

I was a stranger: Welcoming Burmese refugees

by [Peter J. B. Carman](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

We sat crowded onto an old couch, kitchen chairs and the floor in a tiny second-floor apartment in northwest Rochester, New York. Nine newly arrived refugees from a Thai refugee camp near Burma (Myanmar) had agreed to meet with two volunteer interpreters and me, an American pastor. The refugees, Karen tribal people, spoke cautiously in rusty Burmese, a language they tend not to use often after years of persecution, war and exile. This was their first encounter with neighbors—a moment as full of fear as of promise.

But as we talked the apprehension began to ease. An outgoing four-year-old broke the tension when he began exploring my hands and beard. Then the warmth of the church volunteers, themselves members of a Burmese tribal minority, melted the last bits of uncertainty. Soon we had permission to look in the refrigerators and cupboards and determine if there were enough groceries for a few days, as well as blankets and warm clothes. And as we were getting ready to go, we invited our new friends to visit church. “Yes, thank you,” several said. “We want to go to church.”

“What kind of church?” I asked. When they said, “Baptist,” I responded with “We are Baptist too!”

With that visit in the fall of 2006, Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester, New York, began welcoming refugees from Burma. We had no idea what we were getting into. In the spring of 2007 there were 30 refugees from Burma in Rochester; by 2007 there were 200, and by now there are almost 400, with many more expected.

Rochester is a microcosm of what is happening quietly across this continent and in many other nations. The refugees in Rochester comes principally from two distinct ethnic groups: Karen people, who have been living in camps in Thailand, and a smaller number of Chin refugees from Malaysia. While they are supportive of each other, their native cultures and languages are very different, as are the situations from which they have fled.

Many of the Karen are Muslim, Buddhist or animist. Among the Christians there are Baptists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists and Roman Catholics. Many have lived in refugee camps for more than a decade, some as long as 18 years. The word from the refugees, based on their eyewitness observations and reports from relatives still in Thailand and Burma, is that as fast as people are leaving camps, more are arriving over the border from Burma. By cell phone they hear of troops seen across the border, and of the fear of threatened attacks on the camps on the Thai side. We hear of villages burned inside their homeland on the Burma side of the border.

Every Chin refugee I’ve met here is a Baptist. Some of the immigrants have Bibles and hymnals in their native languages, Sgaw Karen and Hakha Chin. These are prized possessions. In the Chin community, worries run high for friends and loved ones still caught in Malaysia, a nation reluctant to accord individuals from Burma formal refugee status.

At first there were only two congregations in town cosponsoring one family each, and our local refugee resettlement agency was in danger of being swamped. Lake Avenue had no formal sponsorship role. Should we cosponsor a family or two or three? One refugee, Po Teh, advised us to think beyond a few families. “If this is going to be our church,” he said softly in Karen, “better that we should share as much as there is with everyone. Already there is a feeling that some families are getting more or less than others.” After discussion our leadership group agreed this was the right approach—and profoundly biblical.

There have been two kinds of challenges in the months since that decision. The first has been the human and material needs of the new arrivals, which threatened to overwhelm all who tried to help. The key has been to multiply efforts by forming a network of working relationships with other churches, with a synagogue, with a volunteer from the Islamic Center of Rochester, with a young Hindu student, with members of the Lao Buddhist community and with members of an Asian-American cultural group.

The second challenge has been our rapidly changing congregation. Most of the Karen and Chin Christians in Rochester have chosen to worship together at Lake Avenue Baptist Church, regardless of their denominational affiliations. Some are members of other faiths. A longtime member of Lake Avenue sums up the situation well. When she was asked, “How are things going over there at your church?” her response was both understated and honest: “I suppose we are a bit overwhelmed.”

In the past year Sunday school at Lake Avenue has grown four- or fivefold and worship attendance has almost doubled. The church is reworking everything from transportation to children’s church school to membership procedures to worship schedule—and much of this change has had to happen on the fly. As of this writing we have one worship service on Sunday in a format that tries to balance unity and diversity—mostly in English (scripture in either Karen, Chin or Burmese, music ranging from classical to contemporary gospel to the Karen choir) as well as Karen and Chin worship services. New-member meetings are translated three ways. Children and youth classes are taught by teams of Karen- and English-speaking teachers.

It is a lot of change—there is nothing like being turned upside down to reveal a church community’s essential character. Fortunately, Lake Avenue people have been clear about some basic unwritten assumptions. The first is full inclusion in life, leadership and decision-making. Decisions affecting Karen and Chin people in the life of the church include their input. The refugee mission group, for example, includes leaders from both the Karen and Chin communities, and the new leadership structure of the congregation includes involvement of our Karen and Chin brothers and sisters despite language challenges.

The second assumption is the unity and openness of the church. We are one church, not three—so worship services include all even if a given service is predominantly in one language. We are a Welcoming and Affirming church, and a multicultural and multiracial church. It has set a tone for relationships within and between these communities themselves.

The third assumption is fairness in compassion and service. Our material aid and personal support of refugees is not based on religious affiliation, but is available to any and all as there is need and we have ability to respond—in line with Po Teh’s early reminder.

Christians everywhere can learn about and press for attention to the plight of these people. The thousands arriving in the U.S. represent a drop in the bucket. Over 140,000 live in refugee camps in Thailand alone, and the total number of refugees from Burma may be over a million women, men and children, including the internally displaced. The shocked reaction of the mainstream media to the mistreatment and murder of monks in recent demonstrations in Rangoon (Yangon) did not explain the larger situation; many reports failed to name the longer-term realities of ethnic cleansing and systematic forced relocation that characterize the situation of many far from Rangoon.

Meanwhile we continue with the resettlement of these victims of war and oppression. No matter how much we work to assist them, challenges for the refugees themselves will still be huge. Finding a job in Rochester that provides a living wage is extremely difficult. And surviving a first winter in upstate New York is no joking matter for people who have never seen a snowflake before. When a reporter asked Po Teh for his reaction to our Rochester winter, he showed the skill of a born diplomat and his good Karen upbringing: “When we experienced the welcome of the people of Rochester, it made us feel warm.”