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A community of Burmese refugees fought to keep their Catholic church open

Cody Boteler, 7/3/24 5:30 a.m. EDT



A community of Burmese immigrants organized pushback to the Archdiocese of Baltimore's plan to close its church. Lun Khek, the extraordinary minister of communion at Our Lady of Victory, is pictured at a morning Mass on June 2, 2024. (J.M. Giordano)

Our Lady of Victory, a Catholic church in Arbutus, is filled with signs of new life and second chances.

In addition to the obvious — traditional Christian teachings of life after death and the resurrection of Jesus — its pews are filled with young families with babbling babies and Burmese migrants and refugees, some of whom escaped their country's military dictatorship and now make their homes in western Baltimore County.

That Burmese community is also, some believe, why Our Lady of Victory is one of just a few churches to win a reprieve after first being slated for closure under the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Seek the City to Come plan.

Cassandra Palmer, pastoral associate at Our Lady of Victory who has been attending Mass there since 2016, said she and others see the refugee and migrant community as "the salvation of the parish community."

"It is a very Christian, scriptural thing, that the least of these, the least of our brothers and sisters in our community, are who saved us. It wasn't us saving them," Palmer said. "I believe that, for sure."



The closing procession at Our Lady of Victory Parish at a morning Mass on June 2, 2024. (J.M. Giordano)

When the archdiocese's consolidation proposal was first announced in April, Our Lady of Victory was one of the 40 parishes on the chopping block. The Catholic Church in Baltimore is facing multiple headwinds, including declining attendance, the costs of building maintenance and bankruptcy.



Joan Nau Huai, a 25-year-old member of the Burmese community at Our Lady of Victory church, helped organize the parish in advocating for it to remain open. (J.M. Giordano)

Joan Nau Huai, a 25-year-old parishioner at the church, said the news struck her with fear about what she could lose.

Baltimore's Catholic Burmese community includes many who chose to live geographically close to the church so that they could easily access it. Without that central pull, Nau Huai and others said, they might not be able to stick together or feel unified.

"It was all very personal, emotional," she said. "Thinking about how much it [the church community] meant to not just me, but to all of us."

But the congregation did not wallow. Father Bill Keown, then the pastor at Our Lady of Victory, encouraged people to push back. He said the church community could make its voice heard at the archdiocese's public meetings.

"When we were proposed to close, his response to that was that he believed that the community could advocate for themselves," Palmer said. "He was willing to instigate that and direct them that they didn't need to surrender."

Our Lady of Victory was founded in the wake of World War II in 1952 and had its first home in the former St. Mary's Industrial School, according to the church's website. It moved to its current location, off Wilkens Avenue, a few years later.



Maung Myo, a member of the Burmese community, at Our Lady of Victory Parish at a morning Mass on June 2, 2024. (J.M. Giordano)

A major renovation of its current gathering space was completed in 2009. It included the installation of seven beautiful, detailed stained glass windows that were preserved from the chapel at St. Mary's Industrial School and had been in storage for 50 years.

Nau Huai and many of the Burmese parishioners at Our Lady of Victory came to the United States as refugees and said the parish has become much more than a church.

Burma also is called Myanmar, the name military leaders imposed soon after the ruling junta violently suppressed a pro-democracy uprising in the Southeast Asian nation in 1989. Some groups oppose the use of Myanmar, feeling it gives legitimacy to the authoritarian government there.

Some parishioners speak little English and spoke with The Baltimore Banner with Nau Huai's help as a translator.

"This is our home. I couldn't imagine anywhere else," said Paul Thang Pi, through Nau Huai. He has been attending Our Lady of Victory since 2009.

He had come to the U.S. a year earlier, fleeing the military dictatorship in Burma.

"Imagining it [the church] being closed, and then to start over in another place especially given our background of displacement," he said, "it has become extremely traumatic, triggering."

The fight to keep Our Lady of Victory open was long and required dedicated work — but it was more bureaucratic than dramatic. It was emails and phone calls and petitions and letter writing. A public meeting or two. And lots of prayer.

"I didn't want to give up," Nau Huai said. "So I was like, 'Let's pray together, and then do what we can.'"



Our Lady of Victory Parish in Arbutus has a large, multi-generational and diverse congregation. (J.M. Giordano)

For Nau Huai, that meant helping to translate letters written in native languages for members of the Burmese community who don't speak or write fluently in English.

One parishioner, Palmer said, came up with a clever idea: The archdiocese was likely getting hundreds of letters, so Our Lady of Victory parishioners decided to write every letter on blue paper and stuff them in blue envelopes. That way, even if messages went unopened, the archdiocese staff would be able to see how much support for the community there was.

When it came time to go to one of the town hall meetings that the archdiocese held about the closure proposal, Our Lady of Victory members filled up three chartered buses and traveled to The Cathedral of Mary Our Queen.

Many members wore matching T-shirts. Those from the Burmese community donned traditional clothing from their respective regions and tribal cultures.

Nau Huai was one of two parishioners to speak in front of archdiocesan officials and hundreds of attendees. As a member of the Burmese community at the church who speaks fluent English, she said she felt it was "essential" for her to speak on their behalf.

"I was definitely nervous, because we were given such little time," she said. "How can you share a whole people's experience or history in three minutes?"

She talked about how invested in the parish the Burmese community was and how, especially to those who are refugees, the church has provided a sense of home since they fled their country.

And then in May, OLV was one of eight churches that got a reprieve. The final plan will reduce the number of parishes in Baltimore City and parts of Baltimore County from 61 to 23, while closing nearly 30 churches.

Jessica Sian Cing, who has been attending Mass at Our Lady of Victory for about three years, said news of the reprieve was like her "prayers were heard."

"This is gonna be my home now," she said through Nau Huai.

Monica Nuam, 17, has been coming to Our Lady of Victory since she was 4 or 5, she said. She and her family also moved to the U.S. from Burma. She spoke without translation.

The community in Arbutus has been very open and accepting, she said. And when she got the news that the parish wasn't closing, it was like a weight off her shoulders.

"Not only is OLV a building, but it's a place where we grew up," she said. "It's somewhere I'm not afraid to be myself."

During the June 9 Mass, it was announced that Keown, the pastor who helped lead the church through COVID-19 and the Seek the City process, would be leaving. The reading was from the third chapter in the Gospel of Mark — a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Keown celebrated how the church community successfully worked together to save their parish.

"The question becomes, what are we going to do with that gift?" Keown asked from the front of the sanctuary. He declined an interview request.

Neither Nau Huai nor Palmer said the reprieve felt like "winning." Other churches set to close had made similar pleas to those coming from Our Lady of Victory.

"It's like survivor's guilt that I felt," Nau Huai said. "It's not a time for celebration because other people are losing their spiritual home."

Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski, who is overseeing the archdiocese's reorganization plan, said drawing the connection between Our Lady of Victory staying open and the activism and presence of the Burmese community is valid "in the sense that we want parishes to be connected to their neighborhoods."



Members of the Burmese community at Our Lady of Victory parish on June 2, 2024. (J.M. Giordano)

"Certainly the Burmese community is very connected to the neighborhoods around that church," he said. "That is certainly a good starting place, not only to engage more folks in the Burmese community but to engage the neighborhood."

Between the initial proposal in April and the final plan in May, the archdiocese listened "really hard" to the Catholic community in and around Baltimore, he said. But pretending to be the church of 50 years ago to keep 61 parishes open, he said, "just doesn't work."

Under the final plan, the nearby St. Joseph's Monastery Parish is merging with Our Lady of Victory. The pastor of St. Joseph's, the Rev. Michael Murphy, will become pastor at Our Lady of Victory.

The St. Joseph Monastery on Old Frederick Road will remain open as a worship site, while two Southwest Baltimore parishes — Transfiguration Catholic Community and St. Benedict — are closing their churches and merging with Our Lady of Victory.

The combined parishes can be "spiritual dynamo" for that corner of Baltimore, Lewandowski said.

Already, parishioners at Our Lady of Victory are thinking about what comes next.

Maybe, they said, it's starting a tutoring program or a study hall for the children who live in the neighborhoods around the church, or holding a monthly outdoor food festival to raise funds and visibility.

Nau Huai wants to see fresh produce from a community garden supplement an already busy food pantry.

"We're not just churchgoers. We're here to serve others, to serve others in need, to see each other, and to be in communion with one another," she said. "That's my hope."

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