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Saving the Saved

How refugees from the Chin state of Burma helped resurrect a historic Richmond church, one family at a time.

BY [NED OLIVER](#) [@NEDOLIVER](#)



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Cung Thawng and his son Samuel Lian fled from Burma, arriving in Richmond as refugees in 2009. Lian now is a freshman at Virginia Commonwealth University, and his father works in the kitchen at Richmond retirement community Westminster Canterbury.

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At a jungle outpost on the edge of Burma, Samuel Lian, 15, boarded a small fishing boat with his 12-year-old brother. Their guide instructed them to lie down and covered them with a thick, black tarp.

It was 2007 and the boys were on the second leg of a nine-day, 2,000-mile journey to escape forced labor, civil war and religious persecution in their homeland, Burma's Chin State.

Under that tarp, Samuel Lian was scared and miserable. If he was caught, he risked prison. And even if he escaped detection, not everyone survived the grueling trip to Malaysia, where they would seek refugee status and reunite with their mother and father who had made the same trip years earlier.

Their nights spent crammed with other refugees in the back seat of a car speeding down a Thai highway toward the Malaysian border, Lian and his brother finally arrived. They greeted their waiting parents with relief and a handshake.

It was the beginning of an unlikely journey that ultimately brought the family to Richmond, where they would connect with a struggling Baptist church in the Fan that, like them, had been praying for new life and direction.

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Scott Elmquist
Parishioners sing a hymn during a Sunday worship service at Tabernacle Baptist Church.

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It's Sunday morning in Richmond, where sunlight beats down on six massive, sand-colored columns that line the front of Tabernacle Baptist Church. It's been sitting at Grove Avenue and Meadow Street since 1923.

Congregants stream into the 900-seat sanctuary. The sun filters in through stained glass windows. Alternating between English and different Burmese dialects, parishioners greet each other among the pews. The mood is light.

In 2007, when Lian was making his trek to Malaysia, Tabernacle was on the verge of dying.

A church that once boasted of having the largest Sunday school on the Eastern Seaboard

didn't have a single youth member when the Rev. Sterling Severns began serving at Tabernacle in 2004. Sunday services were drawing between 80 and 120 worshipers. The average parishioner was 80 years old.

As with many inner-city churches, the desegregation of schools in the 1960s and '70s and the subsequent phenomenon of white flight to the suburbs left Tabernacle's congregation depleted. Many city churches followed the young, white families to the surrounding counties, but in 1974 church leaders polled what was left of Tabernacle's congregation: Members wanted to remain.

"They decided they were going to stay and be the church on that corner. But they didn't know what it was going to look like on that corner, or what that ministry was going to look like," says Judy Fiske, the church's longtime organist and minister of music.

They didn't figure it out until 2008, when dozens and dozens of young Burmese families, like Lian's, started streaming into the Richmond area. Many of them were Baptist — the denomination has had a presence in Burma since the late 1800s — and found their way to Tabernacle, showing up at services asking, "Can we worship with you?"

"Forever we prayed, 'God, send us children,'" Severns says. "And God answered our prayer by bringing families and children from Burma."

Today, children, most of them from Burma, run the halls and fill the pews at Tabernacle. Their art is on the cover of the church's bulletins. Prayers are printed in both English and the dialect familiar to most of the church's new members. They make up anywhere between one third and one fifth of the congregation at services that are lively and energized.

Tabernacle found the new life it was looking for. It also found a new mission. These Burmese needed a place to worship, but they also needed help adjusting to life in the United States.

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Burmese members of Tabernacle's congregation present a hand-woven shawl to Robyn Mosley on her last Sunday as a member of the church before she moves to Georgia.

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Miriam George, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University who specializes in refugee trauma, says her research shows that the experience of trying to resettle in the United States often is greater than the trauma that refugees experience in their home countries.

It is an incredible finding, considering that many of the refugees who resettle here left squalid refugee camps, suffered sexual abuse at the hands of government soldiers and faced religious persecution, she says.

Lian's father, a truck driver when he lived in Burma, a country also known as Myanmar, recalls getting pulled out of the cab and being beaten with the butt of a rifle by soldiers, who demanded that he haul things without compensation. Others who resettled to Richmond from the country describe forced labor — whole villages being ordered to carry supplies for the army as they passed through rural areas with bad roads.

But when refugees move to a place like Richmond, they speak little English and struggle to find housing and employment, George says, adding that perennial issues include drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and poverty.

Locally, the federal and state government contracts with Catholic Charities and Church World Service to provide resettlement services. But the help they provide is limited. A caseworker from one of the agencies meets refugees arriving at the Richmond airport and takes them to apartments that have been rented and stocked with food. They take care of bureaucratic paperwork, then dole out a little more than \$900 in federal money to help them start their new lives. Limited job placement services and group English-language classes also are provided, but beyond that the refugees are more or less on their own.

Tabernacle Baptist quickly found out the services provided aren't usually enough for refugees. "The resettlement agencies were so inundated with people," Severns says, "that they couldn't possibly meet even the most basic of needs."

Almost 2,000 refugees have arrived in Richmond since 2007, according to data provided by the state Office of Newcomers' Services. Most are from Burma and Bhutan, and arrive in Richmond with one small suitcase, no money and limited-to-no English-language skills.

So the church stepped in. Now it's involved with refugees from the moment they arrive in Richmond, striving to be there along with the official caseworker to meet every family as they land at the airport. From there, they provide tutoring and English classes. They help with job placement. They arrange for translators to accompany parents to meetings at school. Anything that comes up, they tend to be the people the refugees turn to for help.

During a recent meeting with some Burmese members of the church, one turns to Severns and tells him he's been the victim of identity theft. Severns promises to help him figure out what's going on. He turns to another who just lost a job because he was missing a necessary certificate. "And we're going to find you a job," Severns says.

While the church dedicates considerable resources ministering to its new refugee members, it also puts energy into making sure it treats its newest members as equals.

"I have to say it from the pulpit on a regular basis to remind us that we're not the great white saviors coming to pat people on the heads and feel good about ourselves," Severns says. "We're doing this because we believe as Christians that we're mandated to love each other as we would want to be loved. So we're trying to avoid patronizing and we're trying to avoid feeding into the broken cycle of poverty by just giving handouts."

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Four of the newest refugee arrivals from Burma collect coats from Tabernacle's clothes closet.

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As much help as the refugees who have joined the church may need as they settle into life in Richmond, congregants say their newest members bring just as much to the table.

"I want to make it clear, for us, as many needs as we're meeting, we're finding that our needs are being met in very surprising ways," Severns says. "These folks are teaching us what it means to live in community, what it means to care for each other. ... It's a mutually beneficial relationship in every way."

The contributions might be less tangible, but they show during the church's Sunday service. The Burmese members of the congregation sit in a loose group toward the back of the sanctuary and frequently come forward with songs and readings, mostly in their own language.

A traditional hymn sung by the church's robed choir with an organ accompaniment is followed by a Burmese choir delivering a poppy anthem in the Chin dialect backed by an acoustic guitar.

Lian explains it this way: "Our belief is that it is God's blessing for them and for us that they should help us and we should worship with them."

Lian arrived in 2009 and knew very little English. He's now a 20-year-old freshman at Virginia Commonwealth University, with plans to earn a degree in engineering. He says getting to where he is was a challenge because of the radical difference between life in Burma and life in Richmond.

"When we first got here," he says, "it was really difficult to go outside or to get to the grocery store."

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In addition to attending services at Tabernacle, members of the church who come from the Chin state of Burma hold a weekly worship service in their language on Saturdays in a North Side apartment complex.

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The food that the resettlement agency had stocked in their apartment was good, but they weren't sure what all of it was. There was fried chicken and semi-mysterious noodles the family had never seen and didn't know how to cook. "We don't adapt easily," he says.

At the store — once the family figured out how to get there — the cashier had to explain how to use their debit card. They'd never swiped anything through a card reader. "We actually had to learn that stuff," he says.

Lian's experience isn't uncommon. Shiva Rei, a refugee from Bhutan, describes spilling a pitcher of water in the dining room at the downtown Omni hotel. It was his first job. The manager told him to mop it up. "What's a mop?" Rei asked. The manager showed him. Another employee taught him how to use it.

They struggle to understand how the city's limited bus service works, no small problem considering that many of the refugees are initially placed in far-flung suburbs. "They say, 'The bus? How can I use this?'" Rei says.

The anecdotes may sound trivial, but George, who studies refugee trauma, says they're indicative of the larger stresses that come from leaving one challenging situation and entering another.

Lian and his father, Cung Thawng, 44, say that Tabernacle quickly became a lifeline that connected them with other refugees, jobs and language classes. The congregation also helped them understand all the minor cultural nuances you might not pick up on if you'd lived your life halfway around the world.

"They even told us in every little detail about the daylight savings time changes," Thawng says through Lian, who translates. "They are like fathers and mothers to us."

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Scott Elmquist
Sai Lat, Siang Siang, N. Sui Vang, Ta Mawi and Khai Bil pose for a photo after being formally accepted as members of Tabernacle Baptist Church during a recent service.

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As much as Tabernacle and other churches do to help orient the area's new arrivals, Patrick Braford, a member of Tabernacle Baptist, says one of the biggest obstacles to successful resettlement is housing — something few churches are well positioned to address on their own.

Because so many refugees have wound up having trouble making payments on time, many property owners will refuse to rent to them at first, says Braford. In an effort to address the problem, he founded ReEstablish Richmond, an organization that pulls together a variety of churches and faith-based groups that already work with refugees.

Braford's group, for instance, is converting the old Adam's Camera building near the intersection of West Broad Street and the Boulevard into temporary housing.

With ReEstablish Richmond, Braford hopes to address a cycle he's seen play out over and over again, he says: Families arrive, burn through the seed money provided by the government, and four months later, still unable to find employment, can't pay rent. Meanwhile, the government–contracted resettlement agencies have moved on to new arrivals. Churches try to help, Braford says, but don't have the resources to cover rent.

The result is that it can be difficult for refugees to find appropriate housing.

He wants ReEstablish Richmond to provide refugees with a centrally located place to stay when they first arrive that also will connect them with support services, offering a kind of immediate orientation to their new city.

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Scott Elmquist
Every Wednesday, Tabernacle sends buses around the metro Richmond area to pick up refugee children for an after–school program that includes one–on–one tutoring. Here, Jeff Walton, a 26–year–old seminary student, works with Shee Gay Moo.

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On a recent weekday, a husband and wife, Biak Tling and Fawm Tin Par, travel to Richmond International Airport to greet four new refugees arriving from Burma.

Tling and Fawm arrived in the same terminal almost four years ago in 2009. No one was waiting for them and their three children when they walked through the security checkpoint into the concourse. They recall looking around and wondering what to do. A caseworker finally showed up 20 minutes later.

Today, a crowd of nine welcomes Richmond's four newest residents. Some are Burmese,

some are members of Tabernacle, including Severns and Braford, and one is the caseworker for Church World Service.

Four short, jet-lagged-looking men walk into the concourse. Tling, Fawm and the other Burmese introduce themselves and serve as translators.

Tling later says that there's always pressure for new arrivals to immediately move to cities in the Midwest where there's a larger population of Burmese and ready employment in factories and meat processing plants.

But in large part because of Tabernacle, Tling, a carpenter, sees an opportunity for a better life in Richmond. Tling explains his philosophy to the men. They tell him they plan to stay.

"We have more friends, we can learn more than in other states, where if we work in a factory, we are working the whole day with machines — not people — and we'd have no chance to learn English," he says. "Here, we have a family. We have a church. And we have good friends. That holds me here." **S**

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