



## Herding Cats: the Unique Challenge of the International Church

A White Paper by Paul Dreesen

Several years ago a technology company called EDS ran a very catchy television commercial. The western scene included hardened cowboys on their horses and they talked about their love for their job which was herding cats. That's right, cats! As one of the cowboys (or better yet "catboys") says in the commercial, "Herding cats, don't let anybody tell you it's easy." Another cowboy chimes in, "Being a cat herder is probably about the toughest thing I've ever done." At the end of the commercial the company claims that in a sense, this is what they do.

The commercial was quite successful and I've thought of it often as I've tried to pastor an international church. Pastoring, an international church, can be a lot like herding cats. Trying to love and lead a congregation made up of multiple nationalities, cultures, ages, and denominations is as daunting as the task of getting a bunch of cats herded in the right direction. As challenging as it is, there is great joy in shepherding this type of congregation and there are some great opportunities for the international church.



It is important to understand what I mean when I say the international church. I am speaking primarily of the hundreds of churches around the world, most in major cities that worship together in English. Usually, they are in a country where English is not the primary language. About 25% of them are connected to a denomination whereas 75% would be considered interdenominational.<sup>1</sup>

The church I pastor, International Baptist Church, San Jose, Costa Rica, is affiliated with a denomination, however, only about one-fourth of our congregation considers themselves Baptists. We are an English-speaking congregation in a Spanish-speaking country. We are in the suburbs of the capital city with a population of over 1 million with the English-speaking population still growing.

Before pastoring this church, I had only heard of the international church in passing. But today, because of my role as a pastor of an international church for over 5 years, and being connected with other pastors of international churches, I have learned a great deal about this most unusual type of congregation. There are great challenges facing international churches but these challenges are also opportunities.

### 1. the transitional nature of the international church

International churches are constantly in transition. Most of these churches serve the expatriate or international communities who have short-term assignments. I often joke that when I meet someone new in our church or community, the same question is asked that prisoners ask each other when incarcerated, "How long are you here for?" Many of these attendees are working for corporations, mission organizations, schools, universities,

<sup>1</sup> This statistic comes from Ken MacHarg in one of his lectures. Ken served as a Latin American Missionary and pastored several international churches.



embassies, military branches, and others are students. Some are just here for an extended visit. Most of them are in the country for a set time period, usually between 2 to 5 years.

This brings about some big challenges. One challenge would be the constant need for ministry leaders and volunteers. Just about the time you get different ministries up and running on all cylinders, one and sometimes more than one of your volunteers is being relocated. There is a constant need for recruitment to keep ministries running effectively. Sometimes an international church only loses a few people at a time, then once in a while a whole group ends up leaving about the same time period which can cause a big leadership void. We have had this happen twice in the 5 plus years I've been at IBC and it takes a while to recover from these kinds of losses.

One other challenge that comes with the transitional nature is that it can take an emotional toll on the pastor, his family and other leaders in the church. It is emotionally difficult when numerous goodbyes are being said. A knee jerk reaction to this is not to get too close to those you know who are not going to be permanent.

I have tried to see this challenge in a different light in recent years. The international church has a unique opportunity of reaching and training people while they are at your church and then we can send them out or back to their home of origin, hopefully as more committed and prepared disciples. And if this is done correctly, we will impact the world because many who came through the church either go to another place of Foreign Service or return to their country of origin. On a positive note, I have invitations to stay with them all over the world if I ever have the time and money.

## **2. maintaining your English identity while being open to reaching other language groups**

What makes the international church unique is that it is trying to reach a particular group, namely expats and internationals, and this is done by using English. However, there is always a certain level of tension that is experienced because you want to be open to other language groups, particularly the dominant language of that country. In our case, this is Spanish. The challenge then is how to keep your English distinctive while still being open to others.

When I speak with other pastors in Latin America, this is one of the main topics of discussion. Various churches have taken different approaches. Some have tried to be bilingual and very few do this well. Some have utilized simultaneous translation. Others have offered another service in the dominant language, but strong leadership is required and there are some inherent dangers with this approach.

In our situation we have been very clear that we will do our services almost entirely in English. We do on occasion sing in Spanish. Because we do have a number of people whose first language is Spanish or only speak Spanish, we offer bible studies in Spanish for all ages along with our bible studies in English. We also offer free English classes on Saturdays which are open to anyone in the community. This outreach program has been very successful.

## **3. the diversity of an international church**

The international church is diverse in a variety of ways. First, it is a mosaic of various nations, cultures, and ethnic groups. On any given Sunday we have about 30 different



nationalities represented in our services. In the past year, we have counted over 50 nations represented at IBC.<sup>2</sup>

I look out on the congregation on a Sunday morning and every shade of skin color is represented. As mentioned previously, many of these various nationalities will return to their country of origin, so in this way the international church will impact the world.

For example, there are very few Muslims in our little country, however, in the last few years we have had a number of Muslims attend our church and I have had the privilege of baptizing two who have converted to Christianity. This is really rather remarkable. In addition, we also have great diversity denominationally. Though we are Baptists, only about 30% of our congregation comes from a Baptist background. We are probably more interdenominational than most interdenominational churches. These are just two ways that demonstrate the diversity of the international church.

#### **4. being a part of the “haves” while living among the “have nots”**

Many international churches are also very diverse economically. Since many of those who attend the international church are from developed countries like the U.S. and Canada, they often are middle to upper class. At the same time others who attend the church may be from developing regions like Africa or Asia. So what can happen is that half of the congregation lives at one standard and the other half lives at a whole other standard. This can have major implications in many ways such as in the church budget and church programming.

The economic diversity of our congregation is significant being in Latin America. We do have numerous expats and Costa Ricans who work for large international companies. Add to this group embassy workers, retirees and the independent entrepreneur types who can afford to live anywhere and have chosen Costa Rica.

At the same time, many of our students are from Africa, there are others from the Philippines who are domestic workers and then there are many Costa Ricans from the barrios right around our church. Every Sunday a lot of our people drive their SUV's or other types of nice cars to our campus while others walk or take public transportation.

While it is exciting that a church can reach across economic barriers, it does have some problems. When we offer a retreat or a camp and we set a price, we know that there are quite a few people in our church who cannot afford this. One way we've worked to make all our activities affordable is by offering scholarships to all our major events. It's our philosophy that everyone pays something, but that price never keeps anyone from attending these events.

Several years ago on a Sunday afternoon our family was invited to two parties. The first was from a local Costa Rican family whose children had been attending our church. It was a birthday party. Since they lived close to the church we parked our vehicle in the church parking lot, and walked a short distance to a very basic home. It was packed with people, mainly children. We were treated royally as we were served rice and beans and other typical Costa Rican food. Everything was, of course, in Spanish.

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<sup>2</sup> List of nations represented by those who have attended IBC in the last year: U.S., Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Guyana, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Haiti, England, Ukraine, Sweden, Holland, Latvia, Germany, Russia, France, Scotland, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Israel, India, Taiwan, Philippines, Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Cuba.



After that party we walked back to our vehicle and drove to the next party. It was in a neighborhood that was gated and guarded. Most of the homes and properties were owned by one of the former presidents of Costa Rica. We drove through the gates, by the guards, and onto an amazing compound of several elaborate homes. One of these was being rented by another family that also attended our church. We went inside where we were served exotic food by maids. The people at the party were from all over the world and worked with various companies. English was the language that was spoken. It, too, was an enjoyable party. As we left that party and drove back past the guards and through the gates I thought to myself, what a privilege to attend such different parties with one commonality, both families were active participants in our church.

The international church is indeed in a unique position to reach the world. Though the challenges are great, the opportunities are greater. What William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement said years ago applies to the international church today, **"Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God!"**

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