Church helps reunite refugee family

Wet and windy Wellington is proving a haven from the stress, poverty and persecution they left behind in Myanmar for Chin refugees Olivia and Frank and their families.

In January 2016 Rev Dr Paul Prestidge and family were joined by, from left, Olivia and Frank for a holiday in Taranaki.

"I am very happy to be here," says Frank, who arrived in Wellington in November with his wife, kids and niece Esther. "I like the kiwi lifestyle and the people here are very kind to us."

The local Miramar Uniting Church has been their home from day one, thanks to his sister Olivia, who arrived in the neighbourhood four years ago and joined the congregation almost immediately.

Since then the church has been working with refugees, providing assistance as needed. They paid medical bills, gave Frank a part-time job, helped with language lessons and even accommodation.

From the start of their journey Frank and his family knew they wanted to be in Miramar, because of Olivia, and that proved a tad tough. "He has a large family, five teenagers plus his niece and Housing New Zealand houses around here aren't big enough," says the Mirimar Uniting minister the Rev Dr Paul Prestidge.

Knowing the families were determined to be united Paul and his wife Fiona offered their home, something Frank took up only reluctantly just two weeks before the Refugee Centre in Mangere was to release them.

"Our children are away at university, so a smaller space would do us fine. We felt God called us to do this and within two weeks someone found us a house three minutes from the church," says Paul.

Myanmar is one of the poorest countries on the planet and for the Chin people, who live predominantly in Chin State that borders India, life is even harder as most of them are Christians.

They often face the wrath of government officials, including the military, who use against the Chin people forced labour, arbitrary arrest and detention; torture and mistreatment; restrictions on movement, expression, and religious freedom; abusive military conscription; and extortion and confiscation of property.

While Olivia turned up at church out of the blue, the arrival of Frank and his family had been warmly anticipated for two years. Frank's family was also home to Olivia's daughter Esther, who is deaf. "She was left behind as they were led to believe that Esther's presence would diminish their chances of getting refugee status anywhere," says Paul.

The family lived in Kuala Lumpur for a while, living hand-to-mouth, with Frank doing cheap labour to make ends meet, and they moved around a lot to avoid complications. Living in a single room with so many people isn't easy and Esther's deafness caused additional issues, simply because she can't hear. The family got to Kuala Lumpur from Myanmar by buying plane tickets.

After Christmas, Paul and his wife took the family for a holiday to Taranaki, with kind cooperation from St James' Church New Plymouth, where Paul was the minister a few years ago. "They let us use the church hall as a base. We took the family to the beach, went fishing and let Frank practice driving on rural roads," he says.

Poverty is the biggest problem facing refugees in New Zealand, says Paul. Olivia's husband has a full-time job in a Wellington cafe and Frank works in the church office.

The siblings' parents and a sister still live in Myanmar and contact with them is sporadic. "The timeframe is different," says Frank, "so we write emails to arrange a time to call, which often cuts out and then we have to arrange another time". Rev Phil King, the Church's global mission coordinator, recently paid a visit to Olivia and Frank's relatives in Myanmar to assure them that all is well with the families in Miramar.

Frank is a qualified and experienced church pastor and the only ordained person among the Chin in New Zealand. He already works as a volunteer pastor among the Chin, many of whom live in Lower Hutt.

Frank is looking for full-time work, and is considering signing up for a bachelor's degree in social work.

"We have no idea what God is working [toward] for the future, but we are very happy to be here," he says.

Janine Baalbergen Spanz