

DAY 1: CHURCHES CONNECT WITH MISSIONARY TASK

Tim and Tina Louderback and Sean and Shelley Blacksten, who serve with the IMB in Panama, are passionate about equipping and connecting churches with opportunities to serve in Central America and the Caribbean.

The Louderbacks lead the Americas Connect program, which was established to provide entry-level ministry opportunities for Southern Baptist churches interested in strategically coming alongside the IMB.

Panama was the pioneer country for Americas Connect, and trips were later extended to Brazil, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. Church members participate in five-to-six weeks of online training before their trip.

Tina said the training for teams coming to Panama is modular and covers basic missiology and country-specific training. Once teams arrive, they receive training related to the missionary task and their specific ministry assignment.

Sean said they have been personally encouraged by the teams, “especially by [those] that are a part of their church’s first foreign trip.”

“It takes courage and obedience to be the leading edge for a church that hasn’t been involved in-person on the mission field to this point,” Sean said. “Our prayer is that they will be the first among many who come to work alongside us and that some would choose to build on their experience in Central America and pray about an even more remote or less-reached place the next time around.”

One volunteer group came alongside an Indigenous team who ministers among an unreached people group. The church served by prayerwalking, sharing the gospel,



Omar Peñaloza stands in front of his church, Iglesia Bautista la Roca de Getsemani. Omar is president of the Baptist Convention of Panama. The convention actively serves Panamanians, a population comprised of Latino, Caribbean, and Indigenous people groups.

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and providing English practice for the Indigenous Christians who support themselves with an eco-jungle tourism business.

The Louderbacks encourage churches to put what they learn on the missions field into practice when they return to the US.

“They’re being trained up in advance,” Tim said. “They’re putting the missionary task in place while they’re on the ground. They’re debriefing, and they’re leaving with a vision to go and serve back home or wherever God leads them in the rest of the world.”

Some churches, after returning from their trip, have started participating in or hosting an English as a second language course to reach out to their communities.

The Louderbacks also encourage churches that have participated in Americas Connect to adopt an unengaged and unreached people group.

Emmanuel Baptist Church in Weatherford, Texas, is one of the churches that has committed to a people group adoption. The church participated in an Americas Connect trip to Panama in 2019.

Michael Bizzell, pastor of admissions and missions at Emmanuel, said the desire to get involved on a greater level led to the formalization of a partnership with the Bolivian Baptist Convention to minister among an unreached people group.

After the Americas Connect trip, the Lord called a couple from the church to serve with the IMB as career missionaries.

PRAY for inroads for the Indigenous team.

PRAY churches participating in Americas Connect would continue to pursue opportunities to serve.

PRAY the Lord would facilitate more church connections and more people would be called to serve as missionaries.