

IBSA was there

Zone consultants like Larry Rhodes ‘boots on the ground’ for churches on Illinois’ front line.

By Meredith Flynn

(Editor’s note: Watch the video “IBSA Was There” at missionillinois.org, part of the 2018 state missions story collection. And use set of videos and download teaching materials to lead a state missions study.)

Belleville | In a season meant for gratitude, **Jason Vinson** didn’t feel much. It was Thanksgiving when years of discouragement over his church led the pastor to the point he now calls rock bottom.

“Lord, this is not what I signed up for,” he prayed back then. “Please get somebody else. Can I have a way out? Would you please do something different, because this is killing me.”

For several years, Vinson and his church had faced internal challenges as they struggled to find effective ways to minister in their community. It was a lonely time, he said, a period when he questioned what God was doing, or whether he was working at all.

Finally, in 2016, they decided they needed a new start. The church moved forward under a new name—Charis Baptist Fellowship—and with Vinson still serving as pastor. He looked for partners to help his church, and found one in **Larry Rhodes**, an IBSA zone consultant in the Metro East region.

“We set a date to have lunch together, and heard the story of their church—the challenges they’ve been through, and how they met those challenges through prayer and fasting and consultation within their body,” Rhodes said.

“I was so excited to hear about how God was bringing healing and new life to that fellowship.”

As a consultant in one of ten zones in Illinois, Rhodes connects resources and training with pastors, who in turn help their churches engage their communities with the gospel. In Vinson’s case, he first needed someone to listen.

The Mission Illinois Offering supports the ministry of zone consultants like Rhodes, who serves as a sounding board and resource for pastors and churches in Metro East St. Louis. Rhodes and his fellow consultants seek to serve on the front lines alongside churches that are seeking community transformation, through the power of the gospel.

“Just the fact that Larry really believed in us was incredible,” Vinson said. “He really believed that God had a good work here, that God wanted me to continue in the work here.”

The summer after their restart, Charis hosted two Bible clubs for children, using a kit provided by Rhodes through IBSA. They hosted the clubs in a local park and in a nearby trailer community with the help of visiting mission teams—partnerships Rhodes helped forge.

Charis has fostered the relationships built through the clubs in a new Sunday morning Bible study for children, and a bi-weekly family discipleship time where dads teach their children from God's Word. Two years after God started something new in Belleville, he's still on the move, Vinson said.

"There's an excitement, a joy, and an expectation that God is at work in this place."

Together in the trenches

Rhodes makes it a point to meet with each pastor in his zone, which includes the Gateway and Metro East Baptist Associations. (Local associations are networks of Baptist churches that often cooperate for ministry efforts like mission trips.) At those meetings, he wants to hear the pastor's story, and help connect him with resources that can help the church in its big-picture mission.

For Calvary East St. Louis, that mission is to engage young people who have moved away from the church. "Our church started primarily with the concept of getting youth involved, getting them to know Christ, and keeping them involved and active in the process," said Pastor **Bermayne Jackson**.

Rhodes came alongside the young church with resources to fulfill their mission, including a Vacation Bible School (VBS) resource kit and an evangelism training resource called "3 Circles." Calvary used both kits last summer, hosting VBS for kids and teaching "3 Circles" to their parents.

The value of their first VBS was to show the church they could do it, their pastor said, that even a small church can be very effective. "We can make an impact," Jackson said. "We can change lives. And it doesn't take a hundred, 200, or 300 people to do it."

"We're a church that has 46 members on the books. Average attendance is 30 a Sunday. But we feel confident in the fact that we can go out and make changes in our community."

Jackson is a bivocational pastor, spending his days working as a sales manager and his evenings and weekends at church. He's surrounded by a great leadership team at Calvary, but acknowledges pastoring can be lonely. Friendship and encouragement from experienced leaders is a key factor in being able to stick with the mission.

"Personally, (I) get an increase energy by knowing that you have a support system there," Jackson said of relationships he's built with Rhodes, others from IBSA, and leaders from his local network of churches, Metro East Association. "Sometimes (Larry) is talking, and he doesn't know how much encouragement he's giving to me."

Rhodes knows how difficult it is for pastors to find time to meet with him, especially when so many are working at other jobs during the week, and balancing work, family, and church responsibilities. On top of all that, they want to see their communities transformed by the gospel.

“That’s why we’re here, is to serve them, and resource them, and encourage them in ways that we can, to push back the lostness in our state, which is vast,” Rhodes said.

“It’s critically important that IBSA realize the people ‘out in the trenches,’ as I like to say, are crucial to evangelism and to discipleship in the state of Illinois. We’re fighting an uphill battle all the way, but we’re still fighting, and we should.”

Here to help

Andre Dobson has pastored churches for 44 years. Still, he said, he needs people like Larry Rhodes to come alongside him and help him be better.

“He went out of his way to stop by the church to introduce himself and inform us about things happening with IBSA,” Dobson said. Rhodes also offered friendship. “It was really out of that relationship, knowing that here was someone that I could trust...that I asked him to begin to get involved in helping us as a church be able to minister in the way that we needed to.”

The long-time pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Alton is mindful of the DNA he’s building for the next generation of leaders at his church. He wants to establish strong, effective, meaningful practices in areas like worship, discipleship, and evangelism.

Rhodes has helped Calvary in each of those places during his time as a zone consultant, drawing on his years in worship ministry, leading evangelism training, and helping equip small group leaders. And the church is connecting the dots between all those things, Dobson said. People are sharing their faith; new groups are starting; people are coming to faith in Christ and being baptized.

“People are coming to Christ because our people have been engaged to witness, simply because someone took the time to say, ‘Here’s how you can do this,’” Dobson said.

Armed with resources, zone consultants stand ready to help churches do more effective ministry in their communities. They also serve as a sounding board for leaders, like Dobson, who are deeply invested in seeing their congregations embrace the gospel and the call to share it. Because of their visibility and partnership with churches, they often serve as the faces of IBSA, Rhodes said.

“I don’t think this face ought to represent anything,” he said self-deprecatingly, “so I call it ‘boots on the ground.’ I think it’s a tremendous way to let our churches know that we’re here. That we’re here to help them. And we’re here because of them.”

Call to prayer

Please pray for IBSA's zone consultants and the churches they serve. Pray for stronger churches across Illinois that can build up disciples and share Christ with lost people. Pray for the Mission Illinois Offering, that many more churches will support the annual collection for state missions, which helps fund the work of Larry Rhodes and IBSA's other missionaries and ministry staff.