



# People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## Recent LDS Growth among Karen Refugees in the United States

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### Overview

For the past several decades, the LDS Church has regularly extended outreach among Southeast Asian refugee groups fleeing ethnic violence in their homelands. Initially occurring among Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, missionary activity has more recently targeted additional ethnic groups who have arrived more recently to the United States area such as Swahili-speaking East Africans, Karen-speaking Burmese immigrants, and ethnic Nepali immigrants from Bhutan. Most of these efforts have occurred in the Salt Lake City area in Utah.

This case study chronicles the Church's progress in reaching Karen refugees in the United States, particularly in Salt Lake City, and discusses successes, opportunities, challenges, and prospects for future growth.

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### Trends in Refugee Resettlement in the United States

The United States government has accepted over two million refugees since the 1970s. Primary world region of origin for refugees resettled in the United States has varied by decade, with most refugees originating from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and early 1980s, Africa in the 1980s, the former Yugoslavia and former Soviet Union in the 1990s, and Africa in the 2000s.<sup>[1]</sup> At present, the United States accepts approximately 80,000 refugees a year; three times as many as all other countries accepting foreign refugees combined.<sup>[2]</sup> During the three-year period consisting of the 2009, 2010, and 2011 fiscal years, the United States accepted the most refugees from Burma (51,867), Iraq (46,242), and Bhutan (40,814). In 2011, the top ten states refugees resettled to were Texas, California, New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Arizona, Washington, and North Carolina. In recent years, approximately one-third of resettled refugees were under 18 years old.<sup>[3]</sup> Between 2006 and 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there were nearly 4,000 Karen speakers and 35,281 Burmese speakers.<sup>[4]</sup> Today, it is likely that Karen and Burmese speakers number as many as 100,000 in the United States combined.

### Trends in Refugee Resettlement in Utah

Utah received between as a few as 251 to as many as 1,264 refugees a year between 2000 and 2009. Between 2000 and 2009, Utah accepted the most refugees from Somalia (1,432), the former Yugoslavia (1,002), Burma (997), Sudan (744), Iraq (572), Iran (530), Bhutan (466), the former Soviet Union (432), Cuba (363), and Burundi (253).<sup>[5]</sup>

In 2004, refugees from Burma began resettling in Utah. The number of Burmese refugees accepted was four in 2004, 17 in 2005, 32 in 2006, 202 in 2007, 378 in 2008, and 360 in 2009. In 2008, Utah began resettling refugees from Bhutan. The number of Bhutanese refugees accepted was 180 in 2008 and 286 in 2009.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Karen Background

The Karen constitute seven percent of the population of Burma and traditionally live in southern and eastern areas along the Thai border. The worldwide estimate for the number of ethnic Karen is approximately five million. Originally populating areas in present-day western China and Tibet, the Karen migrated into Southeast Asia around the seventh century AD. Good relations were maintained with the British during the British colonization of Burma and Christian missionaries were welcomed. Following the independence of Burma from the United Kingdom in 1948 the Burmese-dominated government began military campaigns

and attacks in Karen-populated areas where an insurgency developed that aspired to form an independent Karen state. For more than half a century, the Karen have been targeted by the Burmese government and many have fled the country into refugee camps on the Thai border. The United States government has accepted tens of thousands of these displaced Karen for several years and has granted American citizenship. Karen are traditionally Buddhist and animist although there is a large Christian population comprised principally of Catholics and Baptists. Many Christian Karen exhibit a high degree of religiosity as demonstrated by the integration of Christian hymns into local culture and diligent efforts to convert fellow non-Christians.<sup>[7]</sup> There are other Karen subgroups who have resettled in the United States such as the Karenni, also known as the Red Karen or Kayah.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Karen LDS History**

In the late 2000s, the Church first reported missionary activity occurring among sizable numbers of recently resettled Karen in the Salt Lake City area. Dozens of refugees joined the Church resulting in the Church assigning missionaries to work among the Karen and other Burmese refugees including ethnic Burmese and Karenni. In June 2009, the Church organized its first Karen-speaking branch in the Salt Lake South Stake. At the time of its organization, the branch had 50 baptized members. Six months later, the number of baptized members on branch rolls doubled to approximately 100 and as many as 172 would attend sacrament meeting services. By this time, the branch provided translations of church services and classes in Karen, Burmese, and Karenni (Eastern and Western Kayah).<sup>[9]</sup> In late 2010, the Karen-speaking branch had 220 members and there were several missionary companionships working among these ethnic groups. The first investigators and convert baptisms among the Chin appeared to occur around this time. Many, if not most, church leadership positions in the branch were filled by seasoned white American Latter-day Saints that typically have had some connection to Southeast Asia.<sup>[10]</sup> The branch had a Karenni-speaking Sunday School class with 13 students at the time; nine of which were investigators. In 2011, the Church had already initiated the Boy Scout program in the branch and had 44 young men.<sup>[11]</sup>

Concentrated LDS missionary efforts among the Karen in cities outside of Utah began sometime in the late 2000s or early 2010. In mid-2010, there were four full-time missionaries serving in Saint Paul, Minnesota that were designated Karen-speaking and began learning the Karen language. At the time there were between 10 and 20 Karen attending church services. LDS missionaries report teaching Karen in several additional states such as Idaho, Iowa, New Mexico, South Dakota, Virginia, and Washington. Members living in Twin Falls, Idaho reported in mid-2012 that one congregation had separate Sunday School and Priesthood/Relief Society meetings for Karen and other refugee immigrants from Burma and a separate mission leader to service this population. The congregation had around 12 convert baptisms a year among Burmese groups and church service missionaries also worked with this population in Twin Falls. In early 2012, missionaries serving in Storm Lake, Iowa had nine Burmese and Karen members and investigators attending church services. In March 2012, missionaries were teaching over 30 Karen and Karenni in Lumberton, North Carolina and several baptisms occurred the following month. In April 2012, missionaries serving in Huron, South Dakota reported that there were 14 Karen attending church services. In 2011 and 2012, missionaries frequently taught and baptized Karen and other refugee groups from Burma in the Seattle area.

## **Successes**

The Church in the Salt Lake City area has quickly acted to provide humanitarian assistance, assign missionaries to proselyte exclusively among Karen and other refugee groups from Burma, and form a Karen-speaking branch. Mission leaders in the Minnesota Minneapolis Mission have assigned several full-time missionaries to work among the Karen and learn the language. There have been few comparable instances in the United States where mission and local leaders have so swiftly coordinated to mobilize resources needed to extend outreach to a specific ethnic group. Church leaders have been resourceful in identifying members with past mission or life experience working with, proselytizing among, or living in countries that have similar cultural and religious conditions as among the Karen. Within only a matter of a year or two after appreciable numbers of Karen refugees began resettling in the Salt Lake City area did the Church already establish a basic outreach infrastructure consisting of translators, volunteers, and ecclesiastical leaders.

LDS missionaries have taught and baptized Karen in many states. Many of these new converts and investigators do not appear rushed into joining the Church but rather carefully study church teachings and develop regular church attendance prior to baptism. A lack of language materials and few if any Karen Latter-day Saints in most locations demands a strong sense of dedication and devotion to the Church to follow church teachings in the absence of a Karen LDS community.

## **Opportunities**

Karen refugees generally exhibit good receptivity to the LDS Church throughout the United States notwithstanding many are not Christian. Few Southeast Asian immigrant groups have arrived to the United States in as large of numbers as the Karen over the past several decades and few have demonstrated as strong interest in LDS teachings. The Church has excellent opportunities to capitalize on this unique situation if local and mission leaders are properly educated and aware of Karen populations within the geographical boundaries of their congregations, apply effective methods to teach, baptize, and retain converts, and work towards creating language-specific Sunday school classes and ultimately language-specific branches once local self-sufficiency can meet the administrative needs of a separate unit.

Missionaries report cultural characteristics that have enhanced receptivity to the LDS Church. Many Karen have a Christian background and value personal expression and development of faith and regular religious practice such as attending church

and studying the Bible. LDS teaching styles and resources were developed primarily for those with a Judeo-Christian background and consequently resonate best with nominal and practicing Christians rather than those who profess non-Christian religious backgrounds. This may allow for more efficient missionary efforts among the Karen than many Southeast Asian groups as most have a tiny Christian population. LDS missionaries can take advantage of moderate ethno-religious ties of Christian Karen to a particular denomination, Buddhism, or animism as these ties do not present an insurmountable barrier to conversion. Some missionaries report that Karen have told them of a Karen myth that there was a gold book that was introduced by a "white man" that helped bring them salvation; a story somewhat similar to the Book of Mormon.

With good responsiveness to initiating proactive proselytism among the Karen, the Salt Lake City Mission has many opportunities to create additional branches in Salt Lake City. The geographical distribution of Karen Latter-day Saints in the metropolitan area will be the primary determinant for the Church to organize additional Karen-speaking branches considering there were only about 1,000 refugees from Burma in Utah by year-end 2009. With the sole Karen-speaking branch meeting all of the needs of refugees from Burma, it may be more likely that the Church will organize additional language-specific units for Karenni, Burmese, and Chin instead of splitting the branch into additional units that each meet the needs of some or all four ethnic groups.

## Challenges

The Church faces a high risk of not retaining many recently baptized Karen converts due to no previously established Karen LDS community, no translations of church materials into Karen, lack of coordination between mission leaders extending outreach in various areas of the United States, and the possibility of Karen converts becoming dependent on white American members to fill leadership and meet their ecclesiastical needs.

There are no LDS translations of church materials or scriptures into Karen. Missionaries in many areas of the United States have complained that there are no translations of the Book of Mormon into Karen or Burmese, resulting in major challenges for investigators and converts to gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon and of the truthfulness of the Church. No translations of any LDS materials into Karen require the Church to utilize English or other translations of church materials into languages spoken by Karen as a second language. Investigators and new converts who do not speak English with enough fluency to use English language materials rely on other converts who serve as an intermediary to translate church services, missionary lessons, and interviews with priesthood leaders. Non-English speakers therefore rely not only on other members for translation work but often lean on these members for their own personal testimony of the Church. Lastly, the lack of church materials in Karen prevent LDS outreach online and through ordinary members and missionaries simply distributing church literature and scriptures.

LDS leadership appears totally undeveloped among Karen Latter-day Saints throughout the United States. Few if any Karen members have served full-time missions and many have not been members long enough to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. The lack of Karen church leaders creates several self-sufficiency problems for the Church. First, non-Karen members holding church leadership positions constantly face a language barrier that interferes with their effectiveness to communicate and lead the congregation. Second, a lack of Karen leadership portrays an image of an American culture with little acculturation with Karen culture. This may reduce the social appeal and attractiveness of the Church when in comparison to other Christian denominations with established Karen leadership. Third, outsourced non-Karen leadership can prevent Karen members from becoming leaders if these responsibilities are simply designated for more experienced church members to do. This over time can lead to increased dependence and lack of accountability for church responsibilities from Karen members.

Many refugees suffer from economic challenges relating to employment, housing, and acculturation to American society. Consequently Karen communities in many cities appear vulnerable to relocating to other cities or states in search of jobs. English skills are largely undeveloped and insufficient to work in many businesses and settings. The LDS Church has provided life skills and English lessons to Karen in the Salt Lake City area but has not appeared to engage in similar programs in other major cities around the country. Most Karen lived in rural areas and engaged in agriculture in Burma whereas most Karen in the United States live in urban areas with few opportunities to connect with the land and apply their farming skills. Due to the major change in living space and environment, many Karen youth appear vulnerable to the negative societal influences common to American inner-city areas and economically depressed suburban communities such as illicit drugs, gangs, violence, corruption, and other illegal activity. The Church generally has a small and at times dysfunctional presence in many inner-city areas in part due to these issues. The lack of Latter-day Saints in these locations appears linked to the perceived incompatibility of many American Latter-day Saints that urban life and culture conflict with LDS lifestyle and culture.

The Karen and other Burmese refugee groups are widely dispersed across the United States, challenging the Missionary Department and mission leaders to effectively administer a receptive population living in dozens of states. Furthermore the ethnic and linguistic diversity among Burmese immigrants complicates outreach as there are several different groups each speaking their own language. The most effective method to capitalize on mission outreach among Karen populations while receptivity is high is to primarily rely on local church leaders to head these efforts and utilize local members to perform outreach. Full-time missionaries and mission presidents can become overwhelmed with other language-specific proselytism efforts among other larger ethnic groups within their jurisdictions and limited resources prohibit a more coordinated effort to reach Karen at a time when they will be likely the most receptive to LDS proselytism. In order for member-missionary programs headed by local church leaders to become effective in reaching Karen populations, the Church will need to become proactive in

coordinating these efforts between multiple local church leaders residing in different branches, wards, stakes, and missions. These efforts will also require members to avoid undertaking all leadership and member responsibilities from new converts in order to instill self-sufficiency.

The assignment of full-time missionaries to serve exclusively among Karen offers many benefits to concentrated outreach among this population, but an oversaturation of mission resources, poor convert retention efforts and post-baptismal teaching and guidance, and failure to assign new converts callings and responsibilities in their respective congregations may lead to little or no long-term growth. Oversaturation of missionaries among some ethnic groups in the United States appears to have hurt the growth of the Church as members feel a reduced responsibility to do member-missionary work, fill local leadership, and hold ward or branch callings. Poor follow through of reviewing missionary lessons after baptism, assigning home and visiting teachers, and providing other social and ecclesiastical supports to new converts has been strongly correlated to lower convert retention rates. Assigning callings to new converts requires investigators to be prepared to receive a call prior to baptism and often improves convert retention as members feel a sense of worth and accountability to serving other members in their congregation.

The LDS Church appears vulnerable to counterproselytism efforts by other more established Christian denominations among the Karen. Missionaries have not reported any significant challenges at present, but some Christian groups have published Karen translations online of information on the LDS Church that portrays the Church as unchristian and heretical. The potential impact of incorrect or negatively-biased information on the LDS Church appears most detrimental on the overall receptivity of Karen rather than the strength and activity status of recent converts. However, the number of resources offered to Karen by other Christian denominations and many Christian groups operating Karen-speaking congregations in dozens of cities may dissuade some Latter-day Saints from attending the LDS Church in search of greater socialization opportunities within their ethnic community.

## **Comparative Growth**

The LDS Church has experienced similar success baptizing Nepali-Bhutanese converts in Salt Lake City and in other cities in the United States. Full-time missionaries have been assigned to work among Nepali-Bhutanese in Salt Lake City and have reported convert baptisms almost on a weekly basis. In early 2012, the Church created its first Nepali-speaking branch outside of Nepal in Salt Lake City. In Oakland, California senior missionaries reported in 2010 that several Bhutanese joined the Church and further enhanced the already diverse demographics of LDS wards in the area. In Saint Paul, Minnesota members report that Nepali-Bhutanese have joined the LDS Church and bless the sacrament. Missionaries teach Nepali-Bhutanese in several locations around the United States, but the degree of coordination between mission leaders in different states and the Missionary Department appears similar to the level of coordination with the Karen.

Other Christian groups extend outreach to Karen, Burmese, Karenni, and other refugee groups from Burma. Baptists have major presence among Karen refugees in the United States in part due many Karen already affiliating as Baptist prior to resettling in the United States. Provided with the number of churches extending outreach to Burmese refugees in mid-2012, Baptists reported proselytism efforts and church planting among Karen, Burmese, Kachin, or Chin in Arizona (3), California (10), Colorado (2), Connecticut (2), District of Columbia (1), Florida (7), Georgia (5), Iowa (5), Idaho (2), Illinois (7), Indiana (13), Kansas (3), Kentucky (3), Massachusetts (4), Maryland (4), Michigan (6), Minnesota (6), Missouri (3), North Carolina (12), Nebraska (5), New Jersey (7), New York (15), Ohio (5), Oklahoma (1), Oregon (4), Pennsylvania (10), Rhode Island (1), South Carolina (2), South Dakota (1), Tennessee (1), Texas (15), Utah (3), Virginia (1), Vermont (2), Washington (8), and Wisconsin (3). Seventh Day Adventists report missionary activity among Karen in several locations. In May 2012, Adventists reported three Karen-designated congregations in Saint Paul, Minnesota; Durham, North Carolina; and Utica, New York.

## **Future Prospects**

The LDS Church has ample opportunities for church growth among Karen refugees in the United States. However, a lack of coordination between different mission presidents on outreach, only one Karen-speaking branch operating in the entire United States, few missionaries assigned to work exclusively among Karen and Burmese immigrants, and no translations of church materials into Karen limit the Church's effectiveness in reaching this population. Ideally the Church will need to establish an LDS community that can become self-sufficient and perpetuate itself into additional unreached locations with sizable numbers of Karen speakers.

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