Southeast Asian Refugees

Khmu, Laotian and Hmong

Today I would like to hold the Khmu, Hmong and Laotian people in prayer and in my heart as they celebrate their New Year. I was hired by the Diocese of Stockton to form lay ministers but as the Creator would have it I was also called to what I considered my real ministry and that was to the Southeast Asian refugees; Laotian, Khmu and Hmong. All three communities originated from Laos but had variations on cultural expressions. They were my teachers and in ministering with these communities I learned so much. My first learning was that I did not know what I did not know but was to discover a completely new way of being. It also got me into situations for which I was unprepared but learned to go with the flow. The following are some observations and learnings:

**Resiliency:** Fleeing from Laos was very traumatic. They had assisted both the French and our military during the Vietnam War, much of which had been fought in Laos. They therefore had to flee for their lives in fear of retaliation by the communists. They spent months in refugee camps in Thailand before coming to Stockton. These communities came from villages in the mountains where they lived simple and basic lives. It was a shock to be placed in a technological society. I was both impressed and in awe of their resiliency in both dealing with the trauma of the war, fleeing their country and being placed in an unknown world.

**Community:** When a family stopped coming to church I eventually was told that they removed themselves from the community because their son had been arrested and this brought disgrace on the community.

The members did not see themselves as individuals but part of a community. They understood that their actions affected the entire community.

**Time:** Their concept of time was quite different. I learned that we may or may not start at a particular time. They were also in tune with the seasons. We had obtained land for planting. The negations took a bit longer than anticipated. When the land was available, no planting happened! The explanation was that the moon was not now in the right place and the planting would have to wait for several months.

**Synchronistic:** When asked what it means to belong, the Khmu used the word Broom yo, that means working in harmony together. I often observed them working on a project in perfect harmony. No one stood out from the rest.

This is just a few thoughts that I wanted to share. I continue to hold these communities in my heart, thought and prayers. I give thanks for their presence in my life.

Sister Diane Smith, CSJ