



Discipleship is crucial in this environment. Denpo says new believers must be taught to leave Buddhist practices that are ingrained in the culture. He and other leaders spend time training local Christians in how to teach new believers well. Other groups are teaching Bible lessons.

A couple of months ago, an ICR worker accompanied Denpo to visit a church near Yangon. Denpo preached, and after the service the pastor approached him.

“We have people who are ready for baptism,” she said. “Will you baptize them?”

So the next morning Denpo and the ICR worker returned. Nine new believers, some younger and some older, publicly committed their lives to Jesus Christ through baptism.

In spite of the ongoing civil war, in spite of being suppressed by the government for decades, in spite of likely family rejection for new believers, the church in Myanmar is growing as people recognize that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. ■



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## PRAYER

- Pray that Christians would be able to live and worship in peace in Myanmar.
- Pray against the spread of bad doctrine.
- Pray for people to receive sound teaching.
- Pray for more people to be willing to serve as missionaries and church planters within the country.

## STORIES OF HOPE FROM THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

# UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITIES AMID SUFFERING IN MYANMAR

MARCH 2024



*A country engulfed in civil war* does not seem like a place where the church would be thriving. But a combination of tenacious Christians and long-running political struggles have left people in Myanmar hungry for the truth. A ministry leader explains it well: “When people get problems, they pray more.”

Church growth was born out of suffering. When the military regime came to power in 1988, Christians in Myanmar were repressed. But they eventually realized they had an opportunity. They could share the gospel right under the military junta’s nose.

The junta wanted the world to believe their people had religious freedom, so they allowed Christmas festivities. Churches held large Christmas parties where they shared the gospel clearly. “We took the Christmas celebrations as an advantage,” ministry leader Denpo\* said.

\*Name Changed





Most people in Myanmar are Buddhists, but some converted to Christ at the Christmas celebrations. Some of the new converts desired to share the gospel with their own people. Again, mature Christians recognized this as an opportunity and supported these church planters as they started churches.

## HALF DEMOCRACY

When Myanmar elected a new government in 2010 and began to practice what Denpo called “half democracy,” Christians had more freedom. Once again, Christians saw a window of opportunity. “So many churches began sharing and preaching,” he said.

During a big springtime festival known for lots of drinking, Christians began to hold Bible camps for the youth. Young people invited non-Christian friends to join them at camp, and some Buddhist parents preferred to send their children to a Bible camp over the season’s heavy imbibing. More teenagers gave their lives to Christ.

Soon, the semi-democratic government began carrying out a genocide against the Rohingya, a Muslim-minority ethnic group. This plunged the country into chaos again. Next, the coronavirus pandemic hit, and many people lost jobs. Christians saw opportunity in these situations,

too. Churches organized food distributions and used the opportunity to share the gospel. As nonbelievers witnessed the love of Christians, more people gave their lives to Christ.

Then came the civil war.

## BOMBING VILLAGES

In 2021, Myanmar experienced another coup, and much of the country has been engaged in civil war ever since.

To get aid to another group of Christians who live in territory controlled by one of the ethnic armies, a pastor gets on a motorcycle carrying a white flag.

Ethnic armies are fighting the government armies, and government forces are indiscriminately bombing entire villages. Recently the government has targeted schools and wiped out many children.

Denpo regularly hears fighter jets flying over his home. “They are bombing every day,” he said.

The fighting has displaced 3 million people inside the country, including many Christians. Since November 2021, the Burmese army has burned down 10,000 villages. Families and whole communities have fled into the jungle after losing their homes.

Denpo and other Christians are trying to help the displaced believers as much as possible. But entire communities are scattered, with some hiding in the jungles and others staying with friends and family.

When one group wants to communicate, they leave their jungle camp and climb to the top of the nearest hill to get a cell phone signal. They send messages to a group WhatsApp chat. “They ask us for prayer for God’s protection,” Denpo said.

To get aid to another group of Christians who live in territory controlled by one of the ethnic armies, a pastor gets on a motorcycle carrying a white flag. When he reaches the checkpoint, he tells the militiamen he’s there to visit church members, and they let him through.

## TRAINING NEW BELIEVERS

But even amidst these difficulties, Christians in Myanmar continue to reach out in Jesus’ name. ICR is currently supporting six church-planting teams in different parts of

*Baptizing new believers who have been disciplined. Praise God, more people are coming to Christ every day.*



the country. One team is focusing on a Buddhist area where there is one Christian. A missionary regularly travels into the area to establish relationships and encourage the believer. Over time, they hope more people will come to Christ and a church will form. It’s a tough area to work in, though, because the Buddhist authorities are highly controlling.

Another unique ministry ICR supports is a 30-minute evangelistic program published on Facebook each week. Facebook is very popular in Myanmar, and the program has resulted in many interactions and conversations about faith. Previously, this same team used to evangelize by sharing Christian DVDs, but these days social media is more effective.

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## SNAPSHOT: MYANMAR

This Buddhist-majority country has seen a lot of political upheaval during its history. Some refer to Myanmar as “Burma,” which is also the name of the largest people group. Even though the Burmese make up 68% of the population, they have never been able to subdue the 149 ethnic groups in the country. Many ethnic groups have their own armies, which are fighting against the government for their independence. The fighting has displaced many people within the country since 2012. Christians are caught in the middle of the political struggle. Only about 8% of the population are Christians, and most of these are members of minority ethnic groups. ■