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magazine

APRIL/MAY 2015



## Being church together

Burmese refugees spark renewal  
for Richmond congregation

## FROM THE EDITOR

**MEET KHAN NAW** — the man featured on the cover of this April/May 2015 issue of *fellowship!* magazine. Khan is a recent graduate of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond who is now pursuing a D.Min. at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Mass. Khan is Kachin and, prior to coming to the United States on a student visa, was a youth worker for the Kachin Baptist Convention in Myanmar (formerly Burma).



Khan's story is part and parcel of the story of Tabernacle Baptist Church, an incredibly diverse congregation located in the heart of the Fan District in Richmond, Va., where he served as a pastoral intern. Blake Tommey beautifully tells Tabernacle's story on pp. 8-10.

The story of Richmond's Tabernacle Baptist is a story of a once-rapidly declining congregation that experienced renewal through welcoming Burmese newcomers — families of Chin, Karen, Kachin and Lisu refugees. These Burmese refugees transformed the 128-year-old church into a multi-ethnic, multi-language community of faith, where adults and children lead worship together — praying, proclaiming, reading scripture in their native language, without translation.

"Our partnership with refugees from Burma is not a ministry of the church, it is the church," said Tabernacle pastor Sterling Severns. "We're raising our children together. ...We're being church together."

Being church together. This is what partnering to renew God's world is about.



**AARON WEAVER** is the Editor of *fellowship!* Connect with him at [aweaver@cbf.net](mailto:aweaver@cbf.net)



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Richmond congregation finds renewal among Burmese refugees

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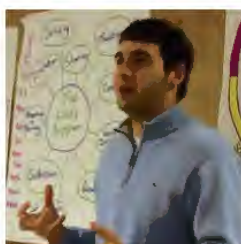


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# Being church together

**RICHMOND CONGREGATION FINDS RENEWAL  
AMONG BURMESE REFUGEES**

*By Blake Tommey*

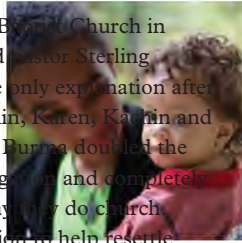
“When these kinds of things happen in my life, things that are so clearly filled with more beauty or redemption or reconciliation than my cranky personality and stony heart could ever manufacture on their own, I just have no other explanation than this: God,” writes pastor-author Nadia Bolz-Weber in her popular book *Pastrix*.



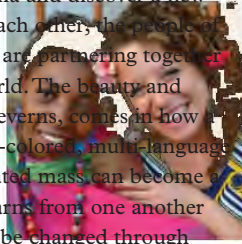
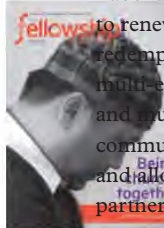
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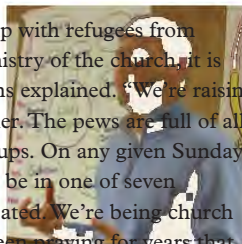
For Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., and pastor Sterling Seaverns, God is the only explanation after communities of Chin, Karen, Kachin and Lisu refugees from Burma doubled the size of their congregation and completely transformed the way they do church.



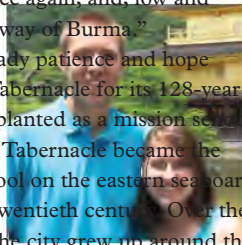
Through a mission to help resettle refugees from Burma and discover a new church alongside each other, the people of Tabernacle Baptist are partnering together to renew God's world. The beauty and redemption, said Seaverns, comes in how multi-ethnic, multi-colored, multi-language and multi-opinionated mass can become a community that learns from one another and allows itself to be changed through partnership.



"Our partnership with refugees from Burma is not a ministry of the church; it is the church," Seaverns explained. "We're raising our children together. The pews are full of all kinds of ethnic groups. On any given Sunday, the doxology could be in one of seven languages, untranslated. We're being church together. We had been praying for years that life would come once again, and, low and behold, it came by way of Burma."



This kind of steady patience and hope has characterized Tabernacle for its 128-year history. Originally planted as a mission school to engage children, Tabernacle became the largest Sunday school on the eastern seaboard by the turn of the twentieth century. Over the next few decades, the city grew up around the church until Tabernacle found itself right in the heart of Richmond's most cohesive urban neighborhoods, the Fan District, so named for the "fan" shape of the district's streets as they extend west.



By the 1960s and 1970s, most churches had retreated to the suburbs, and, in rapid decline, Tabernacle received an offer to move west beyond the Richmond city limit. Knowing the choice might very well mean its death, the congregation declined the tantalizing offer and remained in the city where they felt God was calling them to be.

Over the ensuing years, Tabernacle continued to experience decline, even walking with their own pastor through terminal cancer. Then, in 2004, Seaverns accepted the call to serve as pastor of the struggling downtown church. "I have no idea what to do and no idea what's next, but it's clear God is preparing us for something," Seaverns told the congregation in his first sermon.

That *something* began with a phone call from Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel Duane and Marcia Binkley, who informed Seaverns that three families of Karen refugees from Burma (now Myanmar) had been residing in Richmond for six months without a place to worship. The very next month, the families filled an entire pew in the church's sanctuary on World Communion Sunday for their first worship service.

"We had a choice to go one of two ways when folks first showed up on the doorstep," Seaverns said. "One was to view them as projects; the other was the view them as partners, as gifts God sent to us to guide us and teach us how to be better Christians. Somehow we stumbled into the second way, and opened our hearts to them as sisters and brothers with names, not as projects."

After more than seven years of the church welcoming the Burmese newcomers, families of Chin, Karen, Kachin and Lisu refugees now comprise a quarter of Tabernacle's congregation, and the entire community is exploring what it means to partner in renewing the vision of church and the life of the city of Richmond. Megan Strollo, a 28-year-old graduate student and member of Tabernacle, emphasized that a renewed vision of partnership and community begins with worship. Each Sunday during the 11 a.m. service, each adult and child leading worship is instructed to pray, read scripture or offer testimony in their native language, without translation. While both communities initially struggled with the language barrier, she added, they found that God's healing and transformation did not depend on language.



A once-dying congregation, Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., has found renewal through a partnership with Burmese refugees. "Our partnership with refugees from Burma is not a ministry of the church; it is the church," said Tabernacle pastor Sterling Seaverns. "We're raising our children together."



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“I have no idea how it works, but it does,” Strollo said. “It’s hard to explain or describe in any other way than that it is truly God’s work. It’s beautiful to see how American families and families from Burma care for each other so seamlessly, to see how this place truly embraces what it means to be one body, one church, one family. God is moving and we’re going with it.”

Through partnering with many young families from Burma, Tabernacle has also learned what new life means in a more literal sense, namely through the children who now laugh, scream and boisterously fill the hallways once again. In fact, Severns said, children are the most crucial partners in renewing God’s world, which is why children of all ethnicities populate pulpits, conversations and other realms of leadership within the congregation. Children are also invited into the center of the congregation’s journey through scripture each week with Godly Play, an immersive Bible-story-telling program. As the entire church journeys through the narrative lectionary at Tabernacle, children are empowered as

## “GOD IS MOVING AND WE’RE GOING WITH IT.”


partners to find themselves in the story of God’s renewal in the world.

Art Wright, affiliate professor of New Testament at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, said he and his wife began making relationships early in Tabernacle’s partnership with Burmese refugees. Through welcoming new arrivals at the airport, hauling furniture into newly-rented apartments and providing rides to medical appointments, the couple and other members sought to embody the kind of hospitality God offers us, Wright said. In one instance, Wright and a translator accompanied a Karen friend to the DMV to help her communicate and get a driver’s license. Yet, for all their expressions of welcome, their friends from Burma seemed to be the experts on hospitality.

“They have opened our eyes to what hospitality truly is,” Wright said. “In American culture, we plan and schedule our expressions of hospitality, and provide as much predictability as possible. But in any of

these Burmese ethnic groups, it is completely common to be welcomed into a house unannounced or receive food even though you weren’t invited to dinner. We can be so artificial in our attempts at hospitality, and they are teaching us how beautiful it can be.”

Though the church has welcomed in new life and become completely transformed, one thing the church has not become, Severns added, is clingy or territorial. Through the partnership of Burmese refugees and social workers among the congregation, Tabernacle birthed an independent resettlement ministry in 2010 called ReEstablish Richmond. In addition, the church continues to engage the seminary community and grow young pastors through a residency and internship program. Later this year, Tabernacle plans to commission individuals to Burma to begin new partnerships in which both communities can engage and seek transformation.

“We believe in a God that sends people to us but also sends people from us,” Severns said. “The door that we fling open to welcome is the same door that we fling open to send. We are constantly saying goodbye to people and the vast majority are people who feel called to go. It’s the story of this church, to participate in a kingdom way bigger than we are, and that, by default, means partnership.” 

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TABERNAACLE BAPTIST CHURCH



Tabernacle Baptist, the 128-year-old downtown church, has been transformed into a multi-ethnic, multi-colored, multi-language and multi-opinionated seamless community of faith, where children are empowered as partners in the story of God’s renewal in the world.

**BLAKE TOMMEY** serves with the Baptist General Association of Virginia as a collegiate minister at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va.





Chin, Karen, Kachin and Lisu refugees from Burma doubled the size of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., and transformed the congregation's way of being church together.

# Opportunities to affect:

April 2015

## MORE RESOURCES

Visit [cbf.net/affectonline](http://cbf.net/affectonline) for additional Opportunities to Affect, including:

- In Worship: Children's Sermon
- Around the Table: At Church

## LEARN

Learn more about Tabernacle Baptist Church at [tbcrichmond.org](http://tbcrichmond.org)

## PRAY

Prayer is a critical need for churches and ministries across the Fellowship. *Prayers of the People* provides specific requests to guide your prayers. Visit [cbf.net/pray](http://cbf.net/pray)

## NETWORK

Connect with other CBF churches and refugee and immigrant ministries through CBF's Mission Communities. Visit [missioncommunities.org](http://missioncommunities.org)

## GIVE

Your gifts are vital to the work of CBF field personnel and other Fellowship ministries in the U.S. and around the world. Find out more at [cbf.net/give](http://cbf.net/give)

# Being Church Together

## IN SMALL GROUPS

### Missions Education Resource

The outline below is designed for adult mission groups, Bible study classes and other small groups. Share copies of *fellowship!* with group members prior to the meeting and have extra copies available. These suggestions are for a 45-minute time frame.

1. In this session you'll be focusing on the work of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, Va. Before the session, gather large sticky notes (or index cards and tape) and pens/markers. Also create a place on the wall (using a white board or poster paper) for the opening activity. Read through the article "Being Church Together" on pp. 8-10.
2. Begin the meeting by writing the words "MINISTRY WITH" and "MINISTRY TO" on the white board, creating two columns with a line down the middle.
3. Ask participants to think about these two categories and to use the sticky notes to give examples of each type of ministry. (If there is some confusion at first, this is fine — ask participants to give their best guess!)
4. After everyone has had a chance to contribute their ideas, distribute copies of *fellowship!* and give participants time to read the article (either in small groups with discussion or on their own).
5. Then return to the white board, brainstorm and ask, "Would you consider the ministry at Tabernacle 'ministry to' or 'ministry with' refugees?"
6. Ask: Reflecting on this example, do you think there is a big difference between the two categories? How does the language of 'projects' vs. 'partners' define these two categories?"
7. Ask: What do you think of Pastor Sterling Severns' quote: "Our partnership with refugees from Burma is not a ministry of the church, it is the church?"
8. Continue the discussion by asking participants to use the example of Tabernacle Baptist to further define "ministry with" and "ministry to" by adding more sticky notes to the board.
9. Turn the conversation inward by comparing the work at Tabernacle to some of the ministries at your own church, deciding which category your ministries would fit into.
10. Close the discussion by asking, "What do you think it takes to transform a 'ministry to' effort to a 'ministry with' effort?"
11. End by praying for Tabernacle Baptist, your own congregation's ministries and for CBF field personnel mentioned in the Prayer Calendar on page 4.





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## EXPLORE CBF CHURCH STARTS

CBF Church Starts encourages people to follow Christ and to join in God's mission of reconciliation.

Are you called reach our world with the Good News by leading a missional congregation?

Participate in the CBF Church Starts Exploratory process to more deeply discern your call and learn about our philosophy, process and partnership.



Get more information at [www.cbf.net/churchstarts](http://www.cbf.net/churchstarts)



2005: Began taking Bi-annual photos on World Communion Sunday (October) and Pentecost Sunday (late spring/early summer)





2007: Majority of growth = young adults: seminarians, social workers, public school teachers, and doctors.

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[Redacted text block]



2009: Photo taken approximately 6 months after arrival of our Burma rooted Siblings in faith.  
Initial wave = Karen and Karenni. Second Wave = Chin



[Redacted text block]

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2009



2009: First "Family Photo" taken after arrival of Burma rooted siblings of faith.



2010



2011



2015 (October)



2012





2013: Year marks arrival of faculty and Lisu communities.