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2theadvocate Religion

Church of the Nations reaches to the world

Congregation eases path of internationals living in BR

By ANNABELLE ARMSTRONG
Special to The Advocate

Church of the Nations is geared toward helping internationals adapt to life in the United States.

"We do not pressure those who attend our church to change their religion," the Rev. Rick Wright said. "We try to meet the different needs of immigrants, helping any way we can to ease their adjustment to life in a new country."

The ministry offers conversational English, clothes and furniture, transportation to appointments and other practical needs.

In its 15 years of ministry through its host church, University Baptist Church, 203 Leeward Drive, Church of the Nations invites everyone to learn about the love of God as seen in Jesus Christ, treating Christians and non-Christians the same, Wright said.



Advocate staff photos by BRIAN HARKIN

The Rev. Rick Wright shakes hands with people leaving the Church of the Nations service. Behind him are Xinoping Yi and his daughter Xinyu Yi, 11, who are from China and now live in Baton Rouge.

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Average attendance at Sunday 10:45 a.m. worship service is 60. Annually, the church ministers to several hundred internationals, almost all of whom live in the LSU area. While regular service is held in the sanctuary, Church of the Nations meets in the chapel.

Wright has a heart for working with internationals. His four degrees include a doctorate in ancient near Eastern studies and Hebrew Bible from Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

Church of the Nations participants come from various religious backgrounds, including atheists, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. Geographically, they are from China and African nations as well as Japan, Korea, India, Russia and France.

For two years Shujie Liu, 40, of Changchun from northeast China, took conversational English classes.

"I was baptized at the Chinese Christian Church," she says. "Our son, Delong, 15, was baptized here one and a half years ago."

Delong was one of four selected for the Louisiana Math Counts Competition and went to Washington, D.C., ranking 37 out of about 220 high school students.

"Church of the Nations gave Delong financial support and spending money," his mother said.

Shujie and her husband, Lingqi Meng, are graduate assistants, working toward their doctorate degrees at LSU, his in math education and hers in education.

Activities, with transportation, are a large part of the ministry that includes retreats, short trips and Bible study. Several times a year the children visit the elderly residents of Sharlo Apartments on Brightside Avenue to distribute gifts, sing and minister.

Some activities are merged with University Baptist Church, such as the music and mission program for children on Sundays during the school year.

A monthly fellowship lunch on Sundays is a chance for internationals to chat with Americans while the conversational English classes take place in homes.

"We share so many things, and we pass so many difficult times together," said Lu Min, who received her degree in computer science May 13 from Southern University. The 34-year-old wife of Hongwei Zhao, who works for an architectural firm, and mother of three children, got help with English when she arrived in Baton Rouge from southern China five years ago.

Leo and Margaret Stanley, University Baptist Church members, are "like family," she said.

"We can call them anytime and share," Lu Min said.

Margaret Stanley said she and her husband have volunteered with the ministry since it began.

"We do things like help them find a car, learn about insurance and driver's licenses," Margaret Stanley said, "and Leo takes them grocery shopping on Saturdays.

For nine years, Paulina Nsibu, 41, originally from Angola, has felt the support of the church.

"When I first came here, I was expecting a baby, and my husband, Antonio, was a student at LSU," she said. "I learned English at the church."

Antonio Nsibu earned his petroleum engineering degree in 1997 and returned to Angola. Due to the internal strife and wars at the time, Paulina stayed in Baton Rouge.

The couple has two boys and two girls. The oldest son, Felisberto, 17, is in Angola with his father. The three children here, Nathaniel, 14, Daisy, 10, and Dominique, 8, are Church of the Nations members.

"Antonio comes over twice a year and calls often," she says. "We've been married 18 years."

Paulina Nsibu supplements the family income by working as a sitter for the elderly and braiding hair.

"So much help from this church!" she said. "They've given us clothing, and are like family."

The church has a storage place for furniture, with Wendy TerHaar as coordinator.

"Wendy does the e-mail and coordinating, and I help take the furniture to the families," Brian TerHaar said.

Jean and Bob Barrett are English conversation coordinators.

Wright has found involvement with the church's programs satisfying. Besides his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, he earned a master of divinity degree from Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va.

Wright was approached for the Church of the Nations pastorate just after he finished seminary in 1999.

"I was strongly attracted to the idea of working with people from other national, cultural and language backgrounds," he said.

Wright speaks English and French and some Arabic and German.

His heart swells when he hears the testimonies of the internationals who stand up and say what this church means to them.

"Sometimes they say things that make my jaws drop," he said. "There's no preaching a sermon needed.

"When we see the difference made in the life of someone lonely, struggling or searching, it is as close to the Kingdom of God as I have ever experienced," Wright said.

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