

INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE:

A Way Forward to Make a Peaceful Society in Myanmar

Simon Van Lal Chhuanga

Prologue

Myanmar endured a closed-door nation system for more than half a century. Myanmar churches have been suffering painful experience throughout the years of military dictatorship and isolation. After the oversea missionaries were expelled in 1962, Burmese Theravada Buddhism enjoyed the authorized patronage of the sovereign military junta. However, since then Christians in Myanmar have suffered religious persecution led by military and Buddhist fundamentalists. Under different socio-political situations, Christian mission in Myanmar has a history of more than two centuries of presence. Amidst on-going civil wars, ethnic strife, gross and systematic violations of human rights and denial of freedom of religion, the church in Myanmar has been faithfully engaged in mission and has been agent of peace with justice and reconciliation. Today, the church in Myanmar is very vibrant and actively participating in inter-faith dialogue for peaceful living from the grass root level to national level amongst different faith in the country.

The propaganda, hate-speech and inter-religious narrow-mindedness have differentiated the opinions of Myanmar main religions such as Buddhist, Christian, Islam and Hindu. Misinformation and inter-religious intolerance also have polarized the opinions of Myanmar's Buddhists and Muslims alike. Actually, the religious conflict happen particularly in the Rakhine Buddhist and the Bengali Muslims in Rakhine state. The Bengali Muslims who wander mostly in Rakhine state, in the north west of the country, bordering to Bangladesh.

I believe that Inter-faith dialogue is one of the most important implement and effective way to reduce the tension among main religions for the present situation of Myanmar. As Samuel Ngun Ling mention that, "In order to build a peaceful community, we have to encourage inter-faith dialogue and cooperation among religious communities to work together for their common good and their common brighter future."¹ Nowadays because of fear, insecurity, threat and hostility they react at times with violence in different parts of the country in Myanmar. The religion is politicized or abused for political benefit and inter-religious violence is added. We also see that conflicts, riots, killings and wars are waged in the name of religion. Therefore, the alternative to dialogue is, thus, none other than death.

Myanmar is a unique country in Southeast Asia, and no doubt that the country is make beautiful by various ethnicity such as Kachin, Kaya, Karen, Chin, Mon, Bama and Shan. In regards of religions, Buddhist, Christian, Islam, Hindu all exist in the country. From 1958 onwards, a strong militarized organism has ruled Myanmar, a mainly Buddhist country, some kinds of oppressing all ethnic groups systematically. Some of the 135 ethnic groups that make up have their own army, and armed clashes with government forces are repeated. Since she came to power two years ago, pro-democracy leader Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has been involved in the challenging route of national reconciliation called Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi said that, "In our country, armed conflicts have occurred for nearly 70 years. Efforts were made to bring peace to the country in successive eras. While taking lessons from failures due to some reasons, we must write a new chapter of our history of our era with collective efforts."

¹ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Christianity Through Our Neighbor's Eyes* (Yangon: JRC, 2014), 298-299.

In the country history, actually, we rarely understand any fervent effort to do inter-religious dialogue before the religious conflict happening. Actually, after the religious conflicts happening, the religious leader realized that inter-religious dialogue is a must do program, since then various group try to do inter-faith dialogue such as NGO, INGO, Mission and Ecumenism Department of Myanmar Council of Churches, Judson Research Center of Myanmar Institute of Theology, Inter-faith committee organized by the Myanmar government in every Region and State. We must take these difficulties as an opportunity to make a bridge to reach people of other faiths for building a peaceful coexistence. Hans Kung mentioned the importance of inter-religious dialogue that, “No peace among the nations, without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions, without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions, without investigation of the foundation of the religions.”

Background

Actually, the country of Myanmar obviously experienced religious conflict between Buddhist-Christians and Buddhist-Islam and so on. In the year 2012 and 2015, inter-religious violence occurred in Rakhine State, Mandalay Region and other parts of the country causes several houses and vehicles have being burned and loss, hundreds of peoples dead. Actually, in the area of conflict zone, peoples are living in fear and feels that no security for their family. In order to have a better and peaceful coexistence for the people and country of Myanmar, I believe that ‘nurturing interfaith harmony’ is a crucial for the present situation and must do.

The Myanmar government released the 2014 Census results of Religions on July 21, 2016 at Novotel, Yangon. In regards of the Religions in Myanmar, out of the total population of over 51 million in the country, the results is as below-

1. Buddhist 89.8%
2. Christians 6.3%
3. Islam 2.3%
4. Hindu 0.5%
5. Nat 0.8%
6. Others 0.2%
7. No religions 0.1%

In November 2015, the country have a landslide election and the opposition party of NLD won in the election. We have a new Government starting from May of 2016. I think our democracy is vulnerable and it seems things can change in the way which we don’t really expect. I can say that around the country of Myanmar, more or less there is a religious conflict happen. Our new government try to reduce the tensions by using inter-religious dialogue to create peace and reconciliation among different religions and it would be good not only for present period but also for the country future.

Religious Leaders' View of Violence and Conflict in Myanmar

In Myanmar, we have two Buddhist groups called liberals and fundamental. Most of the liberals monks/monastery and we work together because they are educated and more open. However, the fundamentals groups create the tensions, as far as I understand. Honored Myanmar Buddhist monk Sayadaw, Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, Dr. Ashin Thihanyana Linkara Biwunsa says,

“In the world, 80 % of the conflicts happened because of religion. Interfaith dialogues will solve these religious conflicts and to end the wars as well as to build mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among the different religions and diversity.”²

Nyunt Maung Shein (Islam), Vice Chairman of Inter-faith Dialogue Group of Myanmar also says that,

“Such kind of inter-faith dialogues can help mutual understanding of different religions and also share the knowledge on solving the problems to reduce conflicts. Myanmar has four main religions and all should respect to each other. The inter-faith groups need to build more trust and understanding by holding such kind of activities.”³

In regards of a nation to progress peacefully and harmoniously living for Myanmar, peoples of all living faiths and ideas in the country need to come together for common dialogue and must effort together for common good, growth and life. Actually, we believe in the fact that common efforts will support us to develop together as better Buddhists, better Christians, better Muslims, and better Hindus. Consequently, all Myanmar Christians are determined to backing unity and harmony amongst all the main religious to support strengthen the common scrap for the forthcoming of our common good and freedom.

The role of MCC’s Mission and Ecumenism department for inter-faith dialogue

The Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) has been working with the 13 mainline churches in Myanmar and 11 co-opted member organizations since 1914. The MCC works with three areas. Actually, Dialogue is working under Area (1) that is Mission and Ecumenism concern.

In fact, Inter-faith Dialogue has been one of the main concerns of the Myanmar Council of Churches since its inception. It has been organized as pioneering (project) program since 1996.

Rationale of MCC Inter-faith dialogue program

In order to be more effective in inter-faith dialogue with main religions in Myanmar, I believe that we need to concern on the basic principle of inter-faith dialogue. On the other hand, we need to continue our work in doing dialogue and fellowship. We want to move on to engage in our common concerns in especially in the fields of social matters.

The objectives of MCC Inter-faith dialogue program

1. To promote mutual understanding and unity among religions in Myanmar.
2. To build and promote mutual respect, reciprocity and solidarity between and among Christians and people of other faiths in Myanmar through studying each other’s faith and ideology.
3. To promote Dialogue in Action among different peoples of faiths based on peace, justice and integrity of creation.

²Myanmar International TV. *Building Peace Inter-faith Dialogoue Organize*. <<http://www.myanmarinternationaltv.com/news/building-peace-interfaith-dialogue-organized-hwpl>> accessed on 2 July 2018.

³ Ibid.

Seminars on inter-faith dialogue program

To implement the objectives, the Mission and Evangelism Unit of MCC has organized seminars on inter-faith dialogue, such as,

- National Level
- Regional Level
- Inter-faith forum
- Inter-faith dialogue for Seminarians
- Buddhist- Christian fellowship
- Inter-faith dialogue for social network

Mandalay Inter-faith dialogue program

The Mission Department of Myanmar Council of Churches organized the inter-faith dialogue program in Mandalay in 2017. Actually, Mandalay is the second biggest city of Myanmar and cultural city in central Myanmar.

We invites 40 participants from Christians, Buddhist, Islam, Hindu and Bahai. Below are the outcomes from Mandalay inter-faith dialogue program, such as-

1. Forty participants from Christians, Buddhist, Islam, Hindu and Bahai discussing and learning together for two day program. We believe that this is very positive that we can sat together in one room for two day.
2. For the sake of our Muslims participations, we prepare Halal food for the two day program. All the participants and resources persons have a breakfast and lunch together for two day. I believed that this show our accepting and acknowledged each other.
3. After two day program, we agree that-
 - 1) We agree to make a peaceful society in Mandalay by using inter-faith dialogue.
 - 2) We agree to try to stop the hate-speech of religions by giving a true information by using printed media such as books, newspaper and tracks.
 - 3) We are going to work together in the social media such as Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp and of course in websites for to give the awareness of peace and reconciliation on main religions.

The Mission department of the Myanmar Council of Churches again organized the Inter-faith dialogue program in Magway in 2017. Actually, Magway is the capital city of Magway Region and situated in the middle part of Myanmar.

Actually, we invited 40 participations from Buddhist, Islam, Hindu and Christian. The program was held inside the compound of Baptist church in Magway. In fact, this is the first ever to do inter-faith dialogue program in Magway and I learned that every participation is enthusiastic and joyful in the program. In the opening ceremony and closing ceremony, we requested every leader of the religions to pray in their own religions, and I believed we all enjoy about that. In regards of food for the two day program, due to the weather it is quite difficult to arrange and we ordered food in the Burmese restaurant for all the participants except our Muslim participants. Rev. Myo Htun of Magway Baptist church pastor bring all the participants to the Burmese restaurant for food and I bring all the Muslim participation to the Halal restaurant which situated near the river of Irrawaddy. I believe we enjoy it.

Here is the outcome of the program-

1. We agree to do the program in next year, we believe that it really help us to understand about the teaching of different religions.
2. We agree to invite more youth from different religions.
3. We agree are to fight together the religious conflict in Magway city and also for all the Region.
4. We agree to do a Facebook group for to reduce the tension and conflicts in Magway Region, if happen.

The first day of June this year, the Mission department of Myanmar Council of Churches organized the inter-faith dialogue program in Bago, near Yangon. Actually, this program is different from other inter-faith dialogue which we have been done in Mandalay and Magway. Actually, the participations members is from main religions in Yangon about 70 peoples. The program was held at Pan PyoLett monastery in Bago. The monastery provide breakfast and lunch. We really appreciate the monk for that. Actually, we plan 100 trees on the way to the monastery from Bago to Pan PyoLett monastery.

Models of inter-faith dialogue in Myanmar

1. Nurturing interfaith harmony

The present situation of Myanmar clearly mentions that nurturing interfaith harmony is the only way to make a peaceful society for the country. Actually, after the last election, the peoples of Myanmar had a great hope that the new government would make peace and justice among the religions in Myanmar because some people are facing violent conflicts under the religious and cultural banners. The present government is trying to solve the problems by doing interfaith harmony. But it is difficult task. So, we have to be patient. Xenophobia, with a religious tinge, can be the most dangerous sign for the future of our country. We may find some solace in the fact that the member churches of the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) and other recognized ecumenical bodies would largely stand by the great biblical virtues of 'love of the enemy.' In this context, we call upon all Myanmar Christians (*MCC, Roman Catholics, Evangelical body and Pentecostal body*) to

determine the forgiveness and reconciling power of the cross of Christ, in their connection with other religions and other faith bodies.

2. Forgiveness

Actually, forgiveness is a prophetic and holy mission laid upon all those who follow Christ. Resolving old encounters and healing hurts memories with attention to the values of justice is crucial importance in the ministry of the Myanmar Church. Myanmar churches and Christian associations are called to involve in dialogues of life with neighboring societies, with mutual respect and honesty to learn from the other. The exercise of true hospitality by accepting the other, regardless of faith as God has accepted us in Christ, can help the Myanmar Christians to contribute to the making of a new humanity leading to peaceful living in Myanmar. Actually, God empowers us to be forgiving and to be healing. We the Myanmar Christian must commit ourselves to nurture harmony with the brothers and sisters of different faiths, and to build peace in the midst of the clashes, tensions and turmoil.

3. Geo-Political Turmoil: Building Peace

We recognize that Myanmar is ethnically and religiously diverse. The country shares a border of 1318 miles with China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. And the core values of Myanmar cover a wide series of features: geographical terrain, religious and cultural heritages, ethnic identities, philosophical traditions, diverse customs and social values, economic gamut and political ideas.

Unfortunately, the ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar is often called as the longest running civil war in the world. However, Myanmar still holds promises and hopes, the hope of Jesus Christ. Our faith in God leads us to reflect upon the fundamental Christian principles and the theological beliefs which insist that there is no peace without justice. The absence of peace and situations of clashes in Myanmar are due to the denial of justice. We believe, that ultimately, peace is a condition where, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them” (Isaiah 11:6, NIV). Building peace through inter-faith dialogue in Myanmar is an act of engaging in God’s mission and to have peace, means to enjoy God’s gift of the fullness of life, security, and liberty (Ezekiel 34:25-31).

Conclusion

The practice of theology in Myanmar cannot be significant unless it takes earnestly into account the significance of inter-faith relations and their impacts on community building and interpersonal relationship. In Burmese culture, person-to-person relationship is more important than religion-to-religion relationship. In fact, building a respectable relationship between persons is always more important than building peace and dialogue between religions.

Actually, building a peaceful and democratic future of Myanmar would depend very much on how vigorous correlation the Myanmar government would be able to form between majority Buddhists and minority religious peoples like the Christians, Hindus and Muslims. If there is no strong relationship between religious peoples, there will be no inter-religious collaboration, and if there is no inter-religious collaboration, there will be no peace in the community. In fact, any

preparation of contextual theology in Myanmar needs to be inter-religious liberating then oppressive.

The inter-religious dialogue program is the fundamental mission of the churches of Myanmar for the present situation. I believe that when the people of Myanmar will live in peace and harmony, the country will be able to work on economic growth and social development by centering on education, health, employment, social security and groundwork. The Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) is dedicated from the grass root level to the national unity, and the promotion of inter-faith dialogue program happened in various parts of the country. Inter-faith dialogue is one of the most significant feature that can help to decrease tensions for present and further violence.