

Houston church eases transition for Bhutanese refugees

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HOUSTON—Imagine being forced—under threat of oppression and violence— to abandon home and familiar luxuries for a bamboo hut on a crowded strip of land in the middle of a river.

A boy hands out DVDs titled "New Life in Jesus." Every youth received a copy of the movie, which portrays the life of Jesus and carries the gospel message.

(PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy/Communications Intern)

Rain causes the water to rise, forming barriers that block any escape route, and the flimsy tarp roof proves inadequate. Food consists of a bowl of rice, while clean water and electricity run scarce amid unstable health conditions. Then, imagine being catapulted across thousands of miles into an unfamiliar society with only six months to learn the language, find employment and establish a new home within the foreign land.

That's reality for Bhadra Rai and hundreds of other Bhutanese refugees coming to the United States.

Since relocating to America three years ago, Rai, 27, has been reaching out to members of the Bhutanese community, hoping to aid their transition and share the gospel with them. In 2009, he helped start the [Canaan Bhutanese Church](#), where he serves as pastor. The church is located in southwest Houston. On average, 20 percent of Bhutanese refugees settle in Texas

each year, with two-thirds of that percentage residing in Houston—most within a two-mile radius of each other—according to Mark Heavener, intercultural strategist for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Often, refugees arrive with no concept of where they are, seldom daring to travel outside of those two miles, he said.



Bhadra Rai (center), pastor of Canaan Bhutanese Church in Houston, seeks to make immigrants from Bhutan feel at home in Texas and reach them with the gospel. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy/Communications Intern)

In order to connect locals, Rai founded the Bhutanese Community of Houston. Welcoming all members regardless of faith, the nonprofit organization assists refugees with finding income, health and a successful place in society.

“There’s nobody else working across the state to try and connect the Bhutanese refugees together like (Rai) is,” Heavener said. “He has been recognized by the federal government’s work among refugees as a key leader.”

Rai testified in Washington before the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement about the challenges and difficulties of resettlement. He was also invited to attend a training workshop in California about developing

community group organization and resources.

He regularly advises the Houston mayor's council on refugee issues and leads evangelism efforts through collaboration with the Baptist General Convention of Texas office of intercultural ministries. Funds from the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions support various outreach events.



Members of Bhutanese soccer teams from Austin and Abilene listen for their names to be called during the award ceremony. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy/Communications Intern)

His wife, Ruth Rai, spoke for the Bhutanese community, "We all are new in America, so we don't know what's going on here."

She explained refugees need help, so the mission becomes one of provision, whether it's clothing, kitchen utensils, doctors appointments or something else. Then, the door opens for Christians to connect with nonbelievers and share the gospel, she said. "We know more than them, so we can go (help) them ... After that, we can say: 'Can you come to our church? If you want, you are welcome.'"

And it's working.

Dhan Tamang, 26, was a Buddhist when he first arrived in the United States. "I used to think about the Christian religion, and I used to go to

church informally... just with friends,” he said.

After connecting with Rai, he decided to attend church more, thinking it might benefit his children’s future. He got more than he bargained for however, after coming to know Jesus himself.



Angel, 2, was the first Bhutanese child born in Houston in February 2009.

“I find peace in him, and happiness in him, joy and all these things. Right now I’m not having any kinds of problems,” Tamang said, his face aglow with the brightest of smiles.

After committing his life to Christ and being baptized, “everything got solved,” he testified. He chronicled examples of God’s goodness to him—his ability to buy a car, have a computer with Internet access and see his 3-year-old daughter recover from illness. He credits all to Jesus.

“I never thought my life would be like this,” he said. “If we believe in (Christ), definitely everything will be solved.”

Recently, Rai helped organize a one-day summer camp filled with food, fun and friendly competition for Bhutanese youth. More than 135 children and teenagers attended from Austin, San Antonio, Abilene, Fort Worth and Houston. The event included a soccer tournament, the personal testimony of a Cambodian refugee pastor and a cultural celebration sponsored by local refugee agencies featuring traditional Bhutanese dancing and an

awards ceremony.



Three young men perform a traditional Bhutanese dance. Their hats symbolize leadership of tribal elders. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy/Communications Intern)

“After events like this, people start to come to the church and just get connected,” Heavener said. “A lot of this stuff that his church is doing up front is very clearly Christian. ...Whenever his church is up there, it’s presenting the gospel at this program through song and dance.”

Thirteen-year-old Deepa Adhikari, a dancer from Canaan Bhutanese Church, came to faith in Christ after connecting through local community.

“When I came here, I met my friends, and my friends are all Christians,” she said. Describing the church, she added, “Everybody works together, stays together—we’re like family.”