

The Growing International Church Movement

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

"The Union Church of Istanbul has its beginnings in the early work of missionaries...and in the need they and some British residents...recognized for an English language church for themselves and their families."(1) That statement could easily be found in the history of most English-language, international congregations outside of the United States, especially those which were established twenty years or more ago.

With estimates of 15 million Americans living abroad, the overseas English-language church movement today is a growing enterprise, with some estimates of up to 1,000 churches overseas.(2) These congregations range from large, several-hundred member churches in major foreign cities such as Paris or Tokyo to a small handful of people gathered in a school auditorium, hotel conference suite or even an available living room for worship and Bible study. A few are related to denominations such as the Southern Baptist, Anglican, Christian and Missionary Alliance and Church of Scotland, but the majority are interdenominational.

Some have a long history. The Istanbul, Turkey church began in the early 1830s while the Seoul Union Church in South Korea traces its beginnings to 1885.(3) Others have sprung up as expatriates moved to a new area to open a business or begin missionary work or the changing winds of political fortune allowed a freedom of religion where none existed previously.

There is no doubt that the older churches began primarily as chaplaincies. "Most were formed by colonials in the colonies to import traditional forms of worship and church experience," said Andy Fletcher who is Deputy Director of Young Life International Schools Ministry in Colorado Springs. "Consequently, the primary attendees were those who were familiar with or comfortable by these styles of churches." Many served to provide either a bridge into the national community or to act as a buffer from the perils of culture shock.

That confined cultural island is changing as more English-speaking churches are being formed overseas to, as Fletcher put it, "deliberately reach out into the community on a broader, more modern front." The Crossroads Community Church in Geneva was "the first church planted to target the unchurched expats in any city," he said. "It was that emphasis that made it unique, an intentional desire to reach out into the international community and away from the resident Christian community in Geneva."

[Christian Associates International](#) (CAI) is also at work planting English-language churches designed to reach both the expatriate community and nationals with the Gospel. Jon Freeman who is working with CAI in the Crossroads International Church of Amsterdam said, "Our goal is not to just reach expatriates living overseas, but to reach Europeans. We believe God has called us to reach this continent for Christ." Freeman said that his agency is now operating in 12 cities including Dublin, Barcelona, Lisbon, Berlin and Warsaw and hopes to be in 50 cities by the year 2010.

Some of the older English churches are also changing their emphasis to reflect a more diverse membership and a non-traditional outreach. The 30-year old First Baptist Church of Quito, Ecuador recently changed its name to International Baptist Church to signal a broader appeal. And at the Union Church of San Jose, Costa Rica, members are working to overcome a "rich gringo" impression by reaching out to Costa Ricans.

"Over the years it has been interesting to see the church evolve from being a congregation of English speakers, mainly foreigners, into a bilingual church which ministers primarily to permanent residents," said Rev. James McInnes, a missionary with Latin America Mission (LAM) who serves as the pastor of the Costa Rican church. "We are a bridge to the community and support many activities and ministries that reach out to people. We minister to leaders who have both social and spiritual ministries, everything from rescuing prostitutes to feeding children to Christian literature and evangelism," he said.

Rev. Arthur O. F. Bauer, director of the New York-based office of [International Congregations and Christians Abroad](#) lists six common characteristics of international congregations. These include

Evangelical (focusing on the Gospel), Ecumenical (multi-denominational), International, English as a common language, in the Context of another culture and Missional (bearing witness to God and His love).(4) Most of the 160 churches related to Bauer's office are older, interdenominational congregations with close ties to mainline U.S. denominations.

David Pederson, who served English-language congregations in Athens and Seoul, identifies six trends that are reshaping these churches. The current movement is from denominationalism to (interdenominational) associations, he wrote. Networks such as CAI will approach ministry from a particular "style" rather than from a denominational basis. Second, there will be increased International Church planting in all areas including mainline denominations. Third, growth will continue to outstretch the ability to track and identify all of the churches. (In Korea, he noted that while most lists identify five such churches, in fact there are around 85 currently active!). Fourth, the two-thirds world will increasingly assume leadership of the International Churches. Fifth, churches will continue to move from a national identity, i.e. American or British to international. Sixth, evangelicals will continue to grow, adding to both constituents and pastors.(5)

Along with their own programs, many of the overseas churches are banding together where possible to meet other needs of the English-speaking community. In Costa Rica, the Union church, along with Escazu Christian Fellowship and an English language Southern Baptist congregation are encouraging a ministry to expatriate women. "We call it an SOS—Save our Sanity—program, but underneath we are also wanting to "Save Our Souls," said Darlene Lauderbaugh, also an LAM missionary whose ministry is exclusively with English-speaking expatriates. "We help newcomers with orientation, bring together female missionaries for fellowship and support and hold a Bible Study for new Christians," she said.

In Quito, missions and English churches are reaching out through strategically placed missionaries to meet the needs of youth. As a "youth advocate," HCJB missionary Len Kinzel has linked with English Fellowship Church, the Alliance Academy and other mission agencies to "serve as either a conduit or a catalyst for youth in their most vital relationships," helping them to work through problems with parents, peers, school and others.

Meanwhile, Fletcher says that a broad ministry to English-speaking people is crucial. "We perceive...that the next generation of the world's leaders are attending international schools around the world, uniquely available to relational evangelism because they are either attending schools which educate in English or are learning it out of necessity," he said. "There are 1,100 international schools globally, in which are represented not only kids with the potential to be tremendously influential on a world scale later in life, but kids from every nation, every people group, every religion, from the 10-40 window and beyond, from places where it is illegal either to talk about Christianity or to change one's faith."

With the number of Americans and others growing overseas, the English language churches must continue to find a way both to minister to those who bring their cultural expectations with them and to reach both expatriates and nationals with the good news.

(1) Edmonds, Anna G., *The Union Church of Istanbul, A History*, Union Church of Istanbul, Istanbul, Turkey, 1986, p. 10

(2) Andy Fletcher of Young Life maintains a list of 600 identifiable overseas English Language congregations.

(3) Various, *The Seoul Union Church History*, Seoul, South Korea, 1985, [web site](#)

(4) Bauer, Arthur O.F., *Christians Abroad in International Congregations*, paper distributed by IC/CA office, New York

(5) Pederson, David, *Expatriate Ministry: Inside the church of the outsiders*, Seoul, South Korea, Korean Center for World Missions, 1999, p. 32

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