



# MISSION: MYANMAR

## CHRISTIANITY MAKES INROADS IN A BUDDHIST DOMAIN

by Daniel Tomberlin

**C**HRISTIANITY is flourishing in spite of great odds in the historically Buddhist country of Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Because the country, located in southeast Asia, is rich in precious stones and precious metals, it is known as the "Golden Land." It is also rich in ethnic diversity—its population of 48 million is comprised of Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Chinese, Indian, as well as others.

### **Government Oppression**

The government of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw, is a socialist military dictatorship, which has oppressed and impover-

ished its people. The United States State Department recently named Myanmar as among the most oppressive governments in the world because of acts such as the one in 1988, when the Tatmadaw reacted violently to a growing democracy movement and, according to some estimates, over 500,000 of Myanmar's citizens were killed by the military.

Although "freedom of religion" is the official policy of the government, in reality the government severely restricts the work of the church and views Christianity as a negative Western influence, a vestige of British colonialism. Church properties have been confiscated, and the

building of new churches is difficult.

Most of the existing churches in Myanmar were built during British rule and are in disrepair. In many areas, the government, which strongly favors the 85 percent Buddhist majority, has even taken children from their Christian parents and placed them in Buddhist monasteries in an attempt to destroy the seeds of Christian faith in the country.

### **Christianity and Buddhism**

In practice, Buddhism is more philosophy than religion, because there is no deity who is worshiped. The Buddhist worldview is defined by the belief that



suffering is caused by human desire. Therefore, human desire must be eliminated.

The goal of practicing Buddhists is to reach nirvana (nothingness), a state of existence in which there is no human desire, no suffering and no joy. Buddhists do not hope in anything, for hope itself is seen as a human desire. Nor do Buddhists consider the salvation of one's soul, for Buddhists do not think in terms of a human soul.

The first Christian witness in Myanmar came in the 16th century with the arrival of a French Roman Catholic missionary. Protestant Christianity arrived in Myanmar early in the 19th century, and the most notable missionary was the American Baptist, Adoniram Judson. Judson labored for decades before he baptized his first convert. God blessed his labors, however, and his later work resulted in many conversions to Christ. Before his death, Judson completed a Burmese language translation of the Bible, which is still used by Myanmar Christians.

Because the government forbids the free assembly of people (in fear of the democracy movement), many of the approximately 5 percent of the population who are Christians meet in house churches. Their congregations are small, usually numbering from 50 to 75 members each. As one pastor said, "If we grow larger, we will draw attention to ourselves, and they will come and shut down the church."

Amazingly, in the face of such opposition, the Christians of Myanmar are planting and growing churches almost everywhere. Further, there are Bible schools in almost every part of the country. The schools are also small, to avoid drawing attention to themselves, but their dedication to Biblical education is outstanding. ☪

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## The Church of God in Myanmar

The work of the Church of God in Myanmar is led by Zau Ba, a native of the country and a member of the Kachin tribe. Under his leadership, the Church of God has 23 churches and missions throughout the country, with about 1,500 members. Also, the church operates Evangel Missionary Bible Seminary in Yangon, which trains pastors and evangelists, who leave the school after graduation to establish new missions and churches. The facilities of the seminary consist of a 30-by-60-foot bamboo and brick building and two bamboo huts that serve as dormitories.

The visionary work of the Church of God in Myanmar extends beyond its national borders. Zau Ba has recently commissioned an evangelist who has moved into China to establish churches among the Kachin peoples living there and to distribute Chinese language Bibles.

The burden of evangelism among the Christians of Myanmar is contagious. One pastor, an ethnic Indian, said, "I was born a Hindu, but several years ago I accepted Christ. Since then I have won to Christ 102 of my relatives!" Another pastor said, "Our desire is like that of the apostle Paul. We desire to preach the gospel where Christ is not known" (see Romans 15:20).



Daniel Tomberlin (right) with Myanmar church leader Zau Ba