

Ohio volunteers refurbish Baptist distribution center

By RIC LILJENBERG
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SEBRING - More than a dozen volunteers from First Baptist Church in Elyria, Ohio, spent last week painting and remodeling Editorial Bautista Independiente. They came from the same church where the idea to establish EBI was born 41 years ago. [EBI started in Puerto Rico about 41 years ago, Baptist Mid-Missions started in Elyria about 80 years ago, ed.] The work crew took time off from work or otherwise volunteered their time and energy to the project.

As the Spanish Literature Division of Baptist Mid-Missions headquartered since 1920 in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2001 EBI is sending religious materials to 28 countries to help train pastors and church workers. In Sebring, the operation translates, publishes and distributes Biblical training materials in Spanish.

While most of the customers are Baptists in Central and South America, General Director and Business Manager Dr. Marvin Stephens said anyone can order materials. It is truly a missionary work, Stephens said, because most of the materials go to Third World countries that have limited funds to buy EBI's products.

"We have spread ourselves into two categories — our own published books and books published by other publishers," he said. "We're not a high-volume (operation) because of the clientele we're working with."

These published works include Bible commentaries, Sunday school teacher's manuals, Bible study guides and pastor training materials that take the place of [a man] going to a seminary or Bible school since many of these Hispanic pastors simply have no money for a more formal education.

"This essentially allows these pastors to train while they are working," he explained.

EBI does not supply ministerial certificates nor does it operate a correspondence school; it simply distributes materials.

The operation was founded in Peru, then moved to Puerto Rico where it operated until the early 1980s. It then moved to Deltona for three years before moving to Maranatha Village in Sebring in 1984. As the operation outgrew the Maranatha site, EBI leaders began looking around for a larger building. [They found a small building on East Center Street, which they occupied until the need for a larger building became apparent.] They found it on Kenilworth Boulevard and moved once more in 1997. Two years ago EBI bought the building and last week the Ohio volunteers went to work on it.

Stephens and EBI's director of donor relations, Bob Owen, find Sebring's economy and geography suits them. It is closer to its Hispanic market than most of the United States and it is centrally located.

Sebring has been an excellent location because the cost of living is relatively low compared with the rest of the United States, Stephens said.

"It is very convenient for shipping," he said. "We can have all the major shipping companies in and out of Sebring."

The larger shipments are only two hours from Miami where they are loaded aboard ships bound for Central and South America.

The basic thrust of the operation includes several components:

- Instructing in the distinctive beliefs and history of Baptists.
- Establishing strong, Biblical positions on doctrine and practice.
- Giving up-to-date information on cults and other doctrinal trends.
- Training leaders for the Hispanic church.
- Educating lay people through Sunday school and other Christian education programs.
- Encouraging believers for missionary work.

Stephens and Owen, along with the Sebring staff, expressed their appreciation to the Ohio volunteers.

First Baptist Church Associate Pastor Dan Friesner came along with the group and said that since Stephens and his wife, Joan, are part of the church's missionary family, helping out in Sebring made sense.

"They were in our church last fall and shared their ministry and it sparked some interest because we were looking for a project," Friesner explained.

Over the winter, the Sebring project was organized. The volunteers paid their own way and stayed in staff member's homes.

Painting the outside of the building was a primary part of the project. Applying two coats to the outside took nearly two days and about 880 man-hours. With a team of 14, the work did not take long.

The volunteers came from a wide range of backgrounds — retired, nurses, housewives, office staff, students and construction workers.

Volunteer and registered nurse and cardio-vascular services consultant, Debbi Wegryn, came to Sebring "from a totally practical stand-point." Wegryn saw the importance of the project and signed on. EBI does not have the money to hire the work done. "We have the funds and the able bodies so there would be no excuse not to come."

David Curry also volunteered to make the trip from Elyria. Curry is retired from the Ford Motor Company in Cleveland. "I came down here because I feel God wanted me to come."

He learned about the EBI project during a meeting at his church. He went home with a growing desire to participate. When he suggested his wife and he sit down because he had something on his mind, she replied, "I already know — go." A simple yet profound motivation and he had the time and the money to spend a week here.

This is his fifth time traveling considerable distances volunteering to help with a variety of projects. However, this is first such trip in the United States.

"I just feel it's something to do with your retirement years and pleasing God," Curry said.

In return, the money he spends and the work he does "does not compare with what I get out of it." He finds a blessing in making new friends, for one thing.

More important is the spiritual blessing. "It's like God tells me, 'I have a lesson for you to learn, I have something you need to see and the only way you are going to learn this lesson and grow is by going and helping.'"

In addition to the work in Sebring last week, Friesner also presented Stephens a check for \$2,800. It was a gift from the Elyria congregation.

The money will finance about 19 libraries for 19 Third World pastors.

A missionary who served 20 years in the Republic of Central Africa before joining the EBI staff, Owen said the work and the money "are a real encouragement to us because it makes us realize that there really are people out there who care about this ministry."

He added, "This shows people that missions is about anyone who is in the Lord's service."

This year marks the first time EBI has received a request for materials from outside the Hispanic world. Just a short time ago, an order arrived from Japan, a request that surprised Stephens and Owen who said they were not aware there were Hispanic communities on the island nation.

More information about EBI is available on the internet at www.ebi-bmm.org.