

CBF ministry to internationals takes place at home, abroad

July 24, 2008

ATLANTA (ABP) — Imagine yourself living in another country, either by choice or by circumstance. Although a professional in your home nation, you can't qualify to pursue your vocation, or perhaps your language skills aren't yet up to par. Or perhaps you are unskilled and can only find menial labor, but you need work to send money home to your family.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel are finding ways to minister to internationals who come to the United States and to individuals who seek refuge in other countries.

In Gambia, Dabou made a living as a fisherman until the fishing industry plummeted. When he couldn't afford to feed his family, he left for Europe, where a job meant he could send money back home.

Oakland Baptist member Janet Ownley, right, visited with African refugees. (Photo courtesy of Oakland Baptist)

For migrants, such as Dabou, life in Europe isn't easy. It's hard to find and keep work, and there is sadness and loneliness from leaving family, friends and home behind.

But along the way some African migrants will cross paths with Joel and Tiffne Whitley, CBF field personnel serving among the large migrant community in southern Spain.

"I want others to be able to have a personal relationship with God," Tiffne said. "There are many migrants and refugees from countries in Africa who

have not heard [the gospel]. It is our hope to build relationships with them, helping them with humanitarian needs and spiritual needs."

During a year of language and culture study, the Whitleys have developed relationships in two migrant neighborhoods. They've met migrants like Ester, who is from Equatorial Guinea and was thankful the Whitleys could connect her with a church, and Mamadou, who is from Senegal and has been teaching the Whitleys about migrants' greatest needs.

The Whitleys met Ester and Mamadou through a weekly food distribution. Each Wednesday morning they collect excess vegetables from a nearby produce factory. They sort, bag and distribute the produce in migrant communities.

"This small-scale food distribution has been a very meaningful and beneficial way for us to meet individuals, start friendships and nourish hungry stomachs," the Whitleys said. "We hope that in time we will be able to share the 'food of the gospel' and nourish hungry and hurting hearts."

Migrant ministry built on prayer

For the Whitleys, this migrant ministry is built on prayer. They pray for those they meet on the street, around town and near their home. "Prayer is such a vital element of ministry because it puts the power where it belongs - with God," Tiffne said.

Butch and Nell Green are based at Oakland Baptist Church in Rock Hill, S.C., to help U.S. churches find ways to minister to internationals in their areas. With the Greens' encouragement, Oakland members visited CBF personnel, including the Whitleys, in several European and North African locations in 2007.

The Greens, who formerly worked among unreached people groups in

Belgium said that, at one time, distance between cultures was measured by geography. Now, it is measured by differences in language, culture and worldview.

"Not only do these things create barriers to the gospel, but they create barriers to meeting social needs," Nell Green said. "The church is poised to minister holistically to the entire world right here. No longer is the career missionary the church's window to cultures far away. Now we need only look out the window into our own backyards."

With a CBF \$25,000 "It's Time" grant, Oakland will help resettle three refugee families and will expand the ministry members have begun among international students at nearby Winthrop University. In a bid to help the church develop the ministry further, Oakland leaders plan to visit U.S.-based CBF field personnel working with international students.

Oakland also has a growing Spanish-speaking group that emerged from an English-as-a-Second-Language class, and a group of young people — composed of Baptists and Muslims — that meets regularly for dialogue.

Understand the situation of internationals

"Once an American has been the minority, been treated with suspicion, misunderstood, completely unable to communicate, or blundered through a culture different from their own, they are better able to understand the situation of internationals in their home cities and more able and willing to get involved," Whitley said.

"Internationals living in the States may know very little about American culture, customs, norms, language," Tiffne Whitley added. "They may look and sound different, but they are people. They have a need to be accepted and understood."

Green cautioned that U.S. churches must be sensitive to individual needs.

"It isn't about mass ministry," he said. "It is about seeing that one person of a different background and loving them in the way Christ would."

He suggested that church members first learn what it means to be culturally sensitive, learn about other faiths, and learn how to invite and maintain cross-cultural relationships.

Green pointed out that since virtually every college and university has some international students, churches can be intentional about ministry to them.

Thousands of refugees have been approved for settlement in America, but can't come because they have nowhere to go. Churches can connect with local agencies to provide places for them. And churches can educate others in their communities about internationals and their needs, he said.