Building Friendships across Cultural Lines:

A Handbook for Churches

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Exploring God’s call to welcome the stranger in our midst: a guide for faith communities encountering refugees from Myanmar/Burma (or other immigrant populations).
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About this handbook

In Fall 2014 Central was awarded a grant by the Budget Review Committee of ABCUSA to assist Dr. Hrang Hlei in the development of a handbook for churches to reach out to immigrant communities in the US. A recent Pew Research study on Christianity in the US indicates a continued decline in overall church attendance across major denominations, except for the ABC-USA which showed a small increase. The integration of immigrant communities likely played a significant role in this small growth. Hopefully this handbook will assist even more congregations considering God’s call to “welcome the stranger in our midst.”

The final handbook is a collaboration between, Hrang Hlei, Duane Binkley, John Gravley and Robin Sandbothe.

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Our prayer is that the handbook provides space for conversations about ways the Holy Spirit may be calling you today.
Introduction

With the influx of refugees like the Chin and Karen from Myanmar (Burma) since the early 2000s, local US congregations, as well as immigrant churches have struggled in their attempt to adapt to the new and changing context. Both groups have been equally challenged by leadership issues, such as how to engage with one another culturally and socially in order to develop healthy congregations. This basic leadership manual for both the immigrant churches and local US congregations is a guide for dialogue and conversation around God’s call to us today.

A. Why are people from Myanmar (Burma) arriving in our communities?

- With independence from Britain in 1948 the national borders engulfed approximately 135 different ethnic groups, many with their own national aspirations
- The largest ethnic group is Burman and is predominately Buddhist
- Many of the other ethnic groups (Chin, Karen, KaChin, etc.) are predominately Christian
- Nationalist Buddhist (Burman) leaders have seen other (non-Buddhist) ethnic groups as culturally offensive and politically threatening or mere instruments of “white men’s schemes”
- For the majority of the past 65 years, the government has been a military dictatorship that has forced the ethnic people off of their native land, used the people as forced labor, and tried to push them out of the country
- Many have ended up in refugee camps in Thailand or working illegally in neighboring countries
- The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has been working to resettle many of these refugees
- Roughly 15,000 refugees from Myanmar (Burma) have come to the US each year since 2006
- In 2010 there were approximately 100,200 immigrants from Myanmar (Burma) in the US
- Many of the refugees have a strong identification with Baptists because of the continued legacy of Baptist missionaries, Ann and Adoniram Judson
- These refugees often seek out a Baptist church in the community in which they are resettled

B. The immigrant experience – A brief look

The vast majority of refugees from Myanmar (Burma) came to the US with a single hope – that there would be no more struggles (politically, economically, socially, etc.) since the US is such a rich and free country. But many of them have admitted that such hope gradually disappears when they actually start their new life in America. Many of them, especially parents who do not speak English, have stated that they have to struggle in this country more than they did in Myanmar (Burma). They struggle because they are not well informed about how the systems—governmental, educational, and cultural—work. More importantly, they are not well informed about how society works. Hence, they are more likely to fall behind in every aspect and greatly struggle for their basic survival.

The fact is that immigrants from Myanmar (Burma) have encountered many challenges in their struggle to survive and make a living in this new social and cultural context. Many of the first generation refugees from Myanmar (Burma) came to the US with little education. As a result, they are faced with language problems and difficulties in finding jobs. Thus, many end up working in low-paying jobs or have transportation problems even if they can find decent jobs. Many face difficulties in terms of making appointments with government offices, schools, and hospitals.

For immigrants, the Church serves as a social service center through which many newly arrived refugee families receive necessary help and support. However, language barriers become a fundamental hurdle for refugees from Myanmar (Burma) in making deeper connections with their host congregations and in their respective communities. When asked why no activities or practices have been arranged for the host and refugee families to engage with one another, a Chin pastor simply replied: “We cannot communicate.” In fact, this lack of communication tends to become a barrier for building trust and friendships.

Another leadership challenge directly related to the language barrier is cultural differences between the host congregation and immigrants from Myanmar (Burma). Cultural expressions are different from one group to another. For example, people of European descent tend to be time-oriented, while people from Myanmar (Burma), in general, are event-oriented. The latter group comes from a communal culture, whereas the former
group has an individual-oriented culture. The churches of immigrants from Myanmar (Burma) tend to have community activities more often than the host congregations. With more gatherings, there is more possibility of damage to the church building, which has consequently led to a number of immigrant churches being asked to leave by their host congregations.

Finally, leadership challenges faced by both US congregations and immigrant churches may be addressed in both technical and adaptive ways; hence, it is important to differentiate the two. Technical solutions attempt to provide immediate answers to the problems people face, whereas adaptive solutions focus on discovering answers by creating open and safe spaces for discussion and reflection on the problems themselves. Both US congregations and immigrant churches must not be simply satisfied with a technical fix, but they must also be ready to be engaged with adaptive changes.

C. **What is the difference between technical and adaptive solutions?**

Immigrants in their early transition period face many difficult challenges, such as language problems, financial difficulties, finding jobs, completing government and school-related paper work, and, most importantly, cultural adaptation. At the same time, the presence of refugees brings a big challenge to local US congregations because of cultural differences and the language barrier between the two groups. In fact, the challenges faced by refugees and local US congregations are both technical and adaptive.

- **Technical Challenge** – one that can be addressed by a clear-cut solution or technical fix. These challenges can be solved with the right information and willingness to implement a fix.
- **Adaptive Challenge** – one that presents with no clear-cut solution. Adaptive solutions require change in values, beliefs, or behavior. Both leader and follower must work together to find this type of solution.

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D. **Practical steps for congregations**

*An honest WARNING from experience.* The attempt to invite and welcome new groups into any congregation is not easy. There can be many misunderstandings, especially when the attempt is made across a cultural divide. These misunderstandings can bring fear and disappointment. The host group can be concerned about losing control of their own church if they allow immigrant churches to use their building for Sunday worship and other communal activities. They worry that the immigrants will mistreat or take advantage of their church buildings.
Many local churches worry that they might have to make adjustments to the way they do things in the church if they fully embrace an immigrant congregation. Many are not ready for the change immigrants bring to their doorstep. Neither the host nor the immigrant churches have put enough effort into learning from each other, learning to understand one another’s culture, or engaging in adaptive change.

Below are some specific steps that might help overcome the fear associated with inviting others into an existing congregational group.

1. **Hospitality** - Hospitality to strangers is one of the grand themes of the Bible. The Bible informs us that Abraham was the first person who showed the act of hospitality to strangers (Gen. 18:1-15). The Book of Hebrews reiterates this theme: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Heb. 13:2). When the Israelite people finally entered into the Promised Land and settled down, hospitality was written into their law: “Love the stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19; Lev. 19:34).

   a. **Welcoming vs. Embracing** - Many people tend to view hospitality as one directional, meaning the host is the one responsible to welcome the stranger who seems to have no role in the process. Many congregations are committed to welcoming refugees, immigrants, and homeless in such a way that the host has an active responsibility while the stranger is simply a passive receiver of hospitality. In fact, many tend to neglect the view that there is a sense of mutual exchange in hospitality. In other words, both the host and the one being hosted have equal responsibilities in the act of hospitality. In this case, both the US congregations and immigrant churches not only welcome one another, but they should also embrace one another.

   b. **Welcoming** - Welcoming alone can be superficial, which may hardly convey the welcome of God. Genuine hospitality must be reflected in the act of embracing the other.

   c. **Embracing** - Embracing the other means integrating the other into one’s own life. With embracing there is a sense of mutual belonging, mutual acceptance and indwelling which is missional in its nature.

**ACTION ITEM:** Both groups must be ready to give up (if necessary) their long-held worldviews in order to welcome and embrace the other. Both groups will become spiritually healthy and enriched when they develop the courage to welcome and embrace the other with open minds and are ready to be challenged by the other. There are risks in the act of hospitality; but there are also blessings in it, which can convey the welcome of God.

2. **Bible Studies** - One of the ways to be engaged in adaptive experiment by both the immigrants and US churches is to develop a shared biblical imagination for mission. Bible study has the potential to create learning environments in which the whole congregation has the opportunity to learn and grow. But adopting this practice requires both leaders and members to be more involved in reading and studying the Bible themselves, rather than passively listening to and relying on the interpretation of the experts. In the “For More Resources” section of the handbook are two example Bible studies that can be used to promote the work of the Holy Spirit to help us build friendships across cultural experiences.

**ACTION ITEM:** Schedule a series of joint Bible studies to focus on the joint discernment of a shared vision. These should be scheduled when members of all groups can attend, and there should be some shared responsibility for leadership of these Bible studies.

3. **Communal Discernment** - Closely related to the practice of dwelling in the Word, is missional discernment, the primary purpose of which is to listen “attentively to the Word, to one another, and to the world.” In other words, it is about “the practice of attending to God’s call for Christian communities corporately” in their immediate community as well as in the world. As mentioned already, both US congregations and immigrant communities are faced with adaptive challenges. In such a situation, it is not enough to simply preach about the Bible. It is essential to engage in missional discernment by using the four tasks of practical theology developed by Richard Osmer. The four tasks of practical theology ask the questions:

   - What is going on?
   - Why is this going on?
   - What ought to be going on?
   - How might we respond?
Theologically speaking, the first two tasks are concerned with the question of what God is doing in the community in which both the local congregations and refugees live. In the same way, the last two tasks are concerned with the question of what God wants in response to the former questions. Both US congregations and immigrant churches need to ask the above questions as they are engaging in their respective new cultural and social contexts. These questions are essential for the transformation of congregations.

**ACTION ITEM:** Schedule a series of conversations on the topic of joint discernment of a shared vision. Ask the suggested questions. What groups need to be included? Be sure to include both formal leaders and those with informal influence in the conversations.

4. **A Faithful Experiment** - Both US congregations and immigrants must take the necessary risks in order to build faithful relationships that would bring adaptive changes in their congregations. In other words, they should not be afraid of taking risks for faithful experiments as they are engaging in new leadership challenges. In this case, it is important for both groups to be aware of the nature of “responsible experiments and valuable failures” in order to find ways to build healthy and faithful relationships. Many churches today face significantly changing social and cultural contexts that call for learning new ways of embodying and communicating the gospel. Both US and immigrant churches find themselves in this challenging situation. In this case, it will not be helpful for them to do things the ways they have always done before, if they truly want to be faithful to their sense of God’s calling to be new missional churches. To be a new missional church requires innovation with a belief that God is always bigger than our ideas about God. In fact, the concept of innovation has always been a part of the Church’s story, deeply rooted in the story of incarnation. Innovation and faithful experiments go hand in hand in the Church. In this process, however, there is a tendency to avoid facing the risks of losing one’s long-held tradition and values. But it is also important to know that taking such risks can be a great act of faithfulness to the gospel.

Our hope and prayer is that practicing hospitality that conveys the welcome of God, developing a shared biblical imagination for mission, discerning God’s calling communally, and taking risks as we experiment faithfully will lead more churches to make the needed adaptive changes.

**ACTION ITEM:** What is the next step? What is God calling your community toward? How will you respond?

**E. For more information...**

Look for the “Building Friendships” link at www.cbts.edu

**Bible Study #1**
Separate or Together? (Galatians 2:11-14) by John Gravley

**Background:**
- Paul condemns Peter for refusing to eat with the Gentile Christians after some leaders from Jerusalem come for a visit.
- Who are the leaders from Jerusalem?
- What is the difference between a Jewish Christian and a Gentile Christian?
- Why did Peter act this way?
- Read Peter’s speech in Acts 11:1-18

**Observation:**
- Paul makes a point that God shows no distinction between different people.
- Peter preaches that the Holy Spirit is available to all people who respond to God.
- Not everyone believed it was ok for different races to worship together.
- How important for the early growth of Christianity was the ability of people with different cultural traditions to worship together?
- Is this important for us today?
Application

- If it is easier to worship with people just like me, is that what I should do?
- Why was Paul so upset with Peter?
- What does God need from us today?
- Does the way we worship say anything about what we believe is important to God?

FINAL Question: Is this passage leading us as a church or me as an individual to start or do something new?

Bible Study #2
We Consider Working with Those Different Than Us (Deuteronomy 10: 10 – 21) by Duane Binkley

18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.
19 And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

Key Points:

- This is the second time Moses comes down with the 10 Commandments.
- Moses meets the people and introduces the 10 Commandments and the Ark with an impassioned sermon.
- In the midst of this sermon when God is first establishing his relationship with the people of Israel, Moses, speaking for God says, we “are to love those who are foreigners.”
- Interesting that while Moses is praising God and talking about how all powerful God is, we’re told to love those different than us.
- Throughout the Old Testament this theme is often repeated. We’re told to love foreigners and that the same rules apply to foreigners as apply to us.
- In the New Testament, stories like “the woman at the well” show Jesus’s love for those considered different.
- Acts 2 includes people speaking at least 15 languages with different cultures.
- Acts 11 shows Christ is for all.
- Paul’s letters were to churches in various countries - the New Testament church started as multi-lingual and multi-cultural.
- What does this passage mean for those of us in the majority who claim this place as our longtime home?
- What does this passage mean for those of us that arrived here in recent years?

Group Discussion

1. What words, images, or phrases are speaking to us in this text?
2. How do these words, images, or phrases speak to us as believers?
3. What does God want us to receive?
4. What does God ask us to share?

FINAL Question: Is this passage leading us as a church or me as an individual to start or do something new?