

## January

**PATHEIN, Myanmar** — When the Karen Baptist Church and the [Bible Society of Myanmar](#) were planning the dedication of the newly-published Common Language Sgaw Karen Bible, they knew that many people would want to attend. So, on a football field at the Ko Tha Byu Baptist Seminary, they built a large temporary bamboo chapel that would provide shelter and seating for 4,000.



But at dawn on January 4, more than 6,000 brightly dressed, eager people arrived at the chapel, soon filling to capacity and spilling out onto the field. As the sun and the heat intensified, many took shelter under trees. A large number of them had travelled long distances to there, some from as far afield as Thailand.

For the Sgaw Karen people, the long-awaited publication of this Bible was a proud and significant moment in their history as a Christian community. In fact, the dedication ceremony was the final part of a five-day 'Triple Celebration Convention' to mark three milestones in their history: the conversion to Christianity 175 years ago; the first Sgaw Karen person ([see below](#)); the 150th anniversary of the first Sgaw Karen Bible; and the publication of the Common Language Sgaw Karen Bible.

The temporary bamboo chapel built for the dedication of the Common Language Sgaw Karen Bible on January 4, 2004, was not large enough to hold all of the 6,000 people who attended the event. Pathein, Myanmar.

Speakers at the dedication ceremony reminded the gathering of the incredible growth of Christianity among the Sgaw Karen people, who make up a significant proportion of Myanmar's Christian population: the Karen Baptist Church alone now has more than 200,000 members, 1,441 churches and about 2,000 full time ministers.

The first Sgaw Karen Bible, published in 1853, has played a vital role in the growth of the Karen Church. In 1982, however, Karen church leaders approached the Bible Society with a request for a new translation that would be more relevant to today's Karen-speakers. A team of nine translators, including a number of Karen church leaders, got to work, supported by United Bible Societies consultants. The New Testament was published in 1994.

Ten years later, the publication of the full Bible has come at a time of further growth in the Karen Church, which is seeking to help people to truly engage with the Bible's message. During the launch ceremony, Bible Society General Secretary the Rev Mar Gay Gyi asked God to bless the new translation, pray that it would have as great an impact on today's Sgaw Karen people as the old version did in the past.

To help fund the production costs of the new Bible, the Society organised a hand-written New Testament and Psalms

which many hundreds of people contributed. (423 words - MYANMAR.13.2.04)

## **How the Sgaw Karen became Christians**

The Sgaw Karen, who today number about 1.2 million in Myanmar and about 300,000 in Thailand, are traditionally animists. Today, however, a large proportion are Christians, and they mark the beginning of Christianity in their tribe with the conversion 175 years ago of Ko Tha Byu, a notorious criminal. Having been apprehended by the government for his crimes, he was sold into slavery and bought by the missionary the Rev Adoniram Judson, who freed him and gave him work.

Mr Judson taught him about Jesus, and took Ko Tha Byu with him as he preached in Burmese villages. He eventually decided to become a Christian and developed a deep desire to share his faith with his own people. Slowly but surely and more Karen people, inspired by his preaching, became Christians.

Some of the Karen's traditional mythology that surrounded their animist beliefs made them more open to the Gospel because, in some instances, it tied in with some of the stories found in the Bible. For instance, there is one story in their mythology that speaks about the consequences of eating forbidden fruit from a 'tree of death'. Another of their stories prophesied that one day a white brother would bring the Karen people a book from across the water that they had lost through carelessness after creation.

The 'book' was translated into Sgaw Karen in 1853 by an American Baptist missionary, Dr Francis Mason, in co-operation with Saw Quala, a Karen church leader, and Dr Jonathan Wade, another missionary who devised a Sgaw Karen orthography. (257 words - MYANMAR.13.2.04)