

Houston Burmese Christians Create Community for Others

By Jonathan Brooks

"We are truly the fruit of Baptist missionaries," said Dr. Mang Tiak (front row, center), one of the founders of the Greater Houston Burmese Christian Fellowship (GHBCF) and a chaplain at the Methodist Hospital in Houston. "Burma is six percent Christian and the majority of those are Baptists due to the work of Adoniram Judson."



The Massachusetts-born Judson and his wife Ann were the first missionaries to Burma, arriving there in 1812. Adoniram continued to minister among the Burmese until his death in 1850. When the Judsons first arrived in Burma (also known today as Myanmar) there were no known Christians. It took six years for their first Burmese convert to Christianity. At the time of his death, there were an estimated 210,000 Burmese followers of Jesus or 1.7% of the population.

Though many Burmese became Christians because of the efforts of the Judsons, GHBCF is flourishing in part due to the help of Tallowood Baptist Church. "Tallowood provides space for us to meet and helps us out with transportation," said Mang. "One of the biggest helps is the use of their vans. Since so many in our congregation have just resettled and are getting started in this country, they do not have transportation and we provide that for them. We are so grateful to God for Tallowood Baptist Church."

Mang, along with her husband Thong Lun, Dr. Aye Thida, Dr. Lily Beth Lorenzo, Mr. and Mrs. George Koo, Mr. Tial Ling, Mr. Steven Yoe and Mrs. Gladys Lao founded GHBCF in 2005 of April. "We realized that there was not a Burmese Christian community here in Houston, so we decided to help start one," said Thong, who serves as the pastor of the church.

"Our fellowship's Motto is 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthened me,'" said Mang. "We meet every 2nd and 4th week of the month for Bible study and worship. We have a fellowship dinner each time we meet. Most of those who are part of GHBCF are newcomers who have been in the United States for about six months." (For articles about the current political situation in Burma, go to <http://news.yahoo.com/fc/World/Myanmar>.)

"One of the focuses of GHBCF is about 300 Burmese people who have newly settled in Houston within the last year," noted Mang. "We enlist the help of people who are professionals, such as doctors and engineers, who are already settled to help these new arrivals find places to live and jobs."

Since the case workers of resettlement agencies are overloaded, GHBCF seeks to help fill the gap. Due to lack of education and the language barrier, GHBCF helps

newcomers by serving as translators, taking them to hospitals or clinics, providing food, and helping them find jobs.

Api, one of a music leaders, lived in two different refugee camps in Thailand for a total of about 13 years before coming to the United States and connecting with GHBCF. "While we were in the camps, we did not have any musical instruments. The other youth leaders and I would find material to weave into something to sell as a fundraiser so we could buy instruments. I would teach them how to play the instruments and they would practice. Every quarter, the youth camps would get together. I would help them learn to sing and praise the Lord."

Htoi Doi, another of the worship leaders at GHBCF, came to the United States in 1988 with her mother. In Burma, Htoi was a gospel singer and toured as a member of the Myanmar Christian Music Fellowship.

Though most who attend GHBCF are Burmese Christians, not all who attend are either Burmese or Christian. "There are Muslims and Buddhists who attend," said Mang. "We want to show the love of Jesus Christ to all; we want all to experience the love of Christ. Whether people are Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist, they are welcome to come to the church and have fellowship with us. We try to be Good Samaritans to all our people who are in need."

According to Thong, GHBCF is a diverse group and several countries are represented such as China, Taiwan, Honduras, Philippines, India, Romania and the United States. The mixed congregation conducts worship services in both English and Burmese. Mang added that Burma itself is very diverse ethnically and culturally.

"Even here in GHBCF, we represent several ethnic groups and dialects such as Kachin, Karen, Karen Ni, Chin, and Burmese," said Mang. "This is another reason we have to do services in two languages. Sermons are delivered in both English and Burmese. Also, songs are sung and Scripture is read in both languages." The vision of GHBCF is to have Bible studies in English, Burmese, Karen and Chin in the very near future.

"We ask that UBA churches keep us in their prayers," said Mang. "Ministry is very challenging when you are reaching people in cultural transition, experiencing cultural shock, and facing language barriers. Pray that as we help these people transition they will see the love of God.

"Also, we would like to invite all Houston area churches to celebrate with us on Christmas day and experience Burmese culture. Our celebration will be held in the gym at Tallowood. We will serve a traditional Burmese meal with rice noodles and catfish soup. At the same time we will be celebrating the Karen New Year. There will be folk dancing by members of the Karen (more information about Karen refugees at <http://www.karenconnection.org>) ethnic group and singing. We will have food for about 400 people."

For more information about the Christmas day celebration, call Pastor Thong Lun at 713-858-2634.

