

Claiming their names

St. Paul's Christian Church in Raleigh, whose members include several Montagnard families, is assisting women and children to claim their family name. North Carolina is reported to be home to the largest population of Montagnard people outside of Vietnam. Montagnards, the indigenous mountain people from Vietnam, experience oppression and harassment from the Vietnamese government, in part because they helped the U.S. army during the Vietnam War.

Many Montagnard men have fled imprisonment and worse in Vietnam through the jungles to neighboring countries. With assistance from the U.N. and the support of the U.S. government, these men arrived as refugees in the United States and many have settled in North Carolina with some joining Disciples churches. The U.S. allowed the men to use their family names on their official immigration documents. After years of diplomatic negotiations with the Vietnamese government, their wives and children were allowed to reunite with their husbands and fathers here.

The Vietnamese government does not recognize the Montagnard family names for women and children. As a result, those who leave Vietnam are given last names of only "A" (male) or "Y" (female). This practice has led to great confusion on school records, job applications and official forms.

The legal process is complex, time consuming and expensive - about \$150 per person. More than a dozen Montagnards from St. Paul's want to change their names and others in the Montagnard community would also like to legally claim their family name. Besides the obvious benefit for official records, they see this as a means of taking control and claiming an identity they were denied in their home country.

In the fall of 2012, St. Paul's Christian Church will raise funds for this project and awareness about the Montagnard experience with a Coffeehouse Concert on Friday, Sept. 14 at 7 p.m., with a variety of live music, desserts and coffee. A suggested donation of \$5 at the door will go towards the Name Change Project.

Also, on Sept. 23 at 5 p.m., there will be a free screening of "Abandoned Allies," a new documentary by filmmaker Cameron Watts (<http://abandonedallies.com/>). Reserve your free tickets at www.abandonedalliesspcc.eventbrite.com.

For more information, please contact Rev. Diane Faires at St. Paul's Christian Church, 919-787-1278, x23 or dianefaires@stpauls.net.