

Baptists 'Embrace' Church Planting in Europe

When Nick Hodges decided to watch the Southern Baptist Convention meeting online last summer, he never dreamed he would be navigating the “tubes,” trains and taxis of a major European city this spring as a result.

During the meeting, Hodges heard about Embrace, “and it was like a light went on inside of me,” he said. Embrace is an initiative to encourage churches to choose an unengaged, unreached people group (UUPG) and establish an active church-planting strategy among them.

“We’re supposed to just go and carry out the Great Commission,” he said.

Hodges serves as pastor of the 80-member Emmanuel Baptist Church in Oakdale, La. He and members of 1,100-member First Baptist Church of Mansfield, Texas, spent the last week of April in Europe with International Mission Board trainers to begin their journey to Embrace one of the world’s 3,800 UUPGs, 500 of which can be found in Europe.

They are the first Embrace churches to make connections with their people group on the ground in Europe.

Johnny Dickerson, senior pastor of FBC Mansfield, said, “The thing that appealed to me about Embrace was that we were stepping in to places and situations where there was not already an IMB missionary on the ground. When we decided we were going to do this, I told our church, ‘We are not sending a missionary—we are sending you.’”

Hodges said he and his wife, Dawn, had never been on a mission trip or out of the country before going to Europe for training.

"All of this is very new to us. Not to mention the fact that we are both introverts," he said. "I think we (Emmanuel Baptist) represent the typical Southern Baptist church, and I'm hoping that people will see us and say, 'If they can do it, then we can too.'"

Before the team came to Europe, the churches spent time investigating the world's UUPGs and praying about which to Embrace. After meeting with IMB personnel, each European Embrace church is assigned a "coach" who acts as a consultant for the church as it fulfills its commitment of eight weeks per year for eight years.

Then, on the ground in Europe, the coach helps them learn about the culture and locations of their people group, as well as how to begin planting churches among them. They also go out into the city and make initial contacts with the people group.

Paul Combs, a volunteer from FBC Mansfield, said he "saw the Holy Spirit do stuff that only the Spirit could do."

"We went out there today not knowing where we were going, who we were going to talk to or if we were even going to find anybody to talk to," Combs said. "But now, when we send teams back here, one of the hardest things about all of this has already been taken care of. We have somebody who has invited us back. They want to know when we are coming and want us to contact them when we get here."

Doors are now open that weren't open before, he said.

Dickerson said the project embodies what he endeavors to preach every Sunday: "You have got to put your faith into action," he said.

Hodges echoed the need for faith in this project. "There is no way that a church of 80 to 100 people in Louisiana can reach a European people group of 200,000," he said. "Yeah, this is a huge task. But if we are faithful, then God will provide the

resources and the people along the way. We are not responsible for the results—God is. Our job is just to be faithful to the task.”

The Great Commission is not for professional missionaries only—it’s for him and his church, and all churches, he said. “We all have a responsibility to go.”

The results are eternal, Dickerson said.

“Some day in Glory there is going to be someone from my people group,” he said. “And they are going to say, ‘Thanks for going.’ And when that happens ... well, I know there are no tears in heaven, so when that happens I am going to just have to jump and shout or something.”

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