

Missionaries minister to English speaking, expatriate communities

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

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Where do the approximately 15 million North Americans who live abroad attend church? The answers are varied, but many find their spiritual home in one of nearly 1,000 English language congregations around the world.

While many of these Union Churches or International Congregations were established as a chaplaincy to provide ministry to expatriates, today most have become multi-national as well as multi-denominational and are reaching out not only with pastoral care but in evangelistic ways as well.

“Our church has tended to be an island in the past,” says Dick Boss, a missionary with the Miami-based Latin America Mission (LAM) who is currently the pastor of the International Evangelical Church of Lausanne, Switzerland. “In recent years there has been a greater recognition that there are Christians in other churches with whom we can have fellowship. So, the bridge is slowly being built, especially to the English-speaking of the third world.”

The Lausanne church is typical of an overseas English-speaking congregation in that it draws parishioners from twenty-two countries and is multi-denominational. Boss says that while his church identifies itself as mainstream evangelical, it has occasionally attracted Catholic and Orthodox Christians as well as occasional Muslims and Buddhists.

Across the ocean, LAM missionaries Jim and Pat McInnis serve the Union Church of San Jose, Costa Rica where expatriates and local residents mix in a bilingual service each Sunday.

“It was primarily an expatriate church when we came here and we are still open to that,” McInnis says. “However, I saw a need to serve expatriates who were married to Spanish-speaking Latins. They felt left out so we started to do things in Spanish to include them.”

McInnis said that translating helped, but wasn't enough, so the church decided to become bilingual. “We tried two services, but we ended up with two congregations,” he said.

Pastor McInnis, who is from Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, is bilingual but also uses a translator. “Sometimes when he is preaching he switches to Spanish and doesn't know it,” McInnis' wife Pat says. “The translator just goes into English and everybody breaks up.”

Jim and Pat McInnis both recognize that a three-hour, bilingual, charismatic service isn't for everybody. “At the same time the Lord was changing our vision, he made provision

for other expatriates,” says Stratford, Ontario born Pat, referring to the cross-town English-only Escazu Christian Fellowship located near the U.S. embassy.

Some overseas English churches closely resemble congregations back home, others are quite different. “Our church is different from a typical U.S. church in its multi-national makeup, its simple style of worship without cultural accretions and its concentration on the linguistic adaptation of the Gospel to people for whom English is often a second language,” Boss says. However, “it’s the same in that spiritual needs and problems are basically the same the world around, the Word of God is applicable to all people and situations, and all of our activities are geared to help people draw closer to God.”

Boss, a native of Syracuse, New York, served similar international congregations in Colombia, Panama and Mexico before moving to the Swiss church a year and a half ago. “Why the Lord took two “retreaded” semi-retired former missionaries who speak Spanish and lived in the tropics for many years and sent them to French-speaking Switzerland and the cold winters, we’re not sure we understand,” Boss says. “But, we like the scenery and opportunities for ministry here.”

Pastors of overseas churches find their ministry somewhat different than that back home. For one thing, members who retire or become seriously ill often return to their native country, thus there is less hospital visitation and funerals are rare. On the other hand, expatriates face problems of culture shock and challenges to their faith, so counseling and home visits are important.

“One of the frustrating aspects of this type of ministry is that there is a large turnover of people all the time,” Boss says. “You have only a relatively short time to minister to some of them.”

An important part of international ministry is reaching out to youth. While San Jose’s Union church has its own Spanish language youth ministry, it also cooperates, along with the Escazu church and an English language Baptist church in AMCA, a LAM-related program for English speaking residents of San Jose.

AMCA also provides an outreach to expatriate women in the community according to Darlene Lauderbaugh, an LAM missionary working on the AMCA staff. “We help to convey Christ’s love and caring to all expatriates living in the San Jose area with orientation and Bible studies,” she explains.

International churches and their related ministries provide a needed service to those who live so far from home. “We have actually been more involved in our overseas churches than we were at home,” says Charis Geisinger who until recently was a member of the International Christian Fellowship of Managua, Nicaragua and also attended international churches in Thailand, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Russia during her husband’s long

diplomatic career. “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.”

The Latin America Mission is an international fellowship of men and women who, motivated by love for the Lord Jesus and in obedience to His commands, have joined together to encourage and assist the Latin church in world evangelization. The mission currently has approximately 240 missionaries in 15 countries. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami Springs, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 305-884-8400. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>.

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