



# Out of the Belly of the Whale

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*Lal Chung Lura (Lala) is a former Training in Mission participant and passed away from COVID-19 last August.*

**D**espite his calling, Lal Chung Lura says, he “fled from God like Jonah did”. In the latter half of the 1980s, Myanmar was going through a turbulent phase and there was despair all around. Like many others in his country, he left for Mizoram in India for better education and a means of livelihood, intending never to come back. But God had plans to get him out of the belly of the whale. Just as he finished his pre-university examinations, Lura got an invite to apply for a Training in Mission (TIM) programme of Council for World Mission.

That was 27 years ago. A long-entrenched military-led government since 1962 had left Myanmar (then Burma) one of the poorest countries in the world. Politically, the generals who ran the country tightened their grip on power and repressed fundamental rights such as freedom of expression of thought and movement, freedom to hold property, and freedom of religion. As with nearly all authoritarian regimes, ad-hoc decisions were common. The economy was in the doldrums. It plunged further following a demonetisation in 1987, the third one in three decades since the junta took over. In March 1988, the whole country erupted in protests, with students leading them. Consequently, the government dismantled academic establishments, pushing the country into the ground.

“We had no confidence, our world view was very narrow, and our understanding of life and ministry was limited. It was very difficult to dream big of the future or express the faith and witness. Travelling abroad was unimaginable,” says Lura. “I was really surprised when I received a letter from CWM that I was selected to participate in TIM 1991-92.”

Training in Mission (TIM) is a Diploma in Mission Studies programme instituted by the CWM since 1981 to equip young people for the ministry and mission of its member churches. A group of 10-12 young people from churches and ecumenical partners of CWM are brought together for seven months of intensive mission training.

It is open to individuals aged between 18 and 30 and who are not ordained. The aim is to explore mission issues in an international and multicultural context. CWM takes care of the entire cost of travel, accommodation, food and training during the programme.

For Lura’s batch, the TIM programme was held in two places, England and Jamaica. “The training in two different worlds made me understand the meaning of life and enriched my experiences,” he says. “Meeting, learning, sharing, eating, and experiencing different challenges together as a team was a fantastic experience. As we were from different backgrounds, cultures and traditions, there were many things to learn from one another. Our programme included theological insights, practical placements, meeting with different people, and learning the mission and ministry of CWM.

Apart from the given programme, experiencing the lifestyle of a developed country itself was a great lesson for me.”

But most of all TIM was a life-transforming occurrence for him. “Prior to my exposure to TIM my understanding of mission was just ‘saving of souls’, and I perceived people of other faith as sinners who were sure to go to hell.

But my perspective of mission and my attitude towards people of other faith changed. I got a wider understanding of mission as an affirmation of the fullness of life through the course study on contextualisation, cross-cultural mission, gender issues, Third World theology, and CWM mission and policy."

The most significant event during the TIM programme, he says, was the theme chosen for his team, "Here I am, send me" (Is.6:8). "It revived my passion to do God's mission. I was empowered and enriched through TIM to be involved in God's mission throughout my life which I dared not dream of before."

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CWM Leaders of TIM in 1991-92. Photo courtesy of Lal Chung Lura



After returning, Lura enrolled himself in a theological seminary to prepare for full-time ministry. Through his pastoral ministry, "I had a chance to empower people to engage in mission, evangelism, and to reach out to more people with the Good News."

In 2005, he joined as a lecturer at Tahan Theological College, managed by the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. With a CWM scholarship, Lura completed his M.Th at the Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands. In 2015, he was elected Principal of TTC.

Says Lura: "TIM is a wonderful event that moulded me and transformed me to become a servant of God. It enabled and strengthened me to work faithfully in the ministry even in the midst of many struggles and challenges. My experiences with my teammates in the TIM programme is unforgettable; three decades later, they are still vibrant in my memory. It strengthened and enriched my faith and commitment to engage in God's mission. To date, the training continues to have an impact on my life and ministry." ■

Home visiting at Giddyhall village at Long placement, Jamaica. Photo courtesy of Lal Chung Lura

