

English-language churches serve expats in Costa Rica, around the world

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? Psalm 137:4 NIV

The service is comfortingly familiar: hymns and choruses; shared prayer concerns and a sermon developing a theme from scripture. What is remarkable is that the service is in English and the church is located in a setting far from America's shores.

Stretching from Islamabad to Istanbul, Ecuador to Estonia, nearly 1,000 overseas English language churches serve expatriates not only from the United States and Canada but other English-speaking countries as well who find themselves far from home for a period of time.

Costa Rica is no exception. Here, more than a half-dozen expatriate churches serve the English-speaking community from the eastern suburb of Moravia to Escazú on the western side of the city and along the coast to Flamingo.

Ranging from charismatic to liberal, contemporary to traditional, these churches provide a home away from home for diplomats, missionaries, soldiers, students, businessmen, travelers and others living abroad.

"Having an English-language church here in San José means I can worship in my own language," explained Ron Tucker, a member of International Baptist Church in Escazú. "I can handle a Spanish-language church, but I prefer one in English."

Shanda Oakley, a member of Escazú Christian Fellowship, a multi-denominational congregation that meets in the International Baptist Church facility, said her church is "like my family away from home. It's where I can worship and serve with other expatriates, people who are like me."

Oakley has attended similar congregations in Honduras and Zambia and, along with her husband Mark, started a small English-language fellowship in their home in Panama where there were no other similar congregations.

One feature that distinguishes English-language, international congregations around the world is that they are transitional in nature, according to Rev. Paul Dreessen, pastor of San Jose's International Baptist Church. Frequent turn-over in diplomatic and business personnel means that such churches constantly lose members and must actively recruit new people.

"There is also a great diversity in an international congregation," Dreessen said, referring to the multi-cultural, multi-denominational nature of many overseas churches. He also said that even in a Baptist church, he finds greater political and spiritual or theological diversity than he would find in a Baptist church in the United States.

“Beach Community Church (near Flamingo) is made up of expatriates from all over the world,” said Mark Warrington, the church’s pastor for the past two years. “About half of the people live here and half are people who are seasonal. We also bring in people from the local hotels. I would say that the people who are local are less than half. 30% are retirees, 30% are people of means who are working here part time, and 30% are people who are trying to make a living here.”

Despite the diversity, most pastors say that they preach the same message they would back home. “Spiritual needs and problems are basically the same the world around. The Word of God is applicable to all people and situations and most if not all of our activities as a church are geared to help people draw closer to God,” said Richard G. Boss, a retired missionary and pastor who served similar congregations in Panama, Mexico, Colombia and Switzerland.

“We provide a healthy environment for "gringos" to meet other people besides the bar, so we meet a social need in this area,” Warrington said. “Although we are distinctly Christian, we have people from all different denominations and backgrounds.”

“Our church is small and intimate,” explained Lisle Beckles, a member of the San Pedro Christian Fellowship in San José. “However, because of our size, we have trouble finding a full-time pastor. We can’t afford to bring a man with a large family here.”

Beckles said that his church has been searching for a permanent pastor for over a year. Some international churches obtain pastoral services from a local missionary or pastor, while others recruit pastoral leadership from other English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, England, South Africa or Australia.

Despite its size, Beckles said that his congregation is active in supporting local youth ministries and other mission projects in the area.

Typically, the overseas interdenominational churches have to struggle with different practices. “We need to find a way to accommodate the varying worship styles and theological stances of a variety of denominations,” said Charis Geisinger, a former member of Escazú Christian Fellowship who also attended international churches in Thailand, Venezuela and Russia during her husband’s long diplomatic career. “There have been discussions from how often to serve communion, what to call it when we serve it (Communion or the Lord’s Supper), to whether women can be allowed to bring a sermon and fill leadership roles.”

Americans abroad and the churches they attend have particular needs not always seen in stateside congregations. “We have found that expatriates have some unique problems because of their life in another country and the upheaval and adjustments necessary,” said Boss. “Because of the fact that they often are transferred in a few years, the counseling aspect of the ministry is very important. In addition to all the expat issues of culture shock, change in lifestyle concerns and health issues, there is the added pressure of how to live out one’s faith in a non-Christian environment.”

Moravia's Union Church began worshipping several decades ago in the Methodist Church on Avenida Central. Today, the congregation uses a modern facility in the suburbs and attracts more than just an expatriate crowd.

"Our service is in English and Spanish," explained Elizabeth Reid, a member of the church. "The pastor preaches in English, but then it is translated into Spanish." That way, the church can minister in a special way to couples where one spouse speaks English and the other Spanish.

Geisinger reflected that the overseas churches spend less time in meetings, and involve members who are "committed and mature Christians." She said that their interdenominational nature leads to more openness and discussion and less of a dogmatic approach. "Our overseas churches have been much less structured and formal, meeting in rented facilities, having to set up for every service and tear down afterward." That lack of a physical facility has "served to emphasize that the church is not a building, but the people in it," she said.

The presence of an English-language congregation in a foreign setting can have a significant influence on decisions about relocation. "Schools for my children and a church were the first things I looked into," said Oakley, referring to her family's upcoming move to Africa.

"I'm not planning on leaving Costa Rica," said Tucker. "If I did, I would probably move to Panama, but I would want to make sure that there was an English-language church there."

Whatever their nature, international overseas churches provide a needed ministry for those living abroad. "We have actually been more involved in our overseas churches than we were at home," Geisinger said. "These churches have been absolutely essential to our spiritual well-being. The fellowship is invaluable; always important in helping us keep our balance in a foreign setting."



Selected English-language churches in San José:

Escazu Christian Fellowship, Interdenominational, Escazú. Meets Sunday evenings at 5 p.m. at International Baptist Church. 395-9653

Episcopal Church, call 222-1560

International Baptist Church, Baptist, Escazú. Meets Sunday at 10 a.m.

San Pedro Christian Fellowship, Interdenominational, San Pedro, Meets Sunday at 10:30 a.m. 262-4165

Union Church, Interdenominational, bilingual, Moravia. Meets Sunday at 10 a.m. 235-6709

Vineyard Home Groups, call 289-6782 or 215-2610

Beach Community Church, meets at Country Day School in Brasilito (near Flamingo). 654-4551

Listings of international, English-speaking congregations around the world can be found at: http://internationalcongregations.net/nic_directory.html, and http://www.ilsinternational.org/text_direc_.htm. A list of international Baptist churches in Europe can be obtained by writing to: admin@ib-churches.org.

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