

Partners in Mission

‘To see the gospel carried through Baptist churches generation after generation’

Sharing the gospel with at least 8 million people is a daunting calling, especially as the cultural opposition churches face continues to grow. But that is our calling here in Illinois. And each year in order to fulfill that calling, Illinois Baptists gather resources to fund ministries for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting.

How’s that working?

Gathered in the chapel of Broadview Missionary Baptist Church following a meeting of pastors, four IBSA leaders discussed the mission field and the future of ministry partnership through the Illinois Baptist State Association. In the discussion were:

- **Nate Adams**, IBSA Executive Director
- **Mark Emerson**, IBSA Associate Executive Director of the Church Resources Team
- **Adron Robinson**, pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Country Club Hills, and serving his first term as IBSA President
- **John Yi**, IBSA Church Planting Catalyst focused on second-generation ministry in the Northeast region

How does our view of Illinois affect our churches’ commitment to partnership in state missions?

Nate Adams: I think a lot of people don’t think of Illinois as a mission field, because their community is reasonably churched and they’re reasonably happy in their church environment. But Illinois has 13 million people. At least 8 million of them don’t claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And a lot of those who do say they are Christians have just nominal church relationships.

John Yi: And there are many people groups that don’t have a single church that serves them. In Chicago we see so much diversity—people from all over the world speaking all kinds of different languages. There are about two million immigrants in Illinois.

And there are at least a half-a-million young people who have come to Illinois to study, and a large portion of them have come from overseas. We really have a unique opportunity to reach people with the gospel—in our cities and all over the state.

Adams: Illinois is very much a mission field. In Acts 1:8 terms, where Jesus said, “You’ll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth,” Illinois is the “Judea” part of that mission field. In this environment, Illinois Baptists are missionaries, going to places like college campuses and large cities and rural areas, bringing the gospel there as if it had not come there before. Because for a lot of people, they’ve never heard the gospel in a way that they can really understand, even here in Illinois.

Seeing the needs, some churches have noticeably raised their support for state missions. Yours is one of them, Pastor Robinson. Why?

Adron Robinson: My congregation recently increased its Mission Illinois Offering giving because we saw the work that was going forward because of last year's offering. We were able to see the money that we invested going to reach lost people in Illinois—going to help us reach our Judea, you know. Hillcrest can't reach the entire state, but by giving through the Mission Illinois Offering, we can help other Illinois Baptists reach other lost people in their areas. We can join in our part of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Adams: IBSA is helping churches think about the mission field that is most accessible to them. Even though it's a wildly diverse mission field, it's the one that's near enough where they can go there themselves.

Illinois is a very diverse state, both ethnically and in spiritual need. And John, you serve among people who exemplify both needs.

Yi: Chicago is a landing spot for so many immigrants. And because that's the case, we can't stop planting churches for our first-generation folks. But as soon as they arrive, a cultural gap starts to form between the generations almost immediately. And so the challenge is two-fold—that we reach immigrants in their own language, but also reach their children with the gospel in English, which the parents are unfamiliar with, in a meaningful way that's going to bring them to Christ.

What can our churches do together that they could never accomplish alone?

Robinson: I'm grateful for our partnership with IBSA, because it gives the local church the resources and the connections to do statewide ministry that we can never accomplish as one small local congregation. Through Disaster Relief, evangelism training, equipping of our local church body through IBSA staff, we are able to reach people all around the state.

Mark Emerson: As Pastor Robinson points out, missions is part of our work, along with evangelism and discipleship. And we help churches do this by equipping them for leadership: IBSA develops leaders.

I think back to several of the guys who were on the IBSA staff when I was a new pastor and church planter almost 30 years ago, how they took me under their wings and mentored me. Today, I'm thinking how great it would be if every Illinois Baptist pastor had that kind of connection.

Adams: I think the advantage that IBSA has, that allows us to create that kind of opportunity, is proximity to the churches. Southern Baptists have an International Mission Board helping churches go around the world, and a North American Mission Board focusing on some of the great cities in North America. But the Illinois Baptist State Association is the nearby partner. They're the guy nearby to the church who equips the church to reach its own mission field right here in Illinois.

Emerson: As a pastor, I recall how I looked at a lot of different things in our organization and thought, "Well, our church is not growing because we have a community problem. Or an organizational problem. Or a financial problem." What I learned is that our ministry really had a leadership problem. And if the church was going to grow, I was going to have to grow.

So, we are developing leaders by providing the same kind of experience that I had through the state association—creating cohorts where leaders come together and learn to lead. We have about 40 of these groups all over the state now.

In addition to cohorts, the Church Resources Team equips 6,500 leaders from almost all of our 1,000 IBSA churches and church plants in all aspects of ministry in statewide and regional training events. And we train kids and students in missions and leadership with camps each summer and evangelism events in the fall.

Robinson: Our church has hosted youth events for the northern region. Without our IBSA connections, these things would never happen—praying together and serving faithfully, partnering together—

The key word is partnership.

Adams: I hope our young people won't lose the vision of partnering with others who believe Baptist doctrine to send missionaries into places that no one church could send by themselves. But that working together as Baptist churches we can send reliable missionaries to places that will deliver the gospel and start New Testament churches that are relevant to that community. And I hope that's something that will happen for generation after generation.

Emerson: That our work is handed from one generation to another.

So how do you see state missions in the future?

Adams: For me personally to see the gospel carried through Baptist churches generation after generation is a continuation of what my dad started when he was a pastor and a director of missions in Illinois. I want to see that happen in the generations of my kids and their kids—a stewardship of faithfulness, that we believe the Bible, that we believe the gospel, that we believe the mission of God is the most important thing in our lives.