

Hrang Hlei will be speaking extemporaneously off of his PPT slides. Caroline has consolidated the text from the slides below.

From Displacement to Diaspora: Resettlement History of the Myanmar Diaspora in the United States

Hrang Hlei

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The Myanmar diaspora in the US is not one single story: It is a story of many people: Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Bamar, Rohingya, and others.

Many came not simply as immigrants seeking opportunity, but as refugees fleeing dictatorship, civil war, ethnic persecution, religious discrimination, poverty, and displacement.

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Their story is a story of suffering, resilience, faith, and hope. They came to America because they needed a place to survive and rebuild their lives.

Their story reminds us that resettlement is not only about finding a new country. It is about rebuilding human dignity, preserving memory, forming faith, and preparing the next generation.

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What does it mean to rebuild a people in a new land?

To rebuild a people in a new land:

- Is more than relocation
- Involves identity, memory, and belonging
- Is a theological and social process

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Why People Fled Myanmar?

Military dictatorship, political imprisonment, ethnic discrimination, and religious persecution.

Conflicts between the junta and ethnic resistance organizations.

After the February 2021 coup: intensified warfare, airstrikes, conscription, economic collapse, and renewed displacement.

The Central Pattern

Most did not leave because they rejected their homeland. They left because remaining became unsafe, economically impossible, or politically intolerable.

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Historical Roots of Forced Migration

- 1948: Independence; unresolved federal and ethnic questions
- 1962: Military coup; authoritarian rule expands
- 1988: Nationwide uprising and repression
- 1990s: Protracted border wars and refugee camps
- 2006+: Large-scale U.S. resettlement from regional refuge
- 2017: Rohingya mass displacement
- 2021: New coup, civil war, and renewed flight

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Three Waves of Burmese Migration by Joseph Cheah

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First Wave (Post-1962 Political Exodus)

- Military coup (1962)—authoritarian rule
- Migrants: students, professionals, political dissidents
- Characteristics: urban, educated, and small-scale migration
- Implication: Credential transfer challenges

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Second Wave (1988 Uprising-2007 Saffron Revolution)

- 8888 Uprising and military crackdown
- Ethnic minorities (Chin, Karen, Kachin) are fleeing persecution
- Long-term refugee camps (Thailand/Malaysia), prolonged displacement
- Implication: Trauma-informed care needed

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Third Wave (Post-2006 Mass Resettlement)

- Saffron Revolution + US immigration policy expansion
- Large-scale US refugee admissions
- Family-based migration, church-networked, and strong community formation
- Implication: Language, education, and youth integration

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The Fourth Wave, After the 2021 Coup?

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The Myanmar diaspora has become one of the most significant refugee communities in the US, particularly in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne.

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Why Indianapolis Became a Major Hub

- Initial Placement
 - Exodus Refugee Immigration and other agencies placed families in central Indiana beginning in the 1990s and expanding in the 2000s.
- Affordable Settlement
 - Relatively affordable housing, entry-level employment, schools, and access to transportation made the south side viable for new arrivals.
- Network Migration
 - Once churches, relatives, markets, and interpreters existed, secondary migration produced a self-reinforcing community hub.
- Institutional Density

- Churches, ethnic associations, restaurants, groceries, media, schools, and nonprofits reduced the risks of starting over.
- Scale
 - Recent community estimates commonly place roughly 30,000–35,000 people from Myanmar in greater Indianapolis, predominantly Chin; estimates vary by definition and year.

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The Church as a Spiritual Formation Center

Historical Roots: Burmese Christianity has been shaped by American Baptist missions since the 19th century

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The Church as a Spiritual Formation Center

Worship interprets suffering through biblical narratives of exile, deliverance, lament, covenant, and hope.

Preaching, Sunday school, youth ministry, choirs, and prayer meetings form Christian identity across generations.

Pastoral care accompanies grief, trauma, family conflict, unemployment, illness, and news from Myanmar.

Congregations provide moral frameworks for navigating American individualism, consumerism, racialization, and pluralism.

More than Sunday Worship

For many refugees, the church becomes a sanctuary, social network, informal welfare office, school, cultural archive, leadership incubator, and transnational bridge—all at once.

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The Church as Guardian of Culture and Ethnic Identity

Culture is not Lost—it is Carried and Adapted

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The Church as a Cultural and Ethnic Institution

- Language
 - Sermons, songs, Bible study, announcements, and children's programs preserve Chin, Karen, Kachin, Burmese, and other languages.
- Memory and Ritual
 - National days, harvest festivals, funerals, weddings, food, dress, music, and oral history transmit collective memory.
- Belonging and Organization
 - Churches create trusted leadership, mutual aid, newcomer reception, youth mentoring, women's networks, and links to ethnic associations.

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Contributions to Indianapolis and the United States

- Economic Vitality
 - Entrepreneurship in groceries, restaurants, construction, transportation, health care, translation, and professional services; revitalization of commercial corridors.
- Civic Participation
 - Naturalization, voter education, nonprofit leadership, public advocacy, school engagement, and growing representation in local institutions.
- Social Capital
 - Dense mutual-aid networks care for newcomers, elders, grieving families, students, and people affected by crises in Myanmar.
- Religious Renewal
 - Diaspora congregations bring strong traditions of prayer, mission, sacrificial giving, music, and communal responsibility to American Christianity.
- Transnational Service
 - Communities send relief, support schools and churches, document human-rights abuses, and advocate for democracy and peace in Myanmar.

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Major Struggles in Resettlement

Trauma from war, persecution, dangerous journeys, and separation from family members.

Intergenerational conflict over authority, dating, marriage, gender roles, education, and career choice.

Ethnic fragmentation and imported political divisions from Myanmar.

Church leadership overload: pastors are expected to solve spiritual, legal, financial, and social problems.

A Central Tension

The institutions that protect identity can also become insular. The challenge is integration without assimilation, cultural continuity without rigidity, and Christian formation without controlling the next generation.

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Looking Forward: Next Generation and Oral History

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Next Generation Questions:

- Who are we becoming? (What is my identity?)
- What do we keep? (Maintaining cultural identity)
- What do we adapt? (What do I inherit and what do I reshape?)

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Why Oral History Matters

- Preserves first-generation narratives/lived experiences
- Builds intergenerational empathy and understanding
- Strengthens collective identity/communal culture
- Honors suffering and resilience

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Challenges for the Next Generations

- Identity
 - Second-generation youth negotiate multiple identities: American, Asian American, Christian, ethnic, and connected to Myanmar—without always speaking the heritage language.
- Leadership
 - Young adults need meaningful authority, not only performance roles. Churches risk losing them when leadership structures remain exclusively immigrant-generation and clergy-centered or lay-centered.
- Formation
 - The next generation needs theological depth, mental-health literacy, vocational mentoring, civic education, and space to ask difficult questions about race, gender, politics, and faith.

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What Is the Future of These Immigrants?

The future is not a single outcome; it depends on religious institutions and generational choices.

Scenario 1: Flourishing Integration

- Strong education, bilingual capacity, economic mobility, civic representation, healthy churches, and sustained transnational relationships.

Scenario 2: Fragmented Assimilation

- Economic progress for some, but language loss, youth disengagement, congregational division, and widening gaps between generations and social classes.

Scenario 3: Renewed Displacement

- Restrictive immigration policy, family separation, instability in Myanmar, and declining refugee protection could create continuing insecurity even after resettlement.

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Conclusion: From Refugees to Community Builders

The Myanmar diaspora story is not only one of victimhood.

It is a story of survival, faith, institution-building, entrepreneurship, civic participation, and the difficult creation of home across borders.

The future will be shaped by whether churches, schools, communities, and young leaders can turn inherited resilience into shared flourishing.

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Hence, the future of the Myanmar diaspora in America will be shaped by this question:

Will the next generation simply become successful Americans, or will they become faithful, rooted, and responsible leaders who remember their history and people, serve their communities, and bless the nations?

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What role can you play in this ongoing story?