**The Mother with Faith**

**Dr. Anna May Say Pa**



By

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Anna May Say Pa, née Anna May Chain, was born on the 29th of March, 1942, in a little village called Ywa Plaw, near Pathein (formerly Bassein) in the Irrawaddy Division of Myanmar (Burma). When she was born, she was called Ywa Plaw Paw as her nickname, meaning “the flower of Ywa Plaw.” She is the youngest daughter of Dr. Ba Than Chain and Naw Lucy Htoo. Her siblings are Dr. Clifford Chain, Professor Tun Aung Chain,[[1]](#footnote-1) Richard Chain, and Dr. Cynthia Chain.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since her childhood, she wanted to become a nun and then a missionary.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Her parents gave good education to all their children; Anna May received the best one. She went to St. Joseph Convent School in Pathein, and later to English Methodist High School in Yangon. Marcheta Thein, the best friend of Anna May, writes, “as a girl, [Anna May] enjoyed reading books and having fellowship with others. She is a quick reader, and this is a great advantage for her life. She had an assorted group of friends, and since her childhood she showed signs of being ecumenical and pluralistic.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

After her high school, Anna May went to Rangoon University, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1962. Afterward, she went to Burma Divinity School (BDS), a Protestant, Burmese Baptist seminary, known today as Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT). Anna May had a dream that she would become a missionary one day. Although BDS did not have an upper-level program, Anna May did not give up on her dream of becoming a missionary. The faculty of BDS were already discussing the inauguration of a new program, the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Education (BRE). It was a night program and designed for students who wanted to have upper-level theological education, and who were working during the daytime. Anna May and Marcheta Thein had attended the program during its first year. While attending BRE, Anna May worked at the Student Christian Centre from 1962 to 1964, where she met Say Pa, with whom she was married in 1966. They have one son and one daughter, and now have three grandchildren.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Right after she graduated with BRE in 1964, Anna May was recruited into the faculty, and appointed as a lecturer in Biblical Studies. She was the youngest faculty member at BDS; however, when a correspondence program leading to the Master of Theology (M.Th.) degree was opened in the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology in 1974, she was the first person to enroll. She was in the graduates of the first M.Th. cohort and received her degree in Biblical Studies in 1977. While serving as a lecturer, she also became the Dean of Students at Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT)[[6]](#footnote-6) from 1974 to 1979.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1979, she left MIT for further studies in the United States. She studied Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, and graduated with a M.Th. in 1980 and was awarded a PhD in 1989.[[8]](#footnote-8) Soon after her graduation, she returned to MIT and served as a Vice Principal of the seminary. When Principal Dr. Eh Wah retired, Anna May became the Principal in 1998. She served as the third female principal of MIT for a period of two four-year terms, from 1998 to 2006.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Anna May is noted for her ecumenical approach; she served in both the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia. She kept her commitment to interfaith dialogue, to international peace, and to the equality of women in Myanmar.[[10]](#footnote-10) Myanmar is a country in Southeast Asia that is predominantly patriarchal and Buddhist, with ethnically diverse populations. Even in the 1990s, Anna May used the term “feminism” to describe her approach—a term that was misinterpreted to mean “promoting female dominance.” Anna May’s use of the term “feminism,” however, entailed encouraging women to address publicly issues that pertained to them, including domestic violence, and discrimination in work places and in the educational system; she tried hard to fight for equal opportunities for both women and men. She actively led the women’s liberation movement. Anna May is known as the first feminist theologian in Burma in the 1990s.[[11]](#footnote-11) At MIT, she enthusiastically introduced gender studies and feminist theology in her teaching. She taught Old Testament courses in particular, and used feminist perspectives to interpret biblical texts. Her enthusiasm for feminism and gender studies sometimes made her tough and vigorous, as Marcheta Thein mentions in her tribute:

Once Rev. Dr. Sang Awr, the Vice Principal of MIT, who is [Anna May’s] partner in all undertakings, laughingly said, “Your Feminist Theology is a bit too strong compared to the other Feminist Theologians, whose ideas we can easily accept.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Despite criticism by male scholars and coworkers, she stayed strongly for her feminist view. Her influential work can be seen in her paper “Wives, Warriors and Leaders: Burmese Christian Women’s Cultural Reception of the Bible,” published online in the Society of Biblical Literature Forum in 2005.[[13]](#footnote-13) The resources of the paper are from her students, who are supervised by Anna May during their studies at MIT.

After the pro-democracy student protests in 1988, the government relocated many secular colleges from cities to remote areas of the country, and drastically reduced course loads and credit hours for the courses; schools were only in session for three months each year. By doing this, the government effectively prevented students from uniting further protests.[[14]](#footnote-14) When young people suffered under the government’s education system in Myanmar, Anna May responded by offering additional educational opportunities for students. First, she added new courses to the theological education curriculum, including computer and English language courses, which attracted young students in the twenty-first century. Second, she had a vision to offer secular courses for young students. Although there were many disagreements over her idea of offering secular courses within the context of theological education, she remained determined to offer a program of study for these young students. With all these struggles, the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies (BARS) program began in the year 2000, under the umbrella of MIT.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since education was severely curtailed for young people in Myanmar during the period of military dictatorship, BARS opened its doors to all students, regardless of denominational and religious affiliation. This is how Anna May with her ecumenical commitment has brought expanded educational opportunities to young people. Today, she is called “the Mother of BARS.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

In 2006, Anna May was elected comoderator of the Sixth Congress of Asian Theologians. She was one of the four keynote speakers in the Fifth Congress, in which she expressed the laments of Karen people and of Burmese people. The Karen, based mainly in the Irrawaddy Delta region and the borderland between Burma and Thailand, faced continuous marginalization as an ethnic minority group. The Karen National Union and the Myanmar Military have been in armed conflict since the 1960s. Many citizens from the majority Burmese ethnic group also longed for freedom from ethnic conflict in the country. Anna May presented the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth (narrated in the book of Ruth) in parallel to the suffering of these ethnic groups in Myanmar. In Anna May’s retelling of the biblical story, caring and loyalty between Naomi and Ruth bring restored life and hope: “God’s faithfulness may not be expressed directly but it is evident in the way people act towards each other. The role of the caring community therefore is a manifestation of the hope for the vulnerable, suffering, and marginalized.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Anna May said, “God is not isolated from the pain of the people. God weeps with the people and identifies with the suffering and anguish of the people.” She also read the biblical book of Jeremiah as offering a reminder that “God’s last word is not doom and destruction. Beyond the exile is the promise of a return to their homeland.” Anna May’s readings of biblical narratives offer a hopeful message for people who are marginalized, political refugees, or displaced.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Anna May’s family was from an ethnic minority group, the Karen. When Myanmar was hit by the cyclone Nargris on the night of May 2, 2008, the Karen villages in the Irrawaddy Delta were destroyed, and many people were killed. In response, Anna May wrote a short poem called “Cry Tears for Burma” to address the disaster and to let the world know what really happened in the villages at that time.[[19]](#footnote-19) From 2010 on, Anna May participated as an observer in peace talks between two armed forces in Myanmar: the Myanmar Military and the Karen National Union (KNU). Since Anna May was considered to be a female Christian leader representing local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), she was invited to be involved only as an observer in these peace talks and in this process. This opportunity to participate as an observer is a significant role that allows her to access the discussion at the talks; however, the role is still limited: Anna May observes, listens to the talks, and gives feedback after the meetings. The feedback is provided to both groups, the Myanmar Military and KNU; thus, the role of a female observer in these peace talks has been given Anna May a chance to communicate with male decision-makers on both sides.[[20]](#footnote-20)

While a PhD student at Princeton Seminary, Anna May wrote her dissertation on Second Isaiah, the designation biblical scholars give to chapters 40–66 in the book of Isaiah, in which she addressed the prophet’s view of Israel’s relation to the other nations and their gods. Her dissertation was directly relevant to her service in Myanmar, where Buddhism was a dominant religion. Because of her accomplished works and services in Myanmar, she was honored as the recipient of the Princeton Seminary Distinguished Alumni/ae Award in 2010.[[21]](#footnote-21) Her motto is “Ya-bah-deh,” Burmese for “it is possible,” even “in the face of repression.” Marcheta Thein writes of Anna May, “She can dream of things which seem impossible, but she has the power to win people over to work at it together with her and make [things] possible.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Under her leadership at MIT, four new degree programs were opened; including the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies (BARS), the joint Doctor of Ministry program of MIT and Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines, MIT’s M.Th. Program, and a Master of Ministry program. With her motto of “Ya-bah-den” (“it is possible”), MIT under her leadership was able to survive and “even thrive through the post-1988 era of severe repression” under the military dictatorship. Under the military regime around 1988, government personnel visited MIT on a regular basis, and listened to lectures and sermons. Anna May was once detained by a military intelligence officer because of her sermon on Genesis 1:27–28. She titled the sermon “In God’s Image,” and suggested that people should be free to act and to fulfill God’s plan for their lives.[[23]](#footnote-23) The surveillance of MIT reflected government censorship of religious discourse; certain biblical books and themes were forbidden as topics of sermons and seminary lectures.

Apart from being the third female principal at MIT, the first feminist theologian, and the mother of BARS, Anna May served in many capacities in religious activities. Her childhood dream of being a missionary came not only true, but even went beyond that, since her activities were numerous. Anna May’s activities include the following:

President of Association for Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM)

Vice-President of Myanmar Baptist Convention

Faculty Member, South East Asia Graduate School of Theology

Member, Resource Committee, Association for Theological Education in South East Asia

Member, World Vision Advisory Board

Member, Sub-Committee for Lay Participation towards Inclusive Community, Unit 1,

Unity and Renewal, World Council of Churches

Member, Women’s Department, Myanmar Council of Churches

Co-Chairperson, Joint Project of Myanmar Council of Churches and Church of Christ in

Thailand on Myanmar Migrant Workers in Thailand

Editor, *Thamar Alin* (Light of Truth), Baptist Theological Journal

Editor, *Myanmar Journal of Theology*

Editor, *Rays Magazine,* Myanmar Institute of Theology Annual Magazine

During her principalship at MIT, there were several programs created not only for seminary students and for theological education, but also for the community. Those programs are serving as bridges between MIT and the community around till now. Some of Anna May’s highlighted works for the community under MIT include:

Founder of *De Hlain Than (Sound of Wave): Women Magazine,* published annually by

MIT

Provided cost-free private tutoring for children in the community

Established vocational bible school for children of the community

Early childhood care and development center

Initiated “Doing Theology Under the Bo Tree,” International Seminar at MIT

Instituted creative and cultural worship programs

Established Annual Run for Human Dignity

Anna May currently resides in California in the United States. She is still a missionary for Karen refugees in the US, and she teaches in the area of theological education, and preaches in many Burmese immigrant churches across the country. Her service as a missionary still continues.

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