

English-language churches serve expats in foreign lands

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 600 overseas English language churches serve expatriates not only from the United States but other English-speaking countries as well who find themselves far from home for a period of time. 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.

"The main distinctive of an overseas church is that many of the members are transients," said David Chism, pastor of Mexico City's Capital City Baptist Church. "They know when they arrive that they will be in the city for a short period of time. It may be weeks or years, but they are not permanent residents and they know it from the beginning." Dave Petrescue, pastor of the ecumenical Maadi Community Church in Cairo, Egypt agreed. "There is a distinct sense of the temporary. We are sojourners," he said.

International congregations often appear to be a mini United Nations in their make-up. "We are known for the many ethnic people who attend our church from about 20 nations," said Richard G. Boss, a missionary with Latin America Mission (LAM) who is Pastor of the International Evangelical Church of Lausanne, Switzerland. From Cairo, Pastor Petrescue said that his congregation counts members from 32 nationalities and over 50 different denominations. "To serve the diverse expatriate population well, the church must be broad enough to include people from various cultures and denominations without losing its focus and doctrinal base," Petrescue said.

International is an important characteristic shared by all overseas English-speaking churches whether denominational or independent according to Arthur O. F. Bauer, Director of the International Congregations and Christians Abroad office of the National Council of Churches. International congregations "testify to a willing embrace of all persons into one community in Christ," he said. The National Council of Churches does not operate any of the overseas churches, but relates to around 160. "Independence is a strong aspect of these churches," Bauer said.

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," Boss said.

"The Berlin International Church is an evangelical church, but it seeks to be sensitive to all denominational distinctives and practices," said Pastor Henry Paasonen. While his church has ties to the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, Paasonen said that his congregation "invites all who come to be considerate of believers from other denominational flavors, especially in Sunday congregational worship. Within

our small group emphasis, we encourage the expression of biblical practices which may not come to be expressed on Sunday morning.”

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 member of the International Christian Fellowship of Managua, Nicaragua who has also attended international churches in Thailand, Venezuela, Costa Rica 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, who served similar churches in Panama, Mexico and Colombia during his missionary service with LAM. “Because of the fact that they often are transferred in a few years, the counseling aspect of the ministry is very important.” Petrescue agrees, “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.”

Fellowship is important in these churches, said Bob Binden, pastor of the International Church of Budapest, Hungary (Southern Baptist). “Expatriates are looking for friendly faces for emotional support and networking,” he explained.

In addition to the rapid turnover, many international churches face unusual situations. “There were two important age groups missing in the church,” said John Adams, former Associate Pastor of Quito, Ecuador’s English Fellowship Church. “College and career age young people (18-24 year olds) left to go to the U.S. Also, the retired age grandparents were missing. When an person retires, he or she normally returns to their homeland,” he said. “

“People in overseas assignments are generally chosen for their age, good health and general job effectiveness, said Fred Henry, pastor of Hope International Church in Paris. “Therefore we have much less visitation of the sick and in hospitals,” he said.

Andy Fletcher, Deputy Director of Young Life’s International Schools ministry has been a member of international churches in Switzerland, Japan and France. He identified other challenges these congregations face including a lack of commitment by those who see their time abroad as a form of vacation, small, anemic youth groups and a lower level of spiritual maturity. In contrast, Adams observed that “The level of spiritual maturity in the (Quito) church membership was much higher than the average church in North America.” Charis 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.

Many overseas churches began as the outgrowth of mission work or the desire of expatriates to duplicate their worship experience from back home in a foreign setting. But that “chaplaincy” type ministry is changing according to Fletcher. “An exciting trend is found in those churches which are being planted deliberately to reach out into the community on a broader, more modern front,” he observed. Referring to Crossroads church in Geneva, Switzerland, he said “The vision from the outset was to target the international community for evangelism and to appeal on a broader front to those who had little or no church experience or expectations.”

The constituency for overseas churches may be changing in another way. In Mexico City, men in middle and upper management positions with corporations or the U.S. Embassy have headed most expatriate families. Now, according to Pastor Chism, many corporations have pulled upper level management people out of the country and replaced them with short-term technical people. If that trend continues, international congregations may find themselves having to change how they attract members and the way they minister to families who may only be in the country for a few months.

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.”

Many who have participated in these congregations encourage churches back home to be supportive. “Expatriates or internationals overseas are an important people group that needs ministry,” Paasonen observed. Geisinger agreed. “I believe that most denominational mission boards completely overlook the idea of ministry to English-speaking people serving overseas and see no need to send out and support pastors for such congregations,” she said. “This is an important area for ministry and counseling.”

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