

Discipling the Church: A Study of Christian Education in the Anglican Church of Myanmar

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A Review

This book is an incredible resource that gives insight into the life of the Anglican Church and the development of Christianity in Myanmar.

The book is unflinching in narrating the successes and failures of the Church as it paints a clear picture of the undercurrents beneath these successes and failures. The book connects the reader with all the characters as it narrates the situations and circumstances that come into play in every era of the development of Christianity and the church in Myanmar. It is a book I will recommend to every missionary, church planter and church administrator.

The first two chapters give us a perspective of Myanmar's communities and the struggles of the missionaries in the 1800s showing the strength and weaknesses, successes and failures of the church. The denial to acknowledge local development and leadership by the Church of England at that time, saw the foundation of the church set on a weak footing and as a result, "the growth of the diocese of Yangon as well as the church of the province of Myanmar, that is the Anglican church in Myanmar, has been almost stagnant for the last 55 years, ... It is still very low up to 2003." (p19)

These first two chapters therefore give us the insight into the;

- Introduction of Christianity and the Anglican Church in a Buddhist society.
- The early challenges faced by missionaries in getting people to accept Christianity.

- The introduction of schools, especially Christian education, and the rejection of this by the communities.

We also see the lost opportunities by the church to have trained young men and women who would have grown to be policy makers and politicians that perhaps might have taken the country in a different direction from the crises the country has experienced.

The lack of interest in effectively training local indigenous priests and clergy has had a negative impact because when the government forced out all foreigners including foreign missionaries, 'the church was left entirely in the hands of indigenous church leaders' (p86) who had no training.

Chapters three to five bring us face to face with the Bishops who had toiled in the best way they could to overcome the myriads of teething problems of the Anglican Church in Myanmar. We see their struggles in the face of daunting social, political and economic challenges facing Myanmar and the impact of the international power play around them; India, China and the devastating impact of the Second World War.

We however see the 'three-in-one project' of

- 1) 'Propagation of good news by method of evangelism... 2) to be financially self supported... 3) giving necessary basic theological education...' (p116) as one of the initial formulas that helped in pushing Myanmar forward.

In chapters six and seven we are taken into the life of a man who, despite his infirmities, shows incredible commitment, sacrifice and epitomises selflessness in building the Anglican diocese and province of Myanmar, U Tun.

U Tun's weaknesses, on the other hand, included inability to communicate effectively in one of the local languages but most importantly, his failure to "train

capable successors to take his place.' (P199). This albatross followed Myanmar through the period of this book's research.

Chapters nine and ten give a critical appraisal of the Christian education in the diocese of Yangon and highlight how critical Christian education has been to the development of both the church and the society of Myanmar.

Importantly, the book at this point gives the dos and don'ts of running a diocesan Christian education, and indeed, a diocese. The top 5 common mistakes among 11 of them to be avoided are;

- 1) 'weak leadership and lack of vision on the part of the bishop
- 2) discontinuity
- 3) lack of goals, planning, implementation and evaluation
- 4) lack of planning by the personnel concerned
- 5) lack of finance or mismanagement of finance.' (p206)

The "Yangon Diocese 18-year Development Plan' (p232) in the concluding part of the book, sets the tone for the bright future of the diocese and the hope for its development.

The book 'Discipling the Church' shows the diligence, experience and expertise Saw Maung Doe has brought into the book. This book uniquely merges research work with practical imagery of mission that draws its reader into the challenging work of mission.

The book however, seems to take off from looking at the study of the Christian education into politics and ethnic conflicts. It is easy to be drawn off into both the politics on the one hand and the detailed narrative of the different bishops' contributions to the state of the church at each era. This is however understandable because Myanmar, from what the book narrates, is a complex country and the church is engaged in the battle to transform these complexities.

This book is a must read for all involved in mission.

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