

## **Faith, history unite two communities: Church opens hearts to Karen refugees**

**By Peter Smith**

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The bride and groom approached the Frankfort Avenue church from opposite directions on a raw December morning as guitar-led minstrels serenaded them in their native Asian language of Karen. Once inside Crescent Hill Baptist Church, the organ played "Here Comes the Bride," and the couple exchanged vows beneath Christmas banners proclaiming "peace" in English and Karen. Moe Dai -- wearing a traditional fringed shirt over his first-ever necktie -- and Hay Moo Law Eh -- wearing a long maroon skirt and short-sleeved white blouse -- became the first couple to marry among the nearly 300 ethnic Karen refugees from Myanmar who have arrived in Louisville since last year.

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Up to 100 Karen, many of them families with small children have been worshipping each Sunday with the Crescent Hill congregation, which until this year had been a mostly white and generally older group.

It started simply enough -- one of the first refugees learned about the Crescent Hill church from a non-Karen citizen of Myanmar who attended there. The network grew rapidly through word of mouth.

Now, the church nursery has tripled from its original size of about a dozen, and a kindergarten class that typically drew about three children now draws eight or nine. The congregation is increasingly adding Karen hymns, readings and banners to its worship. "These people have come to live here. They're going to be Americans just like us," church member Darrell Adams said. "They have picked us to be their church home. That's called us to step up."

### **Karen's beginnings**

Karen Baptists are descendents of the converts of two of the first American Baptist missionaries -- Adoniram and Ann Judson, who worked in Burma in the early 19th century. With the modern Karen fleeing persecution in the land now known as Myanmar, "it's like our history coming back to us," said Norman Lytle, a church member and retired missionary. There's also a more recent missionary connection.

Beginning in the late 1990s, the Crescent Hill church sent short-term mission trips to work with the Palaung ethnic group in Thailand. During those trips, church members encountered Karen Christians and began working with them as well, installing a water-purifying system and painting a Karen hostel. But they "never imagined" the Karen coming to them, said member Steven Cole, who went on one of those trips.



Hay Moo Law Eh, above, and Moe Dai became the first couple to marry among the Karen refugees who arrived in Louisville last year.



Hay Moo Law Eh was escorted to the church by her father, Daniel Manh Aung, as community members followed on Dec. 8. (Photos by David R. Lutman, Special to The Courier-)