

## **REFUGEES RENEW CHURCH**

### **KAREN IMMIGRANTS FROM MYANMAR, THE FORMER BURMA, ARE GETTING HELP FROM:**

### **AND GIVING BACK TO -- DOWNTOWN BAPTISTS.**

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## **Body**

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On one hand, Eh Say is fighting a battle for survival in his adopted home. On the other, the 36-year-old refugee from Myanmar is helping revive a downtown St. Paul church that had hit hard times.

Having fled the jungles of southeast Asia in the late 1990s after the Myanmar Army killed his parents, Eh Say came to the United States in February after living in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Unable to speak English and with few marketable skills, Eh Say, among a trickle of refugees to Minnesota from the country once known as Burma, has been struggling to find a job. But he and his fellow refugees, mostly members of the ethnic group Karen, have found a sanctuary at First Baptist Church.

They have drawn support from the church and infused new life into it, said the Rev. Loren McLean, associate pastor. The Karen (pronounced cur-REN) have helped the church stay downtown when it looked like its dwindling membership would force it to move, McLean said.

With the younger generation moving to the suburbs, McLean said, "the church was shrinking."

The Baptist Church has a long missionary history in Burma, so when Karens began arriving in the United States, it was natural for them to seek help from Baptists.

There are about 450 Karen refugees in Minnesota, according to Wilfred Shwe, chair of the Karen Community of Minnesota, an organization formed in February 2003. The Karen are an ethnic minority, mostly Christian, from the highlands near the Myanmar-Thai border, and they have been struggling against the Myanmar government. The government has been accused of killing them, burning their crops and forcing their youth into slavery.

The refugees from Myanmar also include a tiny minority of non-Karens.

The church has helped several Karens resolve immigration issues. It has made the Karen community feel welcome in St. Paul, said Amy Twe, a political asylum seeker from Myanmar.

When she and her husband came to the United States on a tourist visa and applied for political asylum, the church provided them with a place to stay. Now the couple has work permits, Twe said.

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Wilfred Shwe, a Karen who has lived in Minnesota for four years, said he came here because one of his comrades in arms in the fight against the Burmese regime lived here.

Paw Say, 47, who came to St. Paul in January, said United Nations authorities wanted him to go to Denmark, but he insisted on coming to the United States to avoid isolation and to seek community support. That support landed him an apartment, where he lives with his wife and five of his seven children.

Julian Kessler, longtime member of First Baptist, at Ninth and Wacouta streets, says the Karen have added new ideas, new music and younger people to the congregation, which has been helping them settle -- providing essential household items, rice and money, for example -- since 2000. Those who have jobs contribute a fair share of their wages to the church, Kessler said. "They do what they can," he said.

About 200 refugees from Myanmar show up for services every Sunday, McLean said, bringing to the church "a whole new spirit of enthusiasm to worship."

"We have become a family," said Kessler, who for two years has organized donations of food, clothes and other necessary items.

"They are coping well because we take the time to listen to them," said Kessler, a St. Paul postal worker.

McLean said the Karen have also formed choir groups who perform during the church's Sunday service.

The Karen are reaching out to others in the congregation by inviting them to participate in their cultural celebrations and offering them traditional Karen meals, Kessler said.

John Borden, associate director of the International Institute of Minnesota, said the Karen refugees who have become homeowners also extend a helping hand to the new arrivals.

Karens arrange accommodations and airport pick-ups for the new arrivals, Shwe said. They also arrange rides for newcomers to medical appointments and help them get social security numbers, he said.

But it's not always easy, Shwe said. Trying to provide rides to the recent immigrants is a juggling act for most Karen community volunteers with jobs and kids to look after.

Their inability to drive means many refugee settlers can't go to job interviews. The downward economic turn has added to their woes, Shwe said.

Research analyst David Zander from the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans, says many Karen refugees feel that Hmong refugees have garnered more attention and more benefits.

The Karen feel ignored or invisible, said Zander, who conducted interviews with many Karen community members in 2003.

But it's case of numbers, he adds. Hmong refugees outnumber other ethnic groups, Zander says.

He said the struggle of Karen refugees is similar to other refugee groups trying to realize the American dream.

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### ABOUT THE KARENS?

Inhabitants of the eastern highlands, near the Myanmar-Thailand border, the Karen are one of seven ethnic minority groups in Myanmar (formerly Burma). The Karen form about 7 percent (about 7 million) of the total population, according to the CIA's World Factbook. More than 100,000 Karens are refugees in Thailand.

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In 2004, 189 Myanmar refugees arrived in Minnesota from refugee camps in Thailand, according to Elyse Chadwick, refugee health consultant at the Minnesota Department of Health. Through April, another 39 arrived.

Chadwick said her department doesn't track refugees who move into Minnesota from other states. Only federal program refugees are eligible for state services and medical assistance, she said.

### RESOURCES FOR REFUGEES

The Minnesota Council of Churches, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, World Relief, Catholic Charities and International Institute of Minnesota have helped resettle Karen refugees in the state since 2000, said Joel Luedtke, director of refugee services for the Minnesota Council of Churches.

Luedtke said the council helped 135 Karens come to the Twin Cities in 2004 and is expected to bring about 30 in this year. The relief agencies ensure that refugees basic needs are met in the first 30 days.

Under contract with the federal government, the agencies help refugees for 90 days, including assisting with medical tests and doctor visits and enrolling new arrivals in English as Second Language programs and public schools.

The refugees are also eligible for assistance from the county they live in.

## Graphic

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3 PHOTOS: CHRIS POLYDOROFF, PIONEER PRESS

1)Cynthia Kyaw, 6, looks around while members of the Karen community pray on a Sunday afternoon in May at First Baptist Church in St. Paul. A church pastor credits the refugees from Myanmar with breathing new life into the church. Who are the Karen? and Resources for refugees, Page C3

2)Sophia Kyaw, 3, runs down a side aisle during fellowship at First Baptist Church. Church members provide essential household items -- rice and money, for example -- to Karen refugees.

3)Wilfred Shwe, chairman of the Karen Community of Minnesota, listens to plans for the next week's service during fellowship on a May Sunday at First Baptist Church in St. Paul. Many of the Karen who resettled in St. Paul from their native Myanmar (formerly Burma) attend services at First Baptist, which sponsored their resettlement and supports them in their search for housing and jobs. Shwe estimates there are 300 Karen in St. Paul, 450 in the state.

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