

Briefly noted: Union Theological Seminary, Myanmar

News in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

Union Theological Seminary in New York has awarded degrees to 104 students, its largest graduating class since 1992. Included were 59 students who received Master of Divinity degrees. “Slightly more than a third of the students are going into some type of church-related work, ranging from pastoral services to chaplaincies,” said a Union news release. Thirty percent planned to work toward other degrees. The 172nd commencement was the last during the nine-year presidency of Joseph C. Hough Jr., who is retiring July 1. Hough is credited with leading the ecumenical seminary out of deep financial problems and bolstering its academic strength.

A disastrous cyclone in Myanmar, a high-intensity earthquake in China and a series of tornados through the U.S. midsection hit within days of each other in May, prompting outgoing stated clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick and another top Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) executive, Linda Bryant Valentine, to urge prayers focusing on the theme of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength.” They wrote: “Explanations are impossible and words themselves seem so difficult to come by when such heart-wrenching tragedies happen.” The PCUSA, like other denominations, have responded with aid through overseas and domestic church partners. Myanmar’s rulers, for days allowing only neighboring nations to provide aid, has left thousands of corpses lying in fields. In China’s interior, tens of thousands were dead, though the government has loosened its usual procedures by allowing outsiders as well as volunteers within China to help.

Many South Africans were shocked by a wave of violence last month directed against foreigners—many of them Zimbabweans seeking refuge from their nation’s turmoil—living in poorer areas around Johannesburg. At least 22 people were slain in a ten-day period, according to news reports. Homes have been looted and people have been attacked and killed in what police have described as “orchestrated anarchy.” The leader of the South African Council of Churches, Eddie Makue, urged people to desist from violence. “Throughout the apartheid era, many of our neighbors welcomed those who had been uprooted by the turmoil in our own land,”

said Makue, speaking for Protestant and Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholic bishops. Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu similarly pleaded: "This is not how we behave. These are our brothers and sisters."