

‘No limitations’: Small town church expands God’s Kingdom 10,000 miles beyond their walls

By Lindsey Williams
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John Bowen has a passion for connecting his small town Mississippi church with international missions. Since his retirement in 2018, the former principal has represented Bethsaida Church, Philadelphia, on three Vision Journeys with the Missions Mobilization department of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board – to Poland, Laos, and most recently, Indonesia.

After each Vision Journey, Bowen reports back to Bethsaida, who now collectively pray for and partner with the churches and missionaries serving in these countries. The church is determined to offer partnerships with a minimum three-year commitment so that missionaries can be guaranteed of Bethsaida’s full support. To date, they have partnered with a church in Poland for almost five years, and missionaries in Laos for four, as well as two national church plants, in New Orleans and in South Dakota.

On September 11, Bowen embarked on his latest Vision Journey with Chad McCord, Director of Missions Mobilization, 10,000 miles away from Mississippi, to the island nation of Indonesia.

“He’s not on staff; he’s just in church. He’s not a pastor; he’s just a faithful member,” said McCord, commenting on Bowen’s commitment to connecting his church to international missionaries.

In Indonesia, Bowen and McCord met with two missionary teams, one in Jakarta, the capital city located on the island of Java, and the other on the island of Bali. “Both teams were amazing,” said Bowen. “Jakarta is the second largest metroplex in the world, second only to Tokyo. If you take the state of Tennessee and put half the population of the United States in there, that’s what the island of Java is like. Jakarta alone holds about 33 million people. So the challenge is daunting.”

When Bowen and McCord arrived in Jakarta after their two most recent



The Indonesia Vision Journey team prayer-walks through Jakarta while visiting a street festival. (Photo credit: Chad McCord)

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After a quick flight to the much smaller island of Bali, Bowen and McCord met the missionary couple finishing up their first term on the field. The missionary team serves both a rural and urban population, as well as a majority Hindu religion and a minority Christian religion stifled with animistic tribal beliefs. They partner with two young pastors who were sent from a church in Jakarta to plant a church in Bali. The missionaries assist in training the church for evangelism and discipleship.

Bowen was thrilled to see both ministries striving. “The two teams face unique challenges and employ different strategies to reach the lost,” said Bowen.

“These Vision Journeys are not mission trips,” clarified McCord. “They are ‘go and see’ trips for local churches to find a potential partner in mission work. The idea is that we don’t want a church to get partnered with missionaries if it’s not a good fit. We hope for these trips to develop personal and ongoing partnerships.”

That’s what Bethsaida Church has been able to accomplish. With 80 adult members, the small town church is making an impact on the other side of the world.

“What happened was, a few years ago, my daughter – a highschooler at the time – went to Peru one summer on mission,” recalled Bowen. “I think her testimony of that trip helped people realize they could reach across the world if

they wanted to. God doesn't limit us because we're here in East Central Mississippi. He gives us the opportunity to serve all over the world.

"We've definitely been blessed as a church, and our pastor, Billy James, is just mission-focused. He has led the church to look outside our four walls and to see what we can do to grow God's Kingdom. Our congregation is convinced that there are no limitations; even if someone can't go physically, they can pray and they can give. Our church has just taken on that role and I'm so proud of them."

"Bethsaida Church is just your average Mississippi Baptist Church," commented McCord. "They are an older congregation, but they are starting to welcome more young people. As a church looks outside of their four walls with a missions focus, they become healthier churches. Mission-minded churches attract people who are looking for a church that loves and serves each other and desires to reach people all the way to the ends of the earth. They don't have to be a large church to use what God has given them to expand the Kingdom; they just have to be obedient with *what* God has given them and use that with a Great Commission vision."

With just a small amount of money, giving churches can impact international missions far more than most people realize. With exchange rates, money can go so much further overseas, and resources and programs for evangelism in places like Indonesia can be easily multiplied.

In terms of *going*, McCord shared, "John Bowen is wanting to talk to other sister churches in the Neshoba Association and gather up people from different churches to go on a mission trip together. That is the beauty of working together. Yes, churches can do some on their own, but as we work together, we can get two or three churches to do so much more. When churches give to the Cooperative Program, they're also helping each other, and when you give to the Margaret Lackey State

Missions Offering, some of those funds come to the Missions Mobilization department, and we are able to give financial assistance to churches seeking to go on mission trips.”

“We just want to encourage other small churches like ours that they don’t have limitations,” said Bowen. “They can contact Chad McCord and ask, ‘Where can we partner? Who can we work with? Give us some direction.’”

“There are all kinds of churches here in the state of Mississippi that, if they had the information and given the opportunity, would enthusiastically partner with missionaries and provide prayer support and financial support. That’s what I see my role as. I wasn’t called to be a missionary, but I love speaking with missionaries, looking at their work, and then coming back here to the states and finding people in churches that would be willing to partner with them. That’s my role.”

Missions Mobilization Events 2024-25*

East Asia Vision Journey (Oct. 14-23)

Balkans Vision Journey (Nov. 7-15)

Poland Vision Journey (Dec. 5-14)

Buffalo, NY Connection Meetings (Jan. 14-16)

Phoenix Vision Journey (Jan. 21-23)

Los Angeles Vision Journey (Feb. 25-27)

Buffalo Vision Journey (March 18-20)

Maine Vision Journey (April 29-May 1)

Central Asia Connection Meetings (May 13-15)

IMB Homeschool Conference

IMB Affinity Meeting

*Schedule is subject to change. Contact the Missions Mobilization department at cmunn@mbcb.org or 601.292.3398 for details, schedule changes, and available opportunities.