

**An unusual breed;
Expats seek familiar worship in foreign setting**
By Kenneth D. MacHarg

They're called expatriates—expats for short.

An unusual breed of people, they live outside of their home country, working, studying, serving, running, seeking.

Several million U.S. citizens call Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, France and a host of other foreign locations home.

Most of them are conventional expats. They are people who go abroad with a definite purpose for a defined length of time. They are diplomats sent by their governments, business executives deployed by international companies, students and professors pursuing educational goals, engineers and technical people working for oil companies or other organizations, relief and development experts seeking to improve the world and missionaries sent to serve the Lord.

Then there are the unconventional expats. These are people who are running from a bad marriage or family dispute, running from a failed business, running from the law, running from themselves, hoping to find a better way somewhere else. With these are an increasing number of retirees who seek a less-expensive way of life in a tropical climate.

They number in the millions—over one million U.S. expats live in Mexico alone. Most live in or near big cities or in coast-line housing developments. Still others live near oil fields, in tropical agricultural areas or remote villages where they serve with non-profit endeavors.

Those who have lived outside of their native land form a unique culture with worldwide ties. They are known as Third-Culture people. In one sense they belong nowhere and in another sense they belong everywhere. Living in another culture, they never really become a part of their adopted land, even if they marry someone from their new home. They are always foreigners to some extent, set apart by language, cultural and political backgrounds and styles of life.

However, having lived outside of their native land, they view the world differently and find it very difficult to return home and fit into the isolationist patterns they discover that they left behind. They understand international air fares, visa regulations and international issues that no one at home knows or cares about. They have seen political coups, eaten exotic foods, traveled to remote beaches and mountains and experienced events not even imagined by their former neighbors and friends.

This culture has its own set of struggles, questions, successes and failures. They are often lonely in the midst of a big city, lost in another culture, cut-off from the familiar with a

longing to return yet a resistance to going back home. And, they, like everyone else, are seeking for the answers to cosmic questions. They need the Lord.

A recent men's prayer breakfast sponsored by an interdenominational, international, English-speaking church in a Latin American capital highlighted the diversity and struggles of this eclectic bunch of expats.

David comes from the conventional expat group. A British citizen born and raised in Uruguay, he lived in Mexico for a while and has called this Central American country home for over 25 years. He and his wife have several children, one working with him in his small business, the other married and living in a South American country. He is a faithful member of the church, has served in leadership positions and plans on staying in Latin America for the rest of his life.

Ryan is a young missionary, working with English-speaking youth in a local private school. Single, he struggles with loneliness and cultural adaptation. His ministry is successful, but he is concerned about his effectiveness and how long he should stay outside of his home country.

James is married to a local woman and relocated to her country just over a year ago. He has opened a small service business, but struggles with the culture and would rather be "back home." But family ties for now keep him overseas. An evangelical Roman Catholic, he attends the men's Bible studies and has led it at times.

Sean is a young businessman with a spirit of adventure who decided that a foreign land offered new opportunities. But, unscrupulous business people who often escape the law by setting up their operations in other countries where there are fewer legal entanglements and little or no enforcement of laws have all-but stolen his business from him and he is returning to the U.S. discouraged and frustrated. At least there he will be closer to his children who live with his ex-wife.

Emmanuel spent much of his life growing up in Central America. Now in his early 20s and a late bloomer, his parents have insisted that he join them in the U.S. where he can work and determine his future. Not sure he wants to go, but with no other source of income, he is reluctantly leaving within the next week.

For the pastor of this international congregation, it is a challenge and a blessing to deal with all types of expats who come to church seeking help, seeking people from their own culture who will understand them, seeking fellowship among people who speak the same language, seeking the will of God for their lives.

They need help adapting to a new culture, getting used to friends leaving for new assignments, facing the uncertainty of moving themselves to another country and another way of life, dealing with frequent travel or frequent absences of their spouse who travels regularly, helping children as they change schools and friends every few years, living

with political, social and security uncertainty and seeking to know the Lord in a different religious context or a church that's different from the one back home.

Psalm 137 asks: *How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?* How can expats seek counsel, find a place to worship, and meet fellow expats who understand them and their life?

The over 1,200 international churches provide that kind of place and the support and encouragement that they need. Situated in capital cities, business centers, oil fields, retirement communities and anywhere that expats live, the international churches offer a much-needed outreach to Christians and non-Christians alike who find themselves living in a foreign land.

About one-third of those churches are denominationally-related, many of them Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran or Anglican. The others are intentionally interdenominational representing a broad diversity of worship style and programmatic approach.

They range from over 1,000 members to several dozen. Many meet in their own building, others rent space from local churches, hotels, international schools or meet in member's homes.

International churches vary in their ministries and theology. Most of them are evangelical while others represent a more moderate traditional denominational style. Most offer worship and study opportunities as well as fellowship programs, counseling services, youth ministries and mission service.

Serving as a pastor of those churches offers an unparalleled challenge and opportunity to minister in a unique setting to some of God's very special people. To serve, one must be willing to participate in a multi-denominational setting while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

Pastors need to learn the third-culture, expatriate style of life and recognize that while the majority of members may be from the United States, the churches are international and often involve members from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America who bring their own perspectives.

Mostly, as elsewhere, pastors serving international congregations will learn to love their congregation, to thrive on their diverse backgrounds, and to proclaim the Word of the Lord in a foreign land.

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SIDEBAR:

Opportunities for pastoral service at international congregations can often be found on various websites that offer listings of churches seeking a pastor.

Some useful websites include:

Network for International Congregations:

http://internationalcongregations.net/nic_openings.html

International Baptist Convention:

http://www.abc-churches.org/placement/placement_index.htm

Missional International Church Network:

<http://www.micn.org/icpositions.html>

Ministry Jobs:

<http://www.ministryjobs.com/>

Ministry List:

<http://www.ministrylist.com/forms/positionsearch.asp> (click on “outside of U.S.”)

Ministry Search:

<http://www.ministrysearch.com/view.shtml> (click on “other countries”)

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