

Love in Deed

Esther Byu Reflects on Her Experience with Fellowship of the Least Coin

BY SUSAN JACKSON DOWD

For the past eight years, Esther Byu (pronounced “Bue”) has served as the lead staff person for the International Committee of the Fellowship of the Least Coin (ICFLC). Although she has lived and worked in the Philippines, Japan and Hong Kong, Esther—a citizen of Myanmar (formerly Burma)—now works in the relative freedom of Bangkok, under the auspices of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT). She and her assistant, Apinya, are the only staff for this international movement. On one wall of their compact office hangs a picture of Shanti Solomon, founder of the Fellowship of the Least Coin (FLC). Tucked in, around, under and behind their desks are files, papers, photographs, maps and other mementoes relating to 50 years of prayer. Esther describes FLC, at its core, as a prayer movement that generates funds as a by-product of its spiritual practice.

Susan Jackson Dowd

(SJD): Share some of the experiences that brought you to your work with FLC.

Esther Byu (EB): God has been preparing me for many years for this work. The Asian Church Women’s Conference in 1962 (Petburi, Thailand) . . . that’s where I met all of the founders—Shanti Solomon, Margaret Shannon, Dorothy Wagner. It was unbelievable. I was quite young, but that was my first experience, really, outside Burma. That was the beginning of my relationship with Asian Church Women’s Conference (ACWC). During that second ACWC conference, FLC was adopted as the main program.

In 1980 . . . I made my first visit to the U.S. and attended a Church Women United conference at the University of California. I roomed with Margaret Shannon. These kinds of things kept linking me with the Asian Church and Presbyterian Women—very strange. It was one [meeting] after another and so overwhelming for me.



Esther Byu and Apinya Korsrisuwan at the office of the Fellowship of the Least Coin Office in Bangkok, Thailand

SJD: How has your work with Fellowship of the Least Coin differed significantly from your other work?

EB: It is the fulfillment of my dream and the crown of my life. I really feel it is a vocation; it is not a job anymore. I enjoy just being there. When I was young, I prayed that one day I would be in a position where I can help people, rather than me being helped by people. It is not

the money; it is from the offering of even the poorest that I could, like a bridge in between, bring those in prayer together. By being involved in this work, I feel like whatever I cannot do inside Burma, I can do by linking them up with the rest of the world. Like putting all the jigsaw pieces of my life together and trying to see myself is very colorful, with all of those women around the world and the opportunity of touching the lives through my writing, [and via the] Internet. It really is a joy! Though I am alone in my office, I don’t feel lonely because of this. Whoever talks to me shares their experience. And that’s a joy, because they say, “Pray for me. I am facing some problem.” It is like worship, being in the presence of God, touching all the lives, and you can feel the spirit linking us up. I can sense the prompting or the urging to call someone. I feel that kind of thing . . . the power of the Spirit is working beyond geographical boundaries.

SJD: What makes this offering unique?

EB: It is love in deed. It is not the talk. What is meaningful is to do something. I think that's what Shanti had as her vision. It's not just to pray—it is to give something. Especially from the poor people's perspective. For them, to just give a coin is service and sacrifice. There are people in parts of the world who do not have a purse to pull coins from. They produce things and exchange, and that's how they survive. To give this coin is something.

In responding to the least, you also feel the hope and aspiration, the strength from these people. It's not just the one who receives but those who only pray who are contributing. That's what is very meaningful—that is the main thing.

SJD: Tell us about FLC founder Shanti Solomon.

EB: I met Shanti in 1962 and again later, when she visited Burma. In those experiences what I see is she is simple, and then she is humble, and the way she shares with conviction and passion, in a gentle way. And she listened. I'm sure that her experience and depth make her who she is. Later, when I read about her life, I could see that those who really have a hard struggle in life and suffer most are the ones who are close to God. They have a vision for a better life. And for her to think of forgiveness, that is really impressive. Her father was killed and one of her sisters . . . to forgive one who has hurt or killed one of her loved ones is quite a faith, it's a gift. She had a real concern and passion for people.

SJD: It is a wonderful theology but so challenging to live.



The International Fellowship Mission Team of Christian women traveled to the Pacific rim in 1956. Shanti Solomon (first row, third from left) was denied a visa into Korea, and stayed in the Philippines, where the idea of the Fellowship of the Least Coin was born. Margaret Shannon (first row, second from right) of Presbyterian Women in the United States coordinated the Pacific Team.

EB: And to think of a movement where there is room for the least. In all the places I travel, I find that those who are poor are so generous and their hospitality is so warm. When I look in the kitchen, there is nothing, but they are saying, "Don't go back, stay with us, have a meal" without considering how much they have. But that is the way. They don't have, but the heart they want to give. So, that's what I think Shanti knew. Those who are poor can be in this movement because out of the struggle of their daily life, their prayer will be more meaningful; it touches the depth of their heart, and also the very beat of inner life. That kind of prayer comes out so sincerely, earnestly. Those who suffer can be in solidarity with others of the same experience.

SJD: Can you share a bit about the theology behind the Fellowship of the Least Coin?

EB: You look in the Bible and Jesus talked about "the least" many times—coins, lost coins, salt, yeast, mustard seeds, small lilies in the field and sparrows. So why did Jesus pick these small things? I think that is behind God's intention for us, to know that

God cares about the least. Out of this can be greatness and wonder.

[In] this prayer movement the rich and the poor all can kneel on the same ground in humility and brokenness, because the message itself is love and forgiveness. In order to love and forgive, we need to be broken. We need to be humble to really understand the other person, even those who offend us. We need to get in their skin and see why it is so. Jesus himself prayed from the cross, "Forgive them for they know not what

they do." So this is the main thing in the life of Jesus, even in the cross—the power of forgiveness, the power that breaks the cycle of violence and hatred. This is said very clearly, even in the Lord's Prayer.

SJD: How does this aspect of the offering manifest itself in your work?

EB: All these years since I joined (now seven years), whenever we meet and look into the requests for project grants, always the question comes up, "Do we have enough?" And one or two will say, "Don't you remember, all the years we have gone through, the Lord has blessed us." The main thing this serves for the committee and myself is renewing trust in God. That trust, that faith in this prayer movement has drawn us together.

Prayer is not just asking, it is constant communion with God. And in constant communion with God, I try every day. Every step for me is to be reconciled, converted, renewed—every step. Then I have the strength to reach out to the committee members I work with and the regional contact people, to keep them in constant communication.



Above: The second Asian Church Women's Conference in Thailand in 1962

Right: Samples of containers used to collect the least coins around the world



Shanti Solomon at the Silver Jubilee of the Fellowship of the Least Coin in Manila

That's why my work is not just my work. I can say, "[H]ere is my work and we need to do it," but we build up communion and communication, and that is, to me, the circle of prayer. It is like the pebble that we drop and each connection, the waves, just go out and out. I may have more but this is the theology that I reflect in my report each year to the International Committee, some reflection, some insight. The report is kind of a journal that reflects my theology as well as my experience.

SJD: What are your thoughts as the 50th anniversary of FLC approaches?

EB: It is not the amount we give each year—this is not the point. It is how many people are participating in this prayer movement and can understand what prayer life is all about. In the next 25 years, we must keep the real meaning from the beginning and never lose track or sight of the original vision. This is not a donor agency or fund-raising organization. This is a movement that grew—is growing—out of our understanding of our life in community and communion with people in

all parts of the world, even with creation. Now we are busy with preparing all of this information. We don't want people just to read materials that we prepare, but to reflect on their own prayer life and what this FLC movement means to them. How can they continue to help this prayer movement be understood by all people? We also must look at the joy of celebrating, because this is such a miraculous work. We can celebrate what God has done. There are many, many people who are still with us and the Least Coin has done that. These are the celebrations.

SJD: Do you have anything in particular that you want Presbyterian Women to know or to hear?

EB: First of all, I want to say a big "thank you" to Presbyterian Women because [PW is] a cofounder, with Margaret Shannon, from the very beginning. In my annual report, [I always note that] even before ACWC, this idea was already rooted

in Presbyterian Women. In fact, I have wanted to visit Presbyterian Women in person to express appreciation and gratitude for what you have been, for what you mean to the prayer movement. So, I gladly accept your invitation to the Gathering in 2006, to present myself as a big "thank you" in person.

Keep praying, because the world needs this power to change to a better, safer world and community family, where people can find peace. That is really important, especially in the U.S. It is really important that we work hand in hand, because we sometimes think that the U.S. has so many things, is an affluent society, but I feel that we need to work together to find fullness of life in all aspects. It is this partnership of praying, giving and receiving together that I pray will reach out to as many people as we can, to reach even beyond our regions and where we have never been, even to people we will never see in this life but with our prayer. 🍷

*There is more to this interview!
To read the rest, visit the Horizons
Web site, www.pcusa.org/horizons.*

Susan Jackson Dowd serves as communications coordinator for Presbyterian Women.

2005 Fellowship of the Least Coin Grant Recipients

Africa—\$22,100

1. Afforestation Project 2000, Cementso, Adjanda Road, Aburi, Ghana; \$3,000
2. Kiga and Micro-Business Self-Help Group, Gatanga Location, Thika, Kenya; \$4,000
3. Jokoyando Self-Help Group, Otonglo Village, Kanyakwar Location, Kisumu, Kenya; \$3,500
4. Orphans Knitting Project, Mathare slums, Nairobi, Kenya; \$4,000
5. Community Support Association, Kalingalinga Compound, Lusaka, Zambia; \$3,500
6. Chifundo Orphanage Home Care, New Kanyama Plot 67, Lusaka, Zambia; \$4,100

Asia—\$36,000

1. Joint Women and Youth Consultation on HIV/AIDS, Gender and Human Sexuality, NCCP, Quezon City, Philippines; \$3,000
2. Young Women Doing Theology (YWDT), Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; \$5,000
3. Leadership Training for Mongolian Church Women, Asian Church Women's Conference Project for Mongolia; \$4,500
4. Leadership Training for Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Church Women in 2005, Asian Church Women's Conference Project, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; \$4,000
5. Journey to Wholeness, Kwinana, Western Australia; \$3,500
6. Re-Making of Eva Project, Hong Kong SAR, China; \$4,000
7. Helping Mentally Diseased People Project, Kotobuki-cho, Naka-ku, Yokohama, Japan; \$3,000

To learn more about Presbyterian Women's support of the Fellowship of the Least Coin, contact Sandy Weldy-Cook, PW program assistant, 888/728-7228, ext. 8014. To order the latest issue of *Circle of Prayer*, FLC's booklet of prayers and meditations, contact Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS), 800/524-2612, item PWR-05-099. The booklet is free. Shipping charges apply (10% of order total; \$4.50 minimum, \$60 maximum).

8. Literacy Program, Por Daus Village, Cambodia; \$5,000
9. The Women's Space, 64 McElhone Street, Woolloomooloo, NSW 2011, Australia; \$4,000

Europe—\$15,000

1. Oxford Place Children's Centre, Oxford Place Methodist Centre; \$4,000
2. Eleventh World Assembly of the World Federation of Methodists and Uniting Church Women (WFM & UCW), Korea; \$5,000
3. "Beyond Feminism? Women and Men in a New Humanity," Ecumenical and Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (EFECW), St. Petersburg, Russia; \$3,000
4. Finances and Project Management in Low-Income Communities, EFECW, Bulgaria; \$3,000

Latin America—\$25,500

1. Workshops on medicinal plants based upon a reflection of the use of curative herbs in the Bible, Concepción Province, Chile; \$4,000
2. Sorority and empowerment: A pastoral accompaniment for women liv-

ing with HIV, Maracay-Edo Aragua, Venezuela; \$4,000

3. Regional encounters and workshops for women and development of gender consciousness and community solidarity in Brazil, Porto Alegre and other points in the southern region of Brazil; \$4,000
4. Literacy, Health and Leadership, municipalities of Momostenango and Chichicastenango of Guatemala; \$4,000
5. Women for Life and Peace, Barranquilla, Colombia; \$4,500
6. Caring for the Caregivers, San José, Costa Rica; \$5,000

Middle East—\$14,000

1. Microcredit Enterprises, slum areas in the suburbs of Cairo and eight presbyteries, Egypt; \$5,000
2. Women's Least Coin Offers Bread on the Table, Sidon, South of Lebanon; \$5,000
3. Support of Saint Ephrem Home for Children Homeless, Orphans and Social Cases, Bicfaya-Atchane, in the Lebanese Mountains, Lebanon; \$4,000

Pacific—\$7,500

1. Women of Hope, Veitu, Suva, Fiji; \$4,000
2. Capacity Building for Women of Nauru, Aiwo District, Nauru; \$3,500

Budget for 2005

Project grants—\$120,100
Block grants—\$120,000
Emergency grants—\$10,000
Program and administration—\$70,000
Annual meeting expense—\$20,000
Circle of Prayer—\$10,000
Anniversary budget—\$20,000
Contingency—\$2,000

Total: \$372,100



Here's What One PW Is Doing

Mission-Minded Meals

Mission and fellowship are two dominant themes for Presbyterian Women at Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church in Guilderland, New York. Each June, we used to go to dinner at an expensive restaurant. But a few years ago, we decided to choose an inexpensive restaurant, share a meal and use the remainder of our money to supplement our mission budget. Now we have food, fellowship and fulfillment. Our group is not large—we average 20 people at our meals—but we raise \$180 or more each year. For us, mission and fellowship are the perfect combination!

*Ann R. McKinney
Guilderland, New York*