

# Persecuted Vietnamese Highlanders seek freedom

May 23, 2025

An East Texas-based organization that played a key role in securing the release and resettlement of the [Mayflower Church](#)—persecuted Chinese Christians detained in Thailand, who eventually relocated to Texas—hopes to do the same for Vietnamese Christians in a similar situation.

[Freedom Seekers International](#) has worked more than two months to help free members of the Vietnamese Highlands Montagnard Christian Church from immigration detention centers in Thailand.



After supporters of Freedom Seekers International provided bail payments, 26 of The Highlanders were released in early May following 73 days in detention. (Courtesy Photo)

To escape religious persecution, members of the church fled Vietnam on foot in 2019, entering Thailand without passports or other documentation to seek the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

“And like the Mayflower Church, their journey to an immigration detention center in Thailand was for the same reasons, persecution because their home government did not want them to worship Jesus, followed by arrest by the Thailand immigration police due to illegal residence in Thailand,” wrote Tim Conkling, a Taiwan-based missionary with Asia Mission Partners and founder of [Connecting Families](#).

## **Rounded up during a prayer meeting**

Sixty-four members of the Vietnamese Highlands Montagnard Christian Church gathered on Feb. 24 in a house to pray for the family of one of their members whose mother died in Vietnam.



Tim Conkling, a Taiwan-based missionary with Asia Mission Partners and founder of Connecting Families, visits with some of the released members of The Highlanders. (Photo courtesy of Connecting Families)

“When the group prayed, Thailand immigration police arrived at the scene

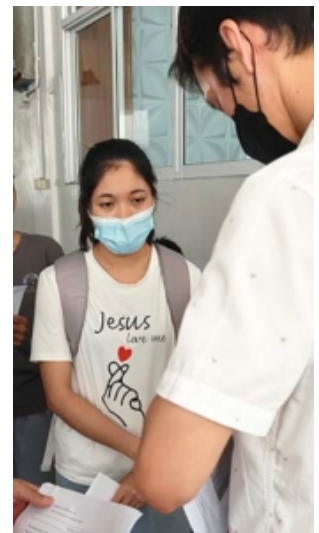
and broke up the prayer meeting,” wrote Conkling, a missions partner with Freedom Seekers International. “The police arrested all of the church members and then took them to prison for processing.”

Several adults who already had bail release papers from a previous detention were released, along with some of the children in the group.

Forty-eight members of the church—including three pregnant women, one of whom later gave birth—eventually were processed into the Suan Phlu Bangkok Detention Center and the Bang Khen Immigration Detention Center.

The Center for Asylum Protection in Thailand advocated on behalf of “The Highlanders,” as the group has become known. After supporters of Freedom Seekers International provided bail payments, 26 of The Highlanders were released in early May following 73 days in detention.

## Ten Highlanders still detained



Iris, a member of the Vietnamese Highlands

Montagnard  
Christian Church,  
wore a shirt  
expressing her faith  
in the love of Jesus,  
but her eyes showed  
the stress of 73 days  
in detention. (Photo  
courtesy of  
Connecting  
Families)

Conkling helped the released members of the Vietnamese church—including another dozen released after the first group—relocate to rented single-family dwellings in a suburb of Bangkok.

He took the two pregnant women who had been detained to a hospital for prenatal exams. He also took another woman to the hospital who had been suffering from constant headaches and vomiting.

“There are still 10 refugees in the International Detention Center in Bangkok,” Conkling reported on May 22. “All are adults and have their UNHCR cards, so they are recognized as refugees by the United Nations.

“Three will be released next week, and three have been denied bail release due to unresolved issues with the Vietnam government. The remaining four will be released sometime in the future, but we are not certain of the date.”

## **Advocating for admission to the U.S.**

In the meantime, Deana Brown, founder and CEO of Freedom Seekers International, is working to persuade U.S. government officials to allow The Highlanders to relocate to Texas.

The same East Texas organization that housed the Mayflower Church until they relocated to Midland has committed to provide lodging for The Highlanders, said Brown, a former Southern Baptist missionary.

“I’m confident that churches will help with other support—ESL, securing jobs, getting kids in school, teaching them to drive, connecting with medical facilities—everything that FSI did with the Mayflower Church,” she said.

Brown already has secured the support of Rep. Nathaniel Moran, R-Tyler, who was part of a bipartisan effort to obtain Priority-1 visas with the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for members of the Mayflower Church in 2023.

Both she and Conkling are optimistic Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who was part of the effort to help the Mayflower Church when he was serving in the Senate, will respond favorably to The Highlanders.

“Secretary of State Marco Rubio has been given authority to let in refugees on a case-to-case basis,” Conkling wrote.

“Because Secretary Rubio was actively involved in protesting the Thailand government returning the Uyghurs to China, we feel like he will be possibly favorably disposed to considering this church’s case.”

In early February, Thailand forcibly deported 40 of the 350 Uyghurs who fled China in 2014 and had spent a decade in a Thai detention center. Rubio protested the action and offered the refugees political asylum before they were returned to China.

When the Thai government did not accept the offer, the United States imposed sanctions on the particular Thai governmental officials involved in the deportation.

# Reasons to admit Highlanders outlined

Conkling outlined reasons The Highlanders meet the criteria for admission to the United States:

- “Their persecution histories have been recorded and vetted by the UNHCR, and they were granted refugee status because of religious persecution against Christians. Had the present U.S. administration not curtailed the State Department’s Welcome Corp program, these Christian refugees would have been sponsored to come legally to the United States.”
- “They are in constant danger in Thailand, and neither the UNHCR nor the U.S. government is in a position to protect them from the same fate as the Uyghur refugees.” Some members of the church have expressed fear of being abducted by members of the Vietnamese secret police and being forcibly deported to Vietnam.
- “Their documented persecution in Vietnam arises for Christian religious reasons, as well as historical association with assisting U.S. troops during the Vietnam War.”
- “Freedom Seekers International has already secured housing for the group, should they be allowed to come to the U.S., and would accept the responsibility to raise the additional sponsorship funds needed for their relocation, just as they successfully did with the Mayflower Chinese Church refugees in 2023.”

Both Conkling and Brown encouraged Christians in the United States to contact members of the Senate and House of Representatives to advocate on behalf of members of the Vietnamese Highlands Montagnard Christian Church.

“If the Lord works out the details,” Brown said, she hopes to fly to Thailand in early June to spend time with The Highlanders and connect with ministry partners who are helping them.

While The Highlanders remain in Thailand, they are not permitted to work. Conkling said concerned Texas Baptists who wish to donate to their support in the interim can do so online through Connecting Families by [clicking here](#).

Brown added Christians can support The Highlanders now and in any future relocation by donating [here](#).