

Finding Lost Alumni Overseas

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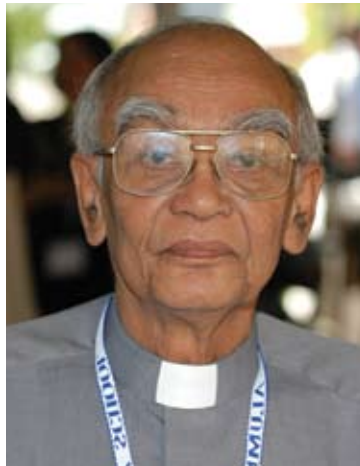
OVER 45 YEARS AFTER LEAVING Yale Divinity School, U Tha Din '62 B.D. returned to the grassy Quad on a sunny October afternoon for his class reunion. A serene man in a clerical collar, Tha's presence on the Quad that day was a testament to the perseverance of his family in his native Myanmar, a country mired in political turmoil and renowned for its Byzantine bureaucracy.

"Because of my age, you see, my son especially wanted to ask for me to come," says the understated Tha, former leader of the Baptist Churches of Myanmar (formerly Burma). His son, along with YDS staff who supported Tha's petition for a United States visa, persisted through the months-long permission process that ended with the Burmese cleric traveling from Kyimyindine in Rangon to stand with over 400 other alumni at the four-day 2007 Convocation and Reunions.

International alumni traveled from far and wide to come to Convocation 2007 at just the time when the YDS Alumni Office is exploring ways of reaching out to them. The Divinity School has long been committed to being an international and global institution. However, of the 7,055 living alumni, just 373 foreign graduates maintain contact with the Alumni Office. Although distance is certainly one hindrance, the attendance at Convocation 2007 of alumni from as far away as Ghana, Germany, and the United Kingdom indicates that there is still a spirit of respect and kinship between overseas alumni and YDS.

"Starting with the international alums that returned this year, there will be an organized effort during the upcoming years to further the Divinity School's longstanding commitment to partnerships abroad," says John B. Lindner, director of the Department of External Relations. Lindner explains that the disproportionate number of foreign alumni with whom the Alumni Office has lost touch is largely explained by the postal system. In the United States, the postal service updates changes of address, but the systems abroad generally do not. That makes person-to-person contact the predominant way to keep international address information fresh.

One of the goals of the Divinity School's ongoing \$38 million Divinity Tomorrow capital campaign is to raise money that will be used for international student scholarships and to allow YDS students to travel abroad, according to Lindner.



U Tha Din '62 B.D.

Justice O. Akrofi '76 M.Div., who returned to YDS from his native Ghana for Convocation, agreed with Lindner's assessment that poor postal systems and technological underdevelopment abroad are the primary reason for lost alumni. "Communication is very fast here and it's very slow in Ghana so there is no one to blame," says Akrofi, the archbishop of the Anglican Church of the Province of West Africa.

Another foreign-based YDS graduate, Kathleen LaCamera '83 M.Div., suggested going one step further in networking overseas alumni. "It wouldn't hurt to arrange a gathering every few years for those YDS alums living abroad," says LaCamera, a freelance journalist and media consultant in the United Kingdom's Wilmslow, Cheshire, who returned for Convocation. LaCamera says that distance has not affected her relationship to YDS, adding that she was drawn to return in 2007 to see classmate Rita Ferrone '83 M.Div. receive an award, and "because friend and mentor Peter Hawkins was giving the Beecher Lecture and because former ministerial colleague and friend Linda Thomas was giving the Taylor lectures."

One alumnus who has already started the networking process on his own is Dieter Kuchenbecker '75 M.A.R., a senior pastor in the German parish of Schlamersdorf in the Northelbien Lutheran Church. Germany is home to 19 YDS graduates and 316 Yale University alumni, says Kuchenbecker. While at Convocation 2007, Kuchenbecker recounted how he had founded a Hamburg-based group called Common Ground that promotes the "common values, habits and traditions of Americans and Germans."