



Feature

KEEP THE CANDLE BURNING

Church partnerships are vital for creative-access workers

By [Joseph F. Jalkiewicz](#)

It was a wet, rainy morning in September 2011 when Jim Entwistle, Missions and Service pastor at Fellowship Alliance Chapel (FAC) in Medford, New Jersey, and his team boarded a jet at JFK International in New York City. One layover and 14 hours later, the men—three fellow pastors and two lay members of FAC, in addition to Jim—touched down to sunny skies and warm temperatures in “Long Beach.” Their mission: to help Alliance international workers Paul and Sarah Chandler* convert a broken-down, 200-year-old, concrete-and-tile building into a combination preschool/ESL center/Internet café and guest house in an ancient community near the coast.

The team got down to work with an intensity that rivaled “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.” By the end of their seven-day mission, the members had built four sets of bunk beds for the guest rooms and a café bar, replaced dozens of pieces of missing marble and completed numerous other projects. They topped it all off—helped by more surplus funds than expected—with a sound system servicing the entire ground floor.

Mission Invisible

Perhaps more important than their overt mission to help build the center, however, was the team’s covert mission: to lay the foundation for an ongoing partnership with the Chandlers, who are among a growing number of Alliance workers serving anonymously in about 20 creative-access (CAC) countries around the world.

“Partnerships with churches like FAC give us a feeling that we are part of something much bigger than just what we’re doing here,” Sarah said. “We are reminded that we’re not in this alone, but that there are partners back home who are praying for us regularly and supporting us financially so that we can go forth with what God has called us to do here.”

The Chandlers' goal with the facility, which opened earlier this year, is not only to meet a community need for a central gathering place but also to bring the light of the gospel to local people.

David Lauffer, assistant vice president for the C&MA's International Ministries (IM), explained that a country is characterized as "creative access" if visas are not made available for religious workers, if Alliance workers do not want identities that are religious per se or if for political, social or religious reasons it would be dangerous or disadvantageous to otherwise gain residence.

It's that third case that applies to Long Beach, which is one of more than 20 Arab countries that have been rocked by political unrest since December 2010. Indeed, the world watched in amazement throughout 2011 as one Arab autocracy after another collapsed under massive public protests and calls for reform.



Yet, for all the change being wrought by the "Arab Spring," most Arab countries, including Long Beach, remain difficult places in which to shine the light of the gospel. Probably the biggest challenge "is the lack of spiritual fruit and the inability to witness freely," says Sarah. The couple—28-year veterans of international work—have been serving in Long Beach since shortly before the uprisings began. "People always have to use caution and worry about their longevity in the country if they are caught talking to the wrong people."

Lauffer agrees. "Strong spiritual forces blind and bind entire populations, and they must be countered by prayer and the use of weapons that are divinely powerful," he said. "Second, as advocates of a foreign belief system, Christians are regarded with suspicion. Third, the true nature of biblical Christianity is generally misunderstood. This is due to the wide and sometimes subtle dissemination of cultural lies and the shameful beliefs and behaviors of counterfeit 'Christians.'"

Western media, Lauffer adds, often compound these challenges by reinforcing negative stereotypes and presenting misleading images of Christianity. In many CAC countries, Bibles are not available in local languages and literacy rates are low. Other challenges include anti-missionary activities and social ostracism, along with legal prohibitions and restrictions and the threat of imprisonment and/or expulsions. In fact, Alliance workers have been expelled from several North African and Central Asian countries in the past two years.

Working under such conditions can take a toll on the mental, emotional and spiritual health of even the hardest Christian workers.

"Discouragement and depression set in if you don't keep your relationship with the Lord fresh and alive," Sarah said. "Fellowship with other workers for prayer support and encouragement is vital, and having a strong support team back home is of utmost importance."

Indeed, committed, ongoing partnerships between these workers and C&MA churches back home are essential to "keep the candle burning," to borrow the title of a popular Point of

Grace song. Like other CAC workers, the Chandlers rely on mission teams to help them achieve their goals of bringing the light of Jesus Christ to the community where they live and serve.

It's a fact that's not lost on Entwistle. "It's hard to be there. You're sort of like on a desert island," he said, describing the Chandlers' circumstances. "We [tend to] get so project focused that we forget their need for fellowship, for laughter. They need encouragement, too. They want to talk about their kids, their family, their challenges. It takes them a long time to develop relationships in a place like Long Beach. They've met people from other organizations, so they're not totally alone, but they're totally by themselves on their own mission."

Blessings Flow Both Ways

Yet, mission trips aren't just about completing projects—God intends for the blessings to flow both ways, observed Entwistle.

"Mission trips are about relationships between [us] and the missionaries, and they're about discipleship for the people going," he said. "How are we building up the missionaries, and how are we building up the people going?"

Entwistle said a highlight of the Long Beach trip for him was the daily devotion time his team took turns leading—an easy task for the pastors on the trip.

"But for [lay member] Ed Nutt, it was incredibly intimidating," Entwistle said, noting that Ed's devotional, based on 1 Corinthians 13, was about loving the unlovable. "It was an opportunity to get him out of his comfort zone, and it was one of the best devotions of the trip. As a missions pastor, I want to see people grow through [the experience]."

Based on their own comments about the trip, the FAC team members did just that.

"When we think of God's children, we all have an immediate picture in our minds," said lay member Ryan O'Rourke, a father of two for whom the Long Beach trip was his first international mission. "Sometimes that view can be limiting, and I think it is healthy to have a 'full frame' view of all those children, especially ones that are in such darkness."

To sit with seasoned missionaries who have endured great hardships and to listen to their passion for what they do was sobering, encouraging and humbling for Nick Simpson, FAC's Worship and Media pastor.

"Because of the culture, Long Beach is a place that has more opportunities than ever to receive Christ," said Simpson. "I saw a people striving for change. What a tremendous opportunity to present the gospel. The field is ready and the workers are arriving, but the challenge will be great." "I think missionaries are quite possibly the bravest people on the earth," O'Rourke added.

Future of Partnerships

The Alliance plans to place greater emphasis on partnerships between its churches and its workers in CAC countries in the coming years, Lauffer said. In particular, the denomination

is energetically working among peoples who lack access to the gospel and to evangelical Christians.

“The CAC worker percentage has dramatically increased over the past dozen years, and it will certainly grow as IM diversifies its worker force to include ‘hybrid workers’ [workers with ministerial plus other professional training and experience], [and] transitions out of ‘reached nations,’ missiologically speaking,” he said.

Entwistle is one pastor who plans to get his congregation on board with the mission. He described a visit the team made to an ancient amphitheater in Long Beach where Christians had been martyred for their faith.

“We said a prayer there that we would have the same fortitude to ‘be light,’” he recalled, adding that the moment reminded him that “being light” isn’t just for workers like the Chandlers.

“They’re not rock stars; they just have a different calling,” Entwistle said. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t hold them up—we should. But [we have this tendency to] think they’re so different from us, and they’re not really. They’re just being the church in a different place, and we should have the same passion for ‘being light’ that they have.”

** Editor’s note: The names of the international workers and their specific location in this article have been changed to ensure their safety.*



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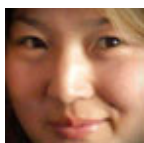
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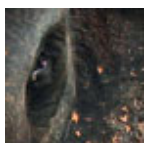
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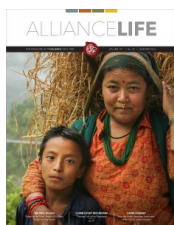
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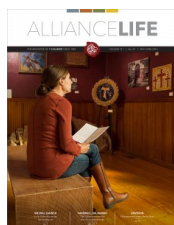
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