

The Burmese Immigration to Michigan:

American Baptists Are Part of The Story!

By William Bauer & Edward Thawngmung

May 9, 2017

The arrival of Burmese immigrants to the city of Battle Creek can be attributed to the First Baptist Church of Battle Creek (FBCBC), an American Baptist congregation. In 1975 the church sent Zella Voss, a member of the Mission Committee, to the World Mission Conference held at the American Baptist Assembly (Green Lake Conference Center) in Green Lake, Wisconsin. Zella heard a presentation made by Church World Service regarding the need for local churches to sponsor immigrants from foreign countries. A key issue was the need for local congregations to offer loans to immigrant families to cover their air transportation, which they would then need to pay back in installments after they found employment in their new home. Zella returned home excited about the presentation, and persuaded the FBCBC Mission Committee to make a request to the church to engage in such an endeavor. Between the years of 1975-1980 four families from Burma and one from Laos were sponsored by the church. Of the five families, four moved away to warmer climates and families in California. The Thawngmung family arrived in 1980 and settled into a home which had been purchased by First Baptist Church. Edward and Anne Thawngmung and their seven children decided to make Battle Creek their new home.

Growth of the Burmese population between 1980-2001 was a slow trickle. Most of the immigrants coming were relatives, friends, or people who knew of the Thawngmungs in Battle Creek and heard help was available through FBCBC. During this period, FBCBC had appropriated a budget and appointed a group of members to help with the resettlement effort, along with the mission committee. Several of the families coming during this time lived with the Thawngmungs until they were employed and could afford to rent an apartment.

It was the year 2001 when the largest influx of Burmese started to arrive in Battle Creek. In 2001 there was a big advertisement campaign in Asia to bring tourists interested in World War II history to Guam. Word of this filtered out to the Chin people in northern Burma, along with a plan for seeking asylum in America. More than 1000 Burmese people secured a tourist visa to visit the island country of Guam, and once there asked for asylum. There were not adequate facilities in Guam to house and care for them. Guam officials asked the U.S. Government and Church World Service to help them resettle these persons in the United States.

Again, the reputation of the Thawngmungs brought about a request to have Battle Creek selected as a site for relocation of those who wanted to come here. Other sites were in Maryland; Texas; Washington D.C.; and Indianapolis, Indiana. Edward Thawngmung contacted Diana Givoa and Dr. Ken George from American Baptist Churches USA; congressman Joe Schwartz of Battle Creek; as well as Naomi Madsen and Jotham Ippel from PARA in Grand Rapids for their suggestions and help. This led to the establishment of a Burmese Refugees Resettlement

Committee for the city of Battle Creek with Rev. Duane Nieuwsma, pastor of the Christian Reformed Church, as the chairman.

Plans were formulated, financial aid was sought, and the committee went about the task of preparing for approximately 100 Burmese who had elected to come to Battle Creek. In the meantime, the Lutheran Social Service established an office in Battle Creek and hired Edward Thawngmung and Jimmy Rung Mang to assist in the resettlement work with the help of the Christian Reform Churches of Michigan. The Refugee Resettlement Committee secured enough financial funds that each person coming would receive a stipend of \$800 to aid them until they could complete the necessary paper work which would allow them to seek employment.

The majority of these refugees coming from Guam were men, many of whom were married with families still in Burma. Their hope was to bring their wives and children to Battle Creek in a year. The attack on 9/11/2001 changed that, so it was three to four years before families began to arrive. This nucleus of 100 asylees grew to about 400 when the families were reunited.

The next initiative occurred in the year 2005. There were approximately 20,000 Burmese refugees living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Thailand. They needed help in applying for refugee status to the United States. Edward Thawngmung once again contacted Congressman Joe Schwartz who, in turn, contacted the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the United States Consulate in Burma. This led to the Chin Community of USA sending Edward Thawngmung and Dr. Steven Hre Kio of Guam to Malaysia where they met with the local officials, and the process for applying for refugee status in the U.S. speeded up. Soon thereafter Battle Creek started to receive many Burmese who had been in refugee camps in Malaysia and Thailand for many years.

In 2005 Florentina Chiu, Lutheran Social Services Director for Refugees, visited Battle Creek and offered her assistance in helping to bring more refugees to Battle Creek. Helping the initial number of fifty more refugees actually turned out to be about 300 more. Lutheran Social Services also sent Lauren Rymer, Assistant Director for Refugee Resettlement, to Battle Creek and the Battle Creek community rejoiced with the formation of an official agency in Battle Creek whom could assist with the resettlement of Burmese refugees.

Burmese families in Battle Creek have continued to help in bringing their friends and relatives to Battle Creek and word has spread among the Burmese that the Battle Creek community is an area with special help for refugees including where they can learn to speak English and find employment. Most of the early arrivals have since become citizens of the United States and have purchased homes in Battle Creek. There are currently six Burmese Christian churches and four Asian markets operated by former Burmese refugees. The Battle Creek School system sold the former Springfield High School to the Burmese and they now have an official meeting place known as the Burma Center. Martha Thawngmung, Director of the Burma Center and daughter of Edward and Anne, estimates there are now approximately 2500 Burmese people living in Battle Creek.

American Baptist Churches of Michigan rejoice in the affiliation of the following Burmese congregations in Battle Creek, Grand Rapids, and Lansing:

- Chin Baptist Church of Battle Creek
- Falam Baptist Church of Battle Creek
- First Baptist Church of Battle Creek
- Grand Rapids Chin Baptist Church
- Michigan Kachin Baptist Church of Grand Rapids
- Myanmar Christian Church of Grand Rapids
- Chin Baptist Church of Lansing
- Karen Baptist Church of Lansing

In addition, other Regions of the American Baptist Churches USA are blessed by Burmese congregations that have united with American Baptists in recent years!



Edward Thawngmung and Dr. Williams



CBC Youth Camp



Rev Biak Lian Thang and Dr. Williams



Rev. Joseph Ngun Lian and Dr. Williams Oct 2010



Dr. Williams and Pastor Nang Lahpai



Cung Bawi Hup (center)



FBCBC Building Dedication



FBCBC Ribbon Cutting