

English-speaking international churches seen as ‘lighthouses’ for all nations

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English-language churches planted in non-English-speaking countries may seem like a small niche market. But a former missionary and pastor of international Baptist churches insists they have the potential to become “spiritual lighthouses for all the nations.”

American expatriates who may have had little interest in religion in the United States—and homesick English-speakers from other countries eager to socialize with other people who share their native tongue—often are drawn to English-language churches overseas, said Thomas Hill, former pastor of international Baptist churches in Germany and Costa Rica.

Members of Bethel International Baptist Church serve meals to homeless people in Frankfurt, Germany.

Hill, now a pastoral care assistant at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, served 33 years with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

After his retirement from the board, he began working with international Baptist churches in Europe and Latin America. He served five years as pastor of Bethel International Baptist Church in Frankfurt, Germany, and three years at International Baptist Church in San Jose, Costa Rica.

The Frankfurt congregation was one of the founding members of the small European association of English-speaking Baptist churches formed 50 years

ago that grew to become the International Baptist Convention.

International Baptist churches in Europe began after World War II primarily due to the initiative of twin brothers Herman and Herbert Stout. The Stouts had helped establish Sunday school classes for children when they were stationed at the Army Air Force headquarters in Weisbaden, Germany, in 1946.

After they completed their military service, they returned to the United States, finished their undergraduate education at Hardin-Simmons University and enrolled in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

While in seminary, the Stouts contacted the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, asking to be sent to Germany. However, at that time, the board had no plans to send missionaries to Germany.

Herman Stout secured his own financial support, and he founded the first English-speaking international Baptist church—Immanuel Baptist in Weisbaden, Germany—in 1957.

Another new English-speaking congregation, Bethel Baptist Church of Frankfurt, called Herbert Stout as pastor and was constituted in July 1958.

One month later, the two churches led by the Stout brothers formed the Association of Baptists in Continental Europe. Those two churches sponsored 19 churches and missions in a short time, and the association became the European Baptist Convention in 1964.

“In the early years, the churches were about 90 percent military personnel,” Hill said. But the drawdown of American troops in Europe during the 1990s forced the English-speaking churches to reconsider their mission, he added.

“They had to reach out to other people,” Hill said. And in the process, the

churches became what they had claimed to be all along—genuinely international.

In 2003, the European Baptist Convention was renamed the International Baptist Convention. Its membership now includes close to 70 English-language churches and missions in two-dozen European, Middle Eastern, African and Latin American countries. Only about one-third of the affiliated churches are comprised primarily of military personnel.

Hill, who serves as a liaison between the International Baptist Convention and the regional group of English-speaking churches in Latin America, hopes to see international Baptist churches mobilize their members for missions outreach.

“We need to harness the potential of people who are overseas already—not only provide them a spiritual home, but also make them missionaries,” he said.

Hill also wants to engage churches in the United States to commission as missionaries their members who move overseas, to develop partnership relationships with international Baptist churches and to provide initial funding for church starts overseas.

“We need a strategic effort to find areas where international Baptist churches can be planted to meet legitimate needs and to seize opportunities for the spread of the gospel,” he said.