


# To God be the glory

## A surprising answer to our prayers

Rhoda Charles

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How did this blending of two groups happen, when in 2008 neither group knew anything of the other?

### **Our two histories**

Habecker Mennonite is a congregation in rural Manor Township, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The first meetinghouse was built on a plot of land purchased from William Penn’s sons in 1724. The current building was constructed in 1898. For many years, the large Mennonite families who lived on neighboring farms filled it on Sunday mornings. But in the last fifty years, attendance declined as many of the congregation’s grown children moved away and the church experienced some divisions. In

2005 there remained about fifty aging adults who felt discouraged. We wondered: How can we survive? Should we simply close our doors and disperse to join other congregations?

At the same time, there was strong loyalty among the long-term members. An older woman reminded us, “We still have love to give!” As she

walked through empty Sunday school classrooms, she passionately prayed that they would again be filled with children.

Meanwhile, halfway around the world, people of a persecuted minority group in Burma/Myanmar were fleeing as their villages were burned and the men were shot or forced to carry supplies for the soldiers. Mothers grabbed a little rice and a few clothes as they ran with their children, hiding as they fled through the jungle. After months and sometimes years in the jungle, these displaced Karen people came to refugee camps in Thailand, across the border from Burma. After the United Nations determined that it was not safe for the Karen to return to their homeland, efforts began to resettle them under refugee status. While some were Buddhist, many others gathered at churches in the refugee camps to pray that God would send them to a place of welcome where they could continue their Christian worship.

### **The new story begins**

By God's mercy, in June 2008 a surprising story began to unfold, connecting these two histories into one intercultural church. We call it God's amazing story. In 2007 Karen Sensenig had been invited to serve as pastor of Habecker Mennonite. Karen brought with her years of experience as a schoolteacher as well as intercultural understanding from living and working in Swaziland and Sudan along with her husband and their children. Under Karen's leadership, the congregation joined six other churches in a program called Partner for Missional Churches. This three-year cohort venture helped prepare the congregation for God's next work, something that was not on anyone's ten-year strategic plan.

In May 2008, Pastor Karen presented an opportunity that came to us through Church World Service (CWS) to sponsor a Karen family of six who were scheduled to arrive in two weeks. Our congregation was open and learned what we could about the Karen people, but in the end we felt that it would be a stretch for us to support a family of six.

Several weeks later, CWS called back about a family of four who would be arriving the next day from a refugee camp in Thailand. We were told they simply needed a place to lay their heads until an apartment was ready and a church sponsor found. Arthur and Miriam Charles, a couple in their eighties, graciously opened their home and hearts to the parents and two preschool children, none of whom knew one word of English and who arrived with jetlag after traveling for twenty-four hours.

On Sunday morning, Arthur and Miriam brought the family along to church, where the only language everyone could share was smiles and love. This connection helped our tiny congregation say yes to sponsoring our first Karen family.

### **Resettlement stage**

The years 2008-11 were primarily years of resettlement assistance. While the learning curve was steep, our little congregation was not new to resettling refugees. In the 1950s, members had sponsored families fleeing Eastern Europe after World War II. We sponsored an extended family of Vietnamese immigrants in 1980. We remembered the words “We still have love to give!”

The biggest challenge in 2008 was that with so few Karen people in Lancaster, few translation resources were available. Without a common language, we did our best to show care through our actions. The Karen families could not drive, so members took them to medical appointments; helped them apply for jobs; and taught them how to pay their bills, read their mail, and fill out countless forms. We also did fun things together, including going on picnics and hiking.

During the spring and summer of 2010, a new wave of Karen refugees came. Hser Hel, the mother of the first family who came, would call. “We have new arrivals. Who will pick them up for church?” I will never forget when one young mother introduced herself: “I am Mya Ray, your sister-in-Christ!”

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One time a family sang in Karen the song “Count Your Many Blessings.” The familiar tune spoke deeply in both languages, reminding us: “Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings, see what God hath done!” It was moving to hear these words from those who had left family members and friends behind, arriving only with plastic bags of things refugees were allowed to bring. God’s Spirit challenged us to reflect on what blessings we were counting.

We started our learning curve by asking, What do they need? We learned to be advocates for refugees. We were blessed to meet employers willing to take risks in hiring people who did not yet speak English. Another gift was volunteer homework helpers who supported the school-age children at home.

And those Sunday school rooms? Thanks to the gifts and resources of retired teachers in the congregation, the classrooms were now filled with children singing Karen songs—and even an ESL class for adults.

### **We need help!**

The years 2010 to 2014 brought waves of new arrivals. Our small group of long-term members felt stretched in our attempts to meet the needs of those being resettled and coming to our church.

A surprise came from Mya Ray, one of the early arrivals who began a two-year service assignment with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Mya Ray learned to provide resettlement support services, and she had the benefit of knowing both languages!

Another gift was a partnership of Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) with Marietta Community Chapel, through which Sean Fitzgerald was placed at Habecker from 2013 to 2015. It marked a significant shift that we came to think of a global mission placement right here in Lancaster County! Together Pastor Karen and Sean remained alert for ways Habecker could model a situation in which those of the dominant culture moved aside and allowed the leadership gifts of newcomers to emerge.

### **Becoming a “we” congregation**

In July 2011, our worship planning committee gathered around the picnic table on the church lawn, enjoying the long summer day and the quiet peace of the surrounding farmland. A question was posed to the two Karen women at the table: Would the Karen group that attended Habecker Mennonite Church be willing to plan the entire worship service on a Sunday morning? What about the third Sunday of the next two months? That timid suggestion resulted in a tradition that remains special seven years later. These Karen-language services involve Karen participants of all generations in serving as moderator, reading Scripture, providing special music, sharing the message, and leading in prayer.

Singing together has been a beautiful connector. Songs of each culture and faith are being passed on to the next generation, and the congregation worships together in a way that is a foretaste of the joys of heaven!

Like those who grew up with Habecker's tradition of a cappella singing, the Karen sing in strong harmony, in three or four parts, and they often include choirs of all ages in the service. Each week a hymn that is found both in the Karen hymnal and in English hymnals is chosen, so the congregation can share the music and words of our faith simultaneously in two languages.

Congregational sharing time has also broadened, now including requests for prayer for Asian homelands. We hear when there is a fire in the camp, when a school has been destroyed, and when new acts of violence or burning of villages in the Karen State leave families without food. The congregation intercedes for a husband hoping his wife and child can soon join him here, and we celebrate new jobs and driver's licenses.

### **Other common ground**

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Here was a rural congregation, with most members coming from a farming background. The newcomers were village farmers accustomed to growing rice and vegetables, and keeping a few animals such as chickens and pigs for family food.

Early on, one of the church members, Wilbur Nissley, researched where to find seeds for vegetables grown in Burma and Thailand. Several acres of land on the neighboring farm of Nelson and Janet Habecker became a site for the Karen community garden. The Karen worked together to grow and harvest the food. Extra food was sold to other Karen families and occasionally to an Asian

market. The homeland flavors were comfort foods, and working outside in the soil was a therapeutic break from Lancaster city living, so different from their life in Asia.

One of the newcomers was July Paw; she was awaiting the arrival of her parents from the refugee camp. When asked what she most wanted to show them, her quick response was, "The church and the garden!"

Another place of common ground has been sewing. For generations, women from three local congregations attended a joint monthly Sewing Circle. By 2010, this group had dwindled to ten to twelve women. Suddenly attendance swelled to twenty or thirty, as Karen women, girls, boys, and a few men came to help knot comforters, put strings in kit bags, and assemble hygiene and school kits. This work was a common language of hands and hearts.

The Karen families had been recipients of comforters, school kits, and infant supplies in the refugee camps, and they were now eager to give back. As they delivered items to the MCC Material Resource Center, Lar Say said with a smile, “In the camp we wondered where these things came from. Now I tell my friends who are still in the camp that we are making them!”

The energetic crew assembles 250 school kits each summer, but Mya Ray’s eyes, glowing with joy, convey more than the numbers do: “The children will be so happy!” These testimonies have breathed new life into the efforts of long-term members. Each year, the Sewing Circle completes around 120 comforters, many donated to MCC and some reserved for new arrivals. Each Sewing Circle evening concludes with praying the Lord’s Prayer and singing the doxology simultaneously in our two languages.

### **Blessing of babies and children**

God’s answer to our prayers to fill the Sunday school rooms with children continues to astound us. From the birth of Moo Lah Law Soe in December 2010 until the present time, more than thirty babies have been born! We hold showers for firstborns as well as for families birthing their first child in the US. In gatherings after Sunday morning worship, the women share a meal of soup and Karen dishes and then gather to open gifts, sing lullabies from both cultures, and share stories of giving birth in the jungle and in the refugee camp.

The Karen women have told us the meaning of Karen names and even taught the “English” women how to carry a baby in a cloth sling. These times have built friendships as we share the love of babies of every culture. Baby showers always conclude by surrounding the parents and offering prayers in two languages, lifting up the family and the child in the womb. In these moments we feel like we are standing on holy ground.

## **Birthday parties and home worship services**

The Karen gather for worship many times through the weekend. Following the intercultural service at Habecker, there is often a Karen home worship service—frequently a thanksgiving service for a child’s birthday—followed by a meal prepared for the family. There are also two Sunday afternoon Karen services held monthly at the Lititz Church of the Brethren. All these events help keep the faith, songs, language, and traditions of the Karen community strong.

## **Reflections and transitions**

When asked to reflect on the Habecker story, Pastor Karen acknowledged that one cannot expect that these outcomes will necessarily be replicated in other contexts. What is important is saying yes to whatever God brings along and then watching with expectancy, but not with particular expectations, for what God will do. For Pastor Karen, it was the attitudes of surrender, awe, and readiness to follow Jesus that allowed this congregation to flourish during the intense time of growth. We could honestly say, “Wow! Look how God is working here!”

Habecker Mennonite Church continues to grow and change as the needs and living situations of the Karen families change. Since September 2016, Chris and Dawn Landes now lead and pastor alongside the Karen leaders and those who have led this congregation for decades. Efforts focus more on leadership development within the congregation and on supporting the growing families.

With all the blessings come some challenges. Karen parents face unique stressors in a country where their children acculturate faster than they do. The elder church members try to walk with youth and young parents, some of whom struggle with addictions and poor choices. Yet our obedience to the call to be the body of Christ across generations, languages, and cultures gives everyone life and hope!

God’s answers to prayer remain evident. As a Karen woman testified, “Our church in the camp prayed that God would prepare a church to welcome us.” Imagine—we were answers to each other’s prayers. To God be the glory!

## **Additional resources**

See photos and reflections from Habecker from November 2014 at this link: <http://jonnychuck.blogspot.com/2014/01/scrapbook-pages.html>. The address of the congregation’s website is <http://habeckerchurch.com/>. We are on Facebook at Habecker Mennonite Church. “Radical Hospitality” is a video about our experience. Find it at <https://>

[vimeo.com/185852000](https://vimeo.com/185852000). For general information, read *Nine Thousand Nights: Refugees from Burma: A People's Scrapbook*, by Sandy M. Barron (Bangkok: Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2010), or watch these movies on refugee resettlement: *The Good Lie* and *All Saints*. The latter narrates the experience of All Saints' Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, which was saved by Karen refugees.

### **About the author**

Rhoda Reinford Charles met her husband, Jonathan, after college, when they both taught at Lancaster (PA) Mennonite High School. Jonathan's hobby of photography turned into his career, and for thirty-three years they operated the home business of Charles Studio until turning the business over to a long-term employee in 2013. Since that time, they have spent many hours with people in the Karen community in Lancaster, helping them get to jobs, school, and medical and immigration appointments. They feel blessed to be part of this surprising story.