

# Mayflower Church begins new life in Texas

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The Easter promise of new life holds special meaning for members of a persecuted Chinese church who arrived in Texas on Good Friday, in preparation for resettlement with the help of Tyler-area churches. 0

Members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church—nicknamed the “Mayflower Church” for their commitment to seeking religious freedom—arrived Friday evening at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

## ‘A Good Friday miracle’



Rushad Hussain, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom with the U.S. Department of State, and

Randel Everett, founding President of 21Wilberforce, waited at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport to welcome members of the persecuted Mayflower Church to the United States. (Courtesy Photo)

“It was a Good Friday miracle,” said Randel Everett, founding president of 21Wilberforce, a human rights organization focused on international religious freedom.

Representatives from advocacy groups and about three dozen members of Texas churches greeted more than 60 Chinese Christians with balloons and banners, welcoming them to the United States.

Rushad Hussain, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom with the U.S. Department of State, joined in that celebration, telling the Chinese Christians, “It is wonderful to welcome you.”

Fleeing persecution and harassment in China, members of the Mayflower Church first sought refuge in South Korea. When they were denied asylum there, they relocated to Thailand on tourist visas. After their visas expired, the Thai government declined to renew them unless members of the church reported to the Chinese Embassy.

One week before the Chinese Christians arrived on U.S. soil, they appeared at a deportation hearing in Thailand. At that time, they feared they immediately would be sent back to China, where they likely would have been imprisoned.



Texas Christians welcome members of the Mayflower Church to the United States on Good Friday evening. (Courtesy Photo)

“Pastor Pan [Yongguang of the Mayflower Church] said the Hebrew people wandered for 40 years. The Mayflower Church has wandered for three years and 10 months. Eight children have been born while they were in exile,” said Everett, former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

“One week ago, they were all in prison—men, women and children. Now, thanks to the grace of God and a coalition of churches, NGOs, and the U.S. State Department, the Mayflower Church resides in a nation where they are free to practice their faith without fear of retribution.”

## **Two East Texans initially detained**

Deana Brown, founder and CEO of Tyler-based Freedom Seekers International, initially was detained along with members of the Mayflower Church in the hours surrounding their deportation hearing.

She and Stacy Nichols, a member of Flint Baptist Church near Tyler, left Texas on March 29 as part of FSI’s goodwill ambassador program to encourage members of Mayflower Church while they were in Thailand.

“We left expecting to visit with them, and I had the privilege of coming back home with them,” said Brown, a former Southern Baptist missionary.

Brown recalled being awakened at 11:30 p.m. on March 30 in Pattaya, Thailand, by a knock on the door and someone announcing, “Thai immigration is here.”



Randel Everett of 21Wilberforce welcomes Deana Brown of Freedom Seekers International back home to Texas on Good Friday evening. (Courtesy Photo)

Brown, Nichols and members of the Mayflower Church—including one woman who was more than eight months pregnant—were detained overnight before the scheduled deportation hearing the next day.

“Everybody walked out with the clothes on their backs,” Brown said.

In the hours prior to the hearing, everyone who was detained was provided with food and water, and they were allowed to go to the restroom as needed.

“The Thai government and the officials were just doing their job,” Brown said. “If Stacy and I had insisted, we probably would have been allowed to leave. But we wanted to be there with them.”

## **Emotional highs and lows**

Brown and Nichols were not allowed to enter the room where the March 31 hearing occurred, but she recalled the relief everyone felt when the adult members of the Mayflower Church left the courtroom.

“They came out happy and smiling,” she recalled.

The adults members of the Mayflower Church were fined for overstaying their visas. Initially they believed they were free and would be transported back to the hotel where they had been staying in Pattaya.

Instead, the two busses left the city and headed toward Bangkok. Members of the church feared they were being taken to the airport for immediate deportation to China.

However, they received assurances they were being transported to immigration detention centers. Four dozen women and children were held in one location, and the men were held in another location with other detainees.



Pastor Pan Yongguang from Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church—nicknamed the “Mayflower Church” for their commitment to seeking religious freedom—journeyed from Thailand to the United States. (Courtesy Photo)

Pastor Pan Yongguang from the Mayflower Church reported the men held worship services twice a day during their confinement and were able to share the gospel with other men who were detained with them—including two who professed faith in Christ.

Together with a representative from ChinaAid, Brown and Nichols were able to deliver diapers, diarrhea medication, ointment for insect bites, bottled water and changes of clothing to members of the church while they were detained.

Meanwhile, they remained in close contact with Adam Zerbinopoulos from

the U.S. Embassy in Thailand and Alex Sonsev, a lawyer who represented the Mayflower Church members.

“We knew things were rattling, and conversations were happening at high levels,” Brown said.

She believes the presence of two Americans who initially were detained alongside the Chinese Christians pushed the plight of the Mayflower Church over the “imminent threat threshold” required for refugees to be admitted to the United States.

Mayflower Church members had been seeking refugee status from the United Nations, and each was issued “refugee-seeker” identification. As of February, only two of the 16 families in the church had been granted a second refugee determination interview with the U.N.

## **‘All due to the grace of God’**

Within a matter of days after their deportation hearing, the Chinese Christians received news they would be allowed to enter the United States. Brown said she understands they have been granted Priority-1 visas with the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

“How great is our God, that he would send two Americans to Thailand at just the right time. It is just all due to the grace of God,” Brown said.

Brown and Nichols hastily traveled from Bangkok to Pattaya, where they went to all the hotel rooms previously occupied by the Chinese Christians. They packed a suitcase for each of the Mayflower Church members, filling the bags with personal possessions they believed would be meaningful to them.



Members of the Mayflower Church received a warm welcome to Texas on Good Friday. (Courtesy Photo)

Once their flights arrived at DFW International Airport, members of the Mayflower Church spent the night in the Dallas area before being transported to East Texas, where they are being housed.

Several churches invited the Mayflower Church members to join them for Easter Sunday, but Brown said, "Everyone decided it was best on their first Sunday here to let them worship by themselves."

In the months ahead, FSI will work with Tyler-area churches to help members of the church with English-as-a-Second-Language classes, job training, transportation and other resettlement issues.

"We've had people offer toys for the children and other supplies, but the real need now is financial," Brown said, noting donors can give to a special account for the Mayflower Church by [clicking here](#).

Bob Fu, founding president of Midland-based ChinaAid, reflected on the drastic change in the circumstances within a single week for the Chinese



Christians, saying it was “truly a Good Friday” for members of the Mayflower Church.

“Barely a week ago, members of the Mayflower [Church] were still incarcerated in a jail, facing imminent danger of [Chinese Community Party] kidnapping threats. Now, they are safe and free,” Fu said.

## **Bipartisan international effort**

ChinaAid, along with advocates from 21Wilberforce and Freedom Seekers International, had been mobilizing Christians to contact elected officials in Washington, D.C., on behalf of the persecuted Chinese church.

“This is a successful example of nonpartisan, international cooperation,” said Chad Bullard, CEO of ChinaAid.

He particularly applauded members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the office of international religious freedom within the U.S. Department of State, along with Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, and Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J.

He expressed appreciation to Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.; Rep. Nathaniel Moran, R-Texas; and Rep. August Pfluger, R-Texas; along with former Rep. Frank Wolf. He also thanked Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida.

The international effort to relocate the Mayflower Church members involved the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, both in Thailand and Washington; the U.S. Mission to Geneva; the International Religious Freedom Alliance, led by Fiona Bruce, member of Parliament in the United Kingdom and the British prime minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief; Lord David Alton from the U.K.; and Sam Brownback and Katrina Lantos Swett,

co-chairs of the 2023 International Religious Freedom Summit, he noted.

“ChinaAid is truly honored to be part of this miracle,” Bullard said.