

Leaders Call for Missionaries to 'Serve' in Secular-Minded France

French believers who attended 'Heart for France' in November said sacrificial love can win their country to God

More than 100 Christians with a burden for France gathered near the northern French city of Lille to pray, learn about and consider missionary calls to this nation, during the Heart for France conference Nov. 4-10.

The conference was organized by France 2001, an international prayer movement for France, and British missions agency World Horizons. The groups conceived the idea as they were promoting a 40-day campaign of prayer and fasting for France.

"As we started pushing the prayer campaign, we realized

there were many Christians interested in knowing more about France," said French pastor Jacky Minard, with France 2001. "We wanted to give these people an opportunity to explore that interest, meet others, and learn about the culture and church in France."

A prayer walk around the host city and daily prayer sessions helped participants focus on the challenges of spreading the gospel in France. Difficulties include a culture lacking references to God, a French church struggling with limited resources and small co

ngregations averaging 50 members.

British pastor Clive Sampson, who has spent the last five years working at the Church of Belleville in Paris, spoke about the hardships of living in the French culture.

"While Britons feel close to France due to geographic proximity, and Americans feel a shared sense of individualism with France, those coming as missionaries often underestimate the difficulties of living here. It is hard just because it is different," he said.

Speakers focused on the challenges of working with the French church. Nationwide, the church is a small number of Protestant congregations divided among 130 denominations—most viewed as a sect by government officials. In addition, French congregations often struggle with practical matters such as finding a place to meet and paying the bills.

"Tithing is seen as the mark of a sect so it is difficult for the pastor to preach about finances," Sampson said. "In fact, the majority of pastors must work outside the church to provide for their families."

Heart for France speakers also offered hope for this nation of 60 million.

Philippe Joret, pastor of a Montpellier church and author of a new book called *Francement* ("Frankly French"), sees a spiritual awakening coming to the country.

"Five years ago, no one would have understood the word 'sin.' Today there is a major advertising campaign for chocolate using the words 'forgiveness' and 'sin.' Advertising reflects the attitudes of society, and I see the image of God becoming more positive."

Joret, who also ministers to university students, quoted a study that reports

75 percent of philosophy majors in France choose the subject because they want to know the meaning of life. He said it indicates that "there is a new thirst in a new generation."

Speakers encouraged those considering missions work in France

to be sensitive to the needs of the French church.

"We need missionaries to come with a servant's heart," Minard said. "Rare is the pastor who has a full-time secretary, someone to help teach Bible or to work with children. We need these kinds of missionaries."

Sampson advised prospective missionaries to link with a French church.

"A regular interchange of prayer visits during vacations would be a good start," he said.

The strongest words, however, came from Joret, who said: "We need martyrs, not missionaries. We need those who will invest in French pastors and churches rather than start their own work. We already have an underdeveloped French church and overdeveloped missions organizations."

Participants came from more than a dozen countries, including the United States, Great Britain, Iceland, France and Holland.

Pastor Alan Reeve, whose church in Rochdale, England, is partnered with a church in Tourcoing, France, attended the conference to

learn how his church can minister more effectively to the French.

"I've been touched by the need for reconciliation between France and England, and realize that both nations need to repent and ask forgiveness," he said.

The spirit of Heart for France, marked by fervent worship and intercession for the nation, may have foreshadowed what hundreds of thousands of Christians from more than 20 countries will experience when they pray for France during the 40 days preceding Easter this year.

"Through prayer, God changes the destiny of nations," said Rob

Reeve, a British missionary to France. "France's destiny is to be blessed and to bless other nations."