

Texas Baptist couple serves British church

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GRAND PRAIRIE—When Robert and Carel Shehane learned small Baptist churches in England needed volunteers to serve interim pastorates, the veteran missionaries saw it as a perfect fit.

About the time Shehane stepped down as pastor of Second Baptist Church in Dallas, he heard about the mission opportunity in England at a Dallas Baptist Association pastors' conference.

American interim pastors in United Kingdom

Through information posted on the Baptist Union of Great Britain [website](#), he made contact with Chuck McComb, president of [American Interim Pastors Ministries](#).

McComb started the program 17 years ago to enlist American Christians to serve in volunteer leadership roles with United Kingdom churches who cannot afford full-time pastors.

Interim pastors receive no salary, but the British congregations provide a furnished house with all utility bills paid, access to a car, and reimbursement for airline tickets and visa application fees.

'Just seemed natural to us'

After 32 years with the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, including lengthy service in France and time in the French West Indies, the Shehanes welcomed the assignment.



Robert and Carel Shehane stretched a six-month volunteer interim assignment at Ringstead Baptist Church in Northamptonshire, England, into a full year. (Photos courtesy of Robert and Carel Shehane) “We may be getting old, but we still want to have an impact. We don’t like being spectators,” Robert said, noting his previous involvement with the Baptist General Convention of Texas disaster response in Haiti. “Going to England just seemed natural to us.”

So, the couple accepted a six-month assignment to Ringstead Baptist Church in Northamptonshire, a village of about 1,600 residents about 35 miles from Cambridge.

“In a village, life doesn’t move as fast. So, we realized pretty quickly we couldn’t make enough of an impact in just six months,” Carel said.

The Shehanes received a six-month extension, serving one year before returning to their home in Grand Prairie Jan. 18.

Time spent investing in relationships yields results

“As it turned out, the real growth came in the second half of the year,”

Robert said. “By the time we left, attendance just about doubled, and I was able to perform the first baptism at the church in more than three years.”



When Robert Shehane baptized Lindsay, it was the first baptism at Ringstead Baptist Church in more than three years. The couple attributed the growth primarily to the relationships they established in the village, where they participated in local organizations and civic activities throughout the week.

Carel focused much of her time and attention on ministry to women and children, helping Ringstead Baptist Church start a Sunday school, along with a program for mothers of preschool children. She also led two weekday Bible study groups, primarily involving women in the village who did not attend church anywhere.

In November, members of a women's club that meets each Thursday in Ringstead wanted to experience a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner. So, Carel cooked the full meal for 32 people—none of them members of Ringstead Baptist Church.

“But by the time we left, a lot of those people were attending services,” Robert noted.

‘Almost like a spiritual pilgrimage’

Because of their missionary background, the Shehanes did not experience the culture shock some Americans who serve overseas talk about—although learning to drive on the left side of the road in England proved challenging, they confessed.



Carel Shehane leads children in a carol service at Christmas at Ringstead Baptist Church. The Shehanes appreciated serving in an area steeped in Baptist history. Baptists in Ringstead founded their church in 1714 when they grew tired of walking 15 miles to the nearest village with a nonconformist congregation.

“It’s right in the heart of where the Baptist movement began to grow,” Robert said.

As a longtime Baptist missionary and pastor, he enjoyed serving in a region that once was home to William Carey, Andrew Fuller and John Bunyan.

“It was almost like a spiritual pilgrimage,” he said. “There’s all kinds of history all around, everywhere you look. It’s the area where the modern missionary movement began.”

Growing gardens, bearing fruit

The Shehanes also appreciated the beautiful gardens at each of the homes in Ringstead, including the one outside the church’s manse.

"I hardly worked in it, because the church members took such good care of it," Robert said.

The church members, in turn, appreciated a steady diet of biblical teaching and preaching after an extended period without a full-time pastor.

"Give the gospel a chance, and it produces the fruit," he said.

The Shehanes dismissed stereotypes of the English people as cold and reserved, saying they found all the people there warm and hospitable.

"We made friendships that will last for the rest of our lives," he said, noting one couple from the Ringstead church already has made plans to visit them in the United States in October.

Hard work but worth it all

During their time in Ringstead, the couple started several outreach and discipleship programs that remain in place. The congregation recently called a retired minister to preach at their church twice a month.



Robert Shehane leads a Good Friday service at Ringstead Baptist Church. "When we came back (to Texas), we were bone tired," Robert acknowledged, noting he led twice-daily Bible studies throughout Lent and Advent, he spoke at the Anglican parish school chapel at least once a month, and the invitations to speak at

various community events increased significantly their last few months in England.

But he strongly encouraged others to consider volunteer interim service in the United Kingdom.

“We wouldn’t trade anything for the experience,” he said. “We still miss the people there.”

American Interim Pastors Ministries is “woefully short of candidates” to serve as volunteers in England, McComb noted.

“God continues to use and grow this ministry,” he said. “Our need for candidates is quite real.”

To any retired pastor or committed layperson who might feel God’s call to serve a volunteer interim leadership role at a British church, Robert Shehane offered the same advice he once gave to new missionaries at Southern Baptists’ Missionary Learning Center.

“You don’t wait until things fall into place before you do God’s will,” he said. “You do God’s will, and things tend to fall into place.”