

## **Hymns, prayers, sermons**

### **Familiar worship in an unfamiliar setting—International congregations serve expats worldwide**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The church service is comfortingly familiar: hymns and choruses, shared prayer concerns and a sermon. 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.

"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." Pastor Dave Petrescue of the Maadi Community Church in Cairo agreed. "There is a distinct sense of the temporary. We are sojourners," he said.

International congregations often appear to be a mini United Nations. "We are known for the many ethnic people who attend our church from about 20 nations," said Richard G. Boss of Orlando, a retired missionary who served as Pastor of the International Evangelical Church of Lausanne. From Cairo, Pastor Petrescue said that his congregation counts members from 32 nationalities and over 50 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 congregations "testify to a willing embrace of all persons into one community in Christ," said Arthur O. F. Bauer, Director of the International Congregations and Christians Abroad office of the National Council of Churches. The NCC 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. His congregation "invites all who come to be considerate of believers from other denominational flavors, especially in Sunday congregational worship.

Typically, the overseas churches 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, who attended international churches in Nicaragua, 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, to whether women can be allowed to preach and fill leadership roles.”

Needs are different among Americans abroad. “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. “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.”

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’s English Fellowship Church. “College and career age young people 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. As a result, many overseas pastors find that they do less hospital visitation and funerals than their colleagues back home.

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 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.” Geisinger reflected that the overseas churches spend less time in meetings, and involve members who are “committed and mature Christians. Our overseas churches have been much less structured and formal, meeting in rented facilities, having to set up for every service.” That lack of a physical facility has “served to emphasize that the church is not a building, but the people in it,” she added.

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. Crossroads Church in Geneva is targeting the international community for evangelism and to appeal those who had little or no church experience.

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 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 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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