



## A MULTICULTURAL CONGREGATION ENRICHED BY THE PRESENCE OF THE HMONG COMMUNITY

BY THE REV. QUIRINO CORNEJO

In May I participated in a virtual conference: “Church Planting In The Asian Diaspora” to learn more about the Critical Principles in Asian American Congregational Development, sponsored by the Asiamerica Ministries and the Church Planting offices of the Episcopal Church. I was so blessed and energized to hear the stories of fruitful ministries spanning Episcopal congregations of Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Korean, Pakistani, and Arab Christians from the Middle East

and North Africa, in addition to multicultural congregations throughout the provinces of the Episcopal Church.

Asians compose 2/3rds of the world’s 7.5 billion people. China and India combined already have over 3 billion people. Asia is characterized by plurality and diversity of races, cultures, languages, ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds. Many countries in Asia were colonized or influenced by Western civilization for better or for worse, for richer or poorer.

In the United States, there are approximately 18 million Asian Americans; 6% of the U.S. population and are growing fast. Asian Americans are still largely treated as either Model Minorities or Forever Foreigners by the American mainstream. Episcopal Asiamerican churches have developed as an umbrella of 9 Ethnic Convocations: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islanders, Arab/Middle East, and Asian American Youth and Young Adults. Episcopal Asiamerica

Ministries serves Asian immigrants, Asian Americans, and works as a “bridge building agent;” connecting churches and communities across the Asia-Pacific and Asian churches in diaspora.

Amid learning about these statistics and facts on Asiamerica ministries, I was struck to learn about a flourishing Hmong community planted right here, in our home church of Colorado. A Hmong congregation was recently born at St. James Episcopal Church in Wheat Ridge. Walee Vang was commissioned as the first Hmong catechist just a month before the pandemic set in—in February 2020—as St. James made history in Colorado by welcoming and embracing the Hmong community as a ministry of the Episcopal Church.

In June 2021, Bishop Kym Lucas received the four members of the Vang family into the Episcopal Church: Walee and Ker, along with their daughter See and son-in-law, Tommy Thao, at the Front Range Regional Confirmation service.

The people of St. James have faced both challenges and opportunities for diversity and inclusion. The Rev. Becky explains:

Due to the pandemic, we weren’t able to accomplish all we had hoped as quickly as we wanted. When we were doing prerecorded services, Walee read the gospel in Hmong once a month, and Ker sang the Lord’s Prayer in Hmong. Now that we’re back together in person, we’ll resume doing that regularly, and we’re going to get Ker to teach us all how to sing

the Lord’s Prayer in Hmong. Back in the fall of 2019, a number of us in the parish took Hmong classes—taught by Fr. Toua Vang, the Hmong missionary for the Episcopal Church—but I doubt if anyone remembers much of what we learned. We’ll have to plan a refresher class.

The people of St. James are a faithful witness in living intentionally and faithfully into what God calls us to be, a Church becoming “the Beloved Community,” striving to reflect the multiethnic richness and unity of the Body of Christ. This striving to become extends to welcoming and embracing each person in their wholeness, including their questions, complexities, ethnicity, culture, and all. ■

**THE REV. QUIRINO CORNEJO** is the Missioner for Multicultural Ministries for the Episcopal Church in Colorado.

Walee Vang was commissioned as catechist for the Hmong community on February 9, 2020. The Rev. Becky describes the big celebration below:

### A HU-HMONG-GOUS CELEBRATION

BY THE REV. BECKY JONES

St. James took a historic step on Sunday, commissioning Walee Vang as catechist in a stunningly beautiful service. He becomes the first ethnic Hmong to be so recognized in Colorado and will equip us to better reach out to the Hmong community. Although Walee is the first Hmong catechist, we trust he won’t be the last.

As the Rev. Dr. Fred Vergara, Missioner for Asiamerica Ministries for the Episcopal Church, said in his sermon on Sunday, February 9, 2020, “People of St. James, because of your incredible hospitality and grace, you have made this Hmong light to shine in Colorado today.”

Vang’s family celebrates with the St. James community.  
Photo courtesy Fred Mast



Our Sunday service was grace-filled, joyous, and colorful! In addition to the Hmong families who have been worshipping with us since last spring, St. James was packed with other Hmong – most of them members of Walee’s extended family, many outfitted in their traditional Hmong garb. Walee and his wife, Ker Chang, who are patriarch and matriarch of the clan, have seven children, thirty-two grandchildren, and five great grandchildren—many of them present on Sunday to see Walee officially take up in the Episcopal Church a position, catechist, he held for many years in the Roman Catholic Church.

As catechist, Walee will be responsible for teaching the faith to those in his community—and by “his community” I’m referring not just to our small St. James congregation but also to the estimated six thousand Hmong individuals who call Colorado home. Walee is now empowered to be a pastoral presence when members of that community suffer death or celebrate an achievement. He will be a light of Christ to them—especially when the situation calls for a fluent speaker of Hmong. Walee will be an extension of my pastoral ministry and help us to serve many in his community, especially those we could not possibly hope to reach without his assistance and good standing.

“Thank you to everyone in this church who has helped me and my family and my people,” Walee said. “Thank you for welcoming us. Thank you for supporting me.”

Sunday’s service was an experiment for us: Could we



Top: The Rev. Becky Jones and Dr. Fred Vergara. Bottom: Members of the Hmong community at St. James. Photo courtesy Fred Mast

conduct a bilingual service in both Hmong and English? The answer was unreservedly yes. We easily alternated between English and Hmong. Hearing the Hmong chant the Lord’s Prayer in their native tongue brought goosebumps. The Rev. Toua Vang, Hmong missionary for the Episcopal Church, and I jointly celebrated Holy Communion, and the meaning of the words flowed forth, regardless of the language spoken.

Of course, we won’t often do that. For now, Walee, Ker, and their immediate family are happy to be part of our English service on Sunday. Their daughter, See Thao, has just been elected to the St. James vestry. Walee will begin

training to become an acolyte, and you’ll soon see him at the altar. He also will take training to become a Eucharistic Visitor so he can take communion to any homebound members of the Hmong community.

What an extraordinary gift this community of Hmong worshipers has been and will continue to be to our parish. May God bless our efforts to be a light to all people and that St. James will be home to many more Hmong congregants in the future. ■

**THE REV. BECKY JONES** is the Rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Wheat Ridge, Colorado.



The 32nd Avenue Jubilee Center. Photos courtesy the Rev. Jan Pearson

# The 32nd Avenue Jubilee Center: A Ministry of Love & Compassion

BY THE REV. JAN PEARSON

**T**wenty-one years ago, a new curate arrived at St. John Chrysostom Episcopal Church in unincorporated Jefferson County. He and I shared an office before he moved on to become vicar at Our Merciful Savior, on 32nd Avenue, then a struggling neighborhood beset with low-income housing, unemployment, food insecurity, and little or no access to health care. It has changed now—more of this later.

But 21 years ago, the vicar and I were soon envisioning a Jubilee Ministry. Jubilee Ministry is a nationwide network of more than 600 social outreach organizations and ministries all affiliated in some way with The Episcopal Church. In Colorado, we have 30 Jubilee Ministry centers, including food banks, day shelters, feeding programs, prison ministries, health care ministries, ministries serving immigrants, Native Americans, children and other vulnerable populations.

A board of directors was formed to help coordinate ministry outreach to the neighborhood. We drew up articles of incorporation, established bylaws, and called on school leaders and colleagues. The work of the 32nd Avenue Jubilee Center was underway.

The vision remained steadfast: to serve our neighbors with love, justice, and mercy out of the abundance provided by through grants, benefactors, the generosity of Episcopal churches, other faith communities, and others who support our mission and the work of the 32nd Avenue Jubilee Center staff and volunteers.

The Jubilee Center has provided food, health care, transportation vouchers, and educational assistance for all who come through its doors. We offered respite for the unhoused by offering a place to rest for a spell, refreshed by glass of cold water, and nourished by a hot meal. The Jubilee Center was the incubator of St. Benedict’s Health and Healing Ministry, which now is a ministry for the underserved in Boulder County.

The 32nd Avenue Jubilee Center also became a pilot site, funded by the Episcopal Church, to develop a model for Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). For many years we hosted the Bienvenidos Food Bank.

Our afterschool tutoring and our summer educational enrichment camps became a mainstay