

FROM ASIA IMMIGRANTS IN OUR MIDST—PART 2



Vietnamese find support and opportunity through parish life

RELYING ON CHURCH IN A NEW HOME



By JENNIFER WILLIAMS
Staff correspondent

Ahn Dang was 6 years old when he last saw his father alive.

He, his siblings and parents were seeking refuge in a Catholic church in the town of Hue in Vietnam when communists took over the building. Mr. Dang's father, an adviser to American troops and a high-ranking officer with the police, was handcuffed and led away from the church. As the child watched him leave, he saw his father had a rosary clutched in his hand.

Later, Mr. Dang would learn that his father, along with hundreds of others, had been buried alive.

While Mr. Dang's story is perhaps more poignant than most, many Vietnamese people can relate to the pain, challenges and obstacles he faced. And like Mr. Dang, a parishioner of Our Lady of La Vang Church in Essex, they have relied on their faith and the Catholic Church for support and sustenance as they have made a home in the United States.

Mr. Dang was a frightened 20-year-old when he left his country in 1982 on a boat packed with 53 other people.

But he knew he had only two choices. "You could live or you could die," Mr. Dang said.

He said many people would die while escaping in such a manner, either because the boat would sink or its occupants would be captured by pirates.

"Every day there was news from the sea that people were killed and raped by pirates," Mr. Dang said. "You know it, but you still have to make a decision. People would do whatever they could to search for freedom."

Mr. Dang spent five days on the boat before he and the other passengers were rescued by an Australian ship. They were taken to Malaysia and interviewed

Sister Therese Thuy Nguyen, M.T.G., instructs the first holy Communion class at Our Lady of La Vang, Essex.

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by delegates from different countries. Mr. Dang came straight to Baltimore, where his uncle and an older brother already lived.

"When I came here, I had to start all over again, getting a job and learning the alphabet," Mr. Dang said.

The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops helped Mr. Dang find a job working for Maryland Cups.

Today Mr. Dang is a father of three, who speaks fluent English and works for Lever Brothers doing technical support.

Noticeably younger looking than his 42 years, Mr. Dang has a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Capitol College in Laurel and masters' degrees in business administration and science in business from Johns Hopkins University.

A new beginning at parish

He plays an active role in the 150-family parish of Our Lady of La Vang, having led the pastoral council a number of times. During the week, the Perry Hall resident attends Mass at St. Joseph, Fullerton.

At Our Lady of La Vang, parishioners pack the small white church, filling pews and folding chairs and even sitting in the stairway for both the 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. Sunday Masses.

Father Francis Nhi Nguyen, the pastor, commutes one hour each way to serve the parishioners of Our Lady of La Vang, who come from all over the metropolitan area and Baltimore City.

Hao Nguyen, an engineer for NASA, commutes from Columbia each week.

"This is a place where I made a beginning," Mr. Nguyen said. "We know each other very well. They are like my family here. They mean a lot to me."

Two Sisters, members of the Adorers of the Holy Cross, commute to the parish from Fairfax, Va., each week to minister to the community and to teach religious education to the children.

Father Nguyen described Our Lady of La Vang as a community of many families that includes members who are different in "age, job and standard of culture."

"The newcomer definitely has a language barrier and also, the elderly people don't speak English at all," said Mr. Dang. "So the church is a very important place for them. There are friends and relatives and it's a place for them to socialize."

He said the elderly especially "can't wait for Sunday," when after Mass, people gather in the basement to talk and eat traditional Vietnamese food such as sweet rice and Vietnamese ham.



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Tammy Huynh, a parishioner of Our Lady of La Vang, Essex, adjusts the shrine located in her family's nail salon.

"They can go and speak their own language and meet their people," Mr. Dang said. "During the week, they are very lonely at home because their children go to work and they cannot communicate."

According to the Maryland Office for New Americans (based on information from the U.S. Census 2000), 35 percent of Maryland's newcomers were from Asia and 34 percent from Latin America, while nearly 17 percent came from Europe.

For many members of a growing Asian population, including 30-year-old Tammy Huynh, who came here 18 years ago, the church holds great importance.

"Since I was young, my family was very active in the church," said Mrs. Huynh, who is married and has a 3-year-old son who attends St. Clare School in Essex.

Mrs. Huynh also escaped Vietnam on a boat when she was 11 and her brother was 17.

"My mom prayed to the Virgin Mary that if the trip went smoothly and nothing happened to us, then she would eat rice with salt all year, with no meat or vegetables," Mrs. Huynh said. "And the money she had left, she would give to the poor."

"It was a nice day, when we left," recalled Mrs. Huynh. "We caught a taxi and went to the bus stop. We could see our mom and dad, but they were standing in the back, where no one could see them. If someone saw them waving goodbye, it might catch people's attention."

Mrs. Huynh and her brother, Tan Ho, went to Cambodia and Thailand before coming to the United States.

Once here, they lived with a foster family who assisted the siblings with their English.

Mrs. Huynh said that when she first came here, she was scared and missed her parents a lot. But she has grown to love the United States.

"Over there (in Vietnam), the people love each other and they care for each other, but the lifestyle is so hard," said Mrs. Huynh, a perky woman with short, spiky black hair and a ready smile. "Every day is a hard-living day, so really, you don't have time to express your feelings to each other or show you care. But over here, people pay so much attention to you, so actually, that makes up a lot."

Mrs. Huynh attended Essex Community College for two years and then went to Virginia to learn about the nail industry. She now owns her own nail salon, Ecstasy Nail and Tan in Essex.

"People make \$40 a month in Vietnam and work 12-14-hour days," said Mrs. Huynh who is now a U.S. citizen. "It's not like that over here at all. I want to make a better life for me and my children."

She said she has relied on the church for moral support and faith.

"I'm very thankful I'm here," said Mrs. Huynh, who has a small shrine to Jesus and Mary in her nail shop. "I thank God that everything in my life has been amazing, more than I expected. I'm very glad for everything I have in my life today. I thank my parents. I thank the people of this country for letting us in and make a better life for ourselves. Because if I was in my country, I don't think I could be the person who I wanted to be."

Next week immigrants from Latin America.

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Nepal to Northwood

Welcome to St. Matthew's

By JENNIFER WILLIAMS
Staff correspondent

When Pravin Moktan first came to Baltimore on a rainy Aug. 12, 2002, after leaving his native Nepal, he had no idea where to go to get help.

Someone directed the now 46-year-old to Catholic Charities in Baltimore City, who directed him to St. Matthew Church in Northwood.

Having no job, no transportation, no money and no place to live, Mr. Moktan walked two hours in the rain to the church at the corner of Loch Raven Boulevard and Woodbourne Avenue.

"I was depressed and didn't know what I was going to do," said Mr. Moktan, who left one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world to come to the United States.

But Mr. Moktan, who was Buddhist by birth, needn't have worried.

He didn't know it, but the person who answered the door at the church that day was Father Joseph L. Muth, Jr., the pastor himself.

When the priest answered the door, he told Mr. Moktan, "Well, you're at the right place."

He then offered the stranger a towel and a cup of tea. "It was the most wonderful time of my life," Mr. Moktan said. "God was right in front of me."

Mr. Moktan left Nepal because Maoist guerillas were killing innocent people and forcing others to join their group. He said families were slaughtered and many people were fleeing the country.

Mr. Moktan, who was working in the Himalayas, said after he was blindfolded and badly beaten, he knew he had to leave.

He lived in England for six months before coming to the United States. At first, Mr. Moktan held low-paying jobs doing lawn-mowing, house-sitting and cleaning. He now works at the Baltimore nonprofit organization People Encouraging People as an outreach worker, and has an apartment.

The dark-skinned man with a friendly smile, who speaks fluent English, was granted political asylum in 2003.

He calls St. Matthew a great congregation.

"It's like a small, mini-world," Mr. Moktan said. "I feel very connected. I think this is the most welcoming place."



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Pravin Moktan, a native of Nepal, prays after Mass at St. Matthew, Northwood.