

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ July 2010

The Most Homeless of the Homeless

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Shortly after I retired from parish ministry in 1998, I became the (unpaid) Executive Director of the Karen Emergency Relief Fund, Inc. Without planning it, I had found a new career with no bazaars, no choir controversies, and no vestry meetings. K.E.R.F. does, of course, have a board of directors that meets four times a year. But — unlike most vestry meetings — these are short, focused, and a lot of fun.

The K.E.R.F. mission, however, is not exactly “fun.” We provide humanitarian aid for the Karen refugees of Burma (Myanmar). They are the largest of several minority groups in that strife-torn country — numbering about seven million. The Karens are severely oppressed by the Burmese military regime. They suffer every kind of human rights violation — including murder of civilians, rape as a weapon of war, looting, the burning of entire villages, and forced labor. The oppression by the Burmese military began in 1948 when the British left Southeast Asia.

My wife Mary and I first became interested in refugee resettlement during my twenty-seven years as rector of St. John's, Niantic, Connecticut. The program we began involved not only the parish but others in the community as well. We found apartments, furnishings, and jobs for resettled refugees. Mary was particularly good at finding the most beautiful clothes for the new families. She also provided them with a “Welcome to America” dinner. Several times we had refugee families living temporarily in our home or in the parish hall.

Altogether, St. John's helped out thirty-five families. They came from El Salvador, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Burma. As this list suggests, the problem of refugee resettlement loomed particularly large in Southeast Asia, and I began to feel the need to get a closer look at the numerous refugee camps that had been established in Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma.

St. John's members supported and encouraged me in my wish to visit Southeast Asia. They saw this as an extension of their ministry to the most homeless people in the world — people who have lost not only their homes but their countries, even their cultures. My first trip to the refugee camps was in 1984. I thought it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but I have returned to the camps nine more times for various teaching missions and building projects.

Refugee camps are not pretty places. They are squalid and overcrowded. In one huge camp, I visited a hospital with dirt floors and no electricity. Relatives cooked meals on charcoal fires next to the patients' beds. I listened to their stories of incredible suffering and loss, and I could never leave the camps without tear-filled eyes. I was returning to my safe, comfortable home in Connecticut, while they were staying in the same wretched place. It was not fair.

Eh Ywa Paw is a beautiful ten-year-old Karen girl. (Her name means “the flower who loves God.”) In a surprise attack, Burma troops shot and killed her father and her grandmother. As she ran away, they shot her in the back. The bullet exited her body near her navel, yet she managed to keep running. Some friends found her, and took her to a “jungle medic” (a Karen volunteer trained as an EMT) who treated her wounds. Miraculously this “flower who loves God” survived. Eh Ywa Paw and her remaining relatives are among some 300,000 “internally displaced” Karen people who still are living inside Burma. K.E.R.F. sends money, through a network of volunteers, to assist this family and many others with food, medical care, and shelter. The shelter we provide is sometimes no more than a blue tarp tented over tree branches, but at least it provides them with some protection from the elements.

About forty percent of the Karen people are Christian — mostly Anglicans and Baptists. The purpose of my first trip to the Karen State of Burma was to meet with six Anglican clergy who ministered to the refugees in an isolated area, along the Burma/Thai border. I was asked to speak to them about the liturgical changes being made elsewhere in the Church. The priests listened politely and intently through an interpreter. But they were not at all interested in making any changes. They loved their 1662 Prayer Book — exactly as it was! Their liturgy and hymn singing, in the Karen language, were extraordinarily beautiful. No change seemed necessary to them — or to me.

On one trip I celebrated the Holy Eucharist on All Saints’ Day in a Karen village. An elderly woman walked for three days, through the jungle, to attend the service. Afterward we went to the cemetery for prayers. I will never forget the grave marker of a Karen soldier—killed while defending his homeland. Painted on the wooden cross were the familiar words, “I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.”

K.E.R.F. established an orphanage on the Thai border in 2002, and now supports the remarkable New Generation School located in a “safe” area inside Burma. The military regime denies Karen children any public education beyond grade school. The purpose of this school (equivalent to our high school and junior college) is to provide the best possible education for a new generation of Karen leaders. The annual budget for the 145 boarding students and eleven professionally trained Karen teachers is about \$27,000.

The Karens have a serenity and wisdom beyond understanding. They live with joy and reverence for life while they struggle for freedom and justice. I learned far more from them than they did from me. Their gifts to me, and to the entire world, are their amazing courage, faith, and hope for the future.



The Karen Emergency Relief Fund is a non-profit organization and has no paid employees. For more information please visit www.karenemergency.org or write to: K.E.R.F. P.O. Box 111, East Lyme, CT 06333. Steven and Mary Hulme live in East Lyme, CT, and are now members of a vibrant urban parish, St. James in New London.