

KAREN CHRISTIAN LEADERS' NEWSLETTER

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Notes from Duane Binkley: As we wrote in the last newsletter, we went to Thailand and returned to the U.S. on February 4th. While in Thailand, Marcia and I got to visit the Tham Hin Camp. Later, we met with a group from the U.S. and we also visited the Mae La Ma Luang (Mae Ra Moe) and Mae La camps. We also visited the IOM office in Mae Sot and the TBBC and OPE offices in Bangkok.

We learned that now the focus for resettlement is on the Karenni from the two camps near Mae Hong Sorn. The Karenni should start arriving in the U.S. at any time. In the meantime, they will continue to take people from Mae La, Umpiem, Nu Pho and tham Hin. Depending on how things go at the two Karenni camps, resettlement should be offered at the Mae La Ma Luang and Mae La Oon camps late this year or early next year.

We also learned that those who had been denied resettlement to the U.S. because they had links to the KNU or KNLA should soon be able to come. Last year, the law had been changed to allow KNU members to come. However, there was no agreement on how the law would be implemented until now. But according to both the IOM and OPE people we talked to, the agreement has been made and former KNU members should soon be allowed to come to the U.S. for resettlement.

Each time we go to Thailand, we ask about how families can be reunited where one spouse is still in Thailand and one spouse is in the U.S. In the past the advice was to ask for the help of your representative in the House of Representatives or U.S. Senate. This time though, they also mentioned applying for a Visa 92 (for asylees) and Visa 93 (for refugees). Using this procedure involves completing form I-730 the Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition. To get a short description of this process, you can go to this link: <http://www.rcusa.org/index.php?page=visa-92-and-93>.

I was recently at a meeting in Texas and learned of a new organization called The Burma Connection. Their goal is to help refugees resettling in the U.S. as well as helping people still in Burma. They have a website at www.theburmaconnection.org. They have also started an online discussion board where they hope to get input from around the U.S. on how to better work with and help Karen being resettled in the U.S. You need a password to use the discussion board so you will need to contact The Burma Connection to get the password.

In Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Burmese Baptist Church has started a new blog so they can better connect to people around the country and around the world. The blog is at <http://pbbc09.blogspot.com>.

I should also remind you that we also have a discussion group going at <http://groups.google.com/group/karen-konnection>. So feel free to join in those discussions. The Karen Konnection discussion group is aimed mostly at people sharing problems and ideas about working with the Karen here in the U.S. So we don't usually post comments about the political situation in Burma. We also don't have anyone handy who can read Burmese so we don't usually post messages written in that language.

Many of you know that we buy Karen language Bibles and hymn books in Thailand and then resell them in the U.S. Last year, there were no Bibles for sale in the refugee camps or Thailand for about 8 months or more. When we were in Thailand, the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention had only a few hymn books left and it wasn't known when more would be printed. So it may be that hymn books will be in short supply this year. But at least for now, we do have Karen Bibles available for \$12 each and Burmese Bibles available for \$8 or \$20 depending on the kind.

International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches held a Missions Conference in Phoenix, Arizona February 20 – 22. The Karen were well represented at the conference as the choir from the Arizona Karen Baptist Church was featured at the evening programs and the youth demonstrated bamboo dancing. Several Goh La Wahs (white people) tried the bamboo dancing but they did not look very good. Fortunately, only one tripped on the bamboo pole and fell down and he was not hurt. I have some photos that I hope to put on the Karen Konnection (www.karenkonnection.org) website soon.

Jim Oldham of PBA (Pittsburg Baptist Association) report on Pittsburgh Karen Event -- December 7, 2008

An exciting "big event" involving PBA and the local Karen resettled refugee community was held December 7 at Temple Baptist Church in Pittsburgh, PA.

The event was truly a blessing to all who participated and again enabled us to see God's strength being manifested in our weakness and our limitations. In spite of cultural and language barriers, and attempting to coordinate a myriad of details over and around them, the Lord worked everything out to His glory and according to His purposes.

Attendance was over 80 and our attendance goals for each segment of participants were reached or exceeded, with the exception of the Erie Karen community, which as I understand it had weather "issues" at home and were unable to attend. Karen folk from Troy Hill, Prospect Park, and Akron (Ohio) were present and each presented a report and brought special music. Rev. John Reynolds, Pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church, brought a message and led in a service of communion, which was the first experience of communion for many in some time. Temple Baptist was well-represented with most of their congregation present and helping with greeting, ushering, and serving. Duane Binkley, ABC missionary to Thailand, and now to Karen people in the U.S. and Baptist groups working with them, organized the service and gave us a lot of Karen-

-English translation assistance. Five of the six members of the PBA Executive Committee were present (the other member had to work or would have been with us) and the following nine PBA churches had representatives present: Franklin Park, Crafton, Broad Street, Coraopolis, Mt. Lebanon, Mars Hill, Tarentum, First Pittsburgh and of course Temple. Sony Jackson of First Pittsburgh catered a delicious Thai dinner funded by PBA that was enjoyed by all after the close of the worship service.

Special thanks to Duane Binkley for helping us put this all together, beginning with his initial identification of the Karen communities being established in Pittsburgh; Pastor John Reynolds and the people of Temple Baptist for hosting; Rev. Mark Egli, Pastor of First Baptist Church Coraopolis for arranging the donation of a school bus and driver (himself) that enabled us to pick and return the largest group of Karen (about 40) from the Prospect Park area for nothing more than the cost of fuel; and our friends Rev. Alan Williams (Alan is a former ABC missionary to Thailand) and Mark Purnell who worked diligently with the planning team for this event and who helped provide transportation for the Karen folk living in the Troy Hill area.

This evening was a marvelous experience of Christian faith and fellowship in and of itself but we hope it will lead to an ongoing relationship between PBA the Karen here in Pittsburgh, most of whom are Baptist, as we get better acquainted and discover more fully the needs that exist and how we can be most helpful in meeting those needs, whether that be through our existing congregations and/or the eventual formation of a Karen Baptist Church right here in our midst.

From Thra Mue Htoo May on Karen Baptist Women's Groups

May God richly bless every one of you. God has prepared his people in ways we don't understand. Now, we Karen people are in many states across America. That we can not be with one another is a big concern for us, but God works in ways we can't always understand.

Through the help of International Ministries, National Ministries, American Baptist Churches of Nebraska, Mountain Brook Baptist Church of Birmingham, AL and Catherine B. Allen, I have been able to travel and visit my people in America and while I am with them, help start Karen Baptist Women groups.

I am not a highly educated person but I believe God is using me and sending me to start cooperation among the former refugees that can be the beginning of our future here in America. Starting February 23, 2008 until today, I have helped start American Baptist Women's groups at 22 churches in locations including: Omaha, St. Paul, Lincoln, Des Moines, Kansas City, Louisville, Indianapolis, Ft. Wayne, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Akron, Philadelphia, Hartford, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Port Lavaca, Atlanta, Georgia and Columbia, S. Carolina.

There are still many places I have not visited. But I plan to organize groups in America whenever I can. So, may you always remember me in your prayers.

This year, I will prepare and send study topics for the women every two months. For the 22 groups that have been started, I already sent the study topics for January through April. In the future, I will end it out every other month until the end of the year. In 2010, I plan to prepare the topics ahead of time.

Please remember me in your prayers always. May we join hands to work together to bring the good news of Christ always remembering each other in prayer.

Congratulations to the Arizona Karen Baptist Fellowship of Phoenix. They were presented their certificate of membership in the American Baptist Churches of the South West and Hawaii on Sunday February 1st by Samuel Chetti, Executive Secretary of American Baptist Churches of Los Angeles.

Karen Event Held in Kansas City, KS About 50 Karen regularly attend the Oak Grove Assembly in Kansas City, Kansas. On February 22, they held a special event for all the Karen in the area and expected 120 Karen or more to come. The people of Oak Grove Assembly have been helping the Karen in a variety of ways including helping with taxes, shopping, transportation, getting drivers licenses, managing health care and more.

Karen Christian Leaders' Manual. A number of persons have been working on a manual for Karen Christian Leaders. It is an attempt to put a lot of useful information in one location. The project is taking longer than expected. Therefore we are offering what has been written to Karen Leaders by e-mail to those who would like to see it. Please understand it is a work in progress. However Karen Leaders will find some of what is finished useful and can suggest to the committee other topics they think might be useful. E-mail neildianasowards@juno.com for an e-mail copy. Currently it is 30 pages long with an 80 page Addendum. Sorry no hard copies are available.

Karen Young Adult Christian Chat Room. A Korean volunteer set up a Chat Room for Christians in Thailand so young adults could meet each other in a country where Christians are less than 1 ½ %. Should we consider setting up a chat room for Karen young people and adults here since Karens now number 44,000 and are spread over 130 cities? Leaders, please ask your young people if they would be interested and let Neil at neildianasowards@juno.com know if there is any interest.

Feedback. If this newsletter is interesting and helpful to you, please let us know. Also send us any information to share with other Karen groups. Tell us what you would like to see in the next issues. Give us e-mails of leaders who might like to receive it--our list is very incomplete.

Several have ordered the English-Karen Citizenship Manual and said it was helpful to them. Details in last issue posted on karenconnection.org

Past Issues of this newsletter are available on www.karenconnection.org.