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## Focusing the mission

*By focusing on its top priorities, Mount Pisgah Church in Alpharetta, Ga., is weathering the economic downturn while continuing its global commitment to working on behalf of children, leadership development and supporting the persecuted church.*

by [David Gibson](#)



Mount Pisgah UMC

Mount Pisgah UMC supports Bible clubs for children in India.

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March 31, 2009

Overseas mission work is a defining characteristic of Mount Pisgah Church, a United Methodist congregation in Alpharetta, Ga.

The congregation's members do mission work themselves -- they have a clean water program and a program for AIDS orphans, among other initiatives -- as well as providing a range of support for local churches in countries around the world, such as funding leadership training and Bible translations.

Mount Pisgah, which draws some 2,000 in worship, is in many respects emblematic of the surge in global outreach by U.S. churches. But the church is also representative of the growing trend toward re-thinking international mission work. Today, even experienced congregations like Mount Pisgah want to improve their delivery while adjusting to the economic crisis.

"We're trying to do less, better, so as not to have so much buckshot out there," said Toni Martin, associate minister of missions for Mount Pisgah. "We're trying to hone down as best we can, to be as strategic as we can, and what we do, we want to do well."

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Mount Pisgah's [overseas mission program](#) began, as many do, with a first contact by members of the congregation. More than a decade ago, newlyweds from the church went to the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia for their honeymoon. They returned both enchanted by its beauty and called to address the great needs of the people there. Mount Pisgah began helping one woman on the island who took in foster children, and the program expanded to Africa, Asia and Latin America. The church at one point supported programs, or worked directly in, 14 countries. It still sends about 200 short-term missionaries abroad each year.

Martin and a colleague came to the church three years ago to find great enthusiasm but also some mission sprawl. They have been trying to bring more strategic focus to the church's efforts. They are aiming to reduce the number of countries they focus on to three. They continue to learn about the latest in best practices and the current needs of churches in other countries.

For example, Mount Pisgah has drawn on the resources of [Advancing Churches in Missions Commitment \(ACMC\)](#), one of a number of networks that provides direction to congregations hoping to start overseas missionary work, or do it better. (Others include the [National Short-Term Missions Conference](#) and the [Alliance for Excellence in Short-Term Mission](#).)

Martin and her boss, the Rev. Bryce Norton, head of global missions and discipleship for Mount Pisgah, attended seminars with Larry Ragan, an expert in mission work who is on the staff at Atlanta's North Metro Church, which has an extensive global [outreach program](#). Ragan stresses discipleship as a priority in mission work and also "due diligence" -- making sure churches do their homework before embarking on a mission project. That includes doing the basics to protect congregants, such as providing travel insurance, registering with the local U.S. authorities, locating medical facilities and other aspects of crisis prevention. The church also provides online resources ranging from a budget worksheet to a list of [10 Ways to Wreck a Good Mission Trip](#).

"It is like taking baby steps," Martin said of their efforts. "People have been doing things one way for a long time and can get pretty lax on some things."

The church has used discernment and education to set its priorities as its leaders have become more aware of the changing needs around the world. The church has three guiding principles for its missions: working on behalf of children, leadership development and supporting the persecuted church. For example, the desire to support suffering Christians led Mount Pisgah to work in Nigeria and to lend support to believers in the Middle East, including in Iran. That requires partnering with other agencies because it is not a place for hands-on work by short-term volunteers.

Another new focus for Mount Pisgah is cultivating and supporting long-term missionaries, a practice that has fallen by the wayside across the congregational landscape.

"Even though you see the trends to short-term missionaries or monetary support, there's still a need for people to go full-time," Martin said.

Economic problems also are forcing the church to cut back its missions budget, and Martin foresees cuts through next year, too. Like many churches, money for short-term mission work comes through dedicated fundraisers by the people who will be traveling. But the overall missions budget is also set apart from the rest of the church's operating budget and is funded by designated gifts and a special annual collection -- both of which are subject to the economic pressures facing church membership.

That is forcing Mount Pisgah to put off expansion plans, focus existing programs and even reduce some programs.

"We start looking at exit strategies, which can be a very sensitive and difficult thing," she said. "We are always learning, absolutely. We have to be willing to take a step back on quantity to take a step forward on quality."

