struggles between the Mon in Pegu and the Burmese kingdom in Ava. Foreigners were often suspected of spying for the enemy, leading to the death of the missionaries and their followers, either through mob violence or formal execution.

Once Burma became united under King Alaungpaya the Catholic missionaries had greater freedom to move around and even to open schools across the country. By 1778 there were allegedly over three thousand Christians in Rangoon. Under his reign (1752-1760) and that of his successor Bodawpaya (1782-1819) the country attained a measure of unity and was able to minimize external threats from its neighbors. While Burma managed to remedy some of its internal divisions, it soon confronted another, external threat; the British Empire was slowly extending its rule into northeastern India, which the Burmese had until then considered as part of their sphere of influence.

**Christianity Seen as Western Import**

Although the first Protestant missionaries (particularly Adoniram and Ann Judson) had arrived in Burma in 1813, before the military engagements with the British army, their progress and setbacks were to a large extent connected with the advance of the colonial powers. In the end “Burma was carved up by the British over three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824-1826, 1852-1853 and 1885) and for much of the nineteenth century there were two competing Burma’s, a shrinking independent state in the north and an

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6 Osborne, *Southeast Asia*, 73.
expanding colonial entity in the south.” Once colonial rule had been established throughout the whole country, British rule soon began to dominate daily life. The large-scale development of rice cultivation in the Ayeyarwady delta of lower Myanmar led to increased prosperity and the migration of a large number of Karen and other minorities to this previously sparsely populated area. While the staunchly nationalistic Burmans strongly resented the foreign domination of their country, some of the minorities were much less antagonistic, possibly due to the better conditions they experienced under the British, who tended to get along better with the Karen, entrusting them with responsibilities they had never been given before. According to the historian Thant Myint-U,

many Karens came to associate British rule and their cooperation with the British with a better life and future. In the months after [King] Thibaw’s downfall, a special levy of Karen soldiers helped patrol the newly won territories, and it was Christian Karens who helped crush a sympathetic uprising in Lower Burma. From then on large numbers of Karens were recruited into the army and military police. Their relative openness to the gospel resulted in numerous conversions and the establishment of a multitude of churches both in the delta region and in the hill country. One unintended consequence of the conversion of ethnic minorities and their close interaction with the foreign missionaries was the perception among the Burmans that the

7 Charney, A History of Modern Burma, 4.
8 Ibid., 9.
10 Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps, 211.
11 Ibid., 211.
Christians had somehow sold their Burmese heritage to the foreigners.\textsuperscript{12} It is not unusual to hear Buddhist people refer to the “Three M’s” when discussing the foreign influences in Myanmar. When asked to explain, they commonly point out that “first came the merchants, who robbed our country, then came the military, who occupied our land, and on their coattails came the missionaries, who tried to undermine our religion.”\textsuperscript{13} It is therefore no exaggeration to assert that colonization has been a mixed blessing for the church. While it opened the door for missionaries to enter the country and proclaim the gospel, it also attached a foreign stigma to the Christians that continues to the present day.

\textbf{The Church as Religious Minority in Myanmar}

Despite over two hundred years of protestant mission work in Myanmar, only a small minority of the Myanmar population consider themselves Christians.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, the vast majority of Christians belong to the country’s ethnic minorities, predominantly the Karen, Kachin and Chin. In effect, Christians in Myanmar have a minority status in a double sense. First, they comprise a small religious community, and secondly, they form

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} A common saying, frequently heard when talking with Burmese (Buddhist) people, is that “one more Christian means one less Burmese.” This has become a major obstacle to the spread of Christianity among the Bamar population, who are almost exclusively Buddhist.


\textsuperscript{14} According to the 2014 population census, carried out with support from the United Nations, Christians make up 6.3\% of the population, totaling 3,172,479 people, “The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. The Union Report: Religion Census Report Volume 2-C” (Department of Population Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population Myanmar, July 2016), 3, accessed November 7, 2017, http://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNION_2-C_religion_EN_0.pdf. It should be noted that the actual number of Christians may be higher, given the negative status attached to belonging to a minority religion and the difficulty some people experience when requesting to change their religion on their ID cards.
\end{flushright}
a religious community consisting almost entirely of ethnic minority people. Bamar Buddhist ideology is closely linked with national identity and nationalist rhetoric.\(^{15}\)

Therefore, the fact that Christians belong to a religious minority places them in a vulnerable position. They often experience serious disadvantages in social, educational, and professional areas.\(^{16}\) Although Christians have generally not experienced the kind of discrimination and prejudice that has come upon the Muslim community, they are nevertheless often restricted in the kind of religious activities they are allowed to carry out.\(^{17}\) When applying for permission to build or expand a church, they often encounter significant obstacles. In rural areas churches regularly face opposition and harassment from Buddhist monks who seek to curb or restrict Christian activities in their area.\(^{18}\)

Besides a general and widespread dislike towards Christianity as a foreign religion, this

\(^{15}\) Cf. chapter 1.3 et.al.


\(^{17}\) Compared with the sometimes indiscriminate use of violence against Muslims (especially in Rakhine State, where many identify themselves as Rohingya. However, the Myanmar government does not include this group among the 135 recognized ethnic nationalities and refers to them instead as ‘Bengalis’.

perspective also reveals a disdain of Christians as members of “ethnic minority groups whom the Burmans regard as ethically inferior to them.”

Naturally, such attitudes have not contributed to the acceptance and integration of Christians in Myanmar society. Consequently, the church faces an uphill battle in its calling to manifest God’s love and proclaim his Kingdom in Myanmar. In this respect, the colonial legacy has not helped the church to win a hearing among the Bamar, as Ngun Ling observes, when he says that “the majorities (Buddhists) tend to look at the minorities especially Christians (also Muslims in some instances) with political suspicions as part of continuing neo-colonial power that would interfere in the country in many ways.” This prevalent suspicion and negative view of the Christian minority form a significant obstacle in the mission of the church to communicate its message to the Buddhist community in Myanmar.

These outside challenges are further compounded by internal hurdles, such as the attitude of Christians towards Buddhists and adherents of other religions. It is not uncommon to hear Christians expressing strongly negative feelings toward Buddhists in particular, which is not surprising given the prejudices and treatment they have faced in this Bamar-dominated society. Many Christians have suffered deeply for their faith at

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19 Ngun Ling, *Christianity Through Our Neighbours’ Eyes*, 51. “[N]o matter how widely Christianity is considered a universal religion, it is, to the Burmans, whose great civilization owes its inception to Theravada Buddhism, inferior to Buddhism.” (48)


the hands of Burmese Buddhists.\textsuperscript{22} Their intense pain simply surpasses the desire to reach out with the gospel message of reconciliation:

\begin{quote}
[A] greater number of Christians come in a massive form from the ethnic minority background and only a handful Christians come from the Burman Buddhist background. A reason for such a failure of the Christian mission works among the Burman Buddhists may have to do much with its teaching and presenting methodologies. The problem here is that the ethnic Christians are not yet theologically mature enough to be able to present the gospel message to their Buddhist neighbors in terms and thought-forms comprehensive to them.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Denominational Division an Obstacle for Witness}

Even a perfunctory survey of the Christian community in Myanmar will quickly reveal the high number of Christian organizations and institutions, often separated along ethnic and linguistic lines. The Yangon Directory for Church and Christian Ministries lists over one hundred Bible schools, seminaries, and training centers in Yangon alone, as well as over seventy orphanages, and this list is probably not exhaustive.\textsuperscript{24} Most denominations, including the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) are divided along ethnic lines into Chin, Kachin, Karen, and other groups (such as Akha, Lisu, Lahu, Mon, Tamil, Shan, and Wa).

One factor behind the proliferation of different institutions is the vast number of languages and dialects in use throughout Myanmar. While people naturally gather with others who share their language and customs, many ethnic churches in Yangon use

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\textsuperscript{22} Zam Khat Kham, “Burmese Nationalism and Christianity in Myanmar,” 96–97. Many examples can be found in Fleming, Hidden Plight, 9–20. Also Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 10.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.
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\textsuperscript{24} Salay Hta Oke, Yangon Directory for Church and Christian Ministries (Yangon: Christian Media Center, 2006).
\end{flushleft}
Burmese language in their worship, so clearly there are factors beyond language involved in these divisions. One observer attributed the abundance of small independent entities to the proliferation of foreign-funded initiatives.\textsuperscript{25} As Christians worldwide became aware of the needs in Myanmar, they stepped in to support local initiatives. Through local pastors and other Christian workers who had studied abroad, they began to finance these small-scale initiatives, such as orphanages that often cared, not for children without parents, but for children from rural families whose parents were hoping for better education options in the city. These orphanages frequently form the nucleus of newly emerging churches. These, in turn, have led to the founding of training centers, which evolved into Bible schools, usually funded by the same individuals and groups who were providing support to these enterprising pastors. Without foreign funding, many of these small entities would not have emerged, let alone survived. It is unfortunate that the genuine concern from the international Christian community has helped to foster such individualism and fragmentation.\textsuperscript{26} This has led to the establishment of many independent


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. The interviewee commented that this concern for Myanmar is not always accompanied by a requirement for accountability. In many cases the sponsors have very little control over or even insight into how their funds are used.
or semi-independent churches, sometimes loosely aligned with a denomination, but without much accountability, as the finances continue to come from foreign partners.  

Another problem is the complication arising when the original pioneer of these individual ministries dies or is no longer able to continue. When this happens, it raises questions as to who will carry on the ministry, who will own and control the property as well as other assets. One should ask critical questions, such as: “What is the purpose of these orphanages?” “Is the objective really to help children without parents, or has it become a ministry tool, a quick way to jump-start a new church, and an easy way to raise funds?” “Are the leaders supporting the children, or are the children supporting the leaders?”

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27 In Myanmar foreigners cannot buy property in their own name. It has to be bought by a local person and that local person does not hand control to the organization. Since the documents are in the individual’s name, the denomination has very little control or authority. “It’s one of the things here that I find quite a dangerous situation […] I’m not saying we should not help, but … donors should find a way to make them accountable to the things that we give them as well. Unfortunately, some people want to be accountable to their leadership but their leadership makes it difficult for them too. For example, someone might want to help this guy in a ministry, but they want the money to come through the organization. Then the organization makes it difficult [complicated] for them. So sometimes they want to donate directly.” GCZ in Ibid.

28 “For this generation it’s great. But after you die, will your son or your grandchildren continue to do what you are doing? That is a concern, when I look at all these Presbyterian, Armenian, Baptist, and Methodist buildings. Near Aung San Stadium there is a Shan construction, very nice condo. The building is on a Methodist compound. When the Methodist missionaries were in Myanmar, they felt sorry for the poor people in the congregation, so they let them live in the corner of their church property. So when the missionaries left, these people were still there. And after all these people died, their children stayed there. They kept the right to live there. They held all the documents and they all agreed and said “This is our land now.” And the government and the Methodists could not do anything. So they became very rich.” Ibid.

29 Ibid.
Theological Education in the Myanmar Context

Not long after the establishment of the first Protestant churches in Myanmar, Christian education became a focal point of mission work by the various mission societies in the country. One of the earliest educational institutions, St. John’s School, was founded in 1863 by the Anglican mission (nowadays known as The Church of the Province of Myanmar) under J.E. Marks, while Holy Cross Theological Seminary was initiated to provide theological education and pastoral training. The Myanmar Methodist Church (divided into Upper and Lower Myanmar) founded the Myanmar Theological College in Mandalay for the training of its ministers.

The Myanmar Institute of Theology (previously known as Burma Institute of Theology, and originally named Willis and Orlinda Pierce Divinity College) was established in 1927. It is the largest theological institution in Myanmar, offering several graduate programs (MTh, MACS, MDiv and MTL), as well as doctoral programs (PhD and DMin). It is governed by the Myanmar Baptist Convention, and is accredited with the Association of Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA). While education at MIT is offered in English, MICT (Myanmar Institute of Christian Theology) and KBTS (Karen Baptist Theological Seminary) use Burmese as their medium of education.

The Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (MEGST), founded

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31 Ibid., 114.


in 1996 by the Myanmar Evangelical Christian Fellowship (now called Myanmar Evangelical Christian Alliance), is the foremost evangelical theological institution, and is accredited by the ATA (Asia Theological Association). In addition to these, there are well over one hundred theological colleges and seminaries throughout Myanmar, many of which are located in and around Yangon.34

As has been observed elsewhere, this proliferation of Bible schools and training centers has had unfortunate repercussions.35 The first challenge has been a fragmentation of educational resources. The large number of training institutes has led to severe fragmentation in terms of finance, teaching staff, and library resources. Since most students are not able to pay the already modest fees, this has given rise to significant competition for sponsorships from abroad. As with the establishment of Christian orphanages,36 the need for outside funding has spawned competition in the search for donors.37 Most Bible schools count only a small number of students (often no more than 20 to 30) and no more than a few faculty members. Many small church pastors supplement their meager income by teaching part-time at one or several of these small schools. The second challenge is the low standard of education offered at these small schools.


36 The term “orphanage” is really a misnomer, as most of the children hosted in these homes have at least one parent. It would probably be better to refer to them as children’s homes or hostels.

37 According to Lal Tin Hre “some theological institutions in Myanmar are deeply dependent on external sources, on mission agencies and partners from abroad.” Lal Tin Hre & Samuel Ngun Ling, “Select Surveys on Theological Education in Emerging Asian Churches Myanmar,” 77.
establishments. The few teachers involved usually teach a large number of subjects, resulting in low quality of education and little cross-fertilization of ideas. Most Bible schools do not offer academic accreditation, as their education standards do not meet internationally accepted benchmarks.\(^{38}\) A third consequence of the widespread fragmentation is the limited availability of theological resources. Most libraries have only a limited selection of standard theological resources, and students often do not learn how to use these effectively.\(^{39}\) Internet access is very limited or non-existent, and students are not taught how to use electronic research resources.\(^{40}\) Fourthly, this fragmentation has often led to inadequate teaching methodologies. As discussed earlier on,\(^{41}\) education in Myanmar has traditionally been based on learning by rote at the Buddhist monasteries. As Ngun Ling explains, this method focuses on acquiring knowledge by memorization, and still is the predominant teaching style in basic education.

Myanmar education and its teaching methodologies had been strongly influenced for centuries by traditional Buddhist monastery teaching method known in Burmese as *kyet-thu-yueh sa-an* meaning parrot learning method. This method is apparently monk’s recital teaching method - a method of teaching in which pupils made oral response to or recitation of exactly what the monks or teachers taught or said. This kind of teaching methodologies represents, in a sense, the

\(^{38}\) Only two institutions are accredited by ATA (MEGST & BTS, cf. www.ataasia.com) and ATESEA recognizes the degrees from 18 affiliated colleges (cf. www.atesea.com).


\(^{40}\) “Lack of theological resources such as library and human resources including other technical materials is on of the major setbacks in promoting quality theological education in Myanmar. Most libraries of seminaries, theological colleges and Bible schools in Myanmar are not fully equipped with adequate number of books in all theological disciplines”, according to Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, 127.

\(^{41}\) See chapter 1.
monologue-style of teacher-student relationship in education. In this method, pupils have no right to question but recite only the words, which the monks uttered to them. Either making a critical response or raising any question to the monk may mean to him insult or disrespect. Hence students who do not submit to this Buddhist culture may be taken [sic] a certain action against them.42

As these monastic education methodologies have largely been carried over into theological education, it has led to teachers using “depository or banking methods rather than participatory methods in their teachings of theology. The net result is that traditional teaching methods do not seem to help students learn and understand critically and creatively of what have [sic] been taught.”43 Finally, another weakness observed in theological education in Myanmar is a lack of contextualization. As a result of the high dependence on support from abroad, many theological institutions have simply replicated the standard curricula and teaching subjects from the donor countries or contexts.44 In many cases this has led to indiscriminate importation of Western theologies, without much regard for the indigenous context and challenges.45 Ngun Ling, advocating for a more critical level of contextualization, observes that

not only the Baptists but also other Protestant Christians in Myanmar still follow verbatim the teachings of their Western missionaries. In fact, theological thinking that has prevailed among theological institutions run by more conservative churches have been and still are biblical-oriented and confessional, minimizing

42 Ibid., 126.

43 Ngun Ling, Communicating Christ in Myanmar, 126–127.

44 Ganzevoort, “Myanmar Experiences”, 12.

45 Lal Tin Hre charges evangelical and fundamentalist schools of being particularly guilty of this practice, Lal Tin Hre & Samuel Ngun Ling, “Select Surveys on Theological Education in Emerging Asian Churches Myanmar,” 77.
relevance of the Christian message (the Word) changing socio-politico-economic and religious cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{46}
While not necessarily subscribing to the author’s understanding of contextualization, attention should be given to his observation that theological education in Myanmar needs to become more relevant and appropriate to the Myanmar context. Such a change in the approach to theological training may in turn lead to a more comprehensive transformation of the way the church in Myanmar reaches out beyond its boundaries.

\textbf{The Church and the Challenge of Reconciliation}

Ever since gaining independence from British rule, and most likely for many years before then, Myanmar has been plagued by internal strife. Despite seventy years since independence, Myanmar is still experiencing armed conflict with several ethnic armed organizations (EAO), especially in the North and Northeast of the country.\textsuperscript{47} The roots of these conflicts have variously been identified as ethnic, religious, and as an identity issue. Mikael Gravers suggests that the conflict is not primarily ethnic, but a prolonged post-colonial conflict between the military seeking to maintain the unity of the nation and minorities fighting for ethnic autonomy.\textsuperscript{48} Elsewhere however, he acknowledges that frictions over ethnic identity and nationalism have also been major drivers of the hostility, challenging the unity and harmony in the country:

\textsuperscript{46} Ngun Ling, \textit{Christianity Through Our Neighbours’ Eyes}, 190. Furthermore, “such imported forms of Western theological education have gradually dominated post-missionary theological education in Myanmar, weakening their connection with the practical, pastoral, and missiological concerns of local churches and also with new challenges of the contexts.” Ibid., 190.

\textsuperscript{47} Cho Cho Myaing, “Forgiveness Toward National Reconciliation in Myanmar From Christian Perspective” (MDiv Thesis, Myanmar Institute of Theology, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2013), 51.

\textsuperscript{48} Cf. Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 8.
Ethnicity is one of the main ingredients and sources of cultural and political identification in the present world order. Ethnicity in its present forms is closely related to the modern development of nation states. However, it is also considered a source of conflicts and violence and one could often wish the ethnicity would altogether disappear from the political agenda, for example in Burma/Myanmar, a country long mired in ethno-nationalism and related conflicts and violence.49

In some ways these struggles for stronger ethnic autonomy are connected with the campaign to restore democracy to the country, which has sometimes overshadowed the cause of the ethnic minorities, especially in recent years.50 Furthermore, religion is also considered an important dimension of the conflicts in Myanmar. Mikael Gravers alleges that under the military-aligned SPDC many Christian churches were closed when Buddhist people converted to Christianity. Also, Burmese troops have regularly demolished Christian crosses in Chin State and elsewhere. Muslims encounter widespread discrimination and violence, as mosques have been attacked and burned by

49 Ibid., 2: "Ethnicity is [...] an important source of self-identification, solidarity and empowerment in terms of belonging to a community and to a common culture and history - a source reinforced by migration and displacement."

Buddhist mobs.⁵¹ Others maintain that religious conflict, although important, is not the most significant issue.⁵²

Summarizing the conviction of many ethnic people in Myanmar, Cho Cho Myaing refers to David Steinberg’s observations on the issues dividing the majority Bamar people from the other ethnic groups, noting that the Burman people are prejudiced against the minorities and consider them to be less civilized.⁵³ According to Steinberg, the coercive power of the state is in the hands of the Burman leadership and through their overwhelming dominance in the state and the military apparatus, the Burman leadership has used its power to further erode and reduce the autonomy of the minorities.⁵⁴ Furthermore, although some autonomy for the minorities was retained during colonial rule and further promises were made under the first constitution (and the Panglong agreement), this has never been fulfilled.⁵⁵ Another grievance relates to the fact that the profits from exploitation of natural resources in minority areas have not been adequately

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⁵¹ Gravers, Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 10.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
⁵⁵ Ibid.
shared and the minorities have been deprived of economic development. Finally, Steinberg alleges that the minorities have been denied the right of education in their native language.\textsuperscript{56}

Without speculating about which is most relevant factor in the ongoing climate of conflict in the country, it is abundantly clear that Myanmar society continues to be highly polarized and fragmented. This is not the place to undertake a major investigation into the various causes and backgrounds of the frictions in Myanmar society. The aim here is to consider the Church’s place and responsibility in this ongoing tragedy.

In this regard it may be illuminative to compare conditions in Myanmar with the situation in Malaysia. Peter Rowan, in his dissertation “Proclaiming the Peacemaker - The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society”, examines the role the Malaysian Church may play in overcoming the divisions in that society.\textsuperscript{57} While there are significant differences in the religious, political and social circumstances of the two countries, there are also some remarkable similarities. Referring to events surrounding the Japanese invasion of Malaysia during the Second World War, Rowan observes that the occupying Japanese gave preferential treatment to the majority population, while the minorities resisted the new imperial conquerors. He notes that, while mistreating the Chinese, the Japanese embraced a more pro-Malay stance, causing


\textsuperscript{57} Peter A. Rowan, “Proclaiming the Peacemaker: The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society” (PhD diss., Open University, All Nations Christian College, 2010).
the Chinese to deeply resent the Malays.\textsuperscript{58} Similarly, in Myanmar the independence movement, led by Aung San, welcomed the Japanese as liberators from the British colonial administration, while most of the other ethnic groups opposed and resisted the occupation by the Japanese forces.\textsuperscript{59} The opposing stances of these various ethnic groups in Myanmar were symptomatic of the hostility that has marked inter-ethnic relations until now. Likewise, the identity of Malay Muslims is inextricably linked with Islam as their religion, in the same way that many in Myanmar consider Buddhism the axiomatic identity marker for the Bamar.\textsuperscript{60}

A major portion of Rowan’s research addresses the issue of how Christians can be faithful followers of Jesus, while at the same time being loyal citizens in a majority Muslim country. He asks:

What role has the church played in working towards a united Malaysian community? How do Malaysian Christians approach the question of national identity? Given the social plurality of religions in its society, how can the church in Malaysia be committed both to the proclamation of the gospel and to being an agent for reconciliation in a divided country?\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 110. This is very similar to what occurred in Myanmar, where the independence movement, led by General Aung San, welcomed the Japanese as liberators from the British colonial administration, while some of the other ethnic groups opposed and resisted the occupation by the Japanese forces.

\textsuperscript{59} This point has also been made by Matthew Walton in “The ‘Wages of Burman-Ness’: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar: Journal of Contemporary Asia: Vol 43, No 1,” p.8.

\textsuperscript{60} Rowan points to “the inextricable bond made in Malaysia's Constitution between Malay ethnicity and Islam, so that to be Malay is to be Muslim. This is enshrined in Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of 1957: ‘Malay is a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom …’” Ibid., 122.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 74.
He identifies three challenges for the churches in Malaysia: To start with, Christian churches are generally associated with the colonial past. Rowan points to the serious consequences of churches continuing to "cling on to patterns of Western or other non-indigenous forms of Christianity."\(^{62}\) Secondly, Christian churches feel threatened by the steady process of Islamization. Rowan presents a list of restrictions on Christian activities, which closely parallels the conditions in Buddhist Myanmar.\(^{63}\) Thirdly, the Christian church in Malaysia exists as a multi-ethnic community in a divided society. Rowan encourages the church to cultivate constructive relations with other ethnic groups, building trust relationships with followers of other religions, and demonstrating sensitivity in carrying out Christian evangelism and mission.\(^{64}\) He quotes Robert Hunt, who claims that “the Christian community is the only community in Malaysia that has no single dominant ethnic component, and which embraces all ethnic groups.”\(^{65}\) However, Rowan concedes that while the Malaysian church does bridge the ethnic divides, many churches are actually segregated, both locally as well as in their denominational structures.\(^{66}\)

Fundamentally then, Christians in Malaysia face a monumental challenge:

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 132.


\(^{64}\) Rowan, “Proclaiming the Peacemaker,” 137.


\(^{66}\) Rowan, “Proclaiming the Peacemaker,” 137.
Even though the Malaysian church as a whole is inclusive of all ethnic groups, the segregation noted above suggests that ethnic identity is emphasised over and above membership of the global body of Christ. If this is indeed the case, it is certainly understandable in the light of Malay nationalism and the accompanying chauvinistic policies of the last forty years. In such a context non-Malay ethnic groups seek to strengthen their own cultural identity, each fearful of the dilution of their own ethnic distinctives.67

Despite the obvious differences, the Christian community in Myanmar shares many of the challenges identified in Malaysia. The association of the church with the colonial administration, the pressure of “Burmanization” on the Christian community, and the ethnic diversity of the church in a divided society, these have all been factors affecting the position and conditions facing the church in Myanmar. As in Malaysia, the Christian community needs to consider what role the church has played in working towards a united society in Myanmar, and how Myanmar Christians approach the question of national identity. Given the social plurality of religions in its society, how can the church in Myanmar be committed both to the proclamation of the gospel and to being an agent for reconciliation in a divided country? These questions will be more fully explored in chapter 4 (Theological Reflection on the Church in a Pluralistic Society), but here we will briefly consider how the church has addressed this issue thus far.

As has been pointed out before,68 the church in Myanmar faces two kinds of division. First, it is experiencing internal division along ethnic and denominational lines, and secondly, it is confronted by the larger separation between the different religions and

67 Ibid., 138.

68 Cf. "The Church as a Religious Minority in Myanmar" (Chapter 2).
ethnicities nationally. In order to engage the schisms in society-at-large, the church will first need to address its own divisions and partitions.

When surveying the Christian community in Myanmar, it does not take long to note the high number of Christian organizations and institutions, often separated along ethnic and linguistic lines. There are hundreds of Bible schools, seminaries, and training centers and numerous orphanages across Myanmar.\textsuperscript{69} The largest protestant denomination, the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC), is divided along ethnic lines and most other churches (including non-denominational ones) also tend to attract members mostly from one particular ethnic group, whether or not this is reflected in the church name. Instead of demonstrating the heterogeneity of churches in this country, however, this diversity expresses their stratification, which has resulted in separating and isolating various ethnicities and faith traditions from one another. While it is undoubtedly easier for people from similar backgrounds to come together and build faith communities, there is beauty and fragrance in seeing individuals and groups from different cultures and ethnicities meeting together to worship the One God and Creator of all humankind.\textsuperscript{70}

The second issue concerns the separation, at times spilling over into antagonism, between the different ethnicities in society.\textsuperscript{71} As the church is largely partitioned along ethnic lines, this also has an impact on how Christians relate to those from other ethnic

\textsuperscript{69} Salay Hta Oke, Yangon Directory for Church and Christian Ministries.

\textsuperscript{70} The biblical and theological imperatives for this kind of spiritual unity will be further explored in chapter 4. Suffice it here to note the powerful message that is communicated by the spiritual unity of God’s people, as also attested by the Lord Jesus in John 13:35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

\textsuperscript{71} Cf. chapter 1, Problematic Inter-ethnic Relations.
groups. The problematic nature of inter-ethnic relations therefore has serious ramifications for the missional role of the church.

Decades of ethnic strife have created an atmosphere of mistrust, bitterness, and alienation toward the dominant Bamar Buddhists. Their nationalist ideology, combined with religious supremacy, has left many Christians feeling betrayed and marginalized. Among Karen and Kachin believers in particular, many have strong feelings of bitterness toward the Bamar ethnic majority. This strong resentment has created major obstacles for Christians to have a significant missional impact among their Buddhist fellow citizens. In the words of a Myanmar church pastor, “we need to acknowledge that these people need the Gospel, and we need to love them. But it took a long time for me to love them. I was honestly thinking, oh they don’t go to heaven, praise the Lord! A lot of people are thinking that way.”

Another pastor recounted hearing a Karen Christian announce, “When I go to heaven, I will look around, and if I find any Bamar people there, I prefer to go to hell.” Obviously, reconciliation — not only with God, but also

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73 Ibid., 243.
75 From an interview with a Myanmar church pastor. GCZ, “Interview on Christian Witness in Buddhist Myanmar.” Also, this person said: “There is a long history of mistrust. I think, as a Christian, before we share even the gospel with them, maybe it will be good for us to think do we really love these people, do we really want them to come to know the Lord? In spite of all the mistrust and misunderstanding. Because the Myanmar people probably look down on these minority groups - the way we live, the way we are and other things. […] For Kachin or Chin or Karen people once you become their friends, you are a friend forever. So these are the things that we, the minorities, think about Myanmar people. And once they become Christians, maybe we did not really know the true them.”
76 JMB, “Interview on Christian Witness in Buddhist Myanmar.”
with one another — is deeply needed, even among Christians. This issue will therefore be taken up in chapter 4, which will reflect on the role of the church in a pluralist society.
PART TWO:
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine how various authors understand the basic nature of the church and what can be learned from these observations. Next, it will consider the mission of the church and its implications. Finally, it will explore how the church should function in a pluralistic world.

The Essence of The Church

_The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church_
by Kendell Easley and Christopher Morgan

Easley and Morgan, editors of _The Community of Jesus_, refer to this volume as a “biblical, historical, systematic, missional journey” into the significance of the church.¹ According to the authors, the church is a community consisting of redeemed members (both Jew and Gentile; cf. Eph. 2:11–22) with a centrifugal and centripetal mission. The church has a missional calling, both when gathered and when scattered.² In describing the


² Ibid., loc. 5653.
nature of the church, they note that “[t]he multinational nature of God’s kingdom proclaims to the world that the God of Israel is not a tribal deity. He is the Creator, King, and Savior of the nations, and we will not know him in his full splendor until we know him as the King of the nations.”

3 The first half of the book covers the biblical foundations of the church. The final four chapters build on this biblical core, connecting the theology of the church to church history, salvation history, God’s glory, and God’s mission.

The Old Testament describes God’s people as those who are on a journey with Him. They respond to his call to faith through repentance and obedience, forming a kingdom of priests for God and for the world. 4 They are his people because God seeks, redeems, and gathers them. 5 As they gather, they form a visible community, demonstrating his greatness to the nations. In 2 Samuel 7:1–29, David’s family is given a central role in God’s redemptive plan, while Isaiah anticipates David’s heir and ultimately a new creation for his people gathered from among the nations (Isa 11:1–16; 65:17–66:24), as does 2 Cor 4:16–18 and Rev 21:1–8. These passages show that the Old Testament people of God are one with his people in the New Testament and do not reveal an Israel versus the church dichotomy. 6

Turning to the New Testament, the Gospel writers present the Messiah and his kingdom, introducing a new messianic community, commissioned for the Messiah’s

3 Ibid., loc. 5657.

4 Ibid., loc. 755.

5 Ibid., loc. 330.

6 Ibid., loc. 670.
mission. This community will extend beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel to include the Gentiles. The mission of the Messiah will be carried out by his disciples in the power of the Holy Spirit (John 17:18; 20:21; see Luke 24:49; John 14:15–17; 16:7–11). This ministry will extend to all nations (Matt 28:19; see Gen 12:1–3). Acts (the birth of the church) and Revelation (its consummation) reveal that we are the people of God, the church of God, the servants of God, and the kingdom of God.\(^7\) Paul’s epistles deal with leadership structures in the church, its worship and other practices. His writings make it clear that “the church exists not merely for itself but as a manifestation of God’s grace in and for the world.”\(^8\)

In the General Epistles the church is consistently portrayed as the restored Israel, the new people of God (e.g. Heb. 12: 22–24). Believers are God’s children and are thus brothers and sisters, making the church a family characterized by love.\(^9\) In Hebrews the church is “the renewed Israel, heir of the promises of God rooted in Christ, set apart to him and holy, persevering in this world with an eschatological hope as it draws near to God.”\(^10\) In the Epistle of James the church is the renewed Israel, a worshipping family created by God to care for one another and to help one another to persevere.\(^11\) In 1 Peter it is the new people of God, a loving family, rooted in Christ, distinct from the world,

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\(^7\) Ibid., loc. 2280.

\(^8\) Ibid., loc. 2762.

\(^9\) Ibid., loc. 3372.

\(^10\) Ibid., loc. 3022.

\(^11\) Ibid., loc. 3085.
living in light of a future hope. In 2 Peter and Jude the church is the “set apart people of God, a family gathering regularly for a love meal and building one another up through prayer in the Holy Spirit and Scripture,”\textsuperscript{12} defending the faith, holding fast and awaiting the return of Christ. The church in John’s epistles is striving to be a loving family united by God’s love, pursuing holiness and proclaiming Christ until he comes.

Looking at the church through the centuries, it is not difficult to observe that often times, historical events, rather than theology, have influenced and directed its development.\textsuperscript{13} The growing influence of the church facilitated its institutionalization, together with the expanding role of the clergy.\textsuperscript{14} The schism with the church of the East was precipitated by the demise of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{15} Even the Protestant Reformation did not originate from or result in a rethinking of the essence of the church, as most attention went to conflicts over soteriology and the role of the clergy.\textsuperscript{16} The trend towards individualism from the Enlightenment era until now has been a more powerful driving factor in the emergence of new religious movements than any ecclesiological consideration or evaluation.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, “the past highlights the inclination of Christian

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., loc. 3294.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., loc. 3606.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., loc. 3618-3717.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., loc. 3719-3818.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., loc. 3832-3845.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., loc. 3974-3999.
\end{flushright}
movements and denominations to absorb cultural influences into their ecclesiology. Institutional realities sometimes override scriptural principles in church life.”\textsuperscript{18}

Turning to theology, the author declares that “[t]o understand the identity and nature of the church, we must view her in light of Jesus’ person and work. For it is in Messiah Jesus that all the biblical covenants reach their fulfilment.”\textsuperscript{19} The church is the new covenant community, and as such it represents the one people of God throughout the ages. The church exists to display God’s glory, through our union with Christ and with one another, based on our reconciliation through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The final chapter focuses on God’s mission which provides the “impetus, framework, and trajectory for the church’s mission to glorify God among the nations.”\textsuperscript{20} The church does this by proclaiming the good news of God who redeems a people for himself. To understand the mission of the church, we need to recognize that it starts with God’s mission. This mission begins with God as Creator, who forms man and woman in his image and intends them to live in relationship with God, with one another, with God’s creation, and with themselves. However, the fall results in the need for redemption, which is accomplished by Christ and proclaimed by the church, his missional people:

Articulated through the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, God’s mission is to glorify himself by redeeming his image bearers and renewing his good creation, restoring them both to their intended shalom. God’s mission provides the impetus, the framework, and the trajectory for the church’s mission: to glorify God among the nations by proclaiming and

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., loc. 3997.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., loc. 4605.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., loc. 5293.
promoting the good news that God is redeeming a people for himself and bringing all things under his good rule.\textsuperscript{21}

Although not every author in this book focuses on the essence of the church, several conclusions can be drawn from this work. First, the basic continuity of God’s engagement with humankind accentuates the unity of God’s people throughout the Old and New Testaments. Secondly, God’s plan of redemption includes not only the Jewish people, but encompasses all tribes, races, peoples and nations. This is what makes the church truly universal, both in scope and in composition. Thirdly, while the church does not replace Israel, it does constitute the fulfilment of God’s design to create “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Peter 2:9).\textsuperscript{22} Finally, the church exists to glorify God among the nations by “proclaiming and promoting the good news that God is redeeming a people for himself and bringing all things under his good rule.”\textsuperscript{23}

While the universality of the church is asserted in several essays, there is only scant discussion of the implications of the all-inclusive nature of God’s people. Particularly in an age in which racial and ethnic tensions and divisions are more relevant than ever, it would have been helpful to confront this issue, which will be addressed in the following chapter. The Bible has much to say on the topic of managing diversity and

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., loc. 5671.

\textsuperscript{22} Throughout this paper, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise noted.

\textsuperscript{23} Easley and Morgan, \textit{The Community of Jesus}, loc. 5671.
overcoming discrimination within the community of faith, and the church is called to
demonstrate this reconciliation both within its community and toward the world.

*The Essence of The Church* by Craig Van Gelder

“The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does.”

These three short phrases, according to Craig Van Gelder, describe the essence of the
church and point to its nature, ministry and organization. Rather than defining the church
in a functional way (in terms of its activities - what the church does) or in an
organizational way (in terms of its structures - how the church is organized), Van Gelder
suggests looking at what it means “to be the church.” He argues that it is critical to
“consider the *nature* of the church before proceeding to define its *ministry* and
organization.”

Starting from a theological perspective, Van Gelder advocates a
missional understanding of the church. According to this view, mission is not merely a
function of the church, but rather points to its “essential nature.” He thus argues for a
“missional ecclesiology” that understands the church as a “living community of God’s
people” as well as a “historical institution”, while at the same time grounding mission in

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24 Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand

25 Ibid., 24.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 31. “Church and mission need to be merged into a common concept. Ecclesiology and
missiology are not separate theological disciplines, but are, in fact, interrelated and complementary.”
the “redemptive reign of the Triune God in all creation.”\textsuperscript{28} This is an important statement in that it affirms that the origin of mission is not in the church, but in God himself.

After a chapter dealing with historical developments, in which Van Gelder traces the understanding of the nature of the church throughout history, he turns to biblical perspectives on the church. He then puts forward one of his main propositions, namely that “[t]he redemptive reign of God must serve as the foundation for defining the nature, ministry, and organization of the church.”\textsuperscript{29} In fact, he goes as far as to assert that misunderstanding the relationship between God’s kingdom and the church is central to many of the problems facing the church today.\textsuperscript{30} This reveals one of his main concerns in this book, which is not primarily a theological concern, but a practical one. Van Gelder sees the church as God’s community confronting the power of evil through his Spirit. Through its missionary nature, it takes part in establishing God’s redemptive reign in this world. One should keep in mind, though, according to Van Gelder, that God’s reign is not defined by the church; instead the role of the church is determined by God’s reign.\textsuperscript{31}

Central in our understanding of church and mission is God’s trinitarian nature, or in his own words, “[t]he church is a relational community because God is a relational God.”\textsuperscript{32} One could say the Father’s plan is that through creation, re-creation, and consummation,

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 96.
the Son accomplishes the purposes and plans of the Father, while the Spirit implements the Father’s plan and the Son’s work.\textsuperscript{33}

Next, Van Gelder examines the nature of the church. Drawing primarily from the book of Acts he concludes “the church is a social community, a community made up of people who are reconciled with God and one another.”\textsuperscript{34} Then, returning to the historical descriptions of the church, he argues that it is not just holy, but also human (it is spiritual as well as social), it is both catholic and local (universal and contextual); the church is both one and many (unified while at the same time diverse); and it is apostolic in the sense that it is not only foundational but also missionary (authoritative and sent).\textsuperscript{35}

Moving to the ministry of the church, Van Gelder advocates making God’s mission in the world our starting point, keeping in mind the communal nature of salvation.\textsuperscript{36} God not only commits to a relationship with his people, he intends to work through his people to bring salvation to the world, and thus the church is a “sign, foretaste, and instrument to invite all humanity and all creation to come to know fully the living and true God.”\textsuperscript{37} Stressing the corporate nature of the church, Van Gelder recommends emphasizing corporate spiritual formation rather than focusing on the individual. He identifies the following core ministry functions: worship (viewed as

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 116–126.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 139.
central activity), discipling, fellowshipping, serving, witness, visioning and stewarding. All of these are rooted in the nature of the church.

The final chapter examines the organization of the church, as it provides the framework for its ministry. The structures of the church should be based on biblical foundations, building on historical developments, and reflecting contextual realities. According to Van Gelder, the New Testament shows that local missional congregations were complemented by mobile missional structures, e.g. apostolic leaders, mobile teams and at-large leaders, such as Philip, Apollos, and Priscilla and Aquila. These mobile structures, although often operating autonomously, were still connected with and accountable to local congregations. When a conflict arose, the issue was addressed by a shared assembly (cf. Acts 15), and the outcome based on foundational beliefs and a shared contextual decision. While local missional congregations live out God’s redemptive purposes in specific contexts, mobile missional structures carry God’s redemptive message to new areas. Both are necessary and require Spirit-filled leadership, which is described not only in terms of authority, but also as service, or ministry (diaconia).

One valuable contribution of Van Gelder’s book is the assertion that the church does not exist in and for itself. Rather, it serves to bear witness to God’s redemptive reign

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38 Ibid., 159.
39 Ibid., 171.
40 Ibid., 177.
41 Ibid., 182.
in the world. As such, the church has both local and universal significance, enduring as well as dynamic structures, both inward and outward ministries. Another point brought out by Van Gelder is the relational nature of God, and thus of the church. Salvation not only brings humankind back into fellowship with God, it also brings reconciliation to human relationships. As the title of the book indicates, Van Gelder focuses on the essence of the church. While he describes both the ministry and the organization of the church, his treatment of these topics in the final chapters remains somewhat superficial, thereby limiting the practical usefulness of this book in facilitating a thorough discussion of the church’s nature, ministry and organization.

For the purpose of this paper, Van Gelder’s work provides valuable insights regarding the church as a reconciled and reconciling community of God’s people. Also, his depiction of the church as “sign, foretaste and instrument” of God’s coming reign highlights the need to emphasize spiritual formation as a corporate, rather than individual, obligation. This emphasis points to the need for the church to be both upward- and outward-focused, instead of just inward. While these are valuable observations, Van Gelder unfortunately offers few concrete ways to apply these principles in the day-to-day life of the church.

**The Mission of the Church**

*Transforming Mission* by David Bosch

This *magnum opus* by David Bosch has been recognized as a milestone in missiological studies and is widely acclaimed for its comprehensive scope and depth. Bosch points out that the old paradigms of mission, referring to the sending out of
missionaries and their activities or the agencies that sent them, are no longer valid.⁴² This ‘crisis’ in mission was caused by the fundamental changes that have swept the world since the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, Bosch maintains that “Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very reason d’être.”⁴³ Mission is rooted in God and his relationship, first with the people of Israel and subsequently with God’s people from all nations through faith in Christ Jesus. According to him, evangelism as the proclamation of salvation through Jesus is an essential dimension of mission.⁴⁴

Turning to the Bible, Bosch argues that mission in the traditional sense is not particularly prominent in the Old Testament.⁴⁵ Therefore he quickly moves to mission in the New Testament. The first change noticeable in the Gospels is Jesus’s inclusiveness. He not only reaches out to the marginalized, the downtrodden, the outcasts, but He also displays a remarkably positive attitude towards some non-Jews, such as the centurion from Capernaum and the Canaanite woman (Mt 8:10; 15:28). A second important feature is Jesus’s announcement of God’s kingdom or reign, both as future and present reality.⁴⁶ Thirdly, Jesus’s ministry was deeply intertwined with his disciples, who were called to be with him, to follow him, and to be sent out by him. Thus, discipleship and mission belong

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⁴³ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 18. While Israel is at the center of attention, “[t]here is an ambivalent attitude toward the other nations in the Old Testament.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.
together and cannot be separated. After Pentecost, as Jesus’s followers began to spread out – either voluntarily or because of persecution – new communities started to develop that were neither Jewish nor Gentile, but comprised both. These heterogeneous communities were a living manifestation of the one body of Christ established by his death on the Cross (Eph 2:14-16). Bosch observes that it sadly did not take long for the church to abandon its initial aspirations. In the struggle for survival, its missionary calling was often superseded by a tendency to separate itself from others. In addition, the church “ceased to be a movement and turned into an institution.”

Examining selected New Testament writers, Bosch concludes that for Matthew:

Christians find their true identity when they are involved in mission, in communicating to others a new way of life, a new interpretation of reality and of God, and in committing themselves to the liberation and salvation of others. A missionary community is one that understands itself as being both different from and committed to its environment; it exists within its context in a way that is both winsome and challenging.

This missional vitality is what made the early church such a dynamic movement that both conquered and transformed the first century world around the Mediterranean.

A similar posture is found in Luke, where the church has both an inward and an outward orientation. Just like Jesus has made peace between Jew and Gentile, now his

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47 Ibid., 39.
48 Ibid., 45–47.
49 Ibid., 51.
50 Ibid., 84.
51 Ibid., 96.
followers are sent into the world to be peace-makers.  

Paul’s writings further elaborate this idea by emphasizing that Christians find their identity in Jesus rather than in their particular race, culture, social class or sex.  

In the next section Bosch turns his attention to understandings of Christian mission throughout history. He describes how the church – as it tried to determine its identity in a Hellenistic world – gradually and increasingly aligned itself with Greek philosophy and thought.  

Nevertheless, Christians often distinguished themselves first and foremost by their conduct, revealing a higher morality than the surrounding society.  

During the medieval period the Church in Western Europe shared authority with the State. This routinely led to the forced conversion of non-Christian peoples subjugated by Christian rulers, a practice which eventually extended to the Christianization of the areas colonized by Spain and Portugal, the two principal Christian nations.  

At the same time a more benevolent missionary endeavor took place through the monastic movements spreading throughout the European continent.  

Moving to the Reformation period, Bosch outlines the main tenets of Reformed theology and discusses its impact on missionary thought and activity. It could be argued that the Reformation emphasis on the sovereignty of God tended to stifle any interest in,
or motivation for, missionary engagement. In addition, the Protestant continuing belief in
the connection between church and state resulted in a limited scope for missionary
activity. Furthermore, internal rivalry among the various branches of the Reformation
meant that little energy was left for outward initiatives.\textsuperscript{58} It was through the influence
first of Pietism, and the Second Reformation and Puritanism next, that Protestants began
to give more thought to the importance of the missionary mandate.\textsuperscript{59} These movements
would later have a profound impact on the missionary efforts in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries.

Although the nineteenth century has been called the great missionary century, the
Protestant missionary revival actually started earlier, in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{60} While in
some ways a response to the Enlightenment sweeping Europe in the preceding period, it
nevertheless also carried many Enlightenment characteristics. Without claiming to be
exhaustive, Bosch highlights a number of these, such as 1) an emphasis on the Glory of
God as missionary motive, 2) a constraint to reach out because of Jesus’s love for every
human being, 3) an often unacknowledged (or even unconscious) ethnocentrism on the
part of the missionary, 4) the notion of manifest destiny, originating in the Enlightenment
idea of Western superiority, 5) the protection and support received from colonial

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 249. Bosch references Ursinus who argued that “obstacles to the conversion of pagans are
insurmountable and the task is impossible; God has already made himself known to all nations, in various
ways; the “Great Commission” was for the apostles only and it is presumptuous on our part to arrogate it to
ourselves; the pagan nations are, in addition, impervious to the gospel since many of them are savages who
have absolutely nothing human about them.”

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 262. E.g. Voetius advocated the conversion of the Gentiles and the planting of churches as
demonstrations of divine glory and grace.

\textsuperscript{60} Philip Jenkins, \textit{The next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity} (New York: Oxford
University Pres, 2002), 52.
powers,\(^6\) 6) a powerful eschatological motive for mission, whether Pre-, Post-, or Amillennial, 7) the emergence of para-church missionary societies, 8) a pragmatic, utilitarian disposition, emanating from an optimistic view of the future, and 9) an emphasis on the Great Commission (Mat 28:18-19) as biblical mandate for mission.\(^6\)

Overall, Bosch has a mixed view of this period, concluding that “[t]he entire Western missionary movement of the past three centuries emerged from the matrix of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, it spawned an attitude of tolerance to all people and a relativistic attitude toward belief of any kind; on the other, it gave birth to Western superiority feelings and prejudice.”\(^6\) While tolerance toward others is surely to be applauded, there are probably more positive things to say about the accomplishments of missionary efforts during this era than Bosch acknowledges. Furthermore, one might ask whether a relativistic attitude toward belief of any kind is be something to be commended.

The cataclysms caused by two World Wars and the end of centuries of colonialism prompt Bosch to identify one more ‘paradigm shift in mission.’ He points to how the Enlightenment rationalism and notion of continual progress gave way to the relativism and subjectivism of postmodern thinking.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 312. This led to the allegation that missionaries belonged to the three C’s of colonialism: Christianity, commerce and civilization, in Myanmar better known as the three M’s: military, merchants and missionaries.

\(^6\) Ibid., 292–349.

\(^6\) Ibid., 352.

\(^6\) Ibid., 360–66.
mission have been immense: in many countries, missionaries are no longer welcome. Even when they are still welcome, their role is more circumscribed and limited than before.\textsuperscript{65} Having carefully analyzed the many dimensions of mission throughout Scripture and across history, Bosch endeavors to synthesize its various understandings in the present. Even though the composite picture turns out both complex and often contradictory, he attempts to tie together some common strands.

First, mission and church are not subordinate to one another; instead, both are part of the missio Dei, and “the church changes from being the sender to being the one sent” for the sake of others.\textsuperscript{66} In this paradigm, “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God […] It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church […] There is church because there is mission.”\textsuperscript{67} Second, salvation should be seen in a holistic sense, encompassing the individual as well as the community, soul and body, both present and future.\textsuperscript{68} Third, mission in this age must include both evangelism and social transformation.\textsuperscript{69} Fourth, evangelism is integral to mission; it is a distinct part, but not separate from mission. It means “enlisting people for the reign of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[65] Ibid., 373. “It has become clear that the missionary is not central to the life and the future of the younger churches; in country after country (and especially in China) it has been demonstrated that the missionary is not only not central, but may in fact be an embarrassment and a liability.”
\item[66] Ibid., 379.
\item[68] Ibid., 409–10.
\item[69] Ibid., 417.
\end{footnotes}
God, liberating them from themselves, their sins, and their entanglements, so that they will be free for God and neighbor.”

Evangelism, according to David Bosch, includes many different aspects, from being set free from the world and its powers, to embracing Christ as Savior and Lord, participating with the church in the ministry of reconciliation, peace and justice, and submitting to the rule of Christ over all things. Fifth, while rejecting the excesses of Marxism-inspired liberation theology, Bosch nevertheless acknowledges the legitimate contemporary theologies that seek to address widespread social inequality and injustice. Sixth, he argues for the need for unity in mission, or as he says “mission in unity,” where ministry is carried out not only by the clergy, but by the whole church, including the laity. Seventh, the existence of other religions necessitates dialogue, which must be done in an attitude of humility; it is, however, not a substitute for mission. Eighth, mission should be the theme of all theology, because just as “the church ceases to be the church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses it missionary character.” Ninth, there is a complicated relationship between mission and eschatology. Quoting William Manson, Bosch argues that we need “an eschatology for mission which is both future-directed and oriented to the here and

70 Ibid., 428.
71 Ibid., 430.
72 Ibid., 453–56.
73 Ibid., 474.
74 Ibid., 506.
now.”  

It must hold together the already and the not yet; the future Kingdom that has already come and the old world order that has not yet ended.

The concluding chapter of this book seeks to bring the different aspects of mission together in a comprehensive manner, encompassing “witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more.” While incorporating all these elements in a definition may prevent a one-sided or distorted view of mission, Bosch himself may have succumbed to Stephen Neil’s adage, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.” In his effort to be balanced and inclusive, Bosch may have fallen in the opposite direction, trying to please everyone and thereby satisfying none.

His six-fold “faces of the church in mission” may be a more helpful proposition, it does not try to include every possible “missional” activity in a definition of mission, but rather looks at mission through the lens of six major “salvific events” in the New Testament: the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the parousia. From these six events the following mission-related themes emerge: 1) The incarnation is a call to follow Jesus in genuine incarnational ministry, 2) The cross reminds us of the need for reconciliation, not just with God, but inevitably also with our enemies, 3) The resurrection is inseparable from the cross and a

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75 Ibid., 520.
76 Ibid., 524.
77 Ibid., 523. Quoted in the page preceding his broad definition.
78 Ibid., 524.
central element of the missionary message, 4) The ascension signals the arrival of God’s reign on earth, and with it the need for kingdom transformation, 5) Pentecost tells us that God’s mission can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit, and 6) The *parousia* reminds us that the full realization of God’s reign will be incomplete until the return of Jesus.\(^7^9\) A shorter definition might be: mission is Christians participating in God’s mission, sharing the love of Christ, incarnated in a witnessing community, for the sake of the world.\(^8^0\)

For the purpose of this study, David Bosch’s book provides several helpful observations. First, the fact that mission is inseparable from discipleship.\(^8^1\) Secondly, the early churches in the diaspora formed heterogeneous communities, as a living manifestation of the one body of Christ.\(^8^2\) Thirdly, these Christian communities were different from their surrounding society, and yet they were committed to their environment, providing both an attraction and challenge.\(^8^3\) Fourthly, the Christians found identity in Jesus rather than in their particular race, culture, social class or sex.\(^8^4\) And lastly, the affirmation that evangelism is wider than proclamation and covers different aspects, from being set free from the world and its powers to embracing Christ as Savior and Lord, participating with the church in the ministry of reconciliation, peace and

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 524–529.

\(^{80}\) Paraphrased from ibid., 532.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 48–49.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 84.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 175.
justice, and submitting to the rule of Christ over all things. These insights will contribute to the missional model outlined in following chapters.

The Mission of God’s People by Chris Wright

Chris Wright’s The Mission of God’s People is a sequel to his much larger work, The Mission of God. While the earlier book is a more comprehensive study of the mission of God throughout creation and history, Wright’s present volume concentrates on the more limited topic of the mission of God’s people “as they live in God’s world and participate in God’s mission.”Starting from the Lausanne Covenant statement that “world evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world,” he then examines what should be understood by the whole world, the whole church and the whole gospel. Wright contends that the church’s mission is firmly rooted in God’s mission, noting that “our mission flows from God’s mission, and God’s mission is for the sake of his whole world - indeed his whole creation. So, we have to start by seeing ourselves within the great flow of God’s mission, and we must make sure that our own missional goals — long term and more immediate — are in line with God’s.”

Wright rejects the tendency to narrow the scope of the gospel as if it only provides a solution to individual sin and offering entrance into heaven. Instead he

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85 Ibid., 430.


strongly argues that the gospel message encompasses “the cosmic reign of God in Christ
that will ultimately eradicate evil from God’s universe.” Mission did not start with the
Great Commission, it is embedded in the biblical story from Genesis 1 through
Revelation 22. It includes a concern for the whole of creation. A central missiological
notion is God’s covenant with Abraham, intended to bring blessing not only to him, but
through him to all nations. As we learn from Paul, this covenant is not only for
Abraham’s physical descendants, but through faith encompasses all of God’s people.

Genesis 18:19 brings together three important themes: God’s choice of Abraham,
Abraham’s responsibility to walk in righteousness and justice, and God’s promise to
Abraham of blessing the nations. In this way, election, ethics, and mission come together
in this one verse. In Wright’s own words, “it is fundamentally a missional declaration,
which explains the reason for the election and explains the purpose of ethical living.” In
this way it provides an important link between ecclesiology and missiology.

89 Ibid., 31.
90 Matthew 28:19
91 Wright refers to passages such as Genesis 3 & 12, Amos 9, Isaiah 49, et al. “God’s mission is
what spans the gap between the curse on the earth in Genesis 3 and the end of the curse in the new creation
92 See e.g. Gen. 1:26-28, 2:15; Psalm 145; Hosea 4:1-3; Isa. 65:17-25; Rom. 8:19-23 and Col.
1:15-23.
94 “What God promised to Abraham becomes the ultimate agenda for God’s own mission (blessing
the nations), and what Abraham did in response to God’s promise becomes the historical model for our
mission (faith and obedience).” Wright, The Mission of God’s People, 80.
95 Ibid., 92 (italics in original).
96 Ibid., 93. “The church is missional or it is not church.”
A second missional motif in the Old Testament is found in the exodus, which demonstrates that God will do “whatever it takes, to pay whatever it costs, in order to protect, defend and liberate his people.” The exodus provides a holistic model of redemption, encompassing political, economic, social, and spiritual dimensions, which requires an equally holistic understanding of biblical mission. Such a holistic view of redemption calls for an equally holistic biblical model of “redemptive living” for God’s people. This template is found in the second half of the book of Exodus, with the giving of the Law and the construction of the tabernacle. As a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, Israel was called to bring God to the nations and the nations to God, in line with God’s election of Abraham and promise to him. While holiness is not a precondition for salvation, it is a condition for mission. Not only are God’s people called to represent Him to the nations, but they are also to live lives that attract others to the God who redeemed them and called them to holiness. According to Wright, this applies to Christians in the same way: “The world will be interested in our claims about God […] only when it sees the visible evidence of a very different way of living.”

97 Ibid., 99.
98 Ibid., 102.
99 Ibid., 108.

100 In Ex. 19:5-6 God challenges Moses and the Israelites, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

101 Wright points out how this missional idea is taken up and elaborated by both Paul (Rom.15:15-16) and Peter (1 Peter 2:9-12), Wright, The Mission of God’s People, 122.

102 Ibid., 132. This attractional aspect of Israel’s calling is further illustrated in 1 Kings 8:41-43, 60-61 (the inauguration of Solomon’s temple), Jeremiah 13:1-11 (Jeremiah’s waistband), and Isaiah 60:1-22 (worship of the nations).
Like Abraham, God’s people are chosen in order to serve Him by being witnesses of the living God. Just as Israel was called to bear witness to God’s uniqueness and sovereignty, so too are Jesus’s followers. Even though present-day believers were not personally present at God’s redemptive actions, in the Scriptures they have the testimony of those who were direct witnesses. The good news (euangelion) message found throughout the New Testament originates in the prophetic announcements of Isaiah announcing a return of the exiles\textsuperscript{103} and the establishment of God’s reign of peace and salvation. It is no surprise then that Jesus took one of these passages as the starting point of his mission (Isa. 61:1-3), thereby proclaiming the arrival of God’s reign. In speaking of the role of Jesus within this passage, Wright notes that “Christ is not only the messenger of good news (as per Is 52:7); Christ is the good news, in the sense that the gospel proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah – King and Savior – in fulfillment of the promises of God in all Scripture since Genesis.”\textsuperscript{104} This missionary (sending) mandate is found throughout the Bible, starting with Joseph in Genesis, Moses, the Judges, and prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.\textsuperscript{105} This sending continues in the New Testament, with the Father sending the Son and the Spirit, with Jesus and the Spirit sending the apostles (sent ones).\textsuperscript{106} The primary task of the apostles was to bring the good news of God’s kingdom to the nations, although this did not exclude other ministries,

\textsuperscript{103} Isa. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1.

\textsuperscript{104} Wright, \textit{The Mission of God’s People}, 198 (italics in original).

\textsuperscript{105} Cf. Gen. 45:4-8; Ex. 3:10-15; Judg. 2:16; Is. 6:1-7; Jer. 1:7.

such as taking care of the poor.\textsuperscript{107} Wright points out that the role and title of apostle was not limited to the Twelve chosen specifically by Jesus.\textsuperscript{108}

Nevertheless, the mission of God cannot be left to missionaries and other ministers of the Lord alone. God’s concern encompasses the whole world of human productive and creative activity: trade, agriculture, industry, education, medicine, media, politics, government, sports, art and entertainment.\textsuperscript{109} All that happens in the public sphere of life, whether individually or corporately, is part of God’s creation and therefore relevant to Him. Although He is not necessarily pleased or glorified by everything that takes place in the public arena of life, He retains ultimate control. In the end, after the final judgement, all of creation will be redeemed and restored to its full glory.\textsuperscript{110} As Christians we are called to be constructively engaged in the world and at the same time courageously confront the world where it stands against God. Wright contends that this is the challenge of being in the world, but not of it, noting that “Christians are to be good citizens and good workers, \textit{and thereby} to be good witnesses. Work is still a creational good. It is \textit{good} to work, and it is good to \textit{do good} by working. All this is part of the mission of God’s people too.”\textsuperscript{111} In all likelihood, as the New Testament writers

\textsuperscript{107} Act. 20:25 Wright notes how little attention is given in most commentaries to Paul’s efforts to organize an offering for the poor in Jerusalem.

\textsuperscript{108} Cf. 1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 14:4 (Barnabas), 2 Cor. 8:23 (Titus); Phil. 2:25 (Epaphroditus); Rom 16:7 (Andronicus and Junia); 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11.

\textsuperscript{109} Wright, The Mission of God’s People, 222.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 227–28. Wright emphasizes that the earth will not be destroyed, but rather purged and purified.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 234 (italics in original).
frequently declare, this challenge will include accepting suffering when confronting the idols of this world in one way or another.

Finally, the mission of God’s people must include praise and prayer. Not only do we exist to glorify God, but we also live to bring others to worship and glorify him. Thus, God’s people praying and praising the Lord is actually a way to bring his blessing to the nations, as they declare God’s glory to them.¹¹²

Wright has done the global church a great service with this book, as it outlines the mission of God’s people. He convincingly argues that this mission encompasses the whole world, including the importance of creation care and serving society. Furthermore, he discredits the false dichotomies between individualistic and cosmic salvation, between faith and obedience, and between evangelism and social action. In his final comments he calls the church to rededicate itself to its biblical mission, to “go and make disciples,” not merely converts. “The evangelization of the world, in the fullest sense of both the words in that phrase, remains as urgent a priority for the church as it was when Jesus laid it as a mandate on his disciples before his ascension.”¹¹³

Wright emphasizes the continuity of God’s mission in the world throughout history, and the need for integrating all aspects of life in the mission of the Church. However, he pays less attention to the cultural diversity that characterized the early Church, while both of these themes are considered important in this present study.

¹¹² Ibid., 251. “So we were created to bring glory to God our creator. We are redeemed to declare the praises of God to our redeemer” (italics in original).

¹¹³ Ibid., 286.
The Church in a Multicultural Context

*Churches, Cultures & Leadership* by Mark Lau Branson & Juan F. Martínez

Ever since its inception at Pentecost, the church has had to grapple with its relationship toward the cultures it engages with. As a community that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries, it has had to continually define its identity vis-à-vis the surrounding cultures. Mark Branson and Juan Martínez advocate a process of “reflective discernment” for church leaders in order to engage with the prevailing culture and to perceive the church’s role in a multicultural context. To this end they propose an interactive approach, alternating between theory and praxis, based upon the educational theories of Paulo Freire. They suggest starting with identifying current praxis in the church and analyzing it, followed by a comprehensive study of Scripture, theology and Christian history regarding such praxis. This should generate conversations around personal and shared experiences related to these practices. Lastly, this process should lead to discerning new ideas and praxis in accordance with the insights gained through the previous steps. This circular process should then be repeated in order to continually update our praxis in line with both the unchanging truths of Scripture and the evolving realities of everyday experience.

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116 Ibid., 42–44.
A second major theme in this book concerns the role of leadership in the church. The authors advocate a threefold role of spiritual leaders, which they identify as interpretive, relational, and implemental leadership.\footnote{Ibid., 55–56.} Through the first role, interpretive leadership, leaders help their community find meaning in their context and interpret this context for them. The second major theme, relational leadership, is about strengthening connections both within the church and with the surrounding community. Thirdly, leaders need to be implemental in that they guide their community in launching new initiatives and developing new approaches in accordance with the needs of their community. The authors summarize this threefold role succinctly by stating that “leadership is not about an individual or even a small group having great ideas and pulling a church into their vision. Leadership is about shaping an environment in which the people of God participate in the action-reflection cycle as they gain new capacities to discern what God is doing among and around them.”\footnote{Ibid., 57.} While the church is a “sign, foretaste and instrument” of God’s reign on earth, it also simultaneously finds itself in specific contexts.\footnote{Ibid., 66.} The challenge for the church as a “contrast society” is to be aware of this context without allowing itself to be defined by it. A missional church needs to ask itself, “What is God doing in our context and how can we participate in his work?”\footnote{Ibid.}
In the authors’ view, churches display the characteristics of communities by sharing memories and experiences, activities, and a common hope and imagined future, all of which are necessary components for discipleship and mission. This is even more important in congregations consisting of multiple ethnicities, where appreciation of each other’s cultures may lead to a better awareness and understanding of one’s own culture. In such contexts it is vital to recognize the importance of people’s worldview, different language structures, and communication styles. The authors give various examples and illustrations from the United States to show the tensions between the majority (predominantly white) culture and minority populations, such as African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos. These center on issues like individual freedom versus mutual obligation, direct versus indirect problem-solving, formality versus informality, and competition and fair play. Intercultural skills are essential in order to navigate these conflicting values and approaches. Collectivist and individualist cultures can and should learn from one another, as

\[\text{d}\text{ominant-culture churches in the United States need to learn from minority churches about group harmony, cooperation and solidarity, recognizing that Western individualism often points us away from the biblical concept of the individual created by God to live in community. But those from individualist cultures can help believers from collectivist churches find the freedom of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, something often missing in church’s [sic] where the self is subsumed under the hierarchy of vertical leadership.}\]

The New Testament calls believers to live in community as redeemed individuals, who find their identity and purpose in their relationship to God as they live in community. In

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\(^{121}\) Ibid., 146–150.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 166.
the midst of this diversity, Christian leaders have a responsibility to guide their people through a reflective and interpretive process.

This praxis cycle consists of the five steps referred to earlier, starting with the present interpretation of Scripture (step 1) and how this has been shaped by one’s culture and worldview (step 2). The initial understanding should be complemented by considering interpretations from diverse theological and cultural backgrounds (step 3). This may lead to a deeper reflection on one’s own biases (step 4) and to consider alternative viewpoints and interpretations (step 5).123

In the final section, Branson and Martínez move from the discussion of cultures to the role of leadership in the church. The authors suggest that leaders, using their interpretive skills, have a responsibility to lead the church in becoming aware of and interpreting the current environment of the church in order to help the community “make sense” of their situation.124 As relational leaders, their task is to maintain stability and offer perspective amid the discomfort that is often the inevitable consequence of change.125 At the same time leaders also need to create space for change experiments and other new initiatives, as this is part of the implemental role of a leader.126 Branson and Martínez contend that, throughout this process, a missional leader must maintain the

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123 Ibid., 184–85.
124 Ibid., 190, 215.
125 Ibid., 217–18.
126 Ibid., 221–22.
momentum for change, while at the same time safeguarding continuity.\textsuperscript{127} Praxis-focused leaders shepherd their congregation through the phases of awareness, understanding, evaluation and experimentation toward commitment.\textsuperscript{128} It is important to keep in mind that “leaders do not need to know the way – we just need the capacities to encourage and guide connections, to link Scripture and context, to engage neighbors and members, and to sanction questions and insights and innovations.”\textsuperscript{129} In the final chapter the authors point out that the process toward developing a multi-ethnic church usually starts with a culturally diverse leadership committed to move the church toward practices that reflect the heterogeneous nature of the community.\textsuperscript{130} This will find expression in areas such as worship, preaching, prayer, hospitality, and decision making. However, there is no single best approach for every situation, and a learning posture with discernment is the most important attribute.

Several findings by Branson and Martínez make significant contributions to the purpose of this study. First, their description of the triple roles of leadership highlights the need for connection both within the church and with the surrounding community. Leaders need to guide their community in launching new initiatives that meet the needs of their community.\textsuperscript{131} Secondly, they point out that a missional church should ask itself what

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 224.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 226. These stages correspond to the \textit{reflective praxis} model introduced earlier in the book.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 231.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 241.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 56.
God is doing in their context and how they can participate in his work. Thirdly, multicultural churches gain an appreciation of each other’s cultures, this will lead to a better awareness and understanding of one’s own culture. Fourthly, the authors helpfully observe that developing a multi-ethnic church should start with a culturally diverse leadership committed to implement practices that support the heterogeneous composition of the church.

Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church by Mark DeYmaz

This book is one of the earlier contributions to the topic of multi-ethnic churches. Mark DeYmaz does not offer a scholarly text, but rather a practical account of his own and others’ experiences in forming a multi-ethnic church. He recounts the challenges in establishing Mosaic Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, some forty years after the city became known for its role in the desegregation of public schools in the United States. From the outset he points out that “Mosaic is not a church focused on racial reconciliation. Rather, we are focused on reconciling men and women to God through faith in Jesus Christ and on reconciling ourselves collectively with the principles and practices of local churches as described in the New Testament.”

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132 Ibid., 66.
133 Ibid., 146.
134 Ibid., 241.
argues for a biblical foundation of unity within diversity for the church. First, he draws our attention to Jesus’s prayer in John 17,

> that all of them *may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they *may be one* as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they *may be brought to complete unity*. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.\(^\text{136}\)

This threefold prayer for unity does not leave any doubt about the importance Jesus attaches to the unity of believers. What is perhaps less obvious is the reason for this prayer, namely to send a message to the world regarding God’s love for them. DeYmaz concludes, “when men and women of diverse backgrounds walk together as one in Christ, they uniquely reflect the Father’s love on earth as it is in heaven.”\(^\text{137}\) Secondly, the book of Acts portrays the struggle of the early church to come to terms with the universality and inclusivity of the gospel.\(^\text{138}\) Starting with the God-fearing Jews from many nations mentioned in the Pentecost account, to Philip’s ministry among Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch, to Peter’s reluctant visit the gentile Cornelius, each of these narratives accentuates the barriers that needed to be crossed as the gospel began to extend ever further from its origin in Jerusalem.\(^\text{139}\) However, describing the leadership of the church in Antioch, it is noteworthy that Luke specifically mentions their diverse cultural

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\(^{136}\) John 17:21-23 (italics added)

\(^{137}\) DeYmaz, Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church, 9.

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 16–17. DeYmaz, noting that the ethnicity of Samaritans and an Ethiopian who believed in Christ is mentioned, argues that this shows that the gospel is not just for Jews.
backgrounds. Thirdly, DeYmaz turns to the apostle Paul and his letter to the Ephesians. The church there, he argues, was composed of believers from both Jewish and Greek backgrounds. This is reflected in Paul’s vision for the church, which is to be “an authentic, visible community of faith where people of diverse backgrounds worship God together as one, and love one another in Christ.” It is also the essence of the mystery, as Paul describes it, “that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). This oneness will flourish in a loving, inclusive community, where believers from Jewish and Gentile background meet together at the cross. In the local church, all believers, no matter who they are or where they came from, are one family, with one Father, to the glory of God.

In part two, Mark DeYmaz suggests seven core commitments a church needs to make in order to be(come) truly multi-ethnic: they need to embrace dependence, take intentional steps, empower diverse leadership, develop cross-cultural relationships, pursue cross-cultural competence, promote a spirit of inclusion, and mobilize for impact. He first traces his own journey through these seven principles, detailing the

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140 Barnabas was born in Cyprus (Acts 4:36f); Simeon, as his nickname Niger indicates, probably came from Africa; Lucius was from North Africa (Cyrene); Manaen, through his association with Herod, may have been brought up either in Rome or somewhere in Palestine; and Saul was a native of Tarsus in Asia Minor.

141 DeYmaz, Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church, 28.

142 Ibid., 29.

143 Ibid., 33.

144 Part Two, chapters 4-10 ibid., 43–129.
many challenges he and his church faced while going through this process. In part three he introduces two more examples of multi-ethnic churches. One of these was a declining homogeneous church on its way to extinction, which was revitalized through its transition to a more multi-ethnic community. The other church was challenged to transform into a more diverse and inclusive community by visitors to this formerly mono-cultural, white church. The authors are honest in acknowledging the challenges they faced in the process of transitioning, such as resistance from the original members of the church, ignorance and insensitivity on the side of more conservative members, and problems integrating new believers from widely different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, many of whom came from dysfunctional and broken families.145

Throughout his book Mark DeYmaz gives innumerable practical suggestions, e.g. multi-ethnic church planters do not have to be experts in the language, culture, or customs of each people group.146 More important is to humbly engage each culture in the church with respect.147 Since cross-cultural competency and mutual respect are crucial for the ministry leaders in seeking to understand and resolve cultural differences, forging unity from diversity will require transformational leaders of diverse ethnic background to come together as one. All involved must passionately embrace the vision in order to lead the people with whom they have the greatest influence. There can be no hint of inconsistency, self-positioning, or diversion from the vision if it is, in fact, to take root and inspire change in the established church.148

145 Ibid., 136.
146 Ibid., 136–46.
147 Ibid., 143.
148 Ibid., 179.
The examples and illustrations above demonstrate that establishing a multi-ethnic church, either from scratch or transitioning from an existing congregation, is a major undertaking, with numerous pitfalls and obstacles. Yet the biblical challenge remains that Christ came to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:15-18).

While it may certainly be easier to establish and lead a monocultural church, the challenge from Scripture to bring together different communities remains. The gospel has clear implications for how we relate to one another, and calls us to be peacemakers and bridgebuilders, striving to unite people from different communities within the one Body of Christ. While the author offers compelling biblical arguments and solid practical suggestions for establishing multi-ethnic churches, it should be acknowledged that he is addressing a North-American audience, where churches are found among different ethnic communities already. In Myanmar, where large areas of the country are dominated by the Bamar Buddhist majority, it may be much more difficult to engage in meaningful multi-ethnic ministry. This model may therefore be more suited to urban areas, where different ethnicities are living together and mingling with each other.

*Christianity Through Our Neighbors’ Eyes* by Samuel Ngun Ling

After considering primarily Western authors in this literature review, it is important to give voice to a theologian from Myanmar regarding the impact and
challenges of mission work in this country. Samuel Ngun Ling is a professor of Systematic Theology and president of the Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT). He has written several books and articles on interfaith dialogue and communication of the gospel, specifically in the Myanmar context. Tracing the history of American Baptist Mission work in Myanmar and the obstacles encountered during that period, Ngun Ling takes a dim view of approaches by both foreign missionaries and some of their local counterparts, as illustrated in the foreword, noting that Christianity from the start was associated with the “imperialistic actions of colonizers.” He explains that “to a Burman, embracing a foreign faith therefore almost means ceasing to be a Burman.” Thus, for a Burman to become a Christian is seen as being a disloyal citizen, or more precisely, becoming like a foreigner. Furthermore, since Christianity is more generally accepted by the ethnic minorities, who are regarded as inferior by the Burmans, it makes it difficult for them to accept such a minority religion.

Ngun Ling identifies the following perceptions of Christianity during the missionary (colonial) era: Christianity was seen as an inferior foreign, and even colonial

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149 Even though most authors evaluated here may be considered Western, some of them do demonstrate a more global perspective, such as Branson & Martinez and DeYmaz.


151 Ngun Ling, Christianity Through Our Neighbours’ Eyes, page d.

152 Ibid., 45.

153 Ibid., 51.
religion, and thus a political threat to the Buddhist kingdom.\textsuperscript{154} From 1886, when the whole of Myanmar became subject to the British, Christianity was perceived as the British colonial religion, since it removed Buddhism as the state religion and replaced Buddhist monastery education with the British secular and American missionary educational systems, while giving special protection or patronage to Christianity.\textsuperscript{155} He argues there are several fundamental suspicions in Myanmar with regard to Christianity, which is seen as an imperialistic, ethnic minority religion, and as betrayer of Burmese Buddhist culture and social life.\textsuperscript{156}

Once the colonial period ended and Burma regained its independence, the roles of the religions were reversed again, and Buddhism reclaimed its privileged position. “This special status of favored religion, tends to minimize the freedom of other unfavored religions, those which do not have special status, although the government claims to embrace all religions to flourish together peacefully and harmoniously.”\textsuperscript{157} However, in 1966 all foreign Christian missionaries and administrators were forced to leave the country, and since then, freedom of religion exists more in theory than in actual practice, so that strict rules are set and permissions required for Christian meetings, conferences, evangelistic campaigns, building churches, and for Christian publication.\textsuperscript{158} One of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[154] Ibid., 45–62.
\item[155] Ibid., 56.
\item[156] Ibid., 62.
\item[157] Ibid., 124–25 (italics in original).
\item[158] Ibid., 159.
\end{footnotes}
consequences of this (Buddhist) prejudice has been religious discrimination of adherents of other religious in the country, and consequently, an identity crisis when an ethnic Burman Buddhist becomes a Christian.\textsuperscript{159} This is based at least partly on the perception that when a Burman Buddhist becomes a Christian, he is disloyal to the Buddhist society.\textsuperscript{160} According to Ngun Ling, it was primarily the British colonization, not the Christian mission, which made Christianity culturally alien and socio-politically undesirable for typical Burman Buddhists.\textsuperscript{161}

When attempting to address these biased perceptions, it should be noted that, while understanding ethnic Christianity is important for majority Buddhists, it is even more necessary for minority ethnic Christians to take seriously such Buddhist issues as their doctrines, worldviews, and behaviors.\textsuperscript{162}

Ngun Ling observes that Baptist principles and doctrines are predominantly Western-oriented, especially with regard to the church, such as forms of worship and church organization (ecclesiology), the expression of God and salvation (theology), and concepts and strategies of mission outreach (missiology).\textsuperscript{163} He then suggests that “contextualization requires of the Baptist and other Christian Churches to deconstruct all Western thought forms, Western forms of worship, and Western structures of the

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 128.
churches, and at the same time to reconstruct them in Burmese way and thought forms with the use of Burmese religious and cultural resources.”

According to him, the American Baptist Mission divided people along racial and cultural lines, so that they became separated, not only from each other but also from the larger Buddhist society. Furthermore “because of their exclusive Christian mentality and holier–than–thou attitude, very little attention is being paid to the questions and challenges posed by people other faiths in present [sic] Myanmar.”

Considering how to address these communication challenges, Samuel Ngun Ling attributes the failure of Christian mission among Burman Buddhists to its teaching and presentation methods. He charges Myanmar Christians with uncritically copying Western missionary approaches, thereby “minimizing relevance of the Christian message” and argues that “imported forms of Western theological education have gradually dominated post-missionary theological education in Myanmar, weakening their connection with the practical, pastoral, and missiological concerns of local churches and also with new challenges of the contexts.” His view is that “a theology in Asia must be a theology that is rooted or planted in Asian ethnic/tribal soil, so that it grows out of rich Asian cultural fertility as to bearing [sic] distinctive fruits for Asia and the world.”

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164 Ibid., 129.
165 Ibid., 132.
166 Ibid., 130 (italics in original).
167 Ibid., 190.
168 Ibid., 192.
about the role of theology and mission, he adds, “A living theology in Asia must speak to the actual questions men and women are asking in the midst of their dilemmas and hopes; aspirations and achievements; doubts, despair, and suffering.” Referring to Myanmar’s long history of conflict and fighting for freedom from oppression, Ngun Ling comments that these conflicts have perpetuated hatred and animosity between the majority Buddhists and the minority ethnic peoples of Myanmar until now. His question is, “how to build a peaceful society in Myanmar? How can inflicted [sic] or oppressed peoples become good neighbors to each other? Peoples can forgive, but many can never forget the history.”

While Ngun Ling’s concern regarding the negative impact of Western (colonial as well as post-colonial) practices and methodologies is justifiable, it may be all too convenient to attribute today’s challenges entirely to colonial-era missionaries and their present-day followers. After all, more than fifty years have passed since all missionaries and mission agencies were expelled from Myanmar, and the church has developed and matured substantially since then. The subsequent isolation of the country in the following decades and the tendency to maintain customs and traditions may equally have played a part. In addition, while Ngun Ling rightly focuses on the need to know and understand the religious beliefs and practices of the Buddhist majority in the country, his primary aim seems to be fostering mutual acceptance and understanding, given his emphasis on peacebuilding and inter-religious dialogue. The gospel certainly advocates reconciliation

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169 Ibid., 218.

170 Ibid., 249–50.
and inter-ethnic harmony, but these cannot be detached from spiritual transformation through the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit, both within individuals and in the Christian community. His endorsement of religious dialogue leads him to contend that truth is relative and therefore no religion should make exclusive claims over against other religions.\footnote{Ibid., 283. He approvingly quotes the Buddha’s illustration of six blind men describing an elephant. None of them possessed an accurate, complete view of the animal. Therefore, he argues, “none of us is able to grasp the final or absolute truth. Truth is thus profoundly mysterious, relative, and universal that no one [sic] can claim monopoly of it.”} However, genuine cross-cultural communication of the gospel should go further than merely promoting inter-religious harmony. Mission (of which cross-cultural gospel communication is one aspect) is concerned with spiritual transformation as an expression of the Kingdom of God in individuals, families and communities. Since this is particularly relevant in pluralistic environments, the next chapter will focus on how the church can carry out its mission in a pluralistic society, such as Myanmar.
CHAPTER 4
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE CHURCH IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

This chapter lays the theological foundation for a biblical understanding of the church as a diverse but unified body of redeemed people. Several key Bible passages focusing on the significance of this reality will be examined. This understanding is essential for the church in Myanmar to fulfill its mandate to be a missional body, demonstrating God’s love in a fractured multi-ethnic society. Several challenges to fulfilling this role will be examined, together with various initiatives that may lead toward reconciliation and diversity within the church and in society.

Understanding the Essential Characteristics of the Church

The Church is One Body in Christ (Romans 12:3-8)

Of all the New Testament images of the church, one of the most powerful is Paul’s portrayal of the church as the body of Christ (Rom 12:5). Whereas Jesus spoke about his body on several occasions, it was always in reference to his physical body in connection with the Last Supper (Mt 26:26, Mk 14:22, Lk 22:19). Therefore, Paul was breaking new ground when he introduced the image of the church as the body of Christ. While the idea of a community of people as a body was not unknown in the apostolic era,
it was Paul who applied it specifically to the church as a community.\(^1\) In 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 11:29, Paul speaks of the body of Christ to refer to the sacrament of the cup and bread, concluding that “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (11:17 ESV). Thus, Paul uses this image to emphasize the essential unity of the church as forming one body. Similarly, in Romans 12 he employs the same image to contend for the unity within the body of Christ (the church) in all its diversity. While acknowledging that a body is composed of different members, each with individual functions, he insists that together they form one body in Christ (8:5). Moreover, Paul adds that “individually [they are] members of one another” (8:5). This unity in diversity connects the members first to Christ, and then to each other. Paul then further develops this concept of unity in diversity by connecting it with the gifts of the Spirit, which are apportioned “according to the grace given to us” (8:6).\(^2\) Craig Van Gelder affirms this, saying “the nature of the church entails an interdependence among all the members. This interdependence is a function of the diversity of spiritual gifts that have been given by the Spirit for ministry by members.”\(^3\) It seems significant that Paul repeatedly addresses this issue of recognizing the unity of the body in the face of diversity within congregations. Here in Romans he urges each believer to “not think of

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\(^1\) Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 110. The image of a socio-political group as a body was not uncommon in the first century. Paul, however, was the first to apply this image specifically to the church as Christ’s body in the world. Also see Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 145.

\(^2\) Keener, *Romans*, 145.

\(^3\) Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 110.
yourself more highly than you ought” (8:3), obviously because some members were tempted to look down on others.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul addresses the same issue from two different angles. First, he speaks to those who feel overlooked, as if they do not belong to the body (12:15-16). Next, he confronts those who consider themselves superior and want to exclude others who they deem less important or valuable (12:17). He then makes it clear that “God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be” (12:18). There is, therefore, in Paul’s opinion no excuse for either excluding oneself or others from the body of Christ. All members are valuable and indispensable. It is probably no coincidence that the passage on the body of Christ in Romans is wedged between Romans 12:1-2, which speaks of offering our bodies as a living sacrifice and to “not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” and Romans 12:9-21, which challenges believers to “be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (12:10).

Clearly the church as the body of Christ is not a uniform, homogeneous group of people. However, there is a basic foundational unity, which is organic and integrated, a unity in diversity. This heterogeneous, or composite, unity is what enables the church to display “the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph 3:10) to this world.⁴ Through reconciled

⁴ Paul extends this to “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.” According to Leslie Mitton, former divisions are healed in the church through Christ’s reconciling power, bringing unity and peace in place of hostility, cf. C. Leslie Mitton, Ephesians, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 126. Perhaps a more vivid way of expressing this would be to speak of the multicolored wisdom of God.
relationships and mutual submission church members can experience true oneness within the body of Christ without losing their uniqueness.

Christ Has Removed the Barriers (Ephesians 2:11-22)

At first glance it may seem that Ephesians 2 addresses similar themes to those found in Romans 12, namely the unity of believers in the church. However, Paul here approaches the subject from a very different perspective. Although he does speak about Jewish and Gentile Christians being brought together through Christ, he employs other ideas besides “one body.” Here he emphasizes the image of “one new man in place of the two” (2:15), of coming together in one household (2:19), and being built into a temple (2:21).

First however, Paul focuses on the fact that non-Jews used to be “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:12). As uncircumcised people they were outsiders and had no prospect of fellowship with God. Paul does specify that he is talking about the outward circumcision “in the body” (v.11), thereby indirectly acknowledging that what really matters is circumcision of the heart. Verses 14-18 form a parenthetical section, focusing on the peace and reconciliation brought by Jesus Christ, after which Paul resumes the theme of the gentiles no longer being “excluded and foreigners.” But first, in verses 14-18, he elaborates on Jesus as Peacemaker, who has broken down the

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5 In Romans 2:29 he makes this explicit when he says that “a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”
dividing wall of hostility that stood between Jews and gentiles (2:14).⁶ According to Leslie Mitton, this wall of hostility should be interpreted metaphorically, as an attitude of the heart “which holds apart whole communities of people in suspicion and hatred of one another […] It was this hostility, firmly implanted in human hearts, which Christ had melted away, so that Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, found themselves knit together in a new and unbelievable friendship.”⁷ The result is that Christ created “one new humanity out of the two”, thus reconciling the two both to God and to one another, thereby removing (“putting to death”) the hostility (verses 15-16). This act of creating a new community, by incorporating former enemies, is further elaborated in verse 17, where Paul underscores that Christ has brought peace both to “you who were far away” (the Gentiles) and “peace to those who were near” (the Jews). The next verse makes it even clearer that there is no more distinction between the two groups, “for through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (2:18). Clearly in God’s new humanity there is full equality among believers, whatever their background.

After this short intermezzo Paul continues on from the topic addressed in verses 12-13, the end of alienation and separation of the gentiles. In verse 19 he announces to the gentile believers “you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with
God’s people and also members of his household.” This is an extraordinary declaration in view of their traditional separation from the Jewish people. From now on they belong together in one house of which Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, a building that “rises to become a holy temple” (2:21). In the final verse, Paul develops the image even further. Not only do the believers together form a temple, but in Christ they are also “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (2:20). Paul’s theology is both groundbreaking and thoroughly trinitarian. It establishes that God has expanded his covenant with Israel to include all nations, regardless of ethnic origin, circumcision or non-circumcision, and even without regard to prior compliance with the law, as Paul asserted in verse 15. By the blood of Christ, God has established a new humanity, a spiritual community. Elsewhere he elaborates by saying that “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:6). Instead of being an exclusive single-ethnicity, the church is meant to be an open, inclusive, welcoming multi-ethnic community, held together by Christ, its head and cornerstone.

A Message of Unity to the World (John 13:34-35)

The previous two passages have helped to determine the essence and composition of the church according to the apostle Paul. Turning to Jesus’s view of the church, it noteworthy to observe that He is not primarily concerned with its nature or internal make-up, but more specifically with how should function in everyday life. Shortly before his arrest and trial, Jesus spent the last few hours among his disciples, preparing them for living in a new kind of community that was to have a profound impact in the world (John
13-17). After telling his disciples that he would not be with them much longer, he changed the topic of the conversation, saying, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34). This is the first of two instances in which Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, the other being in 15:12. However, only on this occasion does he refer to it as a ‘new’ command. In the Old Testament the people of Israel had received the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv 19:18), but here the disciples were told, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This added a new dimension to this old commandment, and thus it is described as a ‘new’ commandment. The new love that should characterize relationships among the disciples (who had been fighting not long before about who should be first) is defined by Jesus’s own love for them (cf. 13:34; 15:9, 12). This love was to lead Jesus to lay down his life for them, and here he commanded them to love one another in the same way.8

The importance of the disciples’ love for one another is evident by Jesus’s explanation in the following verse: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). It is important to note that this verse does not indicate the reason for why the disciples should love one another. Rather, their love for one another would bring the outside world to recognize that they were indeed true followers of Jesus, as Colin Cruse observes in his commentary on this verse:

8 It is clear that the message eventually did get through to the disciples, as evidenced in 1 John 3:16: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”
People would be able to recognize them as Jesus’ disciples by their mutual love. Knowing the truth about Jesus is vital, but so also is believers’ love for one another. This love is not sentimental, but real self-sacrificing love by which they place other believers’ needs above their own. Lovelessness among believers nullifies their witness to the world, and reveals them as hypocrites.  

It also bears pointing out that Jesus’s words “as I have loved you” do not primarily refer to his death on the cross – which had not yet taken place at that point – but to his very practical and specific act of love: the washing of the disciples’ feet earlier that evening. This demonstration of selfless love and humility would undoubtedly still have been fresh in their memory. Jesus’s command, therefore, implies that “to truly love another, we must pursue a life of servanthood and sacrifice.”

For Christians to merit the attention of the world, they need to take Jesus’s command to heart, laying aside petty squabbles and obeying his exhortation to love one another unconditionally. Only a sincere desire to follow Jesus in sacrificial love can cultivate a unity that will send a message to the world. This love must embrace and include people from every ethnicity, language, culture, and nation. It must include those who are despised and rejected by society, as well as those who have caused suffering for others. Only then will the church be the inclusive community God intended it to be, and only then will the church be able to draw in those who are hungering and thirsting for authentic love and life.

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Recognizing the Importance of Reconciliation

One significant outcome from examining the nature of the church within a biblical perspective has been to recognize its intrinsic unity within vast diversity.\textsuperscript{12} The church was established to bring together Jews and gentiles, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28), yet in spite of this formidable diversity the church is destined to display a unique oneness. While this unity is often difficult to detect in everyday life, it is still at the heart of God’s design and intention. In this regard it is important to remember that reconciliation with God has implications for relationships with others, both within the body of Christ and beyond.

The Church as Unified Body of Believers

Craig Van Gelder’s \textit{The Essence of the Church} highlights the church as a community of people who are reconciled both with God and with one another.\textsuperscript{13} Christ has brought people together in one body, not merely to worship God and enjoy the privilege of communion with him. Rather, they are called into community, as they now belong together within one family. It is simply incomprehensible for Christians to remain separated from fellow believers, merely on the grounds of ethnic or clan affiliation, social class, educational background, or other identity marker. Allowing any such distinctions to split Christians into separate congregations or communities is incompatible with the reconciling power of Christ, whose purpose it was “to create in himself one new

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} See the discussion on pages 78-79.
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\textsuperscript{13} Van Gelder, The Essence of the Church, 108.
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humanity out of the two [Jews and Gentiles], thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Eph 2:15-16). Throughout the New Testament, and particularly in the Pauline epistles, believers are exhorted to strive for unity and mutual love as the natural outgrowth of the fact that “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-5).

The Church as Called Community

Not only is the church a unified body; but it is also a community with a specific calling. When the apostle Peter addresses his readers as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Pt 2:9), he accentuates in the same verse the fact that they were “called out of darkness.” Thus, the church is a called-out community, separated from darkness, from evil, and from the world. As the people of Israel were led out of Egypt, the followers of Christ are called to move out of darkness and into God’s presence, toward “his eternal glory in Christ” (1 Pt 5:10). However, Peter makes it very clear in his epistles that following Christ entails hardship. Thus, it is also a call to suffering, for “to this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (2 Pt 2:21).”¹⁴ This call to suffering is linked with obedience to Christ, a theme developed also by Paul in his exhortations to the Romans and to Timothy, whom he also called to live a life of holiness (Rom 1:5-7; 1 Tm

¹⁴ Cf. also 1 Pt 3:9.
6:12; 2 Tm 1:9), a theme also stressed by Peter. Thirdly, the church as a community is not only called out of darkness and into fellowship with Christ, but it is also called to be church together. Like Peter, the apostle Paul addresses the members of the church in Corinth as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2, italics added). Likewise, in the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts his readers to maintain unity and peace with an appeal to the fact that they form “one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called” (4:4, italics added). Similarly, in Colossians 3:15 he admonishes the Colossians to “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” The concept of the church as community together is essential if the church is to function as missional community. The church does not exist in and for itself, but is called both out of and into the world. As church members live and serve together, they are equipped to impact the society around them.\textsuperscript{15}

As a called community the church today has an obligation to live out its calling in the particular context in which it finds itself. This may have been much simpler and more straightforward in an era when the whole community revolved around the church and where government and culture were largely aligned with a Christian worldview and values. These conditions, however, are hard to find in our post-modern and predominantly post- or non-Christian world. Consequently, Christians face the challenge

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{15} J. R. Woodward, \textit{Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World} (IVP Books, 2013), 75. Woodward points out the missional hermeneutic of Ephesians 4, where “leaders learn to lead from the margins as priests ministering to fellow priests, with Christ drawing all of us toward himself at the center.”
\end{footnote}
of demonstrating their faith in an indifferent, or even antagonistic, environment. Closing themselves off from the outside world is not an option for those who take the clear commands of Scripture to heart. This requires the courage to explore the intersection between faith and societal values. If reconciliation has any significance beyond the relationship between an individual believer and God, it must have implications both within the Christian community and in society at large. Christians have a responsibility as agents of reconciliation, as peacemakers, in situations characterized by brokenness and suffering.\(^\text{16}\)

The Church as a Multi-Ethnic Mosaic

Having established the essential unity and interconnectedness of the church, it is necessary to reinforce the organic diversity within the body of Christ, both locally and worldwide. The intrinsic nature of and the need for unity within the church is repeatedly emphasized in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament epistles.\(^\text{17}\) Diversity within the Christian community is not incompatible with its fundamental unity, as both are rooted in the unity of the Trinity.\(^\text{18}\) Therefore, diversity should not be equated with disunity, or seen as an expression of brokenness. Van Gelder expresses this quite fittingly: “Rather than contrasting the church’s oneness with its brokenness, it is more

\(^{16}\) Rowan, “Proclaiming the Peacemaker,” 49. “In the midst of the brokenness and suffering of the world, the church exists as a community of reconciliation, pointing back to the unique reconciling work of God in Christ on the cross, and pointing forward, by its work and witness, to the ultimate reconciliation of ‘all things.’”

\(^{17}\) Cf. Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-14; Eph 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 25; Col 3:15 and others.

\(^{18}\) Cf. Van Gelder, The Essence of the Church, 122.
helpful to see its unity in conjunction with its diversity. That is, the church, while existing as one, also must exist as many.”

There is thus no inconsistency between the church’s unity and its diversity, just as there is no incongruity between the oneness of God and his existence in three Persons. Diversity expresses as much of the church’s essence as does its oneness. This is emphasized by Paul when he says that “through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Eph 3:10).

Such diversity may be expressed in a number of ways, the most important of which are socio-economic, educational, and ethnic identity. In this context the focus will be primarily on ethnic diversity in the church. The literature review showed that the early church made significant efforts to overcome social, racial, and other biases. While the early church initially consisted mainly of Jewish-background believers, they came from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic contexts. When tensions arose between them, the apostles did not attempt to resolve the conflict by separating them into homogeneous units, but instead appointed leaders from a variety of ethnic groups (Acts 6:1-6). Social and class distinctions were abolished by exhorting masters to fellowship together with slaves as brothers in Christ (1 Cor 7:17-24; Phlm 8-16). James commands rich and poor to fellowship together in unity, rather than separate them along socio-economic lines (Jas

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19 Ibid., 121.

20 This is accentuated by Aubrey Sequeira in “Re-Thinking Homogeneity: The Biblical Case for Multi-Ethnic Churches,” in Multi-Ethnic Churches, ed. Jonathan Leeman, 9Marks Journal IX (Washington DC: 9Marks, 2015), 30. He argues that “establishing multi-ethnic churches is not only more faithful to Scripture, but […] multi-ethnic churches more fully display the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.”

21 Cf. the development of the early church in Acts, p. 81.
Aubrey Sequeira argues that “while homogeneity in churches simply reinforces the status quo of society, the biblical evidence shows us that the gospel broke down and cut down across ethnic, social, economic, and cultural barriers in ways never before seen in history.” Jesus and the apostles never encouraged ethnocentrism, but rather called Christians to embrace one another in spite of their differences. Sequeira takes a stand against the Church Growth theory of Donald McGavran, which promotes the ‘homogeneous unit principle’ according to which the gospel spreads most rapidly and easily along the lines of homogeneous units in order to grow the church. He contends that “while the ‘homogeneous unit principle’ emphasizes seeking to win people by not offending their ethnocentric sensibilities, Jesus’s approach is radically different – Christ lays the axe to the root of ethnic pride.” The accounts in the book of Acts demonstrate clearly that churches were not established or separated along ethnic, socio-cultural, or class lines. While it may be true that in practice people prefer not having to cross racial, linguistic or class barriers when becoming Christians, this does not establish any normative biblical pattern. The truth is that reconciliation to God also brings a person into

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22 Sequeira, “Re-Thinking Homogeneity,” 31–32 (Italics in original). Sequeira further contends: “Throughout the NT we see an attack on ethnocentrism, and consequently, a mandate for believers from differing ethnic backgrounds to accept each other lovingly and to live together in harmony in local churches.”

23 Ibid., 33. Against Donald McGavran’s insistence that the Jew-Gentile separation was not an ethnic issue, Sequeira asserts that “though there are some points of discontinuity between the Jew-Gentile divide and modern ethno-cultural divides, there are enough points of continuity to warrant the parallel. Furthermore, the New Testament does extend the call to unity beyond “Jew” and “Gentile” to include categories like “Barbarian” and “Scythian,” which are ethnolinguistic categories (Col 3:11). In the New Testament, unity in Christ trumps all other issues of identity, and the call to embrace the “other” encompasses all categories of “otherness,” and takes shape in the form of life together in the local church.” Ibid., 35 (footnote).
a community “where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another.”

It should be acknowledged, however, that diversity is not the same as reconciliation and the goal of reconciliation is not simply diversity. As Jarvis Williams helpfully points out, “an assembly of the United Nations is multi-ethnic and diverse, as is the army, or the local public high school, or so many other groups. Yet such settings hardly enjoy the racial reconciliation of the gospel.” At the same time, the issue is not always a matter of a majority culture seeking to dominate other (minority) cultures. Often ethnic minority communities choose to meet separately in an effort to preserve and sustain their cultural identity. Patrick Cho, writing about the challenge for Asian churches in North America to become more multi-ethnic, comments that “most cultures do not want a melting pot as much as an acknowledgement of cultural identity. To use a culinary analogy, perhaps a truly multiethnic church would look less like a monochrome chowder and more like a varicolored minestrone.” This observation is particularly helpful, as it emphasizes that unity in diversity does not necessarily lead to or require uniformity. The image of a colorful cauldron of minestrone soup conveys a helpful message. Other helpful metaphors might include a multi-colored tapestry, a multi-faceted diamond, or a

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24 Sequeira, “Re-Thinking Homogeneity,” 34. In a footnote he quotes Rene Padilla, Unity of the Church, p. 25: “[T]he extension of the gospel to the Gentiles was such a difficult step for the Jerusalem church that it took place only with the aid of visions and commands (8:26; 10:1–16) or under the pressure of persecution (8:1-3; 11:19–20).” Ibid., 35.


colorful mosaic. Each of these pictures evokes the image of diversity in harmonious unity. The overall unity does not subsume the identity of its individual components, but rather its composite nature enhances the overall beauty and contributes to its harmony.

**Becoming a Missional Church in Myanmar**

As presented in chapter two, the church in Myanmar has experienced a high level of fragmentation along ethnic as well as theological dividing lines. Viewed from a practical as well as historical perspective, this development is understandable. This is particularly true where these ethnic divisions are reinforced by language barriers, which make communication with other ethnic groups more difficult.

**The Obstacle of Ethnicity-Based Denominationalism**

In some minority areas the older population is generally not comfortable in the national language, Burmese. In addition, some minorities, such as the Chin, consist of multiple subgroups, each speaking separate languages and thus they are not even able to communicate with one another unless they use a common language, such as Burmese or English. This has had a two-fold effect: some groups have opted to use Burmese, thereby strengthening inter-ethnic connection and belonging, while at the same time being more accessible to other ethnic groups. Others have chosen to worship in their particular ethnic

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27 See Denominational Division an Obstacle for Witness, p. 28-29.

28 Or Myanmar language, as it is now more commonly referred to. Younger people are mostly educated in Myanmar language, although they are often at a disadvantage in the education system because they have a deficiencies in that area. For this reason the introduction of bilingual or mother-tongue education has recently been advocated, see Yen Saning, “Mother-Tongue Instruction Pushed for Burma’s Schools,” *The Irrawaddy*, February 4, 2014, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/mother-tongue-instruction-pushed-burmas-schools.html.
language, whether due to a dislike of the national language or out of a desire to maintain their ethnic identity.\(^{29}\) Given the pressures and discrimination many ethnic minorities have encountered from the Burman majority, this desire to preserve and cultivate their own ethnic identity is to be expected.\(^{30}\) Samuel Ngun Ling, discussing the barriers experienced by Christians in Myanmar, offers the following observations:

Freedom of religion in Myanmar is propagandized only with a lip service and never in practice so that strict rules are being set and permissions are often required for Christian meetings, conferences, evangelistic campaign, mission fields, church buildings, Christian publications, and many others [...]. Among the restrictions that had [sic] hindered Christians and other non-Buddhist minorities for years to fully enjoy their rights and freedom of faith and expression are such things as refusing to give permission setting up [sic] the Christian churches or institutional buildings, non-issuance of passports for the Christian pastors, restricted censorship of the Christian literary works, and limited freedom of preaching and propagation of the Christian gospel among the Burman Buddhists.\(^{31}\)

It is not surprising, therefore, when Christians are reluctant to open their doors (and hearts) to this dominant Buddhist majority, and instead opt for the safety and familiarity of their own culture and community.\(^{32}\) While the demarcation along ethnic

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\(^{29}\)Thus there are Chin churches identifying as Asho, Falam, Lai, Lautu, Mizo, or Zomi. Karen churches are usually divided into Pwo Karen and Sgaw Karen, and Methodists have Telugu and Tamil churches (Salay Hta Oke, Yangon Directory for Church and Christian Ministries.)

\(^{30}\)“A number of ethnic peoples especially from among the religiously divided ethnic groups such as the Karen, the Shan, the Mon and the Rakhine are today discovered [sic] being fully asimilated into the Buddhist religion and culture, using the Burman Buddhist names, Burman language and Burman Buddhist culture at the cost of risking their existed [sic] ethnic language, religion and culture. This assimilation process historically known as 'Burmanization' was and still is threatening the cultural values and identities of the ethnic minorities in Myanmar." Ngun Ling, “Ethnicity, Religion and Theology in Asia,” 3.

\(^{31}\)Ngun Ling, Christianity Through Our Neighbours’ Eyes, 159–60.

\(^{32}\)While the Burman majority may be in the best position to initiate ethnic reconciliation (cf. Walton, “The ‘Wages of Burman-Ness:’ Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar: Journal of Contemporary Asia: Vol 43, No 1,” 12–14.), there is a missional imperative on the Christian community to act as “agents of reconciliation”, in spite of the suffering and marginalization they have suffered.
and language lines is understandable, at least in minority areas where the population consists largely of a single ethnic group, it is not particularly helpful for a church wanting to be missional. Using a minority language almost certainly precludes people from other ethnicities to join, or at least to feel welcome. This is especially relevant in multicultural urban settings, such as Yangon and other major cities that form a melting pot of cultures and ethnicities.

The Challenge of the Clergy-Laity Division

As shown earlier, the transition towards a division between clergy and laity in the church was precipitated more by historical than theological causes.\(^{33}\) The Edict of Milan (313 AD), guaranteeing religious toleration for Christianity and the Edict of Thessalonica (380 AD), which established it as the sole recognized religion of the Roman Empire, served to reinforce and expand the role and position of bishops and members of the clergy in the church (and in society).\(^{34}\) While the Reformation sought to enhance the priesthood of all believers, it was less successful in removing the barrier between clergy and laity in the church.\(^{35}\)

The prominent role of pastors, evangelists, and other ordained clergy is clearly visible in churches throughout Myanmar. Their names are prominently displayed on noticeboards, bulletins, and websites, which often include their academic credentials and

\(^{33}\) Cf. the discussion on p. 48.

\(^{34}\) Easley and Morgan, *The Community of Jesus*, loc. 3819.

\(^{35}\) Van Gelder, The Essence of the Church, 58.
titles. Religious ceremonies (baptism, communion, commissioning) and preaching are usually reserved for those who have been properly trained and ordained. Pastoral visits are normally expected to be done by the pastor, rather than an ordinary church member or even an elder. Pastors and Bible teachers are highly respected within the Christian community, and young people from Christian families are often encouraged to go to Bible college and enter Christian ministry. This stems in part from the fact that university education in Myanmar in recent decades has not been of a high standard and university degrees offered few tangible benefits after graduation. For decades, even an unaccredited Bible degree provided opportunities for young people from a poor background in a country with few other prospects. The more significant motive, however, would seem to be the belief that serving in Christian ministry is somehow considered a higher calling than working in a secular profession. A person who commits his or her life to such ministry is often considered more spiritual than an ordinary Christian.

Some Christian leaders from Myanmar recognize the problem of this “clergy-laity bifurcation” as Morris Remlal Liana calls it. They point out that pastors in Myanmar find it difficult to share their ministry with lay people. The reason given is that if they are


38 GCZ, “Interview on Christian Witness in Buddhist Myanmar.”

too close to the laypeople, they would be taken advantage of. This often results in a distance between clergy and laity.⁴⁰ Liana, serving with the Wesleyan Church of Myanmar, observes that a centuries-long history of authoritarian leadership and deference to elders and leaders in Myanmar surfaces in the Church in leadership attitudes and behaviors that do not nurture the Church. Second, and closely related to this first problem, church leaders prove unwilling and/or unable to share ministry with laypersons. In many of the Churches, the lone doers are clergy; the laity has become spectators, watching from the pews. Some pastors see their inability to do all the work in the Church by themselves, but lack leadership skills to engage their congregations in ministry. Others do not seem to grasp the need or options for developing leadership and partners in ministry among the laypeople.⁴¹

This sentiment is echoed by Karen Baptist Saw Gler Taw, who comments that “the professional elite minority ‘jealously holds the fort’, […] leading to discrimination and failure to recognize the Kayin laity.”⁴² Exploring the possible reasons for such a failure to engage the lay portion of the Christian community, Cin Do Kham suggests that Christian leaders may be unwittingly following Buddhist culture by maintaining a distance between clergy and laity. He points out that, just like Buddhist monks who are considered to be above common people and as such receive respect, they also become isolated. In Myanmar culture, people must obey leaders in everything, and thus Christian leaders usually keep a distance from laypeople.⁴³

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⁴³ Cin Do Kham, “Historical Values and Modes of Leadership in Myanmar,” 122.
In a blog article on the topic of *Laypeople and the Mission of God*, Ed Stetzer, dean of the School of Mission, Ministry, and Leadership at Wheaton College, and Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center, notes:

Every church must have a strategy and a process to equip people for ministry and mission. Thus, they create an environment where people are empowered and enabled to do ministry [...] There is a role for leadership, but we cannot miss the reality that, in most churches, there are many more passive spectators than there are active participants in the mission of God.

A missional church will naturally involve, equip, and enable its members to engage in ministry. If, on the other hand, church leaders neglect to involve their members or even hinder their participation, the church will lose its missional focus and the members are at risk of becoming passive bystanders.

Although the New Testament clearly shows that all God’s people are priests (1 Pt 2:9) and ministers (1 Pt 4:10), the reality is that people often expect someone to go to God for them and do the ministry for them. However, if God appoints leaders for the purpose of “the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12), there is no need to perpetuate this system. Perhaps pastors secretly derive their identity from doing the ministry rather than from training and equipping God’s people for ministry. Or, they may be afraid that if they train their congregation to do the ministry, the pastor will not be needed anymore. However, it is essential that

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pastors equip God’s people for ministry, not “be the shopkeeper of the religious store that provides religious rituals to ceremonialize devotion”, as Stetzer articulates it.45

The Need for Contextualization

In the eyes of the Buddhist majority in Myanmar, Christianity is considered a foreign religion, as discussed in chapter two.46 Since the reign of king Anawratha (1044-1077 AD) Burman culture and values have been deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism, shaping their thoughts, ideas, morality, and philosophy.47 When Western protestant missionaries arrived in the nineteenth century, starting with the American Baptist Mission, they were seen as part of the Western military’s economic and political occupation of Burma.48 Thus far the Christian church in Myanmar has not been able to shed its Western identity, which remains visible in the lifestyle of Burmese Christians, their worship style, and their evangelistic messages and methodologies.49

While the need for contextualization is generally acknowledged by missiologists across the theological spectrum, the concept remains controversial and suspect among

45 Ibid.
46 See pp. 25-27.
49 These are the areas proposed as in need of contextualization by Tint Lwin in “Contextualization of the Gospel: An Effective Strategy for the Evangelization of the Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 174.
some evangelicals.\textsuperscript{50} As such it is perhaps not surprising to encounter an abundance of understandings about contextualization. Jackson Wu, author of \textit{One Gospel for All Nations}, lists no fewer than thirteen different definitions and offers the following as his own contribution: “Contextualization is the interpretation, communication, and application of the biblical text in view of a cultural context.”\textsuperscript{51} Given the confusion around the term, it is perhaps helpful to distinguish contextualization from syncretism. Michael Poon, in \textit{Christian Movements in Southeast Asia}, suggests that contextualization is sensitive to the issues, concerns and thought forms of the context. It tries to address these issues and concerns in a way consistent with the larger Christian tradition. When borrowing terms and ideas from the context, these are always reinterpreted in accordance with biblical theology. Syncretism on the other hand, appropriates substantial elements from the context to bring together gospel and context. The end result is that instead of the gospel challenging culture, it becomes a part of culture.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} Cf. David J. Hesselgrave, ed., \textit{Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium} (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2010), 3. “Contextualization is not the only thing going on in Evangelical missions today, but it is surely the most controversial.”


\textsuperscript{52} Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, \textit{Christian Movements in Southeast Asia: A Theological Exploration}, CSCA Christianity in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2010), 5.
Although few publications on the need for contextualization are available in Myanmar, some scholars have written theses or dissertations on this topic. Some authors, like C. Duh Kam, focus on contextualization of theological terms, forms of discipleship similar to the monkhood, and religious festivals, as well as more outward issues, such as church-building architecture. Khai Chin Khua addresses the need for appropriate forms of worship and music, the use of redemptive analogies and symbols, and prophetic movements. Similarly, Tint Lwin proposes several areas for consideration: the lifestyle of Burmese Christians (dress, attitude toward traditional legends, music, dance and poetry), Christian worship (church architecture and music), evangelistic methodologies (cultural sensitivity and respect, conversion as a process), and the content of the Christian message (Christian response to Buddhist concepts like Annica, Dukkha, Anatta, Karma, Samsara and Nirvana; the challenge of God as Creator).


56 Tint Lwin, “Contextualization of the Gospel,” 174-257. Tint Lwin offers many helpful suggestions, some of which will be explored later.
Baptist theologian Saw Say Khu, who focuses his dissertation on the need for contextual models of church growth in Myanmar, suggests a focus on Christian attitude, lifestyle and message. He advocates a strategy focusing on discipleship, using home cell groups that promote both quantitative and qualitative growth. Furthermore, he contends for the integration of evangelism with social service. He points out that under colonial rule the missionaries and the church were strongly engaged in social programs, but after the nationalization of mission schools and hospitals, Christianity lost its role in social development for several decades. Both as a demonstration of Christian love and as a preparation for preaching the gospel message, social service has crucial significance.

The Importance of Outward-Focused Discipleship

As indicated above, Saw Say Khu considers discipleship an important element for church growth in Myanmar. In fact, he asserts that lack of assurance of salvation is one of the main reasons why Myanmar Christians are not active in evangelism. Certainly a basic conviction regarding one’s faith is indispensable for meaningful spiritual dialogue. Missional churches develop from an integral approach towards spiritual formation that seeks to nurture followers of Christ into mature believers who live out their faith in dependence on God and for his glory. The discipleship process needs to be rooted in

58 Ibid., 89.
60 This is the approach offered by Dallas Willard in The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).
biblical values, but it also needs to engage with the worldview and cultural values of the society in which people live.\textsuperscript{61} The Indian intellectual and philosopher Vishal Mangalwadi has called for a social transformation driven by the church, based on biblical, spiritual values. He contends that it was Christianity that brought the West to greatness, while much of Africa, Asia and the Middle East remained in poverty, injustice and hopelessness.\textsuperscript{62} As Myanmar emerges from decades of oppression, it faces a multitude of social, political, religious, and educational issues. At this critical time in history, the church may have to make a choice to either be inward-focused, seeking to safeguard its position and avoid drawing attention, or it can decide to rise up to the challenge and engage with a clear biblical vision for transformation of the nation, which for decades has been plagued by ethnic and religious strife.

\textsuperscript{61} The following example is from a term paper for the course \textit{Developing Missional Churches in Asian Contexts}: Floyd McClung’s ministry in Amsterdam’s red light district was sometimes met with angry or hateful responses from the locals involved in the sex trade. McClung learned to not respond with the same attitude of anger or hate, but instead with love and kindness, thereby breaking through the resistance put up by their defenses: “All of us must learn to live out our ordinary, everyday lives in the power of the Spirit. It means responding to people in the opposite spirit to that which we see around us – showing purity where there is immorality, peace instead of violence, forgiveness rather than bitterness, and generosity in place of greed and selfishness.” When Christians in Myanmar encounter an attitude of ethnic or religious \textit{pride}, how would it be if followers of Jesus would respond with sincere meekness? And what if – when people are bent on trying to control their destiny – Christians show that their trust is in God alone? Finally, rather than pursuing wealth or a more comfortable life, Christians could make serving others their priority. By turning society’s values on their head Christ’s disciples will at the same time engage and challenge these norms. Rather than become ingrown and self-focused, the church transform not only individuals, but society as a whole. Arend Van Dorp, “Developing Missional Churches in the Myanmar Context” (TM751 Term Paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2015), 35.

Working toward Reconciliation and Diversity

This outward-focused discipleship will be needed for the church to fulfil its calling to be a light to the nations, a royal priesthood representing Christ and demonstrating the transforming power of reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul makes it abundantly clear that our reconciliation with God makes believers into agents of reconciliation, as He “reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18). Obviously, such a ministry cannot be fulfilled unless this reconciliation extends to one another. Paul made that clear when he said to the Corinthians regarding a repentant brother that they “ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”

Reconciliation with God and with One Another

Reconciliation has only recently been recognized as a significant missiological theme. However, starting with Miroslav Volf in 1997, and continuing during the last two decades, the topic has received significant attention at various gatherings. He argues that in order for Christian communities to become peacemakers and reconcilers in situations of ethnic conflict, they need to not only understand the biblical message of

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64 2 Cor 2:7. Also Eph 4:32 and Col 3:13, where Paul exhorts believers to “forgiv[e] each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

65 David Bosch treats reconciliation only in passing (Bosch, Transforming Mission, 394.)

66 For a helpful overview of these developments, see Rowan, “Proclaiming the Peacemaker,” 54.
reconciliation, but also more importantly to comprehend "the inherent social meaning of reconciliation." Too often, according to Volf, reconciliation has either been reduced to the restoration of an individual relationship with God, or else reconciliation has been replaced by the pursuit of social justice and liberation. He consequently argues for an understanding of reconciliation with both vertical and horizontal dimensions. This becomes evident from his conviction that “though grace is unthinkable without justice, justice is subordinate to grace” and “though reconciliation of human beings to God has priority, reconciliation between human beings is intrinsic to their reconciliation to God.”

While forgiveness and reconciliation on the individual level are often difficult enough, these issues become even more challenging on a group level. Myanmar society, with its deep-rooted and entrenched divisions, presents a daunting task for the church to be a reconciled and reconciling community. A major contributor to this problem is the fact that identity (both individual and communal) is usually bound up with ethnicity.

Volf (quoting Jacob Neusner) challenges Christians to consider that “the ultimate allegiance of those whose father is Abraham can be only to the God of ‘all families of the earth,’ not to any particular country, culture, or family with their local deities.”

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68 Ibid., 7.

69 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 2010), 37. Volf, quoting Ralph Premdas, comments: “Along with their parishioners the clergy are often ‘trapped within the claims of their own ethnic or cultural community’ and thus serve as ‘legitimators of ethnic conflict, their genuine desire to take seriously the Gospel call to the ministry of reconciliation notwithstanding.’”

70 Ibid., 39.
Elaborating on how God’s election of one man, Abraham, can serve as an instrument of blessing for all nations (peoples), Volf explains the connection between universality and particularity as follows:

[T]he oneness of God requires God’s universality; God’s universality entails human equality; human equality implies equal access by all to the blessings of the one God; equal access is incompatible with ascription of religious significance to genealogy; Christ, the seed of Abraham, is both the fulfillment of the genealogical promise to Abraham and the end of genealogy as a privileged locus of access to God; faith in Christ replaces birth into a people. As a consequence, all people can have access to the one God of Abraham and Sarah on equal terms, none by right and all by grace. 71

Thus, through faith in Christ all of humanity is welcomed into God’s family. Christians need to avoid creating a new, separate culture, by which they would isolate themselves from their own. Instead, while stepping with one foot outside their culture, they should remain with the other foot within it. Although separate and different from others, they still belong. These are the paradoxes of the Christian church: united yet diverse, separate though still belonging, fostering community without exclusion.

However, inclusion is not the end point. In order to move from inclusion to embrace another step is needed: forgiveness. In a fractured and divided society like Myanmar this is a sensitive topic. The reality is that almost all people consider themselves victims in one way or another. Minorities have experienced violence and harassment perpetrated by the majority Bamar, while many Bamar themselves would argue that they, too, have been victims of army and police brutality, and even the military will contend that they have been obliged to use force because of provocations by the

71 Ibid., 45.
ethnic armed groups. Almost no one is prepared to acknowledge responsibility for their role in the continuing conflicts in the country. Consequently, the vicious cycle of violence, suffering and hatred continues, making a resolution to the conflict more difficult. Volf’s portrayal of the situation is as poignant as it is tragic: “If perpetrators were repentant, forgiveness would come more easily. But too often they are not. And so, both victim and perpetrator are imprisoned in the automatism of mutual exclusion, unable to forgive or repent and united in a perverse communion of hate.” In addition, even if there was a recognition of responsibility and culpability, the harm and suffering can never be undone. As Volf says, “our actions are irreversible.” The only way out is through forgiveness, because “unless people manage to forsake their determination to ‘get even’, there can be no new beginning, no transformation of relationships. Everyone will remain imprisoned in a particular history or mythology, recycling old crimes and hatreds.”

Volf’s point is not that forgiveness will necessarily bring suffering to an end – in fact

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73 Ibid., 20.

74 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 120. Jelle van Essen, in his study of the post Cold War inter-ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia, observes that “in most large-scale societal conflicts both antagonistic groups are simultaneously victims and aggressors. Even though both parties are to blame for violent acts, apologies rarely occur for several reasons: First, both parties perceive themselves primarily as victims and not as aggressors. Also, both conflicting groups expect an apology, instead of having to apologize themselves. Third, perpetrators seldom think that they did something wrong during the conflict. They see their abuses as righteous behavior for their country or ethnic group.” Jelle P. Van Essen, “Recognizing Reconciliation: The Role of Culture on Post World War II and Post-Cold War Reconciliatory Processes and Acts of Apology” (MA Thesis, Erasmus University, 2014), 18.

75 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 121.

forgiveness may be considered in itself a form of suffering – but that it allows the one who forgives to move beyond the wrongdoing and to focus on the future, rather than continue to dwell on the past.

Robert Schreiter, in a lecture on a theology of reconciliation, points out that reconciliation is first and foremost the work of God. However, when examining reconciliation between people, he stresses that God’s reconciling work begins with the victim. God’s healing work in the victim sometimes makes it possible for the victim to forgive the wrongdoer even before repentance takes place.77 This may result in a transformation of both the victim and the wrongdoer. Suffering, although not good in and of itself, can acquire meaning in the context of Christ’s suffering. However, reconciliation will only be complete once God has eradicated all suffering.

Cho Cho Myaing, writing specifically in the context of the situation in Myanmar, concludes that forgiveness is the primary way towards a fundamental transformation of both victim and perpetrator and that it should play a central role in both social and individual transformation.78 This has profound implications, not only for Christian community, but also for evangelism, as I. Howard Marshall notes:

[T]hose who make known the gospel and who live as Christians in the world share the reconciling love of the God whose servants they are. They cannot very well preach a gospel of reconciliation to a people with whom they themselves are not prepared to live in peace and love. One cannot shout the gospel across a


chasm to people on the other side so that they may have a relationship with God above but not one with those on this side of the chasm.\textsuperscript{79}

This is one of the great challenges for the church in Myanmar, as illustrated in chapter two.\textsuperscript{80} For Christians to overcome their fears and reluctance to extend to those from other ethnicities the grace they themselves have received, they need to embrace the reality of their own reconciliation with God and with one another. Reconciliation is inherently connected with diversity and inclusivity. These themes will be explored in the last section of this chapter.

The Missional Impact of an Inclusive Community

Buddhism has traditionally absorbed a variety of local customs, rituals and practices, or at least sought to coexist with pre-existing religious traditions wherever it was established.\textsuperscript{81} Christianity, on the other hand, has tended to define much clearer boundaries between what is and what is not acceptable in terms of religious practices.\textsuperscript{82} To avoid falling into syncretism missionaries have usually drawn clear and strict lines demarcating and restricting inappropriate conduct. While inherently sensible, this has created the notion among Buddhist people that Christians are rigid and intolerant. When a


\textsuperscript{80} See “The Church and the Challenge of Reconciliation, p. 37ff.


Buddhist learns that “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them” (John 3:18), this is seen as prejudiced and narrow-minded. This impression of Christianity as exclusionist and restrictive is bolstered by the perception that church membership is predominantly based on ethnic identity and affiliation.83

In order to overcome such perceptions, the church will need to consider its self-understanding in light of the biblical-theological insights established in this chapter. In particular, the unified nature of the church as the body of Christ, its calling as an inclusive community, and its composition as a multi-ethnic mosaic need to receive more attention. Recognizing these aspects of the church as essential will be a vital component in working toward a more missional model of the church in Myanmar.

83 In the context of this paper, there is not enough space to discuss the issue of a contextualized gospel presentation for Myanmar. However, several recent publications have addressed this need, highlighting the need for a more honor-shame-based approach, e.g. Wu, One Gospel for All Nations; Werner Mischke, The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World (Scottsdale, AZ: Mission ONE, 2015).
PART THREE:

MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER 5
GOALS & PLANS FOR MISSIONAL CHURCHES IN MYANMAR

This chapter introduces an inclusive model for developing missional churches in Myanmar. The model seeks to promote reconciliation and embrace multi-ethnic diversity, creating a welcoming environment toward building a transformational community. In order to analyze and evaluate such a transformational process, it was presented for their feedback to participants at the OMF Mission Research Consultation\(^1\) in Singapore in June 2019 and to members of OMF International serving in various ministries in Myanmar. Furthermore, staff and post-graduate students at the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (MEGST) in Yangon were introduced to this missional church model for the Myanmar context at the Faculty and Post-graduate Theological Forum. They were encouraged to evaluate this model for use within their churches and ministries.

\(^1\) OMF International is an international, interdenominational mission agency, founded in 1865 by James Hudson Taylor as China Inland Mission. Since 1951 OMF has been working throughout East Asia, with its international office based in Singapore.
Steps Toward Becoming More Missional

Churches may struggle to become missional without taking intentional steps and measures. Like any other community and social entity, they have created patterns of behavior and models of operation over time. These have developed into solid traditions establishing a common identity. Moving toward an alternate model of operation will therefore require purposeful planning and deliberate action plans. The previous chapter has identified several biblical-theological elements of a missional church model, which will now be developed into more concrete strategies and plans.

Discipleship Focus: Pursuing Life-Changing Spiritual Formation

While discipleship as a concept and discipleship programs as a practical application have received significant attention in recent years in Myanmar as elsewhere, these efforts have often been focused on individual change and formation. However, as suggested before, discipleship requires a more comprehensive, holistic approach based on a biblical understanding of the church as a welcoming community, a diverse but unified body of followers of Christ. In such a context, discipleship is more than a program to help new believers understand the basic teachings and apply various practices of the Christian life. Not only is it a life-long process of spiritual growth, but it is also a praxis which involves the entire congregation. Moreover, it is not aimed exclusively at the growth of

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2 The tendency to focus discipleship efforts on the individual can be seen in the widespread used of discipleship materials, often produced in the West and translated into Burmese. These materials tend to limit discipleship to personal spiritual growth through Bible study and the individual’s journey of faith.

3 Branson and Martínez, Churches, Cultures & Leadership, 43.
individual believers toward maturity; rather, it involves establishing patterns and practices leading to spiritual transformation of the entire community. Discipleship as a missional church praxis is thus a life-long process, involving the entire congregation, impacting the whole community. Discipleship in a missional perspective thus incorporates the whole of life, the whole church and the whole of society. The impact of the Good News of Jesus Christ in Myanmar will not depend on verbal proclamation only (however essential that is), but also on true, life-changing conduct of Christians within their spheres of influence. The changed lives of church members, both individually and communally demonstrating outward-focused discipleship, will send a powerful message of reconciliation to a society riven by contentious ideologies of ethnic and religious identity.

Inclusive Communities: Embracing Ethnic Diversity in Churches

An environment that accentuates ethnic identity and classifies communities based on their religious affiliation poses a challenge to inclusiveness and ethnic diversity. As Miroslav Volf argues, "the problem of ethnic and cultural conflicts is part of a larger problem of identity and otherness." This inclusive embracing, however, is exactly what the gospel requires and what the church should embody. John Woodward stresses the importance of churches crossing “ethnic, class and age barriers because one of the statements our world needs to see is that there can be unity in diversity when Jesus is

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4 Ibid., 42. “No one learns from experience. One learns only from experience one reflects upon and articulates.”

5 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 16.
king of that community.” While the tendency in Myanmar is to emphasize the otherness of divergent ethnic communities, the church as an inclusive community is called to draw people together rather than separate them. Christians must learn, according to one theological student from Myanmar, to

accept not only the unity of humanity but also the cultural diversity that ethnic groups bring to the churches in Myanmar today. One of the tasks of the Church in a given culture is to contribute to the flowering of that culture, as well as to make sure that the salutary sense of ethnic belonging does not turn into ethnic aggressions towards the ‘stranger who is within the gates’ or towards neighboring ethnic groups. It is therefore the responsibility of the Church to work towards genuine community, in which each ethnic group remains faithful to its dynamic and changing identity and yet is enriched by and enriches others.7

The penchant toward exclusion does not necessarily stem from a deliberate effort to reject others, but may arise from an unconscious preference toward those from their own community and faith tradition. What is needed, therefore, is to realize one’s own susceptibility towards discrimination, springing from a tendency to reject others who are different from oneself. Once a process of outward-focused discipleship has been initiated, it should foster a new perspective of welcoming and embracing people from an array of ethnic backgrounds.

Mobilization of the Laity: Involving All Members in Ministry

Not only should the church be a welcoming community, whatever one’s background or ethnic identity, but the church should also engage all members in

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6 Woodward, Creating a Missional Culture, 56.

7 Puia, “Ethnic Diversities and Their Impacts of Today’s Churches” (MDiv Thesis, Myanmar Institute of Theology, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2015), 42.
ministry. This aspect has been discussed in chapter four (The Challenge of the Clergy-Laity Division), but it is important to reiterate it here, as there are significant ramifications for the missional impact of the church. Without the active participation of its members, the church in Myanmar may not be able to fulfill its calling as an agent of transformation and reconciliation.

In his book *Creating a Missional Culture*, J.R. Woodward offers a new model for churches from its leadership structure to its mobilization of the laity. He asserts that “creating a missional culture helps the church live out her calling to be a sign of the kingdom, pointing people to the reality beyond what we can see, a foretaste of the kingdom where we grow to love one another as Christ loves us, and an instrument in the hands of God to bring more of heaven to earth in concrete ways.” He calls for a new kind of leadership, labelled polycentric leadership. His premise is that church leaders should not act as gatekeepers, but equippers. He distinguishes five types of equipping (as seen in the chart below) based on Ephesians 4:11-12, linking them to specific environments they create.

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8 For an examination of the church as welcoming community, see chapter 4 (Christ has removed the barriers), p. 94.


10 Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 29. He also writes, “the church needs a polycentric approach to leadership, where the equippers enable their *fellow priests* to live to their sacred potential.” (italics in the original).

11 Ibid., 189. In the context of this paper the focus is primarily on the relationship between the role of the equippers and the environments they cultivate.
Table 2. Equipping roles and missional environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equipper</th>
<th>Thick Practices (Liturgies)</th>
<th>Environments They Cultivate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apostles</strong> (dream awakeners)</td>
<td>Sabbath</td>
<td>Cultivate a <em>thriving environment</em> that calls people to join God in the redemption of all things by developing a strong discipleship ethos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making disciples</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prophets</strong> (heart revealers)</td>
<td>Being present to God (silence, solitude, fasting)</td>
<td>Cultivate a <em>liberating environment</em> that dares people to embody a holistic gospel, helping people experience liberation from personal and social sins, by forming spirit-transforming communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breaking bread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evangelists</strong> (story tellers)</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>Cultivate a <em>welcoming environment</em> that invites people to bless their neighbors and be redemptive agents in their vocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing God’s story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pastors</strong> (soul healers)</td>
<td>Confession</td>
<td>Cultivate a <em>healing environment</em> in which people learn to embody the ministry of reconciliation and cultivate a life-giving spirituality in God’s new family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peacemaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers</strong> (light givers)</td>
<td>Sacred assemblies</td>
<td>Cultivate a <em>learning environment</em> where people immerse themselves in God’s narrative and engage in praxis and future-oriented living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future-oriented living</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, apostles cultivate a thriving environment, prophets create a liberating environment, evangelists generate a welcoming environment, pastors foster a healing environment, and teachers establish a learning environment. What this model illustrates is the complementarity of polycentric leadership roles in the church and the purpose of each function in creating an enabling environment where church members have opportunities
to engage in various aspects of church ministry. Woodward calls on churches and church leaders to cultivate an equipping ethos, an environment where leaders act less like multi-talented star players and more like coaches and air traffic controllers, enabling and directing others to exercise their God-given abilities. This is vital for churches seeking to involve all members in ministry.

Contextualized Practices and Communication

As suggested in the previous chapter, there is an urgent need to consider contextualized patterns of Christian life and ministry in Myanmar. Not many published resources are available, either in Burmese or English, although some academic papers can be found in local theological libraries. One of the elements most often mentioned as essential for contextualizing Christianity is the need for a renewed appreciation of Myanmar culture and traditions. Tint Lwin recommends a greater adherence to Myanmar dress code and a deeper appreciation of traditional literature, music, dance and poetry. He also challenges churches to reconsider Christian worship styles, such as Western music and evangelistic approaches, and showing more respect for indigenous customs and practices. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, he encourages Christians to think through how the Christian gospel message interacts with Buddhist beliefs regarding

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12 Ibid., 199. Ed Stetzer contrasts this with the traditional role of pastors as being “the shopkeeper of the religious store providing religious rituals to ceremonially devote a religious hierarchy to outsource people’s religious obligations.” Stetzer, “Laypeople and the Mission of God.”

impermanence, suffering and selfhood.\textsuperscript{14} Van Ram Oke adds several other elements, such as showing appropriate respect rather than a condescending attitude, and serving in practical ways, such as attention to physical needs, including healing, as well as deliverance. He also suggests considering how the gospel meets felt needs, especially fear and shame.\textsuperscript{15}

C. Duh Kam approaches contextualization differently, focusing on the contrast between seemingly similar theological concepts, which need clarification in the communication between Buddhists and Christians. Buddhists, influenced by the concept of \textit{karma}, often misunderstand Christ’s substitutionary atonement, a key element in Christian soteriology.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Agape} is very different from the Buddhist belief in \textit{metta-karuna}, while the Kingdom of God is diametrically opposed to the concept of \textit{samsara-nirvana}.\textsuperscript{17} Finally, the relationship between sin and suffering is fundamentally different between Christian and Buddhist thought. Other areas where understandings diverge and misunderstandings can easily arise are between the significance of religious buildings (churches versus pagodas) and festivals, and Christian discipleship versus Buddhist monkhood.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}[itemsep=0pt]
    \item Van Ram Oke, “Missioners as Contextualizers,” 105–115.
    \item Ibid., 229–233.
    \item Ibid., 234–245.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Saw Say Khu points out several areas in need of contextualization. First, he notes Christian attitude, especially avoiding a sense of superiority or a seeing Buddhists as “objects of spiritual conquest.”19 Secondly, he mentions every Christian’s lifestyle, particularly outside the church, in the family and the workplace. Thirdly, he encourages Christians to study Buddhism, in order to be able to share the gospel in a relevant way. Finally, Christians need to explain how Christ sets people free from fear, including fear of the nats.20 In summary, contextualization requires adaptations in the areas of attitude, lifestyle, and accurate, relevant communication of the gospel message.

**Focus groups**

In order to determine the suitability and effectiveness of the proposed missional model, a seminar covering the main points of this paper was presented to several audiences. These settings were selected to cover a variety of participants, one group consisting of Myanmar nationals, while a second group was composed of cross-cultural workers in Myanmar, from both Asian and Western backgrounds. A third audience comprised mission practitioners working throughout East Asia.21 The groups were chosen on the basis of missiological insight, mission experience in Myanmar, and expert knowledge of the ministry situation in the context. In each case, participants were asked

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20 Ibid., 62.

21 These groups will be further described in the next chapter.
to provide feedback using a form with open-ended questions.\textsuperscript{22} Involvement in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

Participants at the OMF Mission Research Consultation

Every three years OMF International organizes a four-day Mission Research Consultation in Singapore, where several speakers address topics of interest to the mission community. The most recent event, which took place in June 2019, provided the first opportunity to present a summary of this doctoral project to an informed audience and receive feedback. Participants represented a wide spectrum, from mission practitioners to missiological scholars, from both Western and Asian backgrounds. Most had years, or even decades, of experience in Asian contexts. The lecture was distributed to participants in advance and a response took place after the presentation, followed by a question-and-answer session. A feedback form was distributed to the approximately fifty participants, of which seventeen were returned.\textsuperscript{23}

Most responses expressed appreciation for introducing the concept of multi-ethnic churches in a multi-cultural context. Several individuals welcomed the historical overview, which described the obstacles faced by the church as a result of the colonial legacy of missionary work in Myanmar.\textsuperscript{24} There was overwhelming support for the concept of inclusive, multi-cultural churches, although some respondents questioned

\textsuperscript{22} See Appendix A, p. 137.

\textsuperscript{23} The low response rate was probably due to the heavy schedule of the consultation and the volume of reading materials for the participants.

\textsuperscript{24} Response MRC 01, MRC 03, MRC 14, MRC 17.
whether this amounted to a universal model. In particular, the question was raised whether this model would be appropriate outside of urbanized, ethnically mixed communities.\textsuperscript{25} Some comments suggested providing concrete examples of multi-ethnic churches in the Myanmar context.\textsuperscript{26} Others pointed out the difficulty of applying the proposed principles in the polarized environment of ethnic identity politics. Two respondents reasoned that minority communities should not be compelled to sacrifice their cultural identity for the sake of reaching the majority population.\textsuperscript{27} However, in a country where more than ninety-percent of the Christians belong to minorities comprising a mere fifteen-percent of the population, it could be argued that the church has an obligation to reach out beyond its own communities. Several of these helpful suggestions were incorporated in subsequent presentations.

Post-Graduate Seminar at the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology

A second opportunity to introduce the concept of multi-ethnic churches in a multicultural society arose with an invitation to present this model at the MEGST post-graduate seminar in Yangon, one of the largest theological seminaries in Myanmar, and one of only two institutions in Myanmar accredited by the Asia Theological Association (ATA). Approximately ten faculty members and fifteen post-graduate students took part in the seminar, and feedback was received from eleven participants. Most participants

\textsuperscript{25} Response MRC 01, MRC 12.

\textsuperscript{26} Response MRC 06, MRC 08, MRC 12.

\textsuperscript{27} Response MRC 07, MRC 11.
belong to the country’s Chin minority, although some have other backgrounds, such as Karen or Kachin, as well as a few non-Asians. While the audience consisted almost entirely of Myanmar people, responses were generally in line with the first group. This was encouraging, as it confirmed that the observations from relative outsiders were essentially consistent with the local audience. Several commented that, although biblically sound, the multi-ethnic church model might not be easy to implement in Myanmar’s fractured society. One person articulated this frustration, saying “this reminds us once again of our century-old problem.”28 Others reflected on the difficulty of requiring ethnic minority people to relinquish their distinctives, such as worship in their own language and using their own ethnic traditions.29 Some inquired whether there might be examples of Bamar-led multi-ethnic churches in Yangon.30 One participant was challenged to see churches become “a bridge between people groups so that they can receive Bamar people in the church.”31 Another respondent noted that “this presentation changed my thinking to address a missional church. We have to help Bamar people in the church maintain their identity”, while a number of other participants also indicated how they had been impacted in similar ways.32

28 Response MEGST 04.

29 “Perhaps we can say the model is idealistic, i.e. Christians agree about unity in principle, but then limit that unity to their own group. People separate into like-minded groups and see themselves as right, with God on their side.” Response MEGST 11.

30 Response MEGST 05.

31 Response MEGST 09.

32 Response MEGST 06
Overall, it was encouraging to observe a number of participants being led to reflect on the need to bridge the gap between the Christian ethnic minority community and the majority Buddhist Bamar population. Several individuals acknowledged the obstacles posed by Christian resentment toward Buddhists in general and Bamar Buddhists in particular, while some recognized that Christians should do more to address this negative attitude. It was clear that many of them wrestle with the tension between their desire to reach out to Bamar Buddhists on the one hand, and the need to preserve their ethnic identity and traditions on the other.

Members of OMF International serving in Myanmar

Although OMF is not officially registered in Myanmar, individuals associated with OMF International have lived in the country since 2002. Currently, more than ten different nationalities are represented. These individuals are involved in a variety of activities, ranging from social engagement to language teaching, and from missional business to church ministries. The team consists of people from a broad range of countries in Europe, North America and Asia. A recent gathering provided an opportunity to present the material on “Multi-ethnic Churches in a Multi-cultural Context” and elicit feedback from the audience.

The challenges facing churches in Myanmar were familiar to most of the listeners. Several respondents affirmed the difficulties encountered in breaking out of the social and religious isolation so prevalent in Myanmar. One respondent, however, pointed out that, while ethnic background is often a defining attribute of Christian identity, others do not have a strong sense of ethnicity because “their ethnicity is so mixed and those people
have different obstacles or strong point when they became believers.”33 Where this is indeed the case, these people could actually become bridgebuilders, peace makers, or agents of reconciliation.

Another respondent commented that “we need to encourage the Myanmar Christian community to respond [to] this ethnical division issue by themselves […] They have experienced church and mission since 1813, but in their society their influence is weak. They struggle how to apply the love of Christ to their division and unity issue.”34 This same person compared the situation in Myanmar with that in Korea, saying “the South Korea church has met big challenges regarding unification of North and South. It is so complicated, mixed with historical and ideological background. However, we are all called […] to do something different and try to be peacemakers like Jesus.”35

A third person reflecting on the challenge for the church to build bridges to the Muslim population of Myanmar, asked: “Is it possible to build a multi-ethnic church with Rohingya people, because we need to approach them in a different way?”36 This is perhaps an even greater challenge, as Muslims are almost universally despised in Myanmar, even among Christians. Reaching out to them might actually further alienate

33 Response OMF MM 01.
34 Response OMF MM 02.
35 Ibid.
36 Response OMF MM 04.
the church from the Buddhist Bamar. This issue poses a substantial conundrum for the church.\textsuperscript{37}

Yet another respondent expressed appreciation for the emphasis on “unity in diversity as well as reconciliation instead of ethnic exclusivism, finding identity in Jesus instead of in race, culture, or social class.” At the same time, this person pointed to the challenge to “proclaim the gospel and be an agent for reconciliation in new ways, so that the proclaiming does not lead to disharmony, enmity or hatred.”\textsuperscript{38} There is a world of difference between the so-called harmony promoted by authorities in Myanmar and a unity in diversity that Christians should demonstrate.

Finally, one respondent drew attention to the “intersection of dominant language and culture, and Burmanization.” He asked, “how do we recognize and acknowledge the implicit role of language in cultural domination?” This is undeniably a key aspect of the dominant role of Burmanization, which is addressed in the first chapter of this study.\textsuperscript{39}

Another comment related to how “Christianization was complicit in the unhelpful forming of ethnicities, but at the same time the gospel, by breaking down these human barriers, itself is a source of transformative hope.” Both comments are valid and, although they did not feature prominently in the presentation, are addressed earlier in this study in the discussion on the post-colonial legacy of church and mission.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} Response OMF MM 08.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Bamar Pride and Prejudice, p. 15-19.

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. The Post-colonial Legacy, p. 6ff. and Christianity Seen as Western Import, p. 27f.
Overall, the respondents’ comments reveal both the immense challenges facing
the church in Myanmar, and the responsibility resting on that same church to be an
instrument of reconciliation, to be peacemakers in a country devastated by decades of
civil war, ethnic division and mutual suspicion. Christians need to recognize their
complicity in some of the divisive behaviors, while at the same time demonstrating a
willingness to forgive those who have committed terrible acts of injustice against them.
Only the power of love through Jesus Christ and an appreciation of his forgiveness will
enable Myanmar Christians to embrace others who need God’s grace as well.
CHAPTER 6
IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

This chapter describes the process of introducing the missional church model to seminary students through a mission course and relevant assignments. The purpose of this course is to introduce theological students in Myanmar to the missional church model presented here in order to kindle initiatives leading to more diverse, inclusive churches in Myanmar. It is hoped that these churches will attract interest among Bamar Buddhist people, as they will feel more at home in a more welcoming environment.

Project Summary

The aim of this project is to encourage a renewed thinking among Christians in Myanmar in general, and among church leaders in particular, regarding ethnic identity and inclusivity, with the end goal being to develop biblical approaches to ministry in a multicultural context. Given the often deeply-held convictions regarding church practices and traditions in many churches, the focus of this project will be on seminary students preparing for future ministry. The expectation is that they will be more receptive to the concepts and suggestions offered in this study than most pastors and other church leaders, who may have an interest in maintaining traditional customs and practices. While initially
these students may not have a major influence and authority to initiate change, they eventually will be in positions where they can have a greater impact. Having grown up in a society with more freedom and outside influences than their seniors, they would likely be more inclined to consider new ideas and introduce new models of ministry. The focus of this project will be on the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, as this seminary is one of the larger and better-known theological institutions in the country and comprises students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In the future, however, this curriculum could also be introduced at other theological institutions in Myanmar.

**Timeline**

In order to implement the missional church curriculum, several preparatory steps are being taken. Initially, a missional church seminar was developed in early 2019, based on the research findings and recommendations in this project. This missional church seminar was then presented to various audiences both within and outside Myanmar between June and August 2019. Following these presentations, its appropriateness and effectiveness was evaluated between August and September. Later, between October and December, a Missional Church curriculum, based on the material of the Missional Church seminar, will be developed. This curriculum will then be implemented in 2020, first at MEGST and possibly later in other settings, after which an evaluation will take place. Following completion of these phases, other opportunities to organize and implement this course will be considered.
Table 3. Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missional Church Seminar Developed</td>
<td>April – May 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missional Church Seminar Presented</td>
<td>June – July 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missional Church Seminar Evaluated</td>
<td>August – September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missional Church Curriculum Developed</td>
<td>October – December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missional Church Curriculum Implemented</td>
<td>January – February 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and Analysis</td>
<td>March – April 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Desired Outcomes

This project aims to inspire the church in Myanmar to expand beyond the confines of its historical boundaries and reach out to the communities around them. To this end a concise outline of the colonial history of the country was compiled in chapter one of this project, followed by an overview of the challenges faced by the church in the present-day ministry context. Next, a biblical-theological reflection on the essence of the church in a pluralist society was presented, including implications for missional ministry. Finally, strategies for implementation were suggested. Together, these strategies should bring about the following desired outcomes for the project.
Understand the Biblical View of the Church and Its Mission

Participants in the missional church course will be able to describe the essential characteristics of the church, such as being a unified body, a called-out community, and a multi-ethnic mosaic. They will identify the implications of such a view for the mission of the church, such as what an understanding of the church as one body in Christ (Romans 12), the removal of barriers between believers (Ephesians 2), and our witness to the world (John 13) have to do with being a missional church.

Recognize the Obstacles to Being a Missional Church in Myanmar

Course participants will be able to describe various obstacles to being a missional church in a pluralist society like Myanmar. These include the challenges posed by ethnic denominationalism that results in widespread fragmentation among churches, which is so prevalent in Myanmar. Related to this is the division between clergy and laity found in many churches, often leading to low participation of ordinary church members in ministry activities of the church. Furthermore, the lack of contextualization in religious practices and gospel communication strategies forms an impediment to being more missional in the Myanmar context. Finally, a missional approach is hampered by discipleship programs that center on individual spiritual growth, rather than outward-focused discipleship that aims for a spiritual transformation of the entire community.

Embrace Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation

Participants will be able to explain how reconciliation with God is inherently linked to reconciliation with others by showing that it has both vertical and horizontal
dimensions. They will establish that our identity as Christians supersedes national, ethnic or cultural identities and fosters a welcoming community based on forgiveness and reconciliation. They will be prepared to embrace reconciliation and acknowledge forgiveness as an integral part of discipleship.

Commit to Create Inclusive Christian Communities

Participants will commit to building inclusive communities where people from all ethnic and religious backgrounds feel welcome. In a society where a person’s identity is shaped to a large extent by his or her ethnic affinity, Christians are called to build a community across ethnic boundaries. Students will reflect on individual and communal attitudes and practices that may alienate people from other ethnicities, and suggest ways to address these obstacles. They will recommend (and where possible implement) ways to ameliorate such praxes and introduce new ones which will contribute to becoming more welcoming, inclusive Christian communities.

Resources

This project focuses on seminary students in Myanmar who are preparing for future ministry in the church and in mission. The context for the project will be a theological seminary setting. The resources needed are associated with this context and will consist of course materials, teaching aids, and a classroom setting.
Materials: Missional Church Course, Computer, Projector, Whiteboard

The primary resource for this project will be a missional church course curriculum, derived from this doctoral project and adapted for the intended audience of Myanmar seminary students. The required and recommended readings will be selected based on suitability and availability to the course participants. They will be adjusted in length and complexity according to the students’ English proficiency. Most of the shorter readings will be photocopied and distributed to the students, while one or two books will be available locally, either in English or Myanmar language. Other materials and equipment needed are a (laptop) computer, projector and screen in order to present the lectures, as well as a whiteboard for notetaking and illustrations.

Space: Seminary Lecture Room

The course will be taught in one of the regular seminary classrooms. There are no particular requirements for this space, other than standard prerequisites such as tables, chairs and a whiteboard. However, the unstable and unpredictable state of the electricity network may have implications when using projection equipment in order to show a PowerPoint presentation. This could be mitigated by installing a backup power source through an inverter and battery.

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1 Cf. Appendix B.
Timing and Duration

While the topic of this project is important enough to merit its own academic course, this will probably not be possible in the present circumstances, as the curriculum is well-established. However, this project could well become a standard component of an existing course. The Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology offers four majors, biblical studies, theology, mission and pastoral studies. This project could probably be integrated in either the mission or pastoral studies major, or both. It would be particularly suitable for inclusion in MS 762 Mission Strategies, or PS751 Peace Making, while other options would be MS761 Urban Mission or MS771 Cross-cultural Communication.

In terms of the scope or duration of the course, this would require a minimum of four class hours, although it would preferably comprise six to ten hours. The time allotted to this course will primarily depend on the needs of the seminary and on how they assess the importance of this topic. In view of the time needed to prepare and schedule this course, it seems likely that it could be offered from 2020 or 2021.

Leadership: Seminary Faculty and Staff

Although this project and the resulting course syllabus were developed independently of the seminary, the implementation will depend on and be determined by the seminary faculty, in particular the Vice Principal for Academic Affairs. Having received the opportunity to present the core material to the seminary faculty and post-
graduate students at a recent seminar and obtaining predominantly positive feedback,\(^2\) it is envisaged that this proposal will also receive a favorable response. However, the final decision and course details will depend on the seminary leadership.

**Assessment**

Student assessment will be based on completing all the course requirements, including required readings, class participation, and achieving the course outcomes. The final grade will be based in part on the students’ application of the course outcomes to an actual church situation where they are involved. They will be asked to devise a plan of action for a missional church in a multi-ethnic context.

**Student Responses as Indicated on Course Evaluations**

Evaluating the effectiveness of this project will be done by inviting the students to fill out a course evaluation, similar to the feedback form used in the testing phase.\(^3\) These evaluations will be voluntary and anonymous. The students’ responses will not affect their grade or assessment in any way. The feedback will be used solely to assess and improve the course content and delivery for future use.

**Student Application to Church Ministry**

A second avenue for course assessment will be through appraising the students’ application of insights gained throughout the course. In particular, focus will be placed on

\(^2\) Cf. Post-graduate seminar at Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, p. 119.

\(^3\) Cf. Appendix A.
their implementation of concrete missional church principles learned during the course and applied through cogent and relevant praxis. The purpose of this course is to generate innovative thinking and appropriate strategies, and thus its effectiveness will be determined by the actual outcomes of the students’ assignments. These will be evaluated against the stated objectives of the course. The findings will inform and shape future iterations of the course.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The inspiration for this project arose from the observation that many churches in Myanmar struggle to effectively reach out to their surrounding communities, especially in multi-ethnic locations, such as Yangon and other urban areas. While most churches thrive within their own ethno-cultural communities, they often struggle to connect with the larger Buddhist-related population around them. This observation prompted an examination of the causes behind the Christian-Buddhist divide in Myanmar, the history of mission work in this country and the biblical-theological foundations of a missional church.

The purpose of this project was to explore a missional model for churches in Myanmar so that they may become more diverse and welcoming to various ethnicities in the country. This venture required a rethinking of the nature of the church, and the need for reconciliation among the various ethnic groups within the Myanmar church. Such internal reconciliation could lead toward forming more inclusive communities, where people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds also feel welcome. This project attempts to show how the present situation resulted from a combination of historical, political and religious factors. Subsequently, this study considered the missiological, ecclesiological and theological factors that have shaped and molded the church in Myanmar, followed by an evaluation of relevant theological reflections on the essence and mission of the church, particularly the implications for the church in a multi-cultural context. These notions formed the framework for a biblical-theological study of the nature of the church, its redemptive purpose in the world, and its calling to be a
reconciling, unifying and missional community. The outcome of this study suggests that churches desiring to be missional should adopt a spiritual formation focus and embrace ethnic diversity, engaging the whole membership in contextualized ministry.

When this model was presented to various audiences, it was received with generally positive responses. Several adjustments were made, taking into account the comments made at these presentations. The next step will be to plan course materials to train seminary students preparing for ministry in multi-ethnic settings in Myanmar. This course aims to create awareness, understanding and appreciation of the missional church concept introduced in this project. Depending on feedback from the course, the content may also be offered at other theological seminaries in the future, as well as at pastoral training courses and church leader seminars.

It is hoped that this project will contribute to a flourishing of the church in Myanmar, inspiring and enabling God’s people to show the reconciling power of the gospel and the multi-colored nature of the body of Christ. The church in Myanmar has a long and rich history going back more than two hundred years. It is well-established and recognized among the predominantly Christian minorities in the country. The next step would be for the church expand beyond its traditional boundaries, and become a community where people from all of Myanmar’s ethnic groups will find a spiritual home. Christians are in a unique position to build bridges to each of Myanmar’s ethnic communities, reaching out in forgiveness and love. If they are able to overcome their hurts and wounds, Christians can bring genuine reconciliation and become true peacemakers in this country, which has for so long been ravaged by conflict and animosity. In fact, with a Christian population of more than three million, the church in
Myanmar may well play a major role in cross-cultural mission in the whole region, not only within Myanmar, but across national borders to neighboring Buddhist countries such as Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. While each of these countries has its own history and traditions, they share a common heritage of Buddhism as the majority religion. As Myanmar churches become more missional among their own people groups, may they also awaken to their missionary calling across borders. With that missionary calling comes the responsibility and privilege to proclaim God’s reconciling love, just as they themselves have received and experienced reconciliation with God and with one another.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Has this presentation changed your thinking about multi-ethnic churches in a multi-cultural setting, and if so, how?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>What are some strengths of this model?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What are some weaknesses of this model?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What could be added or changed to improve this presentation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Are there any elements you disagree with?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>What did you personally learn from this presentation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Do you have any other comments?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

COURSE SYLLABUS

Developing Missional Churches in Multi-ethnic Contexts

Instructor: Arend Van Dorp

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will begin with a brief survey of Myanmar history, from the colonial period to the present, the significance of Bamar culture and religion, and its relevance for church development in Myanmar. The position and challenges of the Christian community in Myanmar will be examined, including inter-ethnic and inter-denominational dynamics. Next, a biblical-theological reflection will be undertaken, focusing on the essence, mission, and role of the church in a multi-cultural context. In particular, we will reflect on the need for reconciliation both within the church and between ethnic communities. Next, we will investigate various obstacles in the way of churches being missional communities, and finally we will explore steps churches can take to become more missional in multi-ethnic contexts.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will be able to explain the impact of colonialism on the development of Christianity in Myanmar.
- Students will be able to outline the major challenges in the mission of the church in Myanmar.
- Students will be able to describe a biblical view of the essence and mission of the church, in particular as it relates to the Myanmar context.
- Students will be able to apply the concepts introduced in this course to propose a plan of action for churches to become missional in a multi-ethnic context.

COURSE FORMAT

The course will employ lectures by the instructor, small group interaction, and interactive teaching. Students are expected to engage in dialogue based on the class readings and their own ministry experience.
RELEVANCE FOR MINISTRY

This course provides an opportunity for the students to wrestle with key issues for the future of the church in Myanmar and to explore ways of developing effective missional churches in multicultural contexts.

ASSIGNMENTS

Pre-seminar
Read 300 pages from the required reading list. Where necessary, readings will be made available to students as photocopied materials.
NOTE: It is against academic policy to claim credit for the same book in different courses. If you have previously read any book on the required reading list for credit, substitute another for it from the recommended reading list.
Write a three-page reflection on your readings, indicating which findings from your readings influenced you, and which issues raised questions for you.

Post-seminar
Write a 10-15 pages (2500-3500 words) paper on how to develop missional churches in multi-ethnic Myanmar contexts. The paper serves as an opportunity for students to work out what they believe about the subject, drawing from information gleaned from class, personal experience, and reflection and engagement with God’s Word. Further details about the paper will be discussed during the course.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY COMMITMENT

As faculty and students, we reaffirm our commitment to be beyond reproach in our academic work as a reflection of Christian character. We commit to honesty in all aspects of our work. We seek to establish a community which values serious intellectual engagement and personal faithfulness more highly than grades, degrees, or publications.
Students will commit to academic integrity in their studies. The following practices in particular will not be tolerated:
- Submitting the same work in whole or in part in more than one course without the permission of the professor(s);
- Submitting as one’s own work material(s) obtained from another source;
- Plagiarism: unattributed quotations or paraphrases of ideas from published, published or electronic sources;
- Unauthorized collaboration in preparing assignments;
- Cheating on exams by any means;
- Aiding another student on papers and tests in violation of these commitments.
Any of these violations will result in a failing grade on the assignment and possibly in the course, and will be reported to the seminary’s leadership, which may impose further sanctions. Evidence of repeated violations will result in a formal disciplinary process.
REQUIRED READING


RECOMMENDED READING

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Note: Most Burmese author names are listed in the order given, since in Myanmar there is no distinction between first and family name.


Kawl Thang Vuta. “A Brief History of the Planting and Growth of the Church in Burma.” D.Mis., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1983.


Walton, Matthew J. “The ‘Wages of Burman-Ness’: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar: Journal of Contemporary Asia: Vol 43, No 1.” Last


