

Transforming lives through relationships

CBF field personnel and Crescent Hill Baptist Church minister with Karen refugees

By Emily Holladay

In 2001, when Crescent Hill Baptist Church, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship partner church in Louisville, Ky., sent their first mission team to Chiang Mai, Thailand to paint a Karen youth hostel, Annette Ellard and her husband, Steve Clark, began an adventure beyond their wildest dreams.

The group of 10, which included Clark

and Ellard, traveled to Thailand to begin a partnership with CBF field personnel and other ministry groups in the area, including the Karen Baptist Convention. The Karen people, who they ministered with, are an ethnic group from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, who were forced to leave their country due to extreme persecution.

“As we all worked together to paint the

two-story dormitory with a band of Karen high school students and their house-parents, our host missionaries pulled us all together one evening and told us to pray for each other. They believed God was calling someone out of the group to full-time mis-

(Below) At Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., Karen refugees and American people find a home in worship together.



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sionary service,” Clark said.

“Annette and I thought we knew exactly who we should pray for, a soon-to-be college student studying to be a nurse. We prayed for her every day, all the while continuing our long days of painting and making new friends.”

Throughout the trip, Clark and Ellard developed deep friendships with the Karen people, and would return to Thailand with Crescent Hill Baptist in 2002 and 2004, each time staying several weeks longer than the rest of the mission team. After their visit in 2004, the couple realized that God had called them to serve as CBF field personnel. Just two years later, Clark and Ellard were commissioned by the Fellowship.

In the years leading up to their commissioning by CBF, the United States began to implement a plan to allow thousands of Karen people to leave Thailand and resettle

in the states. Because of their background in communications, Clark and Ellard were contacted by Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) to put together a video to help raise awareness of refugees and resettlement.

“When the director of KRM mentioned that some Karen refugees were going to be resettled in Louisville, we told her we were sure Crescent Hill Baptist would consider sponsoring a Karen refugee family. The director didn’t know when the Karen would start coming to Louisville, but we were hopeful things would work out for our church to adopt a Karen family,” Clark said.

When they discovered that Karen families were arriving in Louisville without an interpreter, Clark and Ellard used their contacts to secure a translator from Myanmar for the resettlement agencies in Louisville. In February, when the interpreter met with the first Karen family, the family asked the inter-

preter where she went to church. The interpreter told them about Crescent Hill Baptist and asked Clark and Ellard to pick up the family for church the following Sunday.

This family spread the word about the church that welcomed Karen people and by that Sunday, Clark and Ellard had to borrow the church van to transport 20 Karen refugees to church. Within six months, the church saw more than 100 Karen people regularly attending worship, and today, the Karen and American people continue their practice of worshipping together.

“The decision to worship together as one congregation was driven by the Karen.

CBF field personnel Annette Ellard (pictured on left alongside a Karen teen) and Steve Clark started HOPE Academy to help young Karen students adjust to American schooling. Two of the biggest annual events for the academy are the prom (left) and graduation (right).



They were given the choice to use church facilities to worship independently from the larger body, but they said that church means one body and that we should try to make that work. Through their presence among us, the church has been spiritually enriched and revitalized,” said Jason Crosby, minister of preaching, pastoral care and administration at Crescent Hill.

For this Louisville church, welcoming the Karen refugees offered a unique opportunity to cultivate the partnership that began overseas in 2001. However, the journey has not always been smooth. From breaking language barriers to learning to worship in ways that would be meaningful to a diverse body, the church has had to overcome many challenges.

“I don’t think there is any way that Crescent Hill could have developed the depth of relationship that we have with the Karen without the gift of Steve and Annette. The arrival of the Karen was so sudden that the larger institution could not have kept up with the pace of change if Steve and Annette were not bridging the gap,” Crosby said.

“In some ways, it was slow for the Americans in the congregation to see the Karen as other Christians coming to worship rather than other Christians in need. The role of the refugee agency is resettlement; the role of the church is relationship. And, yes, people need to worship in their own language, but these Karen children are going to be American, so we need to make a space where they can express both their Karen

and American traditions,” Ellard explained.

Though Clark and Ellard are not on staff at Crescent Hill Baptist, they see their roles as ministers for Karen refugees. In addition to collaborating with the refugee agency and the church to help make the transition to the states a better experience for refugees, Clark and Ellard work among the refugees, helping them learn American culture and have access to the resources they need to address challenges along the way.

“Our ministry is really a ministry of availability. We take calls all hours of the day and night, and try to accommodate ev-

(Below) “The decision to worship together as one congregation was driven by the Karen. They said that church means one body and that we should try to make that work,” Jason Crosby said.



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everything we can. Before we started working with the Karen people, we had never dealt with food stamp issues, health insurance rights and various other issues, but we had to learn quickly,” Clark said.

On any given day, Clark and Ellard can be found helping Karen students with homework, transporting people across town, leading worship in Karen homes, sitting in court with Karen people facing traffic violations or simply listening to the refugees as friends.

“Early on, we considered ourselves the Karen 911. People would call us any time there was a problem. Now, we see our role as advocates. It is a comfort for the Karen people to have someone go with them in things that are frightening, so we walk alongside them as a calming presence,” Clark said.

Because Clark and Ellard cannot be everywhere, they set up opportunities for others to join their ministry. For example, Ellard started a program called “American Grandmas,” where she pairs up American women with Karen women who are pregnant. These grandmas accompany the women on hospital visits to assist with communication. For the Karen women who came to the United States without a mother, these relationships have allowed them to experience the support of a mother.

The relationships that have developed over the past seven years between Clark and Ellard, Crescent Hill Baptist Church and the Karen refugees have woven together a beautiful image of Christ’s presence at work in this Louisville community.

“The remarkable work that God is doing with the refugees from Burma here in Louisville is still growing and unfolding. We can only see from where we have come to where we are now. I think the target for God’s plan goes far beyond what is being accomplished in the present, and we are watching with eager hearts and eyes to see all the remarkable things God will unfold from the tiny mustard seed of a moment in Chiang Mai, Thailand, over a decade ago,” Clark said.

(Below top left) Through congregations like Crescent Hill, Clark and Ellard are able to provide opportunities for others to join their ministry. (Bottom left) Karen students at the HOPE Academy prom held in Crescent Hill’s Fellowship Hall. (Below) Clark, center, and Ellard, right, celebrate as Karen refugees cross major milestones.

