

## **Brexit Offers Opportunity for International Congregations in Europe**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

In a constantly changing world, economic and geo-political changes are an often-overlooked dynamic that can affect churches in terms of the ebb and flow of participants and the development of programming to meet new dynamics.

One needs to just remember the 25% increase in church and synagogue attendance after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Yet, that surge eventually dropped and participation in worship returned to the previous norm.

For the approximate 2,000 International Congregations (ICs) which serve English-speaking expatriates around the globe, worldwide politics, economics and social movements have historically affected their outreach and membership. During World War II many of these expat churches, especially in Asia, were forced to close as members fled approaching troops and bombing raids. In recent times, the massive exodus of oil executives and other expats from Venezuela has reduced the number of ICs in Caracas from a half-dozen or so to one or two today.

On the other hand, over the past 35 years the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Globalization which opened many previously-closed borders and encouraged many students, business people and retirees to go abroad, have led to an astounding increase in the number of ICs in all parts of the globe.

A 2012 *Talent Mobility Study* by Towers Watson, a New York-based global professional services company, said that over 43 percent of companies across Asia projected an increase in cross-border traditional expatriate assignments within two years,

And, as the global economy improved after the Great Recession, 85 percent of them expected to send their staff to posts in neighboring Asian nations. Globally, 45 percent of all international companies were expected to send an increasing number of employees abroad to all parts of the world.

Those statistics offered an expanding opportunity for outreach by international churches, but also presented a challenge in formulating ministries to meet the unique needs of third-culture members. (A complete article can be read at <http://micn.org/global-increases-in-expatriates-challenge-international-churches-in-ministry/>)

Now, a new report from the *Wall Street Journal* highlights a similar opportunity throughout Europe due to Brexit, the recent vote by British citizens mandating that their country leave the European Union within the next few years.

That change will result in numerous business executives and their families leaving the United Kingdom to settle in European cities, according to the newspaper.

This projected change has brought concern to English-language expatriate schools across the continent as they attempt to gear up for the influx.

“There are (currently) just over 775,000 students attending English-language international schools in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade throughout Europe, according to the International School Consultancy, which tracks the international schools market,” the paper reported.

A challenge is that most of those schools report they are full, capacity is tight and government efforts to meet demand might not match the post-Brexit surge.

Shortly after the Brexit vote, France’s prime minister Manuel Valls said that the country would build as many English-language schools as needed.

Similarly, German officials reported that their schools were full. (The complete *WSJ* article may be viewed at:

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-could-lure-bankers-leaving-london-after-brexit-1470738482>)

While International Congregations may not have those overflow concerns, the impending wave of English-speaking expats to scattered European churches can be a unique opportunity for the ICs to expand their ministries, find new ways of service and grow their congregations.

As has been done in other locations, ICs which link with English-language schools can use that relationship to provide relocation and orientation services to newly arrived residents, offer counseling and family support as people make the transition, and advertise the availability of their church for worship, fellowship, Christian education and other services.

Those who do reach out, however, might be cautioned that the recruitment of new people moving because of changing political or economic circumstances can fall flat if the outreach and programming fail to meet incoming potential participant's needs.

Referring to the 9/11 spurt in church attendance, church researcher George Barna was quoted in a *USA Today* op-ed piece saying, "After the attack, millions of nominally churched or generally irreligious Americans were desperately seeking something that would restore stability and a sense of meaning to life. Fortunately, many of them turned to the church.

Unfortunately,' he said, 'churches succeeded at putting on a friendly face but failed at motivating the vast majority of spiritual explorers to connect with Christ in a more intimate or intense manner.'" (The full article can be accessed at:

<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/comment/2002/01/08/ncguest2.htm>)

Since any large movement of English-speaking families to the continent may not be immediate, International Congregations have time to develop significant programs and extensive recruitment for potential new attendees.

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