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## „Our daily bread ...“

A case study from Myanmar on a problem of sharing in the Lutheran community

### **Introduction**

This case study is about the Lutheran community in Myanmar formerly known as Burma. It intends to shed some light on a problem created by the emergence of a variety of Lutheran congregations in this South-East Asian country which may become a small part of the great discussion to take place at the forthcoming 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. Some new Lutheran communities would like to be admitted as members of the Federation. There are reasons to question the wisdom of such admission. Behind the concrete question of how to decide on this matter lies the fundamental challenge highlighted by the Assembly's motto taken from the Lord's Prayer, how to share the goods given by God in a way that goes with the spirit of Lutheran tradition.

This study starts with some notes on the historical background of the problem which arose in Myanmar. This review illustrates the interrelationship between the material and the spiritual sphere of church planting and highlights the special situation in present Myanmar in which the suppression of civil rights and a boom in religious activities go hand in hand. One central argument of this paper is that any attempt to deal with this special case of Lutheran communities in Myanmar should acknowledge the historical and socio-political context of the present situation which might be regarded as exemplary for many countries in South-East Asia and other regions of the world.

### **Before 1988: Scarcity**

In the year 1878, a Lutheran congregation was established in Rangoon for a group of Indian migrant workers from Tamil lands in Southern India. A German missionary, Rev. Mayr, was present at the occasion. He had been sent to Burma by the German based mission society which had successfully spread the gospel in the Indian region since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century as

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<sup>1</sup> The author served as pastor of the German Speaking Protestant Congregation in Thailand from 1983 to 1990. Regular visits to Burma were part of his assignment in order to care for the spiritual needs of the Germans living in the country and to keep contact with the Burmese churches. He visited the country in 1984 for the first time and has travelled there since then regularly, almost every year, at least once a year. After his return to Germany in 1990 he did some research on the German-Burmese relations and received his Ph.D. in 1998 with a dissertation on the international outlook of the Burmese independence movements between 1920 and 1948. He is presently conducting some study projects which promote academic dialogue between Myanmar and the international community including a theological exchange with Myanmar institutions of theological education including the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon.

the successor of a Danish-German mission, the Lutheran Leipzig Mission Society. After the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, many Indians had migrated to Burma and other parts of the British Empire to earn the money for their daily rice there. The shepherds followed the flocks, checked if the baptised were still living Christian lives in the new environment and if yes, set up a congregation.

The congregation in Rangoon grew, established a school, had to move to another place because of the construction of a new railway station and after some time got Indian pastors being sent from India but remained under the supervision of the German mission until World War I. When the cornerstone of a new church built in Neo-Gothic style was laid on the day of the 400<sup>th</sup> jubilee of Martin Luther's posting of his theses, a Swedish missionary was leading the ceremony. The congregation was not only supported spiritually but also financially by the church planting mission societies.

After the First World War, a time of trials and tribulations came in sight for all Indians in Burma due to the beginning of the nationalist movement in the country which was directed against the Indian communities in Rangoon and other cities. In 1931, more than half of the major cities' population was Indian and the members of this ethnic group were regarded as main beneficiaries of the country's wealth, depriving the Burmans of what they deserved. When the Japanese started to bomb Rangoon in 1941, a large exodus of Indians started in which tens of thousands died. Among the people who survived and came back after World War II was the father of the present pastor of the congregation. At that time, he was an engineer in the service of a British company.

The next blow for the Indian community in India and the Lutheran congregation as well came after Ne Win's coup in March 1962. All foreigners including all foreign missionaries and church personnel had to leave the country. Furthermore, the Lutheran congregation was cut off from its sister congregations in Malaysia and India. By that the Lutheran Bethlehem Church became a congregation not belonging to any church organisation headed by a Bishop. Alternatively, one could say that from now on it turned into a church which established small congregations in many parts of Burma.

It has to be clearly noted that the separation of the Lutheran congregation from its Lutheran brothers and sisters and supervising bodies abroad paralleled the separation of Burma from the international community. All people and all churches in Burma were subject to this isolation, the Lutheran community, however, was affected in a particular way. All other Burmese Churches, Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist, could maintain their structure.

The Lutheran congregation - because of its small size and the non-existence of the establishment of a church structure in the country - became much more dependent on ecumenical support both from within and from outside Burma. Interestingly, spiritual support was much more important than financial assistance.

As a consequence of the congregation's history and the after-1962 development the Lutheran congregation was the only "church" in Burma after 1966 which did not have an ordained indigenous pastor and which could not obtain one according to traditional procedure. The pastoral service of the congregation was therefore taken over by a layman turned clergy. Engineer J.J. Andrews was ordained a Deacon in 1966 shortly after the last pastor, who had been sent from the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church (T.E.L.C.), had to leave Burma. One year later, after some deliberations with the TELC and the Swedish Mission, Deacon Andrews was ordained a pastor by the Swedish Bishop Diehl. His son, the present pastor of the church, started his professional career as an engineer like his father, studied theology in correspondence courses and .... He was ordained by the Anglican Archbishop of Myanmar in .... and followed his father in .... as the Administrator of the church.

### **1988 and After: New Opportunities**

After the popular uprising of 1988 and the takeover of the military, the situation in Burma changed drastically in many regards. On the one side all movements trying to challenge military rule were drastically contained and suppressed. On the other hand a kind of open market policy was introduced. These changes deeply affected Burmese society including the Christian communities.

As one of the measures to prevent further unrest, new towns were constructed outside the centre of Rangoon as it had been done before, after previous takeovers of the army. Members of the Lutheran congregation were among those people resettled. This challenged the congregation to repeat their own history: to move with the flock and open new branches in the new satellite towns. The number of members living near to the old church decreased. In the new quarters quite new opportunities arose because of the mixed population living there and struggling to adjust to the new situation. Rev. Andrews jr. cultivated his talent by providing medical services not just for members of his congregation but for Buddhists and Muslims as well and established contacts with leaders of different communities. At the same time, more evangelists were needed to look after the new Lutheran branches not just in Yangon but in other parts of the country as well as a result of the increased mobility after the end of the Socialist Period.

The new economic policies affected the Lutheran congregation in a difficult way. Those policies opened new channels to receive foreign aid. Foreign bank accounts could be opened and, more important, the half-official exchange rate could be used (officially the US Dollar : Kyat rate is still 1 : 6; the market rate climbed to 1 : 1000 and more). Many foreign churches used these new opportunities from abroad. Most of them have a charismatic background, and like in the United States, Korea and other countries around the world, are tying the Christian faith to church growth and economic prosperity.

Very quickly, these new 'para-churches' became a problem for the traditional churches both Catholic and Protestant under the umbrella of the Burmese Council of Churches (BCC; after 1989 Myanmar Council of Churches). Church planting became a new and flourishing business. Competition came in as a new element. In addition, most of the new churches or church groups arranged themselves with the government (including matters of visa and foreign currency) whereas the relationship of the "old" churches towards the authorities remained tense.

The new climate of economic and spiritual entrepreneurship was influenced by specific conditions of multi-ethnic Myanmar. From the very beginning of missionary work in the country, Christian faith was mainly adopted by members of the non-Buddhist ethnic groups living on the borders of Burma like the Karen, the Kachin and the Chin. This factor contributed to the political problems to establish a united Burmese or Myanmar nation. In the cases of the Kachin and the Karen, the political and military leadership was Christian whereas many other ethnic kinsmen regarded themselves Buddhists or Animists. The Chin Hills, in contrast were almost 100 percent Christianised.

Already before 1988, the Chin had developed a special trend to church splitting. This trend increased and reached new dimensions up to the very day. It is estimated that from the 200 church bodies which may exist in Myanmar today, 80 % are Chin. The same applies to the 100 theological seminaries existing in the country. This phenomenon has not yet attracted academic attention.

### **Today : Disputed Claims**

On June 20, 2010 the online service of the *Asia Lutheran News* circulated the information that "Lutheran Distinctive courses" had been held in Myanmar for a second consecutive year by Rev Wolfgang Grieninger and Rev Dr Philip Tan of the Lutheran Church in Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS). According to the news, the courses took place at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Myanmar (ELCM) and the seminar was supported by the Mekong

Mission Forum (MMF). The Forum is ?? an association of Asian churches and Western mission agencies founded in 2003. It is represented by a moderator and his deputy. Since 2007 these posts are held by Rev. Dr. Traugott Farnbacher, an executive secretary of the mission agency of the Bavarian Evangelical-Lutheran Church and Rev Dr Philip Tan from the LCMS.

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At the end of the article the editor states: “Three Lutheran churches in Myanmar, including MLC [Myanmar Lutheran Church] & ELCM, have applied for membership with the LWF and will be recommended for acceptance during the LWF Assembly of, Stuttgart, this July 2010.”

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ad ELCM

This information is a bit confusing because the acronym ELCM denotes the only member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) until now, namely the Lutheran Bethlehem Church which had already been admitted to the LWF<sup>2</sup> in ... On the one hand, the ELCM mentioned in the news is headed by “Synod President Rev Dr Lal Sawi Thanga”. On the other hand, according to the report submitted by the then LWF’s Area Secretary for Asia/Middle East, Ginda P. Harahap, on a visit to Myanmar in September 2006, Rev Dr Thanga ??? leads the Lutheran Church in Myanmar (LCM).

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The 2006 delegation had talks with representatives of four Lutheran “churches” in Myanmar and stated: “The three Lutheran churches (non-LWF members) understood the advice given to them that LWF still needs time to learn more about the situation of the churches according to the procedures and requirements for LWF membership application. Ways to visit even part of their congregations next time were discussed.”

Rev. Andrews, president of the ELCM was quoted to have said that the three applicants “still need more time to assess their situations before the LWF processes their membership applications.” Behind these diplomatic statements lies a rather bitter conflict between the old congregation and the new churches. It is contested which church bodies might become members of the LWB.

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<sup>2</sup> See the LWF’s website: <http://www.lutheranworld.org/Directory/asi/Welcome-EN.html>: The entry for Myanmar is: “Evangelical Lutheran Church in Myanmar (Lutheran Bethlehem Church)”.

This contest is a rather fierce one. In an interview conducted in May 2010, Rev. Andrews deplored the pressure exerted on him by representatives of foreign mission societies and Asian church leaders to “acknowledge” the new Lutheran churches. He mentioned presents offered to him and the withdrawal of some funds by the Swedish mission after he had declared that he felt unable to do what he was asked for. He was neither convinced of the “Lutheranness” of the newcomers nor was he in a position to acknowledge anything. The Lutheran Bethlehem Church is in fact just a congregation.

On the other hand, Dr. Farnbacher claims that Rev. Andrews had refused any contacts with the “other Lutheran churches”, whose admission to LWF Dr. Farnbacher is strongly supporting. When asked shortly before the LWF meeting in Stuttgart, he was quite confident that the admission would be successful. Interestingly, in a leaflet announcing a study tour through the Mekong countries Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar in October 2010, organised by the MMF moderator, the names of the leaders of two of the “new churches” were mentioned as resource persons to inform about Lutherans in Myanmar, but not the pastor of the Lutheran Bethlehem Church.

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### Some Facts and Many Open Questions

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#### ad UMELC

The third applicant besides the churches mentioned in the Asia Lutheran News of 20 June, 2010, is the Upper Myanmar Evangelical Lutheran Church (UMELC). According to the LWF report of 2006, it was founded on April 17, 1999 in Chin State, and is headed by Rev. Pau Za Khen Tombing. It operates in an area “where no foreign visitors are permitted to travel, due to the political situation.”

The two other non-LWB members were founded around the same time.

#### ad MLC

The MLC was planted in 1998 as an offspring of the above mentioned LCMS, which is one of the four Lutheran churches in Malaysia and Singapore. It is, a fast growing church, with an ethnic Chinese background. This church planting is interesting because the LCMS is a

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member of the LWB. Obviously, there was no consultation with the Lutheran member of LWF in Myanmar before the initiative was taken. President of the church is Rev. Andrew Mang Lone.

ad LCM

Finally there is the LCM. The LWF report gives January 1, 2000 as the date of establishment. But on behalf of LCM, Rev. Thanga had already applied, in 1996 for support, from German church bodies. At that time he had wanted to get theological advice and money for a translation of Luther's Small Catechism into the native language. According to the Yangon telephone directory, the address of his church has not changed ever since. In the meantime, even his son, Martin T(h)anga is also working in the church, which claimed to have 850 members in 8 congregations administered by 12 pastors in 2006. Ordination of pastors was conducted most likely by Bishop Philip Lok of LCMS who ordained three MCL and one "ELCM" pastor one week after the seminar of 2009/ 2010 mentioned above.

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All leaders of the three churches are Chin or Chin related.<sup>3</sup> It must be assumed that all or some must have worked in other denominations before they turned to be Lutheran. As mentioned in the LWF report, there are difficulties to meet at least some of their congregations because they are supposed to live in remote areas of the Chin Hills.

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What is not known without further research, is how the new Lutheran churches came into being, how they are administered and what makes them distinctly "Lutheran". It seems that the LCMS together with the Mekong Mission Forum plays a crucial role in the establishment and in the support of the churches. Given the ethnic Chinese background of the LCMS and the Indian background of the Lutheran Bethlehem Church, ethnic and cultural factors might play a role in the contest for being acknowledged as Lutherans. A closer investigation may confirm the obvious assumption that the "human factor" is at work, here too.

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Finally, there are open questions related to the ecclesiastical and the civil law and to the context of institutionalised Christianity in Myanmar. Other than the Baptist, Anglican and Methodist Protestant Churches, not to speak of the Catholic Church, there is no "fully-fledged" Lutheran Church in Myanmar that, would be headed by a Bishop according to Lutheran tradition. Given the special situation of present Myanmar, it seems to be totally

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<sup>3</sup> "Thanga" is a common name in ethnic groups related to the Chin but living on the Indian side of the border. Names of Chins in Myanmar do not end on an "a".

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unlikely that the situation of the Lutheran congregations can change into some kind of “Lutheran normality” quickly. Strictly speaking, the Lutheran Bethlehem Church is no “church” at all but in the same position as the new applicants. In addition, the basically Lutheran approach to being "church" would rather be the way in which those churches/congregations follow God in his mission in their country at present, in the communion of saints.

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Another question is the relationship of those churches applying to LWF-membership, to the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC). The LWF report mentions the application of the LCM. Details about the process of MCC dealing with the application are not known at the moment. Furthermore it should be considered how the granting of membership status to the new Lutheran churches by LWF, would affect the relationship of the worldwide Christian agencies with their concern for Myanmar and the MCC.

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### Final Remarks

The motto of the Stuttgart assembly indicates that the sharing of the daily bread – both spiritual and material – by the members of the “Lutheran family” will be discussed. The “case” of the Lutheran churches in Myanmar outlined above exemplifies some of the problems involved with this discussion.

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Myanmar is one of those countries in the world which is in dire need for justice, peace, reconciliation and humanitarian aid. It is a deeply divided country and the failure of establishing a communication between the “Lutheran stakeholders” in Myanmar – both inside and outside the country – is part of the problem. As in the political field, the case presented here manifests the global dimension of the internal conflict.

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Therefore, a solution should be sought for which neither deepens division nor prolongs the status quo. The implementation of a “Round Table” could be a way to achieve such solution.

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In order to ease the existing tension it could be considered to suspend the membership of the Lutheran Bethlehem Church in the LWF until a solution in the spirit of the Lutheran tradition has been found. German experiences in the difficult process of unification might be helpful in resolving a conflict in which German Lutherans were and are very much involved both historically and currently.

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