

Peace Lutheran Church, Granger, Indiana
The Joys and Challenges of Sponsoring Laotian Refugees

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Everybody has a story. Everybody has a past. Everybody comes from somewhere. And with the exception of the Native Americans and their descendants, everyone in the United States is living here because they or someone in their family long ago decided to take a risk and come to this country, a land that promised a better life than they had. Everybody comes from somewhere. Most people living in America today have an ancestor who came from somewhere else. Many people living in America today *are* those people who came from somewhere else.

Often these immigrants are taken for granted or overlooked. We see them on the street or in the supermarket or at the park. We see them in the workforce, we see them in church. We see them all the time in our lives but often we do not stop to think about nor do we realize what they have gone through to be in this land of opportunity. And many immigrants have truly fascinating pasts. The families and individuals who immigrate to the U.S. will amaze you with their stories. And behind many of those heroic immigrants, there is another person, or a group of people or, who have committed to helping them.

What follows is the story of one family that fled from their home country of Laos to South Bend, Indiana and settled there as refugees. More importantly, however, it is the story of a group of people, a congregation of Christians, who took it upon themselves to commit to taking care of these Laotian refugees. Peace Lutheran Church of the WELS in Granger, Indiana was that congregation. Sponsoring this small family of refugees was no small task and it required the help and support of many people. Six people in particular bore the majority of the responsibilities. Robert and June Koester, Marcus Bartz, Harold and Lois Kluender and Pastor Michael Hintz. Bob and June Koester and Marcus Bartz primarily helped with the family's physical needs, helping them get accustomed to the way of life in America, helping them find jobs and housing and helping them become Americanized. Harold and Lois Kluender played an

important role in making sure U.S. immigration procedures were followed. Pastor Hintz was instrumental in helping them with their spiritual needs, giving them the word of God in church and in special Bible information classes. With the help of this congregation and especially from Bob, June, Marcus, Harold, Lois and Pastor Hintz, these Buddhist refugees from Laos became Americans and, more importantly, Christians.

The story of Peace Lutheran Church's work began in November of 1986, when Pastor Hintz of Peace received a call from Lutheran Social Services. The representative on the phone told Pastor Hintz that a church in Springfield Illinois was ready to sponsor the family from Laos but had suddenly backed out. By this time the family was already on their way and these refugees were in need of sponsors. Pastor Hintz got the feeling that this was somewhat of a panic call since there was very little time before the family would arrive. He said, "I got the impression this lady [from Lutheran Social Services] just got out the telephone book and started calling Lutheran churches."¹ Pastor Hintz was never told the reason why the church in Springfield backed out.

Before making a decision, though, he decided that the first thing to do would be to make some phone calls. He talked with the president of the congregation as well as a number of other individuals, including Bob and June Koester. Pastor Hintz recalled Bob Koester saying, "We can do something about this, we can help this family."² This was the attitude that all the people of Peace had adopted as they helped this family. Everyone that Pastor Hintz initially talked to said the same thing, that sponsoring this family was something they were able to do and wanted to do. Pastor Hintz encountered no objections from anyone and since it was not an official ministry of the congregation it did not require any special endorsement from the church council

¹ Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

² Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

or the voters. The decision was quickly made to sponsor them. Pastor Hintz described the mindset of the congregation: “Peace congregation was just like that. It was still a very mission-minded family and this was an opportunity to reach out. I can think of some of the people that rallied around it and said, ‘This is really neat.’”³

On November 13th, 1986, around 10:45 pm, the Phetsanghane family arrived at the Michiana Airport in South Bend, Indiana from Denver, Colorado. They were greeted at the gate by a group from Peace Lutheran as well as a few others who were there to help support the family in other ways. But the story of Khountheuang (Khoun), Viengvilay (Vien), Souksamay (Souk) and Hatthalay (Toy) Phetsanghane and their journey to America began long ago in the Southeast Asian country of Laos.

Khoun was born on May 25th, 1956. He was very gifted intellectually. He was a machinist by trade and the Laotian government had sent him to Germany to fulfill his apprenticeship there. While he was in Germany, communists took over Laos and they required that all able bodied men, eligible for the military be accounted for and serve in some capacity. Because of his abilities and his talents and because Khoun’s father was a member of the military, Khoun was especially sought after. The idea of returning to a communist country, however, however, was not favorable to Khoun and he had no intention of going back. In order to get him back, the Laotian government made Khoun’s father write Khoun a letter telling him that his father needed him. So Khoun returned to Laos where the communists got a hold of him and made him work in the rice fields, which Khoun absolutely did not want to do.⁴

To get out of this situation, Khoun and his wife, Vien (born February 5th, 1956), decided to cross the Mekong river into Thailand. During the night Khoun put Vien and their son

³Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

Souksamay (born November 26th, 1982) into a boat while Khoun pushed them across the river, keeping an eye out for any guards who might see them and arrest them. Once they got to Thailand they stayed there at a refugee camp for about 3 years in a living space that measured 10 feet by 10 feet. It was during their stay in Thailand that Toy was born, on January 2nd, 1985.

It was during this time that Khoun decided to bring his family to the United States. One of the main reason's for choosing the U.S. was so that Souk and Toy could receive a good education. In Laos it is customary for both parents to work. Because of this, the older children had to stay home and watch after the younger children and therefore there was really no way for the children to get any kind of formal education.

Anyone that wanted to come to the U.S., however, was first required to spend some time in the Philippines where they could be indoctrinated in the American way of life, learning the language and the customs. Finally they received word that a congregation in Springfield, Illinois was willing to sponsor them. After some time, however, they received word again, this time saying that the congregation in Springfield would not take them. The Phetsenghane's were able to get into contact with Lutheran Social Services, the agency that specialized in finding sponsors for refugee families. It was this agency that had originally arranged for them to come to Springfield. Lutheran Social Services was able to give them the good news that they had found Peace Lutheran Church in South Bend and that Peace was willing to sponsor them and support them.

Meanwhile, the wheels were beginning to turn at Peace. The whole congregation had decided to accept the task of being responsible for Khoun and his family and embraced them. While it was an effort put forth by the entire congregation, it was Peace's chapter of the Organization for WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS) that took on most of the responsibilities. Bob

and June Koester and Marcus Bartz were members of the OWLS. The reason that the OWLS provided most of the help for the Phetsanghanes was because most of them were retired seniors and had more time available than just about anyone else. This, however, was a challenge in and of itself. At times it was difficult for the elderly people of the congregation to be doing so much. Fortunately, since there were quite a few people helping, the necessary tasks could be distributed among a lot of different people.

Finally the day came for the Phetsanghanes to arrive in South Bend. What an exciting time for the Pastor and the members of Peace Lutheran that were there waiting for them. What and incredibly nerve wracking time it must have been as well. June Koester recalls that night vividly.

I'll never forget the day they came to the airport, they walked through the door and they looked so frightened and cold. They had no [winter] clothes, see, so they gave them [winter] clothes in Seattle. And so, we were there to meet them, Bob and I, and another couple from church and Pastor Hintz. And we looked at all their immigration papers and everything and in the meantime they were just so frightened, I felt so sorry for them. We took them to a place that they were going to stay at a friend's house. It was really funny, Vien was very, very quiet and Khoun did all the talking; couldn't understand him, but, he talked.⁵

Sometime shortly after the first week of the Phetsanghane's arrival to the United States, June Koester recorded her and her husband's thoughts on the situation. The following, essentially in her own words, is what she wrote about the first few days that the Phetsanghane's were in South Bend. It serves as a good way to understand the things the sponsors had to do as well as their thoughts and feelings they had knowing they would be responsible for this family for the next few years.

On Thursday the Phetsanghane's plane flew from the Philippines to Vietnam to Seattle. Here they were given warm jackets by the Refugee Committee of U.S. Government. From Seattle they flew to Denver on United Airlines and had a 1 ½ hour stopover. A man they met in Seattle stayed with them

⁵ Personal interview with Mrs. June Koester, January 14th, 2006

until he was sure they got on the right plane. They came into South Bend on United Airlines from Denver arriving at 10:45 pm. It was the coldest night of the year, between 12 and 16 degrees. Snow was on the ground.

Those meeting them were Pastor Michael Hintz, Karen—from the local Lutheran Refugee Committee—Keoung, Sou van Thong (the interpreter and his wife), Harold and Lois Kluender, Bob and I, Tim O'Connor, and [Paul] Ritchie, a student from Notre Dame. The Phetsanghane's papers were checked by Bob, Pastor Hintz and Karen. We wondered what they were thinking. Later Khoun told us that they were concerned about their sponsors being there. They had been told that if a sponsor wasn't there they should go to the police at the airport. Pastor Hintz and the student brought warm clothing. Hatthalay had no shoes on. Vien wore sandals she got in the Philippines. We picked up their luggage which was a box wrapped in green paper covered with fishnet for easy carrying. The box had his name and the address of a Lutheran missionary agency in Chicago. We wondered what was in the box. Later he told us that there were cooking pots inside plus something of Vien's from the Philippines.

We then left the airport. Sou van's car was full so Khoun and his family came in our car. Khoun began asking questions. He could speak and understand English! He asked, "Could I get a job in my trade?" (He was a lathe operator) and "Are there many Laotians in South Bend?" When Bob asked if he could read English he read a sign in a store window. The family stayed at Kueong's home that night.

On Friday morning we let them sleep in. At 1:00 we picked them up to go to the health department. Before leaving the house though, Bob had forms for the family to sign. We all sat around the table. Coffee and water were offered. Another gentleman, we believe it was Kueong's uncle, was there also. His family is still in Laos; they cannot get out of the country. Vien was able to write her name when signing forms. Sou van came along to interpret in case he was needed to help them understand anything. In the end he was not needed. Khoun carried all of his important papers in a plastic bag. We were there for three hours. Their papers were complete, we were told. The only thing necessary was a measles shot for everyone. Their heads were inspected for lice. Everything was fine, the children were very good. Hatthalay's shoes and stockings were taken off by him, he likes being a barefoot boy. The children are to return in a month for booster shots. Later we learned that the department was not satisfied with the work done by their staff. Stool samples were necessary and Carol McDonald is taking care of this. The measles shot for Vien was questioned also.

We took them over to Madge and Mike McLaughlin's. Madge was fixing dinner for them. They showed the McLaughlin's a picture of their family and Vien's scarf. We then drove over to church for them to meet Pastor and to see the school. We decided to come back Monday so Khoun could talk to the children about his country and about why he came to America. Khoun's glasses had been broken. Arrangements were made for a Saturday appointment. It later developed that he did not need glasses but had a lazy eye that could be corrected by eye exercises.

On Saturday the McLaughlin's took them shopping at Kmart for boots and underwear and to see the eye doctor. They introduced them to a shower, shampoo and American hygiene. It was hard to keep diapers on Hatthalay.

On Sunday they did not come to church in the AM but met the Reininges (Larry and Diane). Later they came over to church where Pastor Hintz gave Khoun a driving lesson.⁶

The doctor's visit was required by law. As refugees, they were required to have a TB skin test, a syphilis test, and stool cultures taken. Immunization shots were also required if they had not received one in the refugee camp. This also stressed the importance of refugees having sponsors lined up in America. It also shows what kind of commitment this had to be for the sponsors as this doctor's visit took place the day after arriving in South Bend.

Within 3 days of arrival, the Phetsanghanes moved into temporary housing at Moreau Seminary on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. Notre Dame provided housing for all immigrants that came to South Bend. For a few weeks Khoun and Vien and their two boys lived with the seminary students there, even eating in the cafeteria with them. The Phetsanghanes, however, were eager to move into a place of their own and so Peace Lutheran, particularly Marcus Bartz, found the Phetsanghanes an apartment of their own to rent. This was an important thing for them and it typified Khoun and Vien's independent nature. They were not content to live in student housing at Notre Dame but knew that they needed a place of their own.

About five months after arriving, Khoun and Vien both found jobs in South Bend. Khoun worked during the day as a machinist since he had training in that line of work. Vien worked in the evenings at a factory. The congregation played almost no role in helping Khoun and Vien find work also due to their independent mindset. They were more than willing to seek employment (as well as do many other things) on their own. Pastor Michael Hintz recalled this about Khoun and Vien as well:

⁶Personal writing of Mrs. June Koester, date unknown.

Khoun and Vien were very interested in being as independent as they could as quickly as they could. I remember one of the things that the social services had told us was that sometimes these families come over and they just want to remain leeches...and it turns sour. But that was not their character. And I never go the feeling from anyone, not anyone, that Khoun and Vien were taking advantage of people because that's just not the kind of people they were. If anything they probably were a little bit at times too much to other way.⁷

Khoun and Vien did not yet have jobs at this time and in order to pay their bills in the mean time, they received cash assistance and medical care through welfare. This covered most expenses. The congregation also chipped in. They established a plan to give Khoun an allowance on a periodic basis which would pay for things like clothing, food, toiletries and cleaning supplies. It was decided that Khoun should be given an allowance so that a request for money did not have to be made to the council each time the Phetsanghanes needed to buy something. Bob and June also helped keep track of expenses and helped Khoun and Vien make regular payments to their telephone company. Bob and June also helped the Phetsanghanes pay a driving instructor for lessons. In these ways and in many others, the congregation went above and beyond the call of duty when it came to supporting Khoun and Vien, even financially. But as was noted above, the Phetsanghanes considered it very important to support themselves and continued to strive for independence.

One thing they could not do on their own, however, was resolve the issue of a traffic accident. On June 17th, 1988, only about one and a half years after coming to America, Vien was involved in a traffic accident. Initially, the police report showed that she was not at fault. Since there were no witnesses, the offending driver's insurance company would not comply with the police report. They denied the claim and would not pay for the damages. For the next one and a half years Robert Koester wrote letters to the offending driver's insurance company, Traveler's Insurance, to Khoun and Vien's insurance company, State Farm and to the State Insurance

⁷Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

Commissioner of Indiana, trying to resolve the discrepancies and trying to recover the money Vien had to pay for repairs. This, too, shows the amount of dedication and care that the Koesters had for the Phetsanghanes.

Not only was it important for Peace congregation to help Khoun and Vien find housing, schools and employment or to help them with legal matters, it was also necessary to help them get acclimated and accustomed to American culture. Pastor Hintz remembered coming to see the Phetsanghanes at their “home” at Notre Dame. It was sometime in December and he looked up at their apartment from the outside and saw their windows wide open. In the tropical climate of Laos and Thailand, windows are left open. The Phetsanghanes hadn’t yet experienced a winter and something as simple as closing windows to keep out the cold and keep in the heat was a foreign concept to them.

Learning English was very important for Khoun and Vien and for them to learn it was also important for Peace congregation. A difficulty to communicate always existed between Khoun and Vien and the members of Peace, although it became easier with time as Khoun and Vien’s English improved. Pastor Hintz had a distinct advantage in that he had been an African missionary for six years and had a lot of experience with communicating with people who spoke little or no English. His experience as a missionary in Africa also served him well as he taught Khoun and Vien the Word of God.

American food was also, obviously, foreign to them. When Bob and June took them grocery shopping, they showed them a number of different foods to try and different ways to cook it. At first, however, the Phetsanghanes (especially the boys) continued to eat the rice that they were used to. But when the boys were introduced to hot dogs at a birthday party for Khoun, which Bob and June hosted, they really took to them.

Bob and June Koester also gave Khoun, Vien, Souk and Toy a taste of the things that America has to offer. Bob and June took the family to a shopping mall and walked through a section of Montgomery Ward's. At that point Khoun said, "Okay, that's it. I guess it's time to go." Bob and June had to explain to him that they had only seen a very small section of the mall. Khoun and Vien could not believe how big the place was. They had never seen anything like it and for them it was too much.

The size of the mall was not the only thing that impressed Khoun and Vien. They were also very impressed the Peace Lutheran School. After visiting there and talking to the children about Laos and about his journey to America, he decided that he wanted to send his children to Peace's Sunday school. June spoke about that experience as well:

Their big, black eyes looking at me, they didn't know a word I was saying, but you could see the Holy Spirit working in them. I mean, they just sat there, so absorbed and they ended up being the best of my students. They were just wonderful, because Khoun took the time to study with them every night.⁸

Not only would this provide a good education for Souk and Toy but it also provided the necessary opportunities for teaching the truth of God's gospel to them and, since Khoun was so involved in their education as well, Peace's Sunday school provided opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work in him as well.

Peace's responsibilities in sponsoring the Phetsanghanes extended to helping them become naturalized citizens of the United States. This process required a trip to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) federal offices in Indianapolis to receive their Alien Registration Receipt Card, commonly known as a "green card". This cannot be done before six months of living in a U.S. cit. Permanent residency applicants needed police clearance from the city in which they had been living for six months or more. The Phetsanghanes were driven to

⁸ Personal interview with Mrs. June Koester, January 14th, 2006

Indianapolis by the Koesters who helped them to make sure they had all the necessary documents, including their I-94 form, a slip of paper containing each family member's basic information. These forms were given to them upon their arrival to South Bend and served as identification cards. With the help of the Koesters, the Phetsanghanes were able to complete this process on November 30th, 1987, just a little over one year after coming to South Bend. This was the official date of permanent residency. Each member of the family received an Alien Registration Receipt Card which contained photo identification, a fingerprint and other information including the date on which they became permanent residents.

The immigration laws of America regarding Khoun and Vien were fairly simple because they were coming as refugees from Laos. According to the U.S. department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service's most recent document on immigration of that time, "You are a refugee if you are unwilling or unable to return to your country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion."⁹ Khoun and Vien received refugee status since they were fleeing from a communist government. Because they were required to stay and fulfill obligations to the Laotian government, they had left illegally and could not return without suffering some consequences. Also, according to U.S. immigration law, since they were coming from a communist country they could not obtain a passport from their government and so it was not required. Having fled as refugees from a communist country actually helped the Phetsanghanes and alleviated some of the difficulties encountered when seeking U.S. citizenship.¹⁰

⁹ From "United States Immigration Laws, General Information" from the U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Services, revised 1 April, 1983.

¹⁰ <http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/natz/insfnl.pdf>, January 12th, 2006

Approximately seven years after coming to South Bend, Khoun, Vien, Souk and Toy became U.S. citizens. U.S. law requires immigrants to live in the United States for a minimum of 5 years. They must also demonstrate good moral character (which essentially means they must not have been convicted of a crime and or not lie about their past). Finally they need to demonstrate a working knowledge of English and of U.S. history and government. Khoun and Vien fulfilled all of these requirements and on August 14th, 1993 they were declared to be U.S. citizens at a ceremony in which they, along with several other immigrants, swore an oath of allegiance to the United States. This author was in attendance for that ceremony.

Toy and Souksamay were both under the age of 18 at this time and were declared citizens along with their parents. Parents who become naturalized citizens can apply on behalf of their children as long as the children have also been permanent residents for more than five years, are under 18 and are not married and, in fact, are the children of naturalized citizens. At this time Souksamay and Toy were only 11 years old and 9 years old respectively so they had no trouble becoming citizens along with their parents.¹¹ In this regard, however, some help was needed from Bob and June Koester and Pastor Hintz. As sponsors, Bob and June were required to write and sign a notarized affidavit confirming that Hatthalay (Toy) was indeed the younger son of Khoun and Vien. Pastor Hintz also wrote a separate affidavit confirming the same. Sa and Deng Inthalansy, who were Khoun and Vien's neighbors both in Laos and in South Bend wrote and signed an affidavit confirming that Souksamay was also a son of Khoun and Vien.

There were many needs that the Phetsanghane family had and Bob and June Koester, Harold and Lois Kluender, Marc Bartz and Pastor Michael Hintz did their best to find ways to satisfy these needs. An even greater need, however, was fulfilled by Pastor Hintz. Growing up in Laos, the Phetsanghane family followed the religion of Buddhism. Pastor Hintz, knowing

¹¹ <http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/natz/insfnl.pdf>, January 12th, 2006

how necessary it was to teach them God's Word, began adult Bible instruction with them almost immediately after they had settled in to life in South Bend.

Pastor Hintz began by telling them Bible stories. At first their sessions consisted of Bible stories and conversations about the stories. As their English (especially Vien's since she knew far less than Khoun) improved the studies became more interesting and more enriching. Pastor Hintz utilized some of the adult information books he had used and had become familiar with in Africa as a missionary. These books were simplified Bible stories which built upon each other and laid out the plan of salvation from Eden to Calvary and beyond. As Pastor Hintz recalled, the courses went very well. He said, "They grabbed onto it and they studied it and eventually came to the day that they were ready to be received into the membership of the congregation."¹² It took a little more than two years for Khoun and Vien to complete their courses. The long time frame was due mostly to Khoun and Vien's poor English skills. Since it was hard for Pastor Hintz and the Phetsanghanes to communicate with each other in English, the lessons sank in more slowly.

While it never stopped him from leading Khoun and Vien through the Bible, Pastor Hintz admitted that he did have some concerns. He had heard stories from people of the Lutheran Social Services that sometimes when churches sponsored immigrants, the immigrants took advantage of the churches and used them only for financial support. They would attend church but never had any intent to join or learn more about Jesus.

As Pastor Hintz and the other members of Peach got to know Khoun and Vien, they became less and less concerned with the notion that they were being used. Pastor Hintz commented on that, saying,

¹² Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

As we got to know these two people and they got to know us, friendships started to develop. It wasn't just, "Okay, we're going to have to be here and were going to have to accommodate you and you're going to have to accommodate us until we get you on your feet and then you're off..." That friendship led to concern about their spiritual life and as Khoun and Vien saw the genuineness of friendship and Christian love on our side, they said, "This is something we want, too."¹³

And for Pastor Hintz it was always a joy to work with the Phetsanghanes. The church was growing and they were doing more mission work and despite an increasingly busy schedule, helping Khoun and Vien with their physical needs and helping them understand scripture was a pleasure. "I don't ever remember it to be at any point 'something else I have to do'," he said. "It was fun."¹⁴ The more Pastor Hintz worked with Khoun and Vien, the more it became apparent that the Holy Spirit had worked in their hearts and that they truly did have saving faith. He knew that Khoun and Vien were sincere in their desire to join Peace Lutheran Church.

And Khoun and Vien did join on March 5th, 1989. They were baptized into the Christian faith and welcomed as members of Peace Lutheran Church. By now everyone in the congregation had come to know the Phetsanghanes, they had invested a lot of time and money for their cause because they saw the Phetsanghanes as children of God and were dedicated to helping them. More than that, though, they were deeply concerned about their spiritual life and their growth in faith. June Koester recalled that on the day of Khoun and Vien's confirmation, so many people were overjoyed that "there was not a dry eye in the congregation."¹⁵

Khoun and Vien and their sons regularly attended church and were active as well. Khoun and Vien often provided traditional foods for church potlucks and OWLS functions. Khoun also became involved with ushering for worship services. Pastor Hintz remembered fondly that the head elder of the congregation, who was ushering with Khoun for one particular service, simply

¹³ Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

¹⁴ Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

¹⁵ Personal Interview with Mrs. June Koester, January 14th, 2006

could not understand him. Through this ordeal, however, Khoun showed a great deal of patience. It was obvious that he was used to not being understood and he never became frustrated.

Khoun and Vien showed that worship and hearing God's word was important to them. It was also apparent that Khoun and Vien were concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of their children. The year before Khoun and Vien became official members, Souk and Toy were baptized on March 27th which was Palm Sunday. Bob and June Koester became their godparents. Their youngest child, Malathong-La-June (who is called "June" after June Koester) was born to Khoun and Vien in South Bend on February 10th, 1994. She was baptized on February 27th and her godparents were also Bob and June. Souk and Toy continued in their Sunday School education and when they were old enough, they attended Peace Lutheran School. On May 11th, 1997, Souksamay was confirmed in his faith and on May 25th he graduated from Peace Lutheran School. In the fall of 1997 Souksamay enrolled at Michigan Lutheran High School in Benton Harbor, Michigan, a local WELS area Lutheran high school. In 1998 the family moved to Florida to be closer to their relatives. Souk enrolled at Luther Prep School as a sophomore. In 2001 he graduated from Luther Prep and attended college at Martin Luther College. He graduated from there in 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and has plans of attending Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in the near future. Toy also followed in his brother's footsteps and attended Luther Prep School for four years, graduating in 2003. He is currently enrolled at the University of Florida in Gainesville. June still lives with her parents.

But it was not always easy sailing when it came to the Phetsanghanes spiritual life. Since they were former Buddhists, some of their old habits died hard. This author remembers one particular instance. My sister and I were in South Bend visiting our grandparents, Bob and June

Koester. The Phetsanghanes had recently either purchased or begun renting a new house and they invited all of us to what essentially was a housewarming party. Many of their Laotian friends and neighbors were there. As far as I remember, my grandparents, my sister and I were the only non-Laotians in attendance. Khoun and Vien were involved in some sort of Buddhist ritual in which they were purging the “leftover spirits” from the house. In keeping with a Buddhist custom, many, if not all, of the people who were at the party held chicken feet while have a short string (which was described to me as a friendship bracelet) tied around their wrist. Khoun had around 60 friendship bracelets tied around his wrists.

This incident seems to indicate a sort of ritualistic attitude on the part of Khoun and Vien. Most likely when they did this they were not involved in Buddhist worship per se, but it was a ceremony associated with Buddhist worship and it had become ingrained in their mindset as a part of their culture. June Koester also recalls a similar incident. In 1997, Khoun and Vien planned a trip back to Laos. They brought Bob and June along with them because they wanted to show their relatives in Laos their “American Parents”, which is what they considered Bob and June to be. Bob and June had the opportunity to meet Khoun’s parents and relatives in southern Laos and Vien’s family in northern Laos. Bob and June had a wonderful experience in Laos, seeing the way of life and meeting people there. There was one thing, however, that June described as hurtful.

But the only thing there is, they would revert back to their old religion, which really kind of hurt me. We went on a tour with them to some place...it was up on a hill, we all walked up on a hill and when we got there, the whole cave was filled with Buddhist statues. Vien and Khoun knelt down to pray right there. It was like they were betraying their Christian faith, and that really hurt me a lot.¹⁶

Also while in Laos, Vien practiced the custom of venerating the dead by placing money on a tree dedicated to her deceased mother. Because Bob and June felt like only guests in their

¹⁶ Personal Interview with Mrs. June Koester, January 14th, 2006

country, instead of objecting to their heathen practices, they thought it best to remain quiet about the situation and not “antagonize them”, as June put it.

This goes to show that sanctification of a converted soul is never complete. Perhaps Khoun and Vien just never realized the seriousness of what they did. Most likely they only went through those Buddhist rituals because it was simply a part of their culture. Perhaps it had no spiritual meaning for them at all. One can only hope this was the case with Khoun and Vien. It never came to the attention of the church and as far as anyone else knew, it never happened again.

These are the joys and, yes, frustrations that go along with the enormous task of sponsoring immigrants. Certainly there would have been times when the members of the congregation would have been frustrated with all they had to do. They would have become frustrated trying to budget time for themselves, for their work and their families, while budgeting time to help the Phetsanghanes fill out government forms, drive them to job interviews and doctor’s visits, and to help them understand American culture. Certainly it must have been frustrating for Bob Koester to write multiple letters to the auto insurance companies and make sure Khoun and Vien were getting a fair price from their car mechanic. Certainly it was frustrating watching Khoun and Vien practice the rituals they had denounced in their confession of faith at their baptisms.

The joys, however, must have far outweighed the frustrations. The members of the congregation must have been joyful when they learned what an important role they would play in the Phetsanghanes’ lives. Surely they must have been overjoyed knowing that they could serve their God in this way. Certainly Pastor Hintz was overjoyed when he saw the gospel work in their hearts and when Souksamay announced that he was going to study for the fulltime pastoral

ministry. Surely everyone in Peace's small building was overjoyed the day that Khoun and Vien became official members of their church and members of God's kingdom through baptism. These are the blessings that God bestows on his people, the blessings of other people like Khoun, Vien, Souk, Toy and June Phetsanghane.

So, what does it take from a congregation to make an immigrant sponsorship work? Time, dedication and commitment are three important things. Of course, it is far more important to have people willing to give time and money and willing to make a commitment. Peace congregation had that. Peace congregation had a Pastor who worked hard to preach the gospel to the foreign mission field God had placed right in his church. Peace congregation had Harold and Lois Kluender, Peace congregation had Marcus Bartz, and Peace congregation had Robert and June Koester, people who never tired of helping, people who wanted nothing in return other than friendship, people who wanted nothing more than to serve their Lord.

When Khoun and Vien made the decision to move to Florida, there was a lot of sadness on the part of the congregation. They had become such great friends with the Phetsanghanes and had built such close relationships with them. The congregation had done so much for them and did not want to see them go. But Pastor Hintz and the rest of the congregation knew that they had done all they could for the Phetsanghanes. They knew where the Phetsanghanes stood spiritually and had a great deal of confidence that the Lord in whom the Phetsanghanes trusted would keep and care for them. And they knew that they would see the Phetsanghanes again, even if it was not on this earth.

Peace congregation worked hard to sponsor the Phetsanghanes, but in this case, the members of Peace congregation did more than sponsor them; they established long lasting

relationships with them. As June Koester put it, "A lot of times, you know, the sponsors just bring their people over and forget about them. Not us. They became our extended family."¹⁷

Pastor Hintz summed it up well. This was God's p!an. God brought this family to the right place at the right time and in the right way. If Pēace congregation hadn't been so mission minded, if Bob and June Koester hadn't been members there, if this hadn't basically fallen into their laps, perhaps none of it ever would have happened.

When Jesus said go into all the world, sometimes we, as pastor, or even as members of the congregation, we think of the world as something way out there, this is so far away; God can bring the world right to us. And that was the case here; it was a really great learning experience for the congregation. The idea of taking this responsibility was not really a part of our plan; it was certainly not in my long range plan, or short range plan and it just kind of fell into place, as it was. And I often wonder if it had been different, if we had gotten a letter saying, you know, in a year and a half we would probably have this family, I wonder if we probably wouldn't have done it. It was just the fact that the Lord had it all prepared and he just said 'Here, don't think about it too much, this is what I'm going to have you do,' and a couple of individuals saying 'Yeah, this is what we're going to do,' and that was it.¹⁸

That was it.

¹⁷ Personal Interview with Mrs. June Koester, January 14th, 2006

¹⁸ Personal interview with Pastor Michael Hintz, January 26th, 2006

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