

Georgetown church demonstrates Love for Myanmar

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GEORGETOWN—When Reed Iwami traveled to Southeast Asia to see his missionary son 11 years ago, he fell in love with the people of Myanmar and felt burdened to help them.



Reed Iwami (center)

launched that ministry that became Love for Myanmar after a trip to the Southeast Asian nation 11 years ago. When Iwami returned from the Union of Myanmar, also known as Burma, he sought counsel from leaders at his church—[Crestview Baptist in Georgetown](#)—about how to help the nation's indigenous people. Seven months later, he led a missions team from Crestview to Myanmar.

In the years since, [Love for Myanmar](#), birthed out of Crestview, developed into a nonprofit humanitarian aid organization that provides comprehensive aid, support and programs to the people of Myanmar.

When Iwami first traveled to Myanmar, human rights advocates considered the military junta-ruled country one of the most repressive, behind North Korea and Sudan.

“It was one of the most repressed countries in the world. And as a result, not very many humanitarian organizations or even missionaries from churches would go into that country to help them,” Iwami said. “That’s why we decided it was a country we needed to help, because no one else was doing it.”



Love for Myanmar has provided food, clothing, shelter, education and medical supplies to about 300 abandoned and orphaned children in Yangon, Myanmar. Love for Myanmar has provided food, clothing, shelter, education and medical supplies to about 300 abandoned and orphaned children in Yangon, Myanmar. It has sponsored nine Christian orphanages in the city and provides quarterly funds to help educate and feed the children.

Additionally, Love for Myanmar started and oversees a neighborhood school in a poor area of Yangon, where 35 children receive a free education and learn Christian values. The organization provides the salary for the

teachers in the school and rent for the building, as well as various educational materials.

In July 2007, Gary Watkins participated in his first church-sponsored mission trip to Myanmar, and it sparked drastic changes in his life.

“I hadn’t been associated with church in a long time,” he recalled. “I took my first mission trip at age 58. I spent two and a half weeks in Myanmar, and it changed my life. I came back, and I just had a gnawing feeling that I have to do something.”

With his business background and contacts in the nonprofit sector, Watkins spearheaded the effort to establish nonprofit status for Love for Myanmar.

Initially formed as The Burma Connection in 2008, it was renamed Love for Myanmar in October 2013 because the name “Burma” was not well-received, Iwami said.

“What we wanted to do was to legitimize ourselves by getting international nongovernmental organization status within the country, so that is why we changed the name,” he said.

Crestview’s ministry in Myanmar continued to expand. Chase and Meagan Wooldridge, the son and daughter-in-law of Pastor Dan Wooldridge, have served as full-time missionaries in the country four years.



Love for Myanmar started and oversees a neighborhood school in a poor area of Yangon, where 35 children receive a free education and learn Christian values. In addition to starting the school in Yangon, Love for Myanmar worked closely with Youth With A Mission to start another school in the far northwestern part of the country, which provides education to nearly 200 students.

The organization also has three microfinance teams in place to help families in poor areas achieve self-sufficiency.

Watkins noted the people of Myanmar inspired him and sparked many changes in his life.

“What got me was their faith. That’s what was impressed upon me in 2007—my epiphany, if you will,” he said, noting never-ending warfare has marked Myanmar since it attained its independence from the United Kingdom in the mid-20th century.

“If there was ever a people who had a reason to question God and their

conditions, and their faith...I just wanted some of it. I want what they've got."

Watkins recalled a trip to a cemetery church in the Mon state, an administrative division on Myanmar's eastern coast. He remembered walking through the gravesites and wondering where the church was. When he finally saw an open-air church, he was amazed at the resolve the people had to worship, despite living under harsh, oppressive conditions.

"They had to fight," he said. "You really have to have a depth of conviction to fight the government there to get a cemetery back so you can build a church because you have no place to worship. That just blew me away."

Iwami likewise noted the spiritual fervor of the indigenous people who worship in small house churches.

"The passion that they have put the people here to shame," he said. "There are some very strong Christians in the country, and there is some strong evangelism going on, even though it is a danger to them."

Dan Wooldridge noted Baptist influence in Myanmar, dating back to missionary Adoniram Judson. The version of the Bible Judson translated into the Burmese language in the early 1800s still is used in the country today, he observed.

"Judson, for American Baptists, was the pioneer missionary—the very first one we actually supported in a cooperative way from the United States," Wooldridge said.

In addition to Love for Myanmar's work overseas, the organization also works in Austin with refugees representing one of Myanmar's 135 ethnic groups—the Karen people.

Iwami and Watkins attend Austin Karen Baptist Church, where Iwami

teaches Sunday school to adults. The church averages around 100 people and is led by the first ordained Karen pastor in Texas, Moe Eh, in a building owned by [Austin Baptist Association](#). Students from Crestview consistently volunteer with the Karen youth.

Love for Myanmar has helped more than 100 Karen families in Austin become accustomed to life in the United States and currently is working with the State Department to reunite a father in Myanmar with his wife and children in Austin.

Watkins regards the Karen refugees he ministers to as one of his own—his “family.”

“When you go to one of those citizenship ceremonies, and you see all the different ethnic groups represented—there’s your family,” he said. “It doesn’t get much better than that.”