

For U.S. diplomacy, the latest; for U.S. missions, the first
**As Burma Emerges from Isolation,
Fresh Gospel Possibilities Surface**

Suddenly last month Hillary Clinton was visiting the Southeast Asian nation of Burma. That country—renamed Myanmar by the military strongmen who have ruled it for 50 years—has not been seen by a U.S. secretary of state for even longer. When elections were held 22 years ago, resulting in a landslide for the civilian opposition, the dictators ignored the results and placed the opposition's leader, Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. The U.S. responded by withdrawing its ambassador and imposing tight sanctions.

Three years ago, when a cyclone devastated a wide swath of the country, Burma's generals rebuffed offers of emergency aid from the U.S. Navy, fearing foreign influence. That same year, the military held a carefully managed referendum to endorse a new constitution. And last year it conducted a second election—also carefully managed—to assure that a general-turned-civilian would win. Establishing a parliament gave the regime a new political mechanism that would start out friendly to those who ushered it in. At the same time, it provided a democratic veneer to curry international favor as retirement-age generals looked for a shield from the next generation of generals. It also provided for a circle of key friends bigger than China and Russia.

In less than a year, these steps toward a new political reality—at first assumed to be purely cosmetic—have led from dictatorship to quasi democracy. Thein Sein, the new president, has freed the opposition leader, rewritten hundreds of laws, eased restrictions on the media, lifted internet censorship, released some political prisoners, and started reaching out to some of the country's brutally suppressed minority groups. Also, after years of planning, a massive \$3.6 billion Chinese dam project was suspended in answer to popular concerns about the area it would flood, who would benefit from its power generation, and what the costs would be to those who depend on the Irrawaddy River for their livelihood.

President Obama acknowledged that these are only “flickers of progress”; the generals behind this ostensibly civilian government could easily reverse them. Although years of mismanagement have driven millions to sheer poverty, Burma is rich in oil, gas, hydropower, and gems, and was once the world's biggest rice exporter. The country is still working toward credible banking and independent judicial system. But the government's move to burst out of years of virtual isolation coincides neatly with a growing interest in missions to engage the church in Burma, which has operated independently since missionaries were forced out in 1966.

But the involvement of the U.S. church goes back two centuries. In fact, Burma is where the American foreign missionary enterprise began. The modern missionary movement had been launched in Europe a few years earlier (William Carey went to India in 1793, and the Church Missionary Society entered China in 1799). But Adoniram and Ann Judson, the first missionaries sent overseas from America, sailed for Burma in 1812—an even two centuries ago! (And, yes, Judson University in nearby Elgin is named after them.)

They landed at the Irrawaddy River delta city of Yangon, bristling with Buddhist pagodas. A few foreigners, although held in contempt, managed to survive there; but they were virtually

unknown in the interior basin. Religious toleration was unheard of. The kingdom, ringed by mountains on three sides, knew little of the outside world and had no conception of trade. The king and local governors were arbitrary, powerful despots, meting out cruel punishments without recourse.

The Judsons learned Burmese, the language of the Bamar people of the plains, and Adoniram started translating the Scriptures, beginning with Matthew. After six years of strenuous effort, the first believer was baptized. A couple of other disciples were soon added.

But then, as the New Testament translation was completed, a new king ascended to the throne. Pagodas began springing up in increasing numbers. If the king learned that some of his subjects were deserting Gautama for Christ, Christians could soon expect persecution for heresy or even—since Christianity came from alien countries—for subversion, espionage, or treason. Harassment began, and several inquirers were intimidated and withdrew. Adoniram decided that the only way to move ahead was to appeal to the king in his capital, near the modern city of Mandalay.

Soon after his arrival in the capital, however, Burma's attacks on Britain's outposts in eastern India prompted a British invasion. The few foreigners in the city, suspected of being in league with the British, were promptly imprisoned under harsh conditions. A year-and-a-half later, the war was terminated under terms that let Burma retain its heartland but gave Britain control over territories on its coastal perimeter. Adoniram was finally released, and the Judsons ended up in a southeastern city newly administered by the British, and peopled by one of the non-Bamar tribes: the Karen. These people had a tradition that "Ywa," the great god, would send his word (which the Karen had lost) back to them through a younger, white brother. When Judson, translating the Bible, was recognized as that brother, many came to Christ. Soon the Judsons' growing Baptist Mission had nearly 30 missionaries in Moulmein. But Adoniram felt compelled to return to the Bamar. Their highly developed Buddhist religion and suspicions of ties between Christianity and the British threat to their sovereignty made them more resistant. But now they didn't have a single missionary!

The advance of the gospel among several large tribal groups over the years since those pioneering days has been remarkable. Not only the Karen, but also the Lahu, Kachin, Chin, Lisu, Rawang, and Naga peoples are now overwhelmingly or significantly Christian. The minority people groups, many of them now with a significant Christian population educated in mission schools, had begun seeking autonomy and arming themselves beginning in 1948, when it became apparent that the new government of Burma did not plan to honor the Panglong agreement, which they had signed shortly before the assassination of General Aung San, the revolutionary hero of the country. That agreement guaranteed local autonomy and the right to self-determination. Conflict has continued ever since. As stated earlier, in 1966 all foreign Christian workers were expelled, and phases of concerted national or local pressure and persecution of Christians and Muslims has continued ever since as the country's military rulers and majority ethnic Bamar have tried to push back the threat of foreign influence on their sovereignty and religion. Even in the last decade, government troops carried out the government's systematic policy of violent subjugation against these minorities, raping, torturing, and burning down more than 3,000 villages, in areas where armed local resistance continues. Over the years the ongoing clashes have pushed huge numbers of villagers into refugee camps

on Burma's border with Thailand and China, with over 100,000 refugees in camps in 2011, and even more internally displaced, due to attacks against villages in restive areas.

The mountains ringing the Bamar-populated plains are also home to a number of minority people groups still animistic or Buddhist: the Shan (with whom the government just negotiated a cease-fire), the Mon, the Rakhine, the Palaung, and others. Of over 135 language-groups in Burma, only 26 have a translation of the entire Bible.

So how did College Church become involved with Burma?

The first encounter began indirectly. "Fitz" and Jennie Fitzwilliam, both Moody Bible Institute graduates, had served in southwestern China for two terms before World War II. With both Japanese and Communist inroads destabilizing much of the country, they had entered their China field by "the back door," across the Burma mountains. After serving their first term among the largely converted Lisu people, they shifted during their second term to a sector of the animistic Zaiwa people, part of the larger Kachin cultural grouping. The Fitzwilliam home was just ten miles from the Sino-Burmese border. When their son, Jack, was 11 (at boarding school on the opposite side of China), Fitz died of typhus fever. Not long after, when her mission approved her paying a visit to her son, Jennie became trapped with him at Chefoo (now Yantai). After a harrowing couple of years under Japanese occupation, they were exchanged for Japanese detainees and arrived back in the U.S.

Jennie's friend and College Church missionary Ruth Thomas, whose husband had also died in China, invited Jennie and Jack to move to Wheaton to share a home with her and her daughter. Jennie accepted, serving as an accountant for many of the following years with Wheaton College and MAP International. She also served several terms as a member and treasurer on our Board of Missions. Jack thrived in our Hyacks, and went on to serve, with his wife Alice, with Send International at two schools for MKs (missionary kids): Christian Academy of Japan and Faith Academy in the Philippines.

Meanwhile, an active and outreach-oriented church has sprung up among the Zaiwa, and in 2009 the New Testament was completed in their language. Our direct Burma involvement began in 1991, when we helped send a family engaged in Bible translation to Thailand. The husband now supervises a half dozen teams working on providing Scriptures to peoples in Burma who still lack them.

At the same time, numerous refugees have been processed out of their camps to resettle in North America. Of the many nationalities flowing into Chicago's western suburbs, World Relief reports, only those from Burma predominantly identify themselves as Christian.

In 2004, a son of College Church missionaries to Japan (along with our then-pastor James Seward) deliberately moved in among immigrants at the Wheaton Square apartments. His exposure to the Burmese residents proved life changing. Two years later, he married a daughter of missionaries to Mexico. In 2008, they transferred their membership from College Church to our third church plant, New Covenant Church in Naperville. They made an initial visit to Burma last year. Now, with two sons (one a newborn), they are poised to settle there this spring.

Like the Judsons two centuries earlier, they will begin with language acquisition in Yangon. Since missionaries as such are not officially permitted, they must then assume an occupational

“platform.” And—just as Adoniram Judson did two centuries before—they’ve chosen to make the challenging Bamar people their focus. But even though most children there are educated in monasteries or schools that incorporate Buddhist teaching and Buddhism is strongly entrenched, the prospects are not as bleak as they once were. Throughout the years of military domination, the 700,000 barefoot and saffron-robed monks, with their heads shaved, displayed compassion, humility, and pacifism, earning them respect for their moral leadership. Now, according to *Operation World*, they are displaying a growing openness to Jesus. “Many study the gospel and listen to Christian radio. Reportedly, thousands have quietly become believers; no doubt many more would also believe were there not such powerful cultural, social, and spiritual constraints against leaving Buddhism.” And with the regime seeking to open up to the outside world by degrees, a new day may be slowly dawning as God calls the nations to himself!

To learn more about subjects covered in this report, check out these publications from the church library:

- Anderson, Courtney, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson*, Little, Brown and Company, 1956.
- Chapter 2 of Richardson, Don, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World*, Third Edition, Regal, 2006.
- Fitzwilliam, Alice, *I Will Run After Thee: The Life Story of Jennie Kingston Fitzwilliam*, 2003.