

# MOVING BEYOND TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES: RETHINKING THE CHURCH IN BURMESE BUDDHIST CONTEXT

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## Abstract

There is a range of definition of the church. But it is appropriate to mention that church is “the distinctive people of God called by the Missionary God through His mission and set aside for the continuation of His mission. As His mission always takes place to the specific people at the specific time, His church should be contextually formed. As the church is designed by the Missionary God who is Infinite God, it should be without walls. In other words, the church should be beyond the traditional boundary but contextual.

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## Introduction

The Union of Myanmar is a country which has been deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism and its associated traditions. Myanmar Buddhism presents a certain picture of its society as conforming to the *Dhamma* teachings and Burmese culture is religiously oriented.<sup>1</sup> Buddhism has saturated social life, ideas, manners and aspirations as the national identity. This interconnectedness of religion and national identity is inseparable. The western Protestant missionaries came one group after another to Myanmar from 1813 onwards,<sup>2</sup> but they were unprepared to study the religio-cultural interconnectedness of Burmese society and they did not ask the question: “What does Jesus Christ mean for the people of the country in their own religio-cultural milieu?” They came with the classical Christology developed in the

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Lubeigt, “Myanmar: A Country Modeled by Buddhist Traditions” in Myanmar Historical Committee (eds), *Traditions of Knowledge in Southeast Asia Part 2*. Yangon: University Press, 2004), 244; Ashin Thittila, *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures* (Yangon: Department of Religious Affairs, 2000), 213; Tin Soe, “An Economic Interpretation of Some Myanmar Traditional Concepts in the Context of Globalization,” in Myanmar Historical Committee (eds), *Traditions of Knowledge in Southeast Asia Part 3* (Yangon: University Press, 2005), 118-119.

<sup>2</sup> Maung Shwe Wa, *Burmese Baptist Chronicles* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 128-129.

western countries throughout the centuries and failed to discover values of the audience's own culture and to make them authentically Christian in their cultural context. For the Christians in Myanmar, this defective and foreign Christology produced a defective and alien Ecclesiology. That is why Professor Samuel Ngun Ling critically states that "this Western orientation of church life came to Myanmar Christians not only through their missionaries' teachings but also through their colonial rulers, administrators, and civil educators."<sup>3</sup> As a result, the churches in Myanmar are just the replicas and potted plants of Western churches. In this paper I would like to present how the churches in Myanmar which are tarred with a colonialist brush need to promptly rethink the development of indigenous churches in the Buddhist context. A case study for the development of a model of the indigenous church in the Rakhine Buddhist context in Myanmar will also be presented in brief. The missiological insights from this paper may result in a proliferation of the indigenous church model or models in the Burmese socio-cultural religious context and ignite Myanmar Christians to rethink the structure of Burmese ecclesiology. These insights rooted in the Burmese context may or may not be similar to other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. However, I believe that they may provide helpful insights to rethink what the true church should be in their specific context.

## A Key Biblical Concept of Church

Our understanding of the Church will be much impoverished if we fail to factor in the dynamics of the original Greek word "ekklesia" as used by Jesus. During the time of Jesus, the word *ekklesia* was used almost without exception to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of sociopolitical of making decisions. Looking at history throughout the Greek and Hellenistic areas, the word *ekklesia* always retained its reference to the assembly of the *polis*. In the secular *ekklesia*, every citizen had "the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion."<sup>4</sup> In light of all this, why did Jesus (Mt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20) choose such as a politically "loaded" word as *ekklesia* to describe his people and their gatherings? Atkerson observes that "perhaps, Jesus intended his people, the

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives* (Yangon: ATEM, 2005), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Atkerson, *House Church: Simple, Strategy, Scriptural* (Atlanta, GA: New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2008), 73.

church, to function together with a purpose somehow parallel to that of the political government. Jesus intended that believers to propose matters for discussion, decide things together, make joint decisions, and experience the process of consensus.”<sup>5</sup> His use of *ekklesia* is significant that “this form of government works tolerably well in a “house church” in a specific social context but it is virtually impossible to operate in a larger institutional church setting.”<sup>6</sup>

## The Signs of the True Church

Ever since the inception of the church, the nature of the church, its essence, attributes, marks, criteria, symbols, signs, and distinguishing features, have been debated.<sup>7</sup> In order to use the concept of the church, it is necessary as far as possible to identify some of its concrete, visible and tangible characteristics. In one of the key passages where Jesus talks about the future church, he concludes by stating that “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt. 18:15-20). What qualifies a gathering of people to be the church is the presence of Jesus Christ in their midst. The church therefore happens when and where Christ, according to the Bible, has promised his presence to his disciples.<sup>8</sup> Following this understanding, the true church may therefore be identified by the signs listed below.

### *Church as Relationship of People in the Name of Jesus Christ*

Jesus has promised to be present when and where two or three people gather in his name (Matt. 18:20). In reality, to be recognized as a church one basic requirement of a church is that at least two or three people come together in the name of Jesus Christ. This fellowship around Jesus, based on his authority, is a continuation of the fellowship of the disciples with Jesus during his earthly ministry. The church is not a sacred place or institution, and it is not constituted by the office of a bishop or a pastor. It is essentially a people, a fellowship (*koinonia*) around Christ (1Jn. 1:3), constituted and made sacred by the presence of Christ in its midst. Just as the gospel has been described as a relationship mediated by relationships,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), 81-82. See also Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), 151-168.

<sup>8</sup> David C. K. Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 336. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (NY: Harper and Row, 1993), 121-123.

the church, in its basic form, can be described as relationship.<sup>9</sup>

### *Church as the Preaching Point of the Word of Jesus Christ*

The presence of Jesus is primarily communicated through his Word to those gathered in his name. Jesus is the Word of God, which through incarnation “became flesh and made His dwelling among us” (Jn.1:14). The church is where the Word of God is preached, for there Jesus is present with his grace. Certainly, there are many other components that are beneficial to the church, but the one essential component is the communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the written Word of God, the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> We may say that all the other necessary signs or marks of the church are contained in this most important one, the Word. The Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, contains in itself the four classical marks of the church named in the ecumenical creeds; it is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.<sup>11</sup> With the reformers it may be concluded that the church essentially has only one sacrament, the gospel of Jesus, which is also communicated to us through baptism and Holy Communion.

### *Church as the Sacrament of Baptism and Holy Communion*

Jesus is present through his Spirit at baptism in his name. As promised by John the Baptist, it is Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and thereby incorporates the baptized person into his body, the church (1 Cor. 12:13; Tit. 3:5). Baptism, therefore, becomes a very special characteristic of the church, uniquely associated with the church. It is by faith and baptism---administered by the church---that man is saved (Mk. 15:16), and this baptism is the entrance into the church (Snyder 1983, 96-111). The very words of Jesus at the institution of the Holy Communion (Lk. 22:19-20; 1Cor. 11:23-26) indicate his presence in the church through bread and wine, shared among the believers gathered for the Lord’s Supper. As baptism is the sacrament of entrance into the Body of Christ, Holy Communion is the sacrament of continued fellowship with Jesus Christ and with the other members of the Body of Christ. As a sacrament of fellowship, Holy Communion points to the next characteristic of the true church, that of unity. Just as all of the church members partake of the same bread, so they all belong to the same body of

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<sup>9</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1998), 94-106.

<sup>10</sup> David C.K Watson, *I Believe in the Church* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 335.

<sup>11</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church & Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 96-111.

Jesus Christ.

### *Church as the Demonstration of Love among the Members*

Unity, which is a characteristic of the true church, is neither necessarily organizational unity nor characterized by agreement in the local church on all issues; rather unity is communal, characterized by members genuinely loving one another. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love another” (Jn. 13:34-35). The presence of Jesus in the church may be seen by the members of the church and those outside the church by the love that Christians have for one another.

### *Church as the Place of Prayers*

The church was born in an atmosphere of prayer, the Holy Spirit being poured out on the followers of Jesus gathered in the upper room for prayer (Acts 2). Throughout the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles, a close connection exists between prayer and the Spirit’s powerful presence in the church (e.g. Acts 4:31). Jesus Christ spoke to the church (and individuals) in their prayers and in response to their prayers. The prayers of the church are a continuation of the Lord’s prayer, with which Jesus invited his disciples to join him in praying to God His heavenly Father, calling him, “our Father” (Mt. 6:5-15).

### *Church as an Agent to Continue God’s Missions*

This fellowship around Jesus, guided by the Word, brought into life and renewed by the sacraments, united in love, and breathing through prayer, is sent into the world by Jesus so that it might spread everywhere “the fragrance of the knowledge of him” (2. Cor. 2:14). It is “the distinctive people of God called by him through his mission and set aside for his mission.”<sup>12</sup> To the church sent to participate in the continuation of Jesus’ mission and *diaconia* in the world, Jesus promises his eternal presence: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). And in the person of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, Jesus promises he will meet his church as they engage in *diaconia* (Mt. 25; 31-46). As such, the church is a missionary people sent into the world to

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<sup>12</sup> Gailyn Van Rhee, *Missions: biblical foundations & contemporary strategies*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 31.

represent the reign of God in Jesus Christ and to invite people to enter the Kingdom of God. The church is called to do this through words of love (*kerygma*), deeds of love (*diaconia*), and a life of love (*koinonia*).<sup>13</sup>

All six of the signs of the true church are demonstrated in the life and ministry of the apostolic church described in Acts 2: the fellowship (v.42), the word (v. 42), the sacraments (vv. 41-42), the unity in love (v. 44), prayers (v. 42, and the mission (v. 45 and 47).

## The Characteristics of Church

The above listed signs belong to the being of the true church. On one hand, if one or more of these signs is absent, the essence of the church is aberrant and, as a result, the local congregation becomes a handicapped church, a dying church, or something other than a church. On the other hand, the local congregation or indigenous church always exists in a contextual nature. A contextual local congregation or contextual church is one that reflects the biblical signs of the true church in such a way that is correctly understood by the people in the local context. The characteristics of a contextual church or indigenous church may be said to belong to the well-being of the church in a local context. If one or more of these contextual characteristics is absent, the congregations may still be a true church, but they may not fit very well into the local context<sup>14</sup>

In order to see a contextual or indigenous church come into being, it is necessary to develop forms and structures that will help a local congregation to be “relevant to the context” (i.e., forms and structures that fit into the cultural setting of the people of that society), and which at the same time are “faithful to the text” (i.e., forms and structures that fulfill the God-given functions of the church). There are four specific characteristics of contextual church or indigenous church in the Myanmar Buddhist context.

### *The Contextual Church Within the Socio-Cultural Context*

First of all, a contextual church should aim to help its members to remain within their own culture and community, so that the church is not seen as a foreign

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<sup>13</sup> Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission: An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Charles E Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi, 1981), 81-82.

element in the context. Instead of extracting its members from their culture and community, the contextual church should advocate a contextual conversion.<sup>15</sup> This church should be a fellowship of followers of Jesus who strive to continue to live in fellowship with their non-Christian relatives and neighbors. In attempting to be relevant in its context, a contextual church or local congregation should never lose its unique Christian identity. Being faithful to the biblical principles of the church, it will differ from its surroundings in the whole ethos of the Christian fellowship; however, it will never cease to be relevant for the surrounding community because it expresses its message, fellowship, and service in forms and structures that are familiar to the context and it addresses needs that are felt in the community.

### *The Contextual Church Within the Religio-Cultural Context*

Secondly, a contextual church or indigenous church should endeavor to use the language of the converts and communication methods with which they are most familiar in services and other activities. One of the most important parts of the context is the language because much of a society's culture is stored in and transmitted through its language. Only when the Word of God is communicated in the mother tongue of the members, and only when the members communicate with one another and with God through their own language, can a congregation or indigenous church be said to be contextual. Moreover, a contextual church should attempt to develop and use rituals, symbols, and worship forms which, while communicating the relevant biblical message effectively, address the needs of the members. For literate and non-literate peoples alike, rituals are important for the life of the congregation, "for rituals, like sacred symbols, are languages for speaking of spiritual things."<sup>16</sup> Hiebert asserts that rituals are important to teach new Christians the meaning of the gospel in their new lives and to proclaim the gospel to non-Christians who gather to see what the Christians are doing.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Contextual Church as Place of Disciple-making*

Disciples are made in small (not big) groups where a person looks to another

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<sup>15</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *The bridges of God: A study in the study of missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological reflections on missiological issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 167.

<sup>17</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion and worldview transformation" in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14/2 (April-June 1997), 84-86.

person for instruction, counsel, training, and fellowship (Jenson 1981, 158).<sup>18</sup> Jesus unfolded his teaching of truth in a relational context—discipleship. He chose twelve people to teach by example in the context of the day-in, day-out activities of living together and ministering to people in love and power. A contextual church ensures that its method of education strengthens each member's faith as well as a sense of belonging to the local and universal church without alienating any from his or her original community or its values. This sort of approach to formal and informal education in the local or indigenous church involves teaching of the knowledge of God and skills that are relevant to the members' actual Christian life in the congregation and to their social service and mission in their original community. If the teaching is not done contextually, the content and form of education may alienate the members from their own people within their own context and will not be relevant to the values of their culture.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Contextual Church as a Place of Indigeneity*

Last but not least, a contextual congregation should seek to employ indigenous organizational structures and leadership forms. Only when the patterns and styles used to govern the life of the fellowship are in harmony with those of the local culture may we speak of a contextual organization and leadership of the local congregation.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the theology and ethics of the contextual church should be developed by the members of the local congregations as the congregations reflect on their life in their context in light of Scriptures. Instead of taking a theology of a dominant Christian group developed in another context, a contextual church will begin to develop its own understanding of the Christian faith and its implications for them.

## Models of Developing Burmese Ecclesiology

“The Ecclesia of Jesus Christ is to build to let God's power and purpose flow through her to transform and redeem His creation. For many, that requires

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<sup>18</sup> Ron Jenson and Jim Stevens, *Dynamics of church growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 158.

<sup>19</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion and worldview transformation" in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14/2 (April-June 1997), 84-86.

<sup>20</sup> Smalley, William A. Smalley, "Cultural implications of an indigenous church," in Ralph D. Winter and Steve C. Hawthorne (eds). *Perspectives on the world Christian movement: A reader*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992), 152-154.



looking at “church” in a new way.”<sup>21</sup> Six true signs and four characteristics of the true church have been purposefully developed. When the Burmese religio-cultural and sociopolitical context is considered, Burmese house fellowship is significantly appropriate. The small size of the fellowship and its informal structure contribute to the low profile of such a congregation, which will probably make such a congregation less offensive to the Burmese community. Attending such a house fellowship once a week can hardly lead to persecution and exclusion from the community. On the other hand, if persecution breaks out or if members find themselves in a serious emergency, such a fellowship may not offer enough to support, assist and protect its members. Therefore, Burmese house fellowships may need to join together in a network of Burmese fellowships that will take responsibility for each other’s needs. Furthermore, although a Burmese house fellowship is an independent local congregation, it needs to be in fellowship with the surrounding non-Burmese churches and depend on their help and assistance.

A Burmese house fellowship seems to be very relevant to the situation of present Burmese converts. According to my survey, so far there is no authentic Burmese Buddhist background church in the whole country. The majority of Burmese Buddhist converts live in different places. This means that there are too few Burmese converts in each location to form a Burmese congregation built on a traditional model. A house fellowship, however, can consist of as few as two or three Burmese converts gathering in the name of Jesus Christ, who has promised his presence among them. In many cases, however, there might be a need for assistance from a Burmese or non-Burmese mature Christian in developing this fellowship. Until one of the Burmese members of the fellowship is discipled well enough to take the role of spiritual leadership, the group will be led by this mature Christian. The house fellowship can meet at times and places that are convenient for the members and worship in ways that are meaningful to the Burmese people.

The need for Burmese converts in a small house fellowship to experience the Christian fellowship and celebration in larger settings may be met by participation in occasional gatherings or by bringing neighboring Burmese house fellowships together for joint meetings. This fellowship must also have access to Baptism and Holy Communion; these rites could either be conducted by the leader or by a visiting pastor, according to the tradition of the denomination.

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<sup>21</sup> Budijanto, Bambang, Scott Todd and Mark Yeadon. 2010. *Relentless Hope: The Unstoppable Movement of Disciple-Making Communities*. Canada, Compassion International.

If the leadership of the churches understands the rationale behind the Burmese house fellowships, they should be able to accept Burmese house fellowships and incorporate them in their mission strategy without changing any of their basic ecclesiastical principles. The Burmese house fellowship is a flexible model of a local congregation. If the pressure from the Burmese Buddhist community becomes intense, new members of the house fellowship may remain secret believers for some time, or the whole house fellowship may go underground until the persecution subsides. On the other hand, if the house fellowship grows or experiences a local people movement, it may transform itself into a more institutionalized congregation with a church building (a Burmese church).

## Case Study: Developing the Church Model in Rakhine Buddhist Context

I am a Buddhist monk convert with over 25 ministerial experiences among the Buddhist communities. In this case study I would like to express how we develop indigenous churches within Rakhine Buddhist communities (Rakhine is one of the ethnic groups in Myanmar; they are not Burmese). Rakhine society has been clothed in the cultural garb of Buddhism and their social solidarity is family-oriented. Even though Christian mission began 15 centuries ago, until 2003 there were less than 20 Rakhine Buddhist converts in the whole state, according to the Rakhine Baptist Convention. In 2003 the Rakhine Missions Band for Christ (RMBC) started reaching Rakhine Buddhists with a contextual approach. As communication is not an event but a process, conversion takes anywhere from weeks to months to even a year. We encourage the convert to freely decide to enter into a relationship with Jesus in his or her specific context. Instead of separating the Buddhist converts from their community, we encourage them to remain within their cultural community, retaining their Buddhist identity while being faithful to Christ. In this contextual conversion phase, the gospel has the potential to move rapidly from individuals to families to the community within these cultural contexts and to transform them from the inside. The Lord has been gracious to the ministries and nowadays in ten townships (there are seventeen townships in Rakhine state populated with over three million people) we have more than one thousand Buddhist converts who have been following Jesus Christ in their socio-cultural context without losing their Rakhine identity.

## Conclusion

It is encouraging that church and mission leaders and mission partners have expressed their commitment to do mission among Buddhists all over the country. However, until now, churches and mission organizations have primarily followed the traditional mission principles and approaches in their mission work. Consequently, today, the estimated Buddhist convert membership of Christian churches in Myanmar still forms a tiny minority. The Myanmar church appears to be oblivious to two critical concerns. First, there appears to be a general unawareness of the missiological lessons that should be learned from the efforts of missionaries in the past. Secondly, and perhaps more critically, there appears to be a general lack of interest among the churches in the socio-cultural and religious history of the Burmese people. If the mission work to Myanmar Buddhists is to become effective, the church and mission leaders, mission partners, and volunteers must be empowered to rethink the scriptural concept of ecclesia which is the primary agent God chooses, establishes, and nurtures to accomplish His Great Commission. This requires us to take a serious look at the scriptural concept of ecclesia. Only with the full understanding of the church can a Burmese ecclesiology be relevantly reconstructed.

Since November 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on politics, education, the economy, and the social and religious life of the country. This unprecedented global pandemic has impacted in various ways, including the cancellation of the worship services, the closure of Sunday Schools, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages surrounding observances and festivals. Many churches have offered livestream worship during the pandemic. Even in the midst of this challenge, if we take a serious look at the scriptural concept of ecclesia, and remember that Jesus told Peter that He would build His church with those who confess Him as Christ the Savior and the gates of Hades would not overcome it (see Matt. 16:18), we will see Burmese Buddhist converts worshipping him in their own language and expressing their new faith in their own cultural forms not at a single event on Sunday but every single day, seven days a week in His kingdom ventures. At the end of the pandemic, they will be saying Sadu, Sadu and Sadu in the name of Jesus Christ.