

Churches see themselves as missions-sending entities

July 6, 2007
Posted: 7/06/07

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By John Hall

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NOXVILLE, Tenn.—While Baptist missiologists and prognosticators are declaring church-based missions the future of global outreach, some pastors believe it's the present, as their congregations serve around the world.

Although the evidence is largely anecdotal, many Baptists believe churches doing mission work overseas without the help of missions boards, agencies or parachurch organizations is on the rise. The trend began with congregations taking short-term mission trips, but it has shifted toward churches that send members to the mission field for longer periods of time.

Greg Adams
from
Cottonwood
Baptist
Church in
Dublin
ministers to
a woman
who lives in
Asia. The
church,
which
directly
supports
missionaries
around the
world, has
long-term
missions
commitments
to several
people
groups
around the
globe.

First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., followed that pattern. It began with a partnership with Croatian Baptists focused on support, moved to taking short-term mission trips and now plans to send students to serve in Croatia for several months at a time.

The congregation is helping to “plug the holes in the dike” left by

denominations in Croatia, Pastor Bill Shiell said.

“We cannot find another denominational entity that is willing to send missionaries to this part of the world because they have other priorities,” he said. “We wanted not only to send our own missionaries, but also be connected to the people there.”

The relational aspects of this kind of mission work are attractive to the churches doing it. Ministers want their congregations to feel connected to where the church is serving, which they argue requires more than sending money to a mission board.

“We’re sharing life with them,” said Ben Dudley, community minister at University Baptist Church in Waco, whose church works in Kenya. “We know these people. We know their names. We know their faces.”

University Baptist Church has partnered with Baylor University to minister in Kenya, particularly in an orphanage there. Once the church built relationships, it empowered students to serve there several months at a time.

First Baptist Church in Arlington and Cottonwood Baptist Church in Dublin have partnered to start Global Connection Partnership Network—a program to help congregations train and send missionaries.

Cindy Wiles, executive director of the network, believes her organization can help facilitate congregations who want to assist their members in fulfilling their mission calling.

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“There are no rules,” she said. “Churches are looking to do what they feel God calling them to do.”

The increase in direct mission work is forcing many state and national conventions to re-evaluate their missions efforts. Critics of the increase in direct mission work argue that there is little coordination of efforts, which leads to unneeded duplication of ministry. They also say direct mission work takes money from traditional Baptist cooperative funding channels.

Wiles, Dudley, Shiell and others believe their churches direct efforts get more people involved in mission work and raises more mission funds. Individuals contribute above their normal giving to support direct missions.

Proponents of direct mission work also argue that their churches look for partnerships in the areas they serve. They learn what groups in a given area are doing and seek ways to coordinate efforts with them.

“I’ve never seen people respond to a project like this because there’s such ownership,” Shiell said of his church’s work in Croatia.

Several years ago, the Baptist General Convention of Texas started [WorldconneX](#), a missions broker that connects churches in affinity groups and to needs around the world. WorldconneX helped Waco’s University Baptist Church work through the logistics of sending students to serve in Kenya. Dudley praised the group as a resource for churches.

Just as record companies had to adjust to digital music, denominations are having to adjust to churches sending missionaries, Dudley said.

“The WorldconneX idea is brilliant,” he said. “Instead of sending people to one place, let’s just connect people. I feel Baptists are leading the way in how to do missions in the 21st century.”

Whether or not denominations adapt their work, churches will continue helping their members fulfill God’s calling upon their lives—even on the mission field.

“When a church feels a calling to go somewhere, they’re going to do what it takes to go there,” Shiell said.

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