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Missions

GLOBAL CHALLENGES & CASE STUDIES

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Chapter 5

Fundraising Practices of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church

by Zosangliana Colney

In response to the question of Dr. Jonathan Bonk,

*“How can such a poor church
provide for so many missionaries?”¹*

The Land

Perched on the tip of the northeastern border of India, the beautiful, mountainous state of Mizoram is geographically, economically, and culturally isolated from much of the rest of India, which considers Mizoram “industrially backward.” Despite having the second highest literacy rate in the country, most of the Mizo populations live in poverty. Electricity and decent roads are in short supply.² Mizoram is the twenty-third state of the Indian Union, situated in the northeastern corner of the country bordering with Myanmar in the east and south, Bangladesh in the west, and Assam and Manipur States of India in the north. Mizoram occupies 21,087 square kilometers with a population of only 1,097,206 (2011).³ It has a pleasant moderate

climate with temperatures ranging from twenty to thirty-one degrees Celsius.⁴

The People

J. H. Lorain, one of the first two missionaries to the Mizo writes, "The Lushais [Mizos] are a fine intelligent tribe of Mongoloid hillmen inhabiting parts of the wild forest-covered mountainous region forming the watershed between India and Upper Burma [now Myanmar]. Their ancestral home would appear to have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of Southeast Tibet and Western China;

whence, by slow degrees, through the centuries, they have pressed southward and westward to their present habitat. Their speech belongs to the Assam-Burma branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages.

Until the annexation of their country by the Indian Government in 1890 they were only known to the outside world as a race of daring headhunters, whose periodic raids were a source of terror to their more peaceable neighbours in the lower hills and plains of Eastern Bengal and Assam."⁵ Mizos were first known by outsiders for their savagery. They often raided the people in the adjoining plains of their habitation. In one of their head-hunting expeditions on January 27, 1871 they killed Dr. James Winchester, manager of a Tea Garden at Alexandrapore in Cachar District of Assam State, and then took his five-year-old little daughter Mary as a captive. On hearing about this incident, the British Government sent its troops to rescue Mary, suppress head-hunting, and establish law and order in the land of the Mizos.

Entry of Christianity

The British expeditions paved the way for the coming of Christian missionaries to Mizoram. Rev. William Williams, the Welsh Presbyterian (then Welsh Calvinistic Methodist) missionary, visited Mizoram in 1891. He was the first Christian missionary who sowed the seed of the Gospel in Mizoram. He wrote to the assembly of his church recommending adopting Mizoram as a mission field. He himself longed to return to work among the Mizos. The assembly resolved to accept his proposal and selected Rev. Williams to work in Mizoram. But unfortunately, Rev. Williams died on April 21, 1892.

Remarkably, a devout millionaire in Leeds, Mr. Robert Arthington, set about fulfilling the dreams of Williams. With a great burden for lost souls he set up the Arthington Aborigines Mission to send missionaries to northeast India. Its first missionaries, Rev. James Herbert Lorrain and Dr. Fredrick William Savidge, arrived in Mizoram on January 11, 1894.⁶ They became the first Christian missionaries who settled in Mizoram, but left in 1897.⁷

The Church

In 1897 the Presbyterian Church of Wales sent Rev. David Evans Jones in the place of Rev. William Williams to work among the Mizos. He entered Mizoram on August 31, 1897, joining the first two missionaries and working alongside them for a short time. Rev. Lorrain and Dr. Savidge left Mizoram in late 1897.

Rev. D. E. Jones was the founder of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church. The first two Mizo believers were baptized on June 25, 1899. By 1951 the Christian population in the region was 83.01 percent. Now the percentage of Christians in Mizoram is about ninety.

The Mizoram Presbyterian Church (MPC) Synod, a unit of the Presbyterian Church of India, is now the biggest church denomination in Mizoram with 612,804 members, which is more than half of the total population of Mizoram State.

Insurgency broke out in 1966 driving western missionaries out of Mizoram, and all foreign missionaries left by 1968. Subsequently, the indigenous ministers and pastors began to administer the needs and requirements of the churches. As soon as the Mizo accepted Christianity they were quick to take the burden of spreading the Gospel into their neighboring states and beyond their national boundaries. The work of administering the local churches and spreading the gospel beyond Mizoram has continued side by side.

The MPC adopted its indigenous practices of fundraising in its different local units. This church had 431,056 communicant members with a total membership of 612,804 in 2018/19. The average per capita annual contribution of each communicant member of the church was then Rs. 1224/-.

1. The Mizoram Presbyterian Church is what we call a “three-self church” in the sense that it is financially self-supported, self-administered, and self-propagating. It is financially self-supported in that the total expenditure of the church of Rs. 3,33,82,18,277 was exceeded by the income of Rs. 4,01,20,03,571 in the fiscal year 2019/20. The church is self-administered by its own 585 ordained ministers and 3,940 other workers employed (paid) by the church itself. The church is self-propagating in that it has its own mission with 2,741 workers in and outside of India with no outside funding support. Let us see how this church has managed such an achievement in God’s ministry.

Fundraising Practices

The late Rev. Saiaithanga once said, “From the very beginning our missionaries taught us to be self-supporting. They taught and introduced the ‘Kingdom of God (*Pathian ram*) contribution,’ which was used for the support of local evangelists.”⁸ Moreover, Mizo community is a giving and generous community. “One of the principles of Mizo society is ‘*Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*’ which means ‘equal share for all to survive, curse to death who deviates from it.’”⁹ Thus, Mizos received the teaching of generous giving both from their missionaries and their forefathers. Talking about the history of the church in the early twentieth century Rev. J. Meirion Llyod writes, “The number of paid and church-appointed workers was slowly growing. Pastors and evangelists generally gave devoted service and worked on very meager salaries of which they invariably gave a tenth to the collection known as the ‘Kingdom of God Collection,’ the main support of the Church.”¹⁰ Donald Chapman, Vice President of Mission India USA, reported in 2007 that the “Mizoram Church is a poor Church considering the average per capita income for the state at \$150 per year. But this is not a church comprised of rice Christians, always with a hand outstretched like the beggars lining the streets in every major city in India. The Mizo people do not follow Jesus because of what they can get. Even though very poor, they have avoided becoming crippled with foreign finance. It is not a welfare church. They consider themselves abundantly blessed and generously give and share as demonstrated at each and every meal in every home. These are not rice Christians but Christians who share their rice, the food staple that keeps them alive.”¹¹

1. Tithe or One-Tenth

The organizational set up of the church is a centralized administration in terms of ministry and finance. Mizo Christians are giving Christians in that most of the church members give a tithe, one-tenth of one’s total income. The process of giving is done systematically. A member is free to split up his or her tithe into three selected ministries—pastoral ministry, mission (ministry of evangelism), and local church ministry. The distribution ratio recommended by the church in these three fields is 5:3:2, meaning that one must give about 50 percent of his tithe to pastoral ministry, 30 percent to mission, and 20 percent to local church ministry. The local church retains only the 20 percent that is meant for its local ministry. Both the pastoral and mission

funds amounting to 80 percent are sent to the synod headquarters office. In the 2019/20 financial year the total amount received toward pastoral ministry was Rs. 1,43,93,62,700, and toward mission (ministry of evangelism) was Rs. 90,23,12,901.¹² In addition to members' contributions from tithes there are many more fundraising practices exercised by the Mizo Christians such as missionary support, collection of handful of rice, etc. Some of these practices will be explained briefly as follows.

2. Handful of Rice Collection

This is purely an indigenous fundraising practice. Mizos generally eat two rice meals a day. When the rice for family consumption has been measured into the cooking pot, as large a fistful as one can is taken out and put aside into a special bin. The rice thus set aside is collected once a week and presented to the church to be sold. The proceeds from the sale of handful of rice collected and submitted to the synod headquarters amounted to Rs. 189,124,196/- in the 2019/20 financial year.¹³ The Mizoram Presbyterian Church celebrated the centenary of this method of fundraising. The Mizo church began this practice of fundraising in 1910 when they needed funds for the church building at Mission Veng. The Women's Fellowship started collecting the handful of rice collection, sold out, and the sale proceeds were submitted to the church in support of construction of the building.¹⁴ To this day the management of this fundraising practice (i.e.,

the collection, selling, accounting, etc.) is in the hands of the women's fellowship of the church. Rev. J. M. Lloyd writes, "In 1913 this (handful of rice collection) provided funds to enable them (Women's Fellowship) to appoint the first Bible woman (Woman Evangelist)."¹⁵ In this indigenous practice of handful of rice Mizo Christians say, "As long as we have something to eat every day, we have something to give to God every day." Rev. Dr. Donald Chapman wrote an eyewitness account of the collection of handful of rice when he visited Mizoram: "After the service we visited several homes. I wanted to see and understand how this poor church in a tiny state in North East India could send so many missionaries and be so generous. In the first home, the lady of the house showed us a 2 gallon plastic bucket. There was a label stuck on the outside. It read 'The Lord's Share,' but in the Mizo language. At every meal, the woman of the house sets aside a portion of rice considered 'The Lord's Share' in this plastic bucket. It might be as small as a handful. It can be much more depending on the financial status of the family. But in every home, at every meal, the Lord gets His share. Then on Saturday morning, volunteers collect the rice from each family. A woman volunteers for a month of Saturdays and visits each of 10-12 homes assigned to her, records the amount the family gives in a ledger, and carries the rice on her back in a basket strapped around her forehead. She then brings it to a collection point. Many exist throughout the city. In the Presbyterian Church alone, more than 5 million kilograms of rice are collected each year. That is 5,500 tons of rice!"¹⁶

3. Missionary Support Fund

Members are encouraged to support a missionary at the rate of Rs. 1000/- per month. The total income from the missionary support fund amounted to Rs. 385,186,429/- during the last financial year (2019/20). Individuals, families, groups of individuals, and Christian Fellowship are supporting missionaries under this policy. The funds under this heading are meant for mission and evangelism departments, particularly for the salary of missionaries. The five local churches supporting the most missionaries with the numbers of missionaries supported are listed here:

Chhinga Veng Church	700
Chanmari Veng Church	580
Bungkawn Church	525

Khatla Church	500
Zarkawt Church	465

4. Mission Garden/Farm

Many local churches have gardens or farms usually called *Ramthar Huan*, “Mission Garden,” in order to support the mission and evangelism ministry. Prof. Jonathan J. Bonk acknowledged that “Mizoram churches in rural areas frequently dedicate entire gardens, farms, and teak plantations to missions.”¹⁷

These gardens/farms mostly produce various local cash crops—banana, orange, ginger, tea, teak, grape, paddy, and many others. The proceeds from the sale of these crops go to the mission fund. Clearing and monitoring of the gardens are managed by the church through its mission committee, which mostly organizes social works whenever necessary. For instance, the Kulikawn West Presbyterian Church has a mission garden three miles away from the city. The garden’s land was donated by Mrs. Siamkungi, a widow member of the church. Mr. Hrangkhama looked after the garden voluntarily for sixteen years until he retired from it at the age of eighty. The garden is beyond the reach of any kind of motor vehicle. Mr. Hrangkhama used to carry the products home on his back using a yoke he made himself. Many local churches have this kind of garden in support of mission work. The meager income derived from these gardens and farms goes to the mission support fund.

5. Missionary Firewood

Firewood is the main cooking fuel in rural areas. Collecting firewood from the forest is mainly the responsibility of women. On the way home they are expected to donate sticks of firewood in the place that the church prepared at the entrance of a village, to await the monthly sale. Referring to this practice Rev. Dr. Zairema said, “Another form of raising funds without anybody feeling the pinch is called missionary firewood,”¹⁸ since collecting firewood from the forest

needs no capital outlay. The mission committee of the local church is responsible to sell the collected firewood to support the mission work of the church.

6. Missionary Chickens

Traditionally most Mizo village families own poultry. It is very common among the missionary-minded members of the church to identify some chickens as “missionary chickens” as soon as they are hatched. When these chickens are full-grown, they are sold and the amount goes to the church in support of its mission projects. I remember a childhood experience when a woman approached my mother about selling a missionary chicken. We knew that whatever price we paid would go to the mission fund, so my mother gave a higher price than the chicken deserved. My father who was in the receiving and counting team of the mission fund confirmed that the exact amount my mother gave for the chicken was received from the woman who sold the chicken to us. Another approach to missionary chicken practice in some churches is to distribute eggs to members of the church at the beginning of the year and to collect grown-up chickens at the end of the year, expecting all along that some eggs would hatch and chickens would grow for a year!

7. “For Missions” Box

Mission committees of some local churches keep a box or container labeled “For Missions” at the “Government Fair Price Shop,” where every family receives their rations of rice, sugar, etc. from the government at a low price. Here, willing persons may donate a little amount of rice out of their share, and the sale proceeds go to the mission fund.

8. Setting apart of Land and Plants

Farmers set aside a portion of their land for missions. The produce from such designated areas is kept exclusively for mission work. Likewise, gardeners set apart certain fruit plants (e.g., oranges) for missions. The produce from such plants is set aside for mission work. Many gardeners who have tended to particular mission plants have said that these plants always bear more and better quality fruit than other plants in the same garden!

9. Giving Sunday Salary or Meal

Some local churches encourage their members, particularly government servants, to donate Sunday salary. Such a donation is collected in a box at the door of a church. Similarly, some families donate their Sunday meal or Sunday meat (having Sunday lunch without meat so that the price of the meat is donated to the mission fund). This system is not a regular, ongoing means of collection. It is used mainly for particular projects on the mission field such as construction of church buildings and so on.

10. Multiplying Talents

Willing members of the church take certain sums of money from the treasurer for multiplication for mission support. At an appointed time they return the original amount along with a surplus. The capital is returned to the treasury and the surplus or interest goes to the mission fund.

11. Imaginary Mission Field Visit

Members gather in the church premises or the house of a member family for an imaginary mission field visit, mainly during the night after usual working hours are over. They are expected to bring enough money for the expenditure to visit a certain mission field. Some mission fields are far from Mizoram, viz. Delhi, Lucknow, Patna, etc., whereas some fields are near, viz. Barak, Tripura, etc. Those who would like to visit far away fields are expected to give more, perhaps the amount for return airfare and so on. The money collected goes to the mission support fund. Some generous members give not only the conveyance charge but also the cost of lodging and food for the imaginary visit.

12. Hosting of Missionaries

There is also an imaginary hosting of missionaries by members of the church. A willing family is assigned to host a missionary or missionaries for several days. Travel expenses, daily food allowances, and the cost of lodging a missionary for a few days are collected from the host family or individuals. The sum of money offered by the host goes to the support of mission work.

13. Roaming Box

Roaming box or visiting box (*Bawm inleng*) is a box with the label, *Ka lo leng e, thlarau bo chhandam nan engzatnge min pek ve theih dawn le?*, which means, "Hello, I am visiting you. How much will you give me in order to save the lost soul?"¹⁹ A freewill offering

is cast into the box and is passed on from house to house. When the roaming or visiting is completed the box is opened and the amount received is given for the support of mission work of the church.

Conclusion

Although I could describe many more fundraising systems and practices of church members in Mizoram, time and space do not permit. What I would like to emphasize is that if we are willing at all to give to the One who gave his life for us, then poverty is not a valid excuse for not serving the Lord by giving. Rev. Canon Chye Ann Soh, the EURASIA Director of the Church Mission Society, commented on the generous giving of the Mizo Christians: “Though they are poor, they always set aside 10 percent of whatever they have to support missions: rice, firewood, food. They go without so that the Gospel can be shared.”²⁰ It is neither poverty nor richness that motivates people to serve the Lord but the willingness to reciprocate the love and gift of the Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. Can this Mizo model of fundraising be replicated elsewhere, or is it culture-specific?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this fundraising model?