

Expatriate Ministry: Inside the church of the outsiders

By David Pederson, published by Korean Center for World Mission, (also available through amazon.com), 1999, 201 pages.

Reviewed by Kenneth D. MacHarg, Missionary Journalist, Latin America Mission

Expatriate churches (also known as Union Churches or International Congregations) have always accompanied foreign travelers, diplomats, missionaries, business people and other exiles who found themselves a long way from home. While various articles have been written about them, and a few have turned out their own histories in book form, only now is a thorough study of these churches available in durable form.

David Pederson, a veteran pastor of overseas expatriate churches in Greece, Korea and the Philippines, has turned his Doctoral thesis into a readable study of ministry, the expatriate population, church organization and polity, ecumenical relations, evangelism, church growth and other unique factors affecting these churches. Well-researched, the volume is filled with statistical studies, anecdotal notes and theological reflection that will serve to educate the academician and inform the would-be foreign pastor.

Pederson correctly discerns the trend among overseas expatriate congregations from serving simply as a chaplaincy, a haven for people out of their culture to becoming vital congregations reaching out primarily, but not limited to, the unevangelized expatriate population. Reflecting their interdenominational nature, he says that some International Congregations describe themselves as “evangelical-ecumenical.”

Changes in the nature of the international churches leads Pederson to identify four areas of tension that may be unique to these congregations: Babel-Tribal, most often manifest in discussions as to whether the church should serve only expatriates or be open to citizens of the host country; Oasis-Launching pad, the divide over international churches functioning as a haven to escape from the local culture or as a bridge to open up the expatriate to new ways; Truth-Relationship, the ethics of how to relate to a host culture through a position of righteousness or tolerance (manifest in such issues as to whether to pay bribes), and Dependence-Independence, the struggle concerning whether a church should be autonomous or related to either a denomination “back home” or in the host country.

International Congregations serve a unique population, people who often cannot define where “home” is or where they will end up. Many use the overseas experience as a way to get away from the mores that shape their life while others find it a crisis in which they search for meaning and truth.

Pederson currently an Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology in Seoul, Korea, does an admiral job defining the participants, the dynamics, the needs and the expression of expatriate Christianity among the more than 1,000 overseas congregations and estimated 15 million Americans who live abroad. He concludes, “Now that the gospel has reached many parts of the world, the need for effective expatriate ministry is even greater than before....On these margins, where strangers gather to share the commonness that they have as foreigners, the expatriate church will grow. However, the growth must not continue in a sectarian fashion. Congregations and chaplaincies must remain focused upon providing a smorgasbord rather than fast food. The (International Congregation) is neither a beach house or social club....It has the making of a mosaic...a divine mosaic.”

**Expatriate Ministry: Inside the church of the outsiders, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*,
January 31,2000**