

Refugees rejuvenate Minnesota parish

Julie Carroll Catholic News Service | Jan. 3, 2011

ST. PAUL, Minn. (CNS) -- Father Mike Anderson waited patiently on the front steps of St. Bernard in St. Paul on a recent Sunday morning, his purple vestments cloaking him from the chill. Clanging church bells heralded the 10:30 Mass, but only a smattering of parishioners prayed silently in the pews.

Minutes later, a yellow school bus pulled up to the curb, then another one behind it. The priest's face lit up as he greeted dozens of people pouring off the buses into the church.

About 400 Myanmar refugees have found a spiritual home at St. Bernard in recent months. For Father Anderson, the refugees' arrival has been nothing short of a miracle.

"I think it's the best thing that could have happened to us," he told *The Catholic Spirit*, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. "For 15 years, we've watched our parish rolls drop from 1,000 families to less than 400 families. ... (The refugees) are a sign of new life."

It all started a little more than a year ago when one Catholic family from the state of Karenni in the nation formerly known as Burma heard church bells ringing in the distance. The family members followed the sound to St. Bernard, where they began attending Mass regularly.

One day, the couple invited Father Anderson to visit them in their home. "We had a very silent visit with each other because I didn't know their language and they didn't know mine," the priest said. "But somehow it began a bond."

When the weather changed, the couple asked Father Anderson for help with transportation. The priest offered to drive them to church in his Ford Taurus and soon he began picking up other Myanmar refugees along the way.

"Every Sunday they'd lead me to another person and another person, and pretty soon I brought like eight families to church one Sunday. They were sitting on each other's laps," Father Anderson said with a laugh.

At a parishioner's suggestion, Father Anderson decided to contract with a bus company to transport people to church. "I didn't know how many people would come," he said, "but within two weeks we had 125 Karenni joining us every Sunday for Mass."

Since then, the refugee population at the parish has continued to grow. As word spread that St. Bernard was welcoming the Karenni, refugees from Karen, another Myanmar state with its own language and cultural identity, also began attending Mass there.

Some families have come from as far away as Texas to join what they heard was a Catholic church that would welcome them, Father Anderson said.

While the refugees have been a tremendous blessing for St. Bernard, making the parish a welcoming

environment for them has presented some challenges, Father Anderson admitted.

One of the biggest challenges has been language. Most of the refugees have only recently arrived in the United States and are just beginning to learn English. Several members of the Karenni and Karen communities serve as interpreters to help with sacramental preparation and other needs.

Then there are challenges that naturally arise from blending different cultures. While most longtime parishioners have welcomed the newcomers with open arms, a few have struggled, Father Anderson said.

To help with the transition, Father Anderson said, "we're doing different things to try to keep the communities mixing with each other." He also frequently writes bulletin articles about the refugees and integrates them into his homilies to give people a better understanding of the difficulties they have faced.

Tens of thousands of people have fled Myanmar since the 1980s because of religious and ethnic persecution by the country's military junta against various ethnic minorities, including the Karen and Karenni people.

Most have lived in refugee camps across the border in Thailand, some for more than two decades, before making their way to the United States and other countries. The U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services has resettled many of them.

To help meet the refugees' needs, St. Bernard has created a full-time refugee liaison position. Tom Flood, former dean of students at St. Bernard High School, which closed in the spring, began his new job at the parish Sept. 1.

He assists at parent-teacher conferences with an interpreter, helps the refugees get established with a doctor, walks them through the process of getting their green cards, helps them find employment and provides a number of other services.

"I'm basically helping them get acclimated to life in Minnesota and life in the United States," he said.

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