

British and French Unite as 'Spiritual Allies' to Evangelize France

In this fiercely secular nation, Christians on both sides of the English Channel are putting old hurts behind them

Two European nations who were allies during World War II have joined up again to fight another battle against evil. Churches along the English south coast have been reaching across the English Channel to encourage French believers. Some British Christians have even moved to France, adopting their language and culture.

Many Christians feel that France is on the threshold of a spiritual awakening—even though it is one of the least evangelized countries in the world. The Roman Catholic Church has described it as “the prodigal daughter of Europe.”

Although 79 percent of French people are Catholic, only 12 percent regularly attend church. Less than 1 percent of the population call themselves evangelicals, while 16 percent of French people say they have no religion.

Charlie Cleverly, who leads L'Eglise Reformée de Paris-Belleville—a church in Paris—says the average French evangelical church has only 30 to 40 people. “In some areas there is one evangelical church for 100,000 people,” he told Charisma.

In this fiercely secular nation it is illegal to talk about

Jesus Christ in schools. Even Christmas celebrations must avoid a mention of Christ, so French young people have little hope of hearing the gospel. And, outside of Catholicism, new churches are often labeled cults.

But missionaries here say God is working. "France is a door that is wide open, but would-be evangelists must tread carefully and with great sensitivity," Cleverly said.

Many Protestants find it impossible to work with Catholics. Cleverly has been criticized for his work alongside Catholic priests. "There is often an anointing of God on Catholic groups, but spiritual experience is no guarantee of theological accuracy," he added.

Several churches in southern England have begun to serve French Christians in their efforts to win the nation for Christ. The emphasis is on loving and serving as spiritual allies, just as British and French soldiers worked together during the Normandy landings of World War II.

Dave Adcock, from Southampton Community Church in England, has been linking British Christians with French churches for nearly 20 years. He sees France as the mission field on England's doorstep.

"As English people we need to go there with real humility," Adcock said. "The French say the British have a 'colonizing' spirit. We need to be people who get involved with French culture. It is not a country to flirt with, but a country to give yourself to."

French Christians have a genuine heart for worship and prayer as well as zeal for evangelism. On the streets, French Christians are met with curiosity because most French people are ignorant of the Bible. They also encounter prejudice, since Protestant churches are considered to be dangerous sects.

“I feel that if renewal is to come to France it will be partly through the Catholic Church,” Adcock said. “As evangelicals we have to come to terms with that, but in the same way many French Catholics are amazed that God can work through Protestants.”

Béthanie Renewal Center, in the Calvados region of France, is one example of God’s work through English and French Catholics and Protestants to bring renewal. The converted farmhouse is home to Bill and Jan Gordon. Bill has a Catholic background and Jan has Protestant roots.

French prayer groups meet at the house, which has hosted a Christian conference called Unissons Nous (“Unite Us”) each summer since 1996.

There are other signs of renewal in France. More than 500 churches and prayer groups joined in prayer and fasting for the nation in the first six weeks of the year and during Lent. More than 2,000 people attended Embrase Nos Coeurs (“Ignite Our Hearts”)—a three-day event in Paris during March that united Catholics and Protestants.

More than 3,000 French people, including some 500 Catholic priests, were trained to run Alpha courses last year. Pentecostal evangelist Carlos Annacondia from Argentina held a

nine-day campaign in Paris in April at the invitation of 100 churches in the Paris region.

“It feels like we have been caught up in one of those rivers of fire,” said Chris Stone from Riverside Church in Taunton, England. “All around France there are small informal prayer groups. I sense that many are embryonic churches, and I long to see them burst into life and reach out, bringing revival to France.”

—Catherine Butcher