

Offering changes lives in Thailand

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Rick Burnette, (right) CBF Global Missions field personnel, has been using funds from the 2005 Carter Offering to get residency status for hilltribe immigrants in villages in northern Thailand.

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By Alison Wingfield

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

ATLANTA—The cost of a typical week's grocery bill in the United States was all it took to change a life.

Money given last summer to the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Offering for Religious Liberty and Human Rights is being put to use to help hilltribe people in Thailand obtain legal status in that country. Individuals and churches also contributed a substantial amount to help with this project.

About \$45,000 was collected at the 2005 CBF General Assembly for the first Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Offering, to be shared by the Fellowship and the Baptist World Alliance.

The remainder of the CBF portion will be used to fund projects with Fellowship partner churches ministering in areas where religious liberty issues exist. The offering will be collected again at the 2006 General Assembly June 22-23 in Atlanta.

For 5,100 baht, or about \$123, a Palaung is able to register for an alien resident card, which offers significant residence rights.

"That is a lot of money for most Palaung families," said Rick Burnette, one of CBF's Global Missions field personnel. "They make somewhere between a dollar to two dollars a day."

He and his wife, Ellen, work with various hilltribe people as liaisons with the Palaung and Kachin minority networks, assisting communities in finding ways to make a living, including sustainable agriculture, and

dealing with related rights issues.

"This offering has been extremely timely," Burnette said. "We don't think it was merely coincidental."

The Palaung registration fund fit the criteria of the Carter Offering, noted Don Durham, CBF Foundation president and chair of the committee responsible for disbursing the offering funds.

"This is what being the presence of Christ looks like when we engage the grassroots at home with the grassroots around the world," Durham said. "A significant number of CBF churches were already involved with the Burnettes in funding this registration project. And there were individuals with no rights of any kind. Basic citizenship rights are the first step toward religious liberty rights."

Providing direct assistance to those whose religious liberties are endangered or non-existent is a key objective used by the committee to determine where to distribute the funds, said committee member Jimmy Allen, chaplain and senior minister of the chapel of Big Canoe, Ga.

The Palaung registration fund "seemed a good fit for beginning this process," Allen said. "They need help meeting the high costs placed on them to get the protection of being citizens of Thailand."

Many of the Palaung and Kachin fled civil unrest in Myanmar during the last two decades and have settled in Thailand near the border with Myanmar. As immigrants, it has been difficult for them to get documentation to allow them to work.

Using \$10,000 of the Carter Offering, along with another \$30,000 in donations from churches and individuals, the Burnettes—working with a Christian development project—set up a revolving fund for those eligible to get this documentation.

First Baptist Church of Lee's Summit, Mo., heard of the need after their pastor, Scott Harrison, returned from a two-week trip to Thailand, where he met the Burnettes and some of the Palaung. "The need was overwhelming, and knowing that our CBF missionaries would be able to oversee its distribution and make sure it got into the right hands was important to us," Harrison said. "It was a tangible need, something we could do."

Greenwood Forest Baptist Church in Cary, N.C., found out about the need when leaders contacted the Fellowship.

"It was a different way to help people in a far-away part of the world," said Amanda Atkin, associate pastor.

Currently, the Thai government has said immigrants are eligible if they came to Thailand before Oct. 13, 1985. There is hope those who entered after that also will have opportunities to register.

"Among the Palaung and Kachin, we have identified 247 persons who are eligible to receive assistance from this fund so as to secure legal registration," Burnette said.

After determining who is eligible, the group is screened by their communities, and if they are considered in good standing in the community, they can benefit from the fund, and thus obtain legal registration. They are expected to pay back what they have borrowed, with interest, over time, thus creating a sustainable fund.

"This fund eliminates a lot of uncertainty," Burnette said. Legal registration "gives them rights to reside in Thailand, to access various benefits, including healthcare and education."

Legal registration provides a first step for the Palaung and Kachin peoples toward realizing the religious liberty guaranteed in the Thai constitution.

The group hopes the Palaung and Kachin peoples will be able to access the sustainable fund for other applications related to land rights and forest rights, Burnette said.

For more about the Burnettes' ministry, visit www.uhdp.org/uh/.

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