

RESPONSIVE *Congregations*

Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

CONGREGATIONS, IMMIGRATION, AND AMERICAN RENEWAL

One sunny afternoon in late August, Ramandeep Singh stood outside the home he was buying, shaded his eyes, and pointed across the street. “This house, this house, that house,” he said. “All three are Sikhs. And this one over here, too—he came from New York.”

Like many of his neighbors, Singh wanted a home in this suburban development, not just because of its expansive lawns and peaceful cul-de-sacs, but because it is a short walk away from his congregation, Sikh Satsang of Indianapolis.

Sikh Satsang is situated near the border between Marion and Shelby counties on the far-southeast side of the city. Founded in the homes of members in the late 1960s, it built its current building in 1999. Now, Sikh Satsang is raising money to build a new gurdwara (as Sikh places of worship are called) on an adjacent lot. Construction will likely begin next year.

Singh spends much of his free time at Sikh Satsang, helping preparing food and tea, cleaning up, and socializing. The congregation is extraordinarily active, with morning and afternoon/evening services every day.

Average attendance for the Sunday worship service is roughly 300 people. The building also has a wing for hosting meals and other celebrations, which can seat about 170 people. The same space in the new building will accommodate roughly 700 people. The building’s overall capacity will be about 1,500.

Singh emigrated from Punjab, an Indian state in the northwest part of the country, in 2016, when he was in his mid-20s. His family had converted from Hinduism to Sikhism when he was a child, and he faced death threats. In the U.S., he got a commercial drivers license and began driving long-haul trucks. Two years ago, he

bought his own truck. Then he took out a loan to buy some 53’ trailers that attach to the back of semi trucks, and now he rents out 11 of them. But his future, he believes, is in real estate. He is in the process of gutting and renovating a house, which he hopes to flip and then invest the profit in another house, so that he can rent it out as an AirBnB. And all of this, Singh believes, is just the beginning. The possibilities seem limitless.

That story summarizes the spirit and work ethic of Sikhs, according to one of the community’s local elders, KP Singh, an Indianapolis-based artist and co-founder of Sikh Satsang in 1967. (Ramandeep and KP are not related. Among Sikhs, men typically adopt the last name Singh, and women typically adopt Kaur, to counter caste biases.)

“This is Punjabi culture,” KP says of Ramandeep’s plans. “Tremendous chutzpah, initiative, commitment, courage, vision to move forward in life. Do something that your hands can do. And that your heart says you must do. And your mind says, why not? And go for it. And not for your own personal gain. For your family, your community, your neighborhood, city, state, and nation.”



AP Photo/Michael Conroy

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We [Sikhs] believe that all of humanity is one race. So, I feel there is a higher, divine spirit at work, saying: Come here, share your gifts, share your divine blessings, and make it better.



Credit: Jenna Watson/IndyStar

Sikhism in the U.S.

Sikh Satsang of Indianapolis is part of a broader, fascinating story about changing immigration patterns in the U.S. over the past half-century—and the central role that congregations continue to play in the shifting landscape.

Founded in the state of Punjab in northwest India in the late-fifteenth century, Sikhism is the world’s youngest major religion. With an estimated 25 million adherents, it is also the fifth largest—behind Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Its founder, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, believed that India’s caste system did radical violence to the reality that all people are equally part of the divine being, which Sikhism conceives of as the spiritual essence that permeates and undergirds all of creation. The equality of all beings was (and remains) a core teaching of the faith.

Sikh migration to the United States began in the late 1960s, after a loosening of U.S. immigration law. The U.S. formally began a refugee program in 1980 and accepted more than 200,000 refugees that year. (Refugees are unable to return to their home country due to persecution or threat of persecution based on race, religion, and other factors.)

In the mid-1980s, a massacre of Sikhs in India—part of a complicated story involving retaliation for the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi—accelerated the trend of Sikh migration. The United States is now home to roughly 500,000 Sikhs, who are often mistaken for Muslims because of the turbans they wear (although Muslims typically do not wear turbans.)

Sikhs do not proselytize, and the recent, rapid growth of Indiana’s Sikh population has been driven almost

entirely by immigration. But they do have a strong commitment to public outreaches. Sikh Satsang takes part in a wide variety of civic and interfaith efforts, including disaster- and hunger-relief initiatives, the Indianapolis 500 Festival Parade, and the Festival of Faiths—an annual event, sponsored by the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, that celebrates the city’s religious diversity.

Sikh Satsang as a resource hub

A simple vegetarian meal served each Sunday at Sikh Satsang, following the morning worship services, is both an expression of the congregation’s core values and a tool to help people navigate life’s challenges.

The meal—open to everyone—is “an act of love, an act of service, of divine blessing,” says KP Singh, who has been one of the community’s most visible and energetic champions since he arrived in Indianapolis in 1967. The *Indianapolis Business Journal* recently named him one of the 250 most influential leaders in Indiana.

“Food is the essence of life itself,” he says. “Food is God because it sustains life. Sharing that love with food makes it a godly gift.”

For Ramandeep Singh, helping prepare for the meal and cleaning up afterward are integral to his faith practice. But those acts of service also have a pragmatic dimension. They create opportunities to build the network that has helped him navigate the trucking and real-estate industries. As he notes of the Sikh truck drivers, when anyone runs into challenges and needs help, “there are always five or 10 people who are there for you, to support you.” Much of Ramandeep’s support network also attends Sikh Satsang.

This is one way that congregations have always played a key role in helping immigrants integrate into American society: By creating spaces where informal networks can develop and evolve.

One of the highest priorities for new immigrants, for example, is to find housing. At Sikh Satsang, the membership includes at least a dozen real-estate agents. People often find and make such connections on their own, talking after the meal or scanning the community bulletin board. In other cases, members of Sikh Satsang's executive committee (consisting of 15 elders) connect them to relevant resources.

"They know who does what—who owns what business, and how they can help—within the community," says Maninder Singh Walia, chairman of the congregation's board of trustees. "This is a central place for networking. People can mingle quickly and understand what's going on. If they aren't finding a job, we connect them to the resources that are available for that. Or schools. Whenever a newcomer has a need, they can come here for help."

As with many congregations, Sikh Satsang also plays a key role in helping members navigate various healthcare challenges. When a member is in the hospital, for example, it can provide a translator to bridge language differences and help the providers understand and respect Sikhs' religious practices—like their prohibition on cutting or shaving their hair. Along with turbans, unshorn hair is a visible sign of Sikh identity, intended to signal the person's submission to the divine will.

Immigration in flux

Even as congregations continue to play a key role as critical resources for immigrants, the sources of immigration have shifted significantly. Asian immigrants account for an increasing share of the overall total. This combination of continuity and rapid change make the twenty-first century an especially compelling chapter in the story of American immigration.

Mexico was the primary source of immigration growth in the U.S. through much of the mid- and late-twentieth century, but India and China have recently moved into the top spots. From 2010 to 2017, they accounted for more than three-fourths of all U.S. immigrant population growth.

Nationally, there were nearly 45 million immigrants in the U.S. in 2019 (or 14 percent of the overall population).



Twenty-four percent of U.S. immigrants were from Mexico, which was a decline from 30 percent in 2000. China and India were the second and third largest sources of immigrants overall. Because the spike in immigrants from those countries is relatively recent, however, they were still a relatively small share—6 percent—of the total immigrant population.

In the Indianapolis area, as in the U.S. broadly, Mexicans are the single largest group of immigrants, making up nearly one-third of the immigrant population. They began arriving in large numbers about a century ago, displaced by the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917. There were an estimated 9,000 Mexican nationals living in Indiana by the 1930s, and the number has steadily risen since then. From 2000 to 2020, the Hispanic population in Indianapolis spiked from about 31,000 to nearly 117,000—or 13 percent of the total population. Roughly 70 percent of people who identified as Hispanic (or Latino) were from Mexico.

By official counts, the top two Asian immigrant populations—Asian Indian and Chinese—rose from 17,400 to 22,335 and from 8,408 to 12,249, respectively, from 2015 to 2020. Other Asian immigrant populations whose footprint in Central Indiana has grown substantially in recent years include Filipinos, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese. Those populations ranged from about 2,800 (Japanese) to about 4,900 (Filipinos), according to 2020 official estimates.



Reenactment at St. Mary, photo credit: Heather Cromartie

Faith and place

The relatively long history and large number of Hispanic immigrants in the city means that their presence is visible, diffuse, and pervasive. The *Indianapolis Star*, for example, initiated its first Spanish-language newsletter in 2020. And there are Spanish-language masses held in at least 11 Roman Catholic churches in Indianapolis, scattered across the city.

The situation is different among more recent immigrant communities. With lower numbers, their footprint is much smaller, for starters. They also tend to be more concentrated in specific areas. This is true of Sikhs, whose population in Central Indiana is estimated at 10,000 people, though there is no official count. They have tended to cluster in southern Marion and northern Johnson counties, and in southern Hamilton County.

It is also true of the Chin people from Myanmar, also known as Burma, who have arrived in Indianapolis by the thousands in the past two decades. The Chin state, which borders India, is a hilly and rural area in the western part of Myanmar and has an almost exclusively agricultural economy. Although the Burmese population in Indianapolis officially rose from nearly 4,300 to about 11,500 between 2015 and 2020, that is likely a significant undercount. Unofficial estimates put the number somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000.

The Chin have largely settled in a corridor that runs through the center of Perry Township, on the

city's southside, into Johnson County. They are overwhelmingly Christian, specifically Baptist, and most of the estimated 70 to 80 Chin churches in the city are small—with the significant exception of two Baptist Chin on the southside that have more than 3,000 members.

Feet in two worlds

In the nineteenth century, Baptist missionaries from the U.S. established churches that continue to have a pervasive and enduring impact on the Chin state. An estimated 85 percent of Chins identify as Christian in a country that is roughly 90 percent Buddhist.

This basic religious division is compounded by language barriers. Relatively few Chins are fluent in the country's official language, Burmese. These divisions are multiplied many times over by a civil war that entered a new phase in February 2021, when the Burmese military overthrew the democratically elected ruling body, the National League for Democracy. An estimated 12,000 people were killed in the year following the coup. (Myanmar has a population of nearly 55 million people.) Christian Chins are now on the front lines of the fight against the Burmese military.

This civil war has been going on with varying degrees of intensity for more than 70 years, driven by ethnic loyalties, religious differences, and the tensions between the Burmese government and various separatist groups. The war has been the primary driver of Chin migration to the U.S. Refugees from Burma and the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC) account for more refugee immigration into Indiana than any other country, according to Exodus Refugee—an Indianapolis-based organization that helps refugees transition to Indianapolis. This is true nationally as well. About 24 percent of refugees granted asylum the U.S. in 2020 were from the DRC, and about 18 percent were from Burma.

"We live in this country, the best country in the world, but we're not happy deep down in our hearts," says Biak Lian Thang, general secretary of Chin Baptist Association of North America (CBANA). Thang pastored a Baptist church in Michigan for a decade before assuming his role with CBANA—based in the southside neighborhood of Southport—early this year. CBANA supports roughly 40 churches in the U.S. (and one in Canada) by providing mediation when conflicts arise.

"We are so sad because our loved ones are killed, raped, displaced, their houses burnt to the ground. We're very angry," Thang says. "That's just humanly speaking. But

I'm a Christian. All the Chin churches are struggling with—how can we help them? They need food, they need blankets, they need shelter, they need clothes. Everything. Because many, many of our loved ones are displaced into the jungle and into the forests.”

The nuts and bolts of integration

Among the Chin people, as with Sikhs, congregations are at the forefront of helping recent immigrants with the basics of settling in and navigating language differences.

The Chin Community of Indiana—a small social-services center located next to the Southport branch of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library—is a prime example. It is supported by about three-dozen local churches, each contributing what it can. The center recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary and has a staff of six, whose work is supplemented and supported by several volunteers.

The Chin Community of Indiana hosts regular job fairs, where hiring managers collect dozens of applications in one visit. (Staff at the center help them with the process of filling out the forms.) Local warehouses and distribution centers are a popular employer among the Chin (and Sikhs as well) because language skills pose less of a challenge than in many “customer-facing” jobs. The pay is also relatively high; there are plenty of opportunities to work overtime; and a reliable pipeline has been created by two decades of Chin workers

moving boxes and loading trucks for companies like Amazon, DHL, and Federal Express.

Although the center is supported by local Baptist churches, it serves people without regard to religious affiliation. In July, nearly 1,500 people received assistance from the center. About 12 percent of those were job seekers. In addition to that work, the center has been a key site of for distributing COVID tests and administering vaccinations over the past two years.

It also provides language and interpretation services and connects people with legal aid. One recent Friday, for example, it offered a workshop on how to get an eviction expunged from a person's record, followed by a free clinic for help with all variety of legal matters.

“You have lots of choices”

Julie Zing—who has been in the U.S. since 2011 and was a volunteer at the center for two years before becoming its director in June—says that the Chin community faces the classic generational challenge that many immigrant communities face. Language barriers and cultural differences make it difficult for parents to support their children, which can create a cycle of blame and dysfunction if the children begin to struggle.

That makes the role of congregations and social-services agencies more critical in helping immigrants adapt. Yet they are often so focused on meeting basic needs that there is little capacity to help with the kind of soft skills and social capital that are key to upward mobility.

“A country like mine, we never really practiced democracy,” Zing says. “It's black and white rules. They don't really give you any choices. But here in the U.S., you have lots of choices. So, we are having a very hard time coming from a very strict country to a very open, free country. Nobody really helps us adjust to that. And there are so many families and so many individuals struggling with living in the U.S. Just finding people who can teach us the small, little things—we need a lot of resources.”

Both Sikh Satsang and Chin congregations attempt to address and bridge some of the cultural and generational divides. The Chin Community of Indiana, for example, helps organize an extensive youth sports program—including regular basketball, soccer, and volleyball tournaments—and a Chin National Day. Held in the gym of one of the local Chin churches every winter, the event features traditional dances, costumes,



Indiana Chin Baptist Church, photo credit: Caleb John Smith

and various celebrations of Chin culture, along with presentations about the community's history.

Sikh Satsang, for its part, has a Punjabi School that meets at its building for nearly two hours on Sundays. It offers children of all ages instruction in Punjabi language and Sikh history.

Immigrants and American renewal

The tensions and interplay between immigrants' native culture and the broader culture has always been a powerful force for shaping, reshaping, and renewing the American identity.

Because they tend to deviate from the mainstream—by speaking strange languages, eating “exotic” foods, wearing turbans, or practicing unfamiliar faiths—immigrations have often been accused of corrupting America. And they have often suffered both subtle discrimination and outright violence as a result. Nativists have always wanted the U.S. to be white, Christian, and Northern European.

The great irony of the relationship is that immigrants' stories are often the American origin story writ small: They are migrants fleeing violence and religious persecution and becoming “strangers in a strange land,” where they find hope and refuge and make a home.

Perhaps because of that experience, immigrant communities often reflect and reinforce an earnest vision of the nation's founding ideals and aspirations. In a time when deep political divisions threaten the future of the American experiment, they remain true believers—keeping the faith that America is, or could be, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

“I believe that all humanity will gather and come to this land and create a new model for living, for democracy,



a new model for freedom, a new model for equal rights, for things that elevate each of us as a human being,” KP Singh says.

“And that this country will set that model for the rest of the world to see and emulate. I feel that there is a divine blessing that is part of this country. We [Sikhs] believe that all of humanity is one race. So, I feel there is a higher, divine spirit at work, saying: Come here, share your gifts, share your divine blessings, and make it better.”

Written by Theodore M. Anderson

Responsive Congregations is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the IU School of Liberal Arts and Polis Center, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Subscribe to future research highlights [here](#). Read past issues [here](#). For more information, contact polis@iupui.edu.