

Helping Karen Refugees Arriving in America

Sharon's Story - An Airport Encounter

While standing in line to board an airplane in California, I began talking to the young lady standing behind me. She looked Asian, so I asked her nationality. She said she was Vietnamese and arrived on the first boat from Vietnam. I asked her how her situation was when she arrived to the USA. She told me that if the Christians and churches hadn't reached out to them they never would have made it.

This brief incident emphasized for me just how valuable assistance of mature Christians in America is to the well being of internationals who immigrate to America, both physically and spiritually. We do not need to leave our country to minister! The world is coming to our doorstep. This poses some very large risks and problems. Working with the Karen for 22 years, I now see God allowing the Americans to reach out to the Karen refugees in a new way in the USA!

The Current Situation

The UN is now processing the Karen refugees in the refugee camps in Thailand to leave the camps and go to various countries. The USA has accepted 21,000 to come here - they will be located in all 50 states, and mostly in major cities.

They can make a choice to stay, but this is not effectively communicated to them. According to a recent news article, the Thai government has recently issued Thai ID work permits to the refugees in the south, permitting them to legally leave the camps and work in Thailand. The Thai language is also being taught in the camps.

In the beginning of this process, some spouses wanted to come and some didn't. Consequently, some came and some stayed in the camps, separating families. When this was realized, the UN stated none could leave unless the whole family wanted to come together. In this situation,

those who didn't want to come hindered those in their family who did want to come, so now we have many here who would have rather stayed, for the sake of keeping their families together. As the UN realized this problem, it is now required of those who don't want to join their families who have decided to leave to sign divorce papers. This is now occurring, even among Karen Christian families. In the meantime, NGO's (non-governmental organizations) are teaching the Karen their "rights," making them vulnerable to the assumed freedoms they could have in America. None of these decisions are easy for the Karen refugees!

The American Scenario

When the Karen arrive in America, they are given a place to live by the government, along with a long list of material essentials. The refugee organizations assisting in the process are required to see that these needs are met. Yet, while the government pays the rent for the first month or two, the families must then begin to pay the rent. In addition, within a relatively short time, preferably within a year, they must also pay back the expense of their air flight. In the meantime, not being assimilated into American culture adequately, not knowing English adequately, and lacking citizenship, most can only acquire menial low paying jobs. The result is that several families must live together in a rental apartment or house in order to make ends meet.

In addition to physical hardships, the Karen are being approached by well-organized cult groups to become integrated into their "churches." The Karen families have no experience with how to stand spiritually against the falsehood of these groups.

What is needed in Thailand

My encouragement to the Karen considering immigration is that:

- they first ask God whether He wants them to come, rather than deciding on the basis of "how wonderful the opportunity sounds." Most of them tell God that they want to come, asking Him to then

bless them. Much prayer is needed to change their heart for seeking God in this matter.

- they need to be given full and adequate information of what their true choices are.
- they receive complete instruction about the realities of immigrating to America.

What is needed in America

This is where my heart is currently focused and why I am writing to you. I came to America on this current trip for 5 months with the purpose of visiting as many Karen families as possible across the country to find what help they need in their various situations, as well as to encourage them spiritually to seek God and to walk in His will for them. In this process I have listened to many heart rending stories and observed the vulnerability of these families in getting physical needs met and in standing against spiritual falsehood. I also have lists of contacts that may assist in finding out where the Karen families I know and love have settled in this country.

Here is my heart and my goal:

- To locate the Karen families in their localities.
- To connect mature Christians with these families to help them in whatever ways they can.

What I am Asking You to Do

- Pray!!! (see Prayer Requests below)
- Help me locate Karen families by any means that you know of.
- To consider becoming a helper to a Karen family in your area if they may be found there. The following website is helpful: www.karenkonnection.org for more information on the Karen situation. Click on "How do the Karen Get to America?" and scroll down page to find list of "The 10 National Voluntary Agencies" and call them. You may need perseverance to get the information you need.

These are some of the practical ways of assisting Karen families:

- Pick them up at the airport when they arrive.
- Invite them to your church.
- Invite them to occasional meals.
- Become involved with them socially.
- Help with shopping, errands, etc.
- Offer to teach them English. Excellent tools and training for this may be acquired from:

Literacy & Evangelism International

1800 S. Jackson Ave

Tulsa, OK 74107-1897

918-585-3826 email: General@LiteracyEvangelism.org

<http://www.literacyevangelism.org/elm/>

The course is called *Passport to the World of English* and uses biblical themes and worldview to teach English.

One individual or family does not need to do all of these. Since the body of Christ is a community of believers, various giftings can be blended and/or complimented to meet the needs of many Karen. You perhaps could take on a family, or as part of a church fellowship, take on a family or families together.

Prayer Requests

Prayer is most vitally needed, and the place to begin:

- Pray that the Karen immigrant families may be located.
- Pray that in every locale, translators in either Karen or Burmese (well understood by the Karen), would be available.
- Pray that Karen back in Thailand seriously ask God what His will is regarding immigrating personally.
- Pray that Karen refugees in the camps become better informed of the realities of immigrating.
- Pray that mature godly Christians may be locally connected with Karen families so that they may minister to their many physical and

social needs, and above all, may give spiritual encouragement to follow Christ in this, their new home, resisting all the wiles of the evil one through false cults and the materialism of the American lifestyle.

Please contact me of your level of interest and of any information you hear of or know regarding the location of any Karen family.

Thank you and God bless you!

Sharon
peesharon@gmail.com