

## The IJ Mission in Myanmar

The IJ mission in Myanmar began more than ten years ago, in 2001, as a multi-level partnership, not only among the three Southeast Asian provinces of Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, but with our lay friends as well. This lay partnership in the Myanmar mission has its roots way back in the 1970s, when our Institute responded to Vatican II's call to return to:

- the original inspiration of the founder
- the call of the Gospel.

Jacinta Cardoza and Maria Swee's involvement in the ministry at the two Infant Jesus Homes and Children's Centres (IJHCC) in Galilee and Clementi and their weekly reflection sessions were formative and may have unknowingly sown the seeds which prepared the way for both Jacinta and Maria to respond to the call of Myanmar in the late 1990s, when the Institute was discerning this call ... seedlings nurtured are now bearing fruit in due season.

### IJ Novices

On Dec 15th 2012, in a simple ceremony at IJ House in 7 miles, Yangon, Duangjit (Thailand), Josephine Kay Thi Oo and Mary Thu Zar Lwin (Myanmar) were received to begin their noviceship, under the care of Sr Numpa.

Members of Josephine and Mary's families, as well as some close IJ friends, and the SJ neighbours were with us to mark this day. In true Myanmar fashion, the electricity went out as we were about to begin.

Sr Grace began with words of welcome, and shared the personal stories behind the journey of each novice. Readings were taken from Jer 1: 4- 10, Book of Institute Art 59 - 62, Josephine's version of Psalm 139 written in Burmese and Gospel of St John 15: 16-17.

The three novices shared their individual reflections - that were endearing and unique. During the rite of entry, Sr Grace presented them each with a candle, Bible, Book of the Institute and Cross.

It was sombre and meaningful, reflecting the occasion. In response, the novices sang the Prayer of Abandonment, taking a verse each - it gave a prayerful personal touch.

The electricity finally returned, as God would have it, in time for the final part where we screened a slide show dedicated to the three new Sisters with pictures taken over the past one and half years. It was put to the tune of 'Sacred Journey'.

We then tucked into a lovely lunch which every one enjoyed!

*Jacinta Cardoza*

(Novices Josephine Kay Thi Oo and Mary Thu Zar Lwin have completed their 6-month community experience in Malaysia and done a course in Psycho-Spirituality in India).

This multidimensional partnership that the Myanmar Mission Team experiences is enriching and encouraging, as the interactions both strengthen and expand our consciousness. The differences that stem from our diverse cultures and perspectives fade into insignificance compared to the strength of the spirit of Nicolas Barré that unites the evolving mission in Myanmar.

### **Myanmar Teacher Training 2007 -2015**

Since 2007, the IJ Mission in partnership with the Archdiocese of Yangon has trained teachers to bring more effective and child-centred education to the children in the remote parish boarding houses and schools in the villages. Cardinal Charles Bo is the patron of PSIE and Fr. Noel is the Director of the Teachers' Training Centre, PSIE.

Our efforts have been small, though steadily increasing in outreach. At present, our teachers are in 14 parish boarding houses and village schools. With a more 'open attitude' towards educational reform, several headmistresses have welcomed our teachers to teach in their state run schools in the villages. This is a significant change. With this in view, we created a 3 month intensive up-grading programme for our teachers, with more than 3 years of teaching experience, to be held in Singapore. The ten teachers were in Singapore from March to May 2014.

The generosity of our Sisters, IJ Schools, friends, families and collaborators has made it possible to host this programme in Singapore. While in Singapore they attended specially arranged 'Maths' and 'Science' classes, had the opportunity to conduct science experiments in a science lab, attend classes at the Institute of Education and observe teachers in our schools. This will surely boost their confidence, competence and commitment when they return to the children in Myanmar.

Every March when the schools close for the summer holidays, our teachers return to Yangon for their in-service training. The training lasts for six weeks. This year there are 18 young teachers back with us, having completed their first year of teaching in the rural parish/village schools. They spent the first two days reflecting on their experiences: and some are shared here...

*"I feel a deep sense of gratitude to many who have supported , encouraged and challenged me over the past year"- JMB*

*"I have been helped by my teacher and team mates to steer my thoughts in the right way and now I am more optimistic and can accept the realities of each day."- KTH*

*Ī care deeply for the children and totally support them. I too have discovered that I now know myself better than before."- Sr Chit*

**Theresa Santhanam** from Malaysia shares in the mission by training teachers in the Montessori methodology. She is known especially to the IJ Sisters in Malaysia and brings to the mission team her commitment to early childhood education and social justice, motivated by her faith.

## 2014 update

The government of Myanmar is moving ahead along its path of 'development and democracy', leaving a trail of mixed feelings and many concerns. In December 2013, Myanmar played host to the regional sporting championships, SEA Games, where it was determined to show itself as a country on a par with her neighbours. The world was impressed by the grand opening and closing ceremonies, the fireworks and hundreds of dancers and performers, all working in unison. It was indeed a show that took great effort, money and many hands to pull off.

Many 'shows' continue to be enacted and played out in the lives of the people we are called to serve in Myanmar.

Since the move to a more 'open' system of government, the obvious changes to be seen are the increased number of cars on the roads and the increase in refurbishment and renovation works to old buildings, as well as the number of tourists visiting the Golden Land. Asian as well as Western countries have come forward to assist and to invest in the 're-making' of Myanmar. Land grabbing and 'tricking' the poor to sell their farmlands is a worry in rural areas, while in the cities, property prices continue to rise way out of reach of the common folk. The streets of Yangon are crowded and traffic jams are inevitable. The gentle, patient Myanmar is now more agitated and frustrated on the roads. While apparent employment opportunities are on the rise, the reality is that most Myanmar young people are poorly trained and unskilled for the jobs available. The Myanmar people presently working abroad struggle to decide to return to their homeland as low salaries and increasing cost of food and travel stand in their way. Yet many have returned to be with their families and are hopeful.

Of great concern, to a truly peaceful transition, is the ethnic underlay of Myanmar society. With eight major ethnicities and over 135 different languages being spoken, the ethnic diversity raises many complex issues. The distrust of the other for ethnic preservation is deeply rooted in their psyche. This too remains a sensitive point of contention for the government in the face of international pressure and expectations.

An encouraging sign in the area of educational reform is the creation of a network of interested parties (from diverse ethnic and communal backgrounds) that reflect and propose concrete suggestions to the ministry concerned. The 2014 - 2015 fiscal year hopes to see more changes in education as the newly drafted education bill has been adopted. While this is good news, actualizing any change in a dysfunctional system will be a challenge.

In addition to the usual content improvement, a three-day workshop on 'Modern Day Slavery: Anti-Trafficking Awareness' was conducted in March by Caroline Seow and Junko Yoda. Myanmar is a 'source' country for trafficked labour due to poverty, ignorance, lack of skills and employment, and as such this training answers a pressing need. Adults in the village areas are ill informed, and often tricked by the members of the trafficking syndicate.

Sr Rosemary Barter from Ireland began the awareness sessions on the Child Safeguarding Policy with this batch of trainee teachers last March. She will conduct a refresher session with them where they share their understanding from their lived experiences around child safeguarding. From our periodic visits to the teachers in the parish boarding houses, we hear of the need to help those in charge learn new positive ways of managing the children under their care.

A directive from the Diocese for 'zero tolerance' of the use of physical punishment has been initiated. However the people in charge are inadequately prepared and this could aggravate the situation further. As part of our commitment to protecting the child, we are negotiating with donors to fund a training/formation section that will conduct awareness and readiness to implement more child-centred ways in the boarding houses and at school.

## 2015: MYANMAR TEACHERS' IN-SERVICE TRAINING IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA



This is the second group of teachers who have come to Singapore for an intensive 3-month upgrading programme. The first group of 10 teachers came from March to May 2014. The second group of 16 teachers were in Singapore in March 2015 for an upgrading programme, designed to give them an exposure to CHIJ schools and classroom observations besides learning content and pedagogical skills. They took part in seminars on teaching strategies and methods, observations in Mathematics and Science classes, mentoring as well as training in personal leadership in their role as teachers. The generosity of the IJ Sisters, CHIJ Schools, friends and collaborators had made it possible to host this programme in Singapore. They were welcomed and offered accommodation at the IJ Youth Retreat and Leadership Training Centre at Bukit Timah from March to May 2015.

Special mention needs to be made of Sr Deirdre O'Loan and the Principals and Key Personnel of our CHIJ Primary Schools who created the opportunity for these trainee teachers to learn from the trained teachers in classroom practice. In their classroom observations, the trainee teachers saw theory put into action. They were able to see

how the class is managed, the pedagogy used in teaching and the level of content taught for each class. The teachers ended their experience by having a semi-directed retreat at the Franciscan House in Holland Road with Sr Teresa Lee IJ (Malaysia).





2015: MYANMAR  
TEACHERS APPRECIATING  
THE FLORA AND FAUNA  
OF THE NATURE RESERVE.

In Yangon, Maria Swee and Jacinta ran three-month long summer camps for some 500 children at three different locations. All in all, about 25 teachers and trainees were involved. Another camp (equivalent to the Kem Kawan Kawan we had in Singapore) began on 20 March 2015 and some 70 children and 15 teachers were involved. This is our annual Friendship Camp with a particular theme each year. This year we celebrate “Friendship and Interfaith” with five children from each of the fourteen locations where we send our PSIE teachers to. Children from various parts and different ethnic groups come together and we realize now that this is a brilliant inspiration to begin peace building in a country wrought by tribalism and religious strife.

Our annual Myanmar Mission Team meeting was held in Port Dickson, Malaysia in January 2015. It was attended by Sr. Maria Lau representing the Central Team, the provincials of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, and the mission team members. Together we studied Pope Francis’ letter, *The Joy of the Gospel*.

Religious congregations in Myanmar were invited to send participants to the 3-Day Symposium on ‘Consecrated Life Today’ to be held in Anisikhan in April



