

English Services, Unterseen-Interlaken

How it all begun

The initiative of the caretaker couple

After returning from our ten-year stay in London, I was preaching in Unterseen-Interlaken one Sunday in 1983. After the service, the caretaker couple, Konrad and Trudi Kaufmann, approached us and suggested that I start English services in Interlaken. At first, we were rather hesitant, but when they told us how often they had English-speaking believers attending the German service without understanding a word, but joining the singing of well-known hymns, we were greatly impressed. We brought the idea before the Lord and in contact with the church leaders the way opened, and we had a 'trial summer' in 1984. Posters and cards were placed in hotels and tourist information centres and under windscreen wipers, with the help of the whole family and the caretakers. As a result, astonishing numbers of tourists attended the services, every Sunday from 1 July to 2 September.

English services – a permanent arrangement

We then had more talks and decided to have services every Sunday from June to the beginning of September, starting in 1985. To our big surprise we were literally overrun by the number of people attending, coming mainly from the UK, but also from the US, Ireland and other countries. We realized something of a good English tradition: As a Christian you attend church also while on holiday. Sometimes people booked their holiday only in an area, where they knew an English service was around, still others travelled up to two hours within Switzerland to attend church on Sunday. – Later English-speaking residents started to attend, and we had services throughout the year, first monthly and then twice a month.

Organizing and preaching

From 1985 onward I had posters and cards printed. Later, we handed out programmes to attendants and had our programmes published on the internet. We also organized 'Mission Praise' hymn books and NIV church Bibles.

Whenever it was not possible for me to preach, I was glad that missionaries that had returned from PNG took over the preaching. The last 20 years or so, the children of two families regularly attended Sunday school parallel to the preaching. We are thankful for all who helped and supported this ministry in practical ways, including teaching at Sunday school. And last but not least, without the faithful support of my wife Monika, who accompanied me whenever possible, I would not have been able to do this work over all these years. But most of all, all honour belongs to God.

Outreach

Almost from the beginning Monika and I were concerned to reach out to English-speaking visitors to Interlaken. In the beginning, we just handed out literature, supported by a brass band next to our literature stand, but soon we started open-air services with the support of alphorn players. Later, groups of young people supported us with singing and music. In recent years Arabs, Indians and Chinese tourists were attracted, and we had special tracts, NTs, DVD and SD-cards to hand out to them. I am glad that I could gradually hand over the organization of the open-air activities to younger people from the local GfC church.

When looking back, we thank God for His many blessings. Isn't it a taste of heaven to meet and share fellowship with visitors of various countries, churches and backgrounds! We got so much encouragement from them. Sometimes visitors had planned to attend church months ahead,

while others arrived on Saturday night and gladly received information of the services by posters, information centres, internet or even meeting miraculously churchgoers. Sometimes whole groups attended – on one occasion two large groups on the same Sunday, so that some of the young people offered sitting on the floor. It happened that twelve and more countries were represented, and we were reminded of Rev. 7:9, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ...”

Present Situation

Summer season (June to mid-September)

Over the last five years, the number of English-speaking tourists has steadily decreased. Reasons for this are the strong Swiss Franc, the weak Pound Sterling, and the younger generation of believers usually not as eager to attend a service while on holiday as the previous generation, a tendency we noticed long before the corona pandemic. During summer 2020 we reduced the number of services to two per month. On these Sundays only a handful of tourists attended.

Wintertime (October to May)

Looking back over the last couple of years the number of people regularly attending the services also decreased, due to various reasons (home-call, moving away, old age, etc.). The small Sunday school took place for many years. As children grow, over the years one after the other eventually left. Since summer 2020 only two have been attending.

Preaching:

When I didn't have other engagements, I preached two to three times in a 2-month period. When other pastors replaced me, they often found a congregation of only 8-12 people and sometimes all of them also understood German. These pastors could not be assigned for other ministries on those mornings and even though they said, it was alright for them, we felt that it was not quite fair. I myself got officially retired six years ago and already before have tried to find a pastor to take over responsibility, but the way did not seem to open. Monika and I are happy to give future assistance and support, both practically and in preaching when needed, but am glad for gradually giving up responsibilities.

A new solution found

Back in 1984, the call for church services for English-speaking tourists was obvious. Over more than thirty years we were encouraged by the many people attending and appreciating the services. When in addition we started the two-monthly services during the 'winter months' a good number of English-speaking residents attended them, as well as some Swiss. Even though the situation has changed now, it remains our prayer to maintain the original vision and yet to adapt it to a changed situation.

Joining the German-speaking church:

Over all these years the local GfC-church had supported the English services in their church premises, which even meant adapting their own programme, especially during the summer months. When we discussed a future solution with them, they were very understanding. We've come to the following agreement:

The 'Evangelical Fellowship becomes part of the local church. As from January 2021, an English-speaking person will be present during the morning services on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, also in summer. They will welcome any English-speaking visitors and regulars, making sure at least the basics of the sermon, content of hymns and announcements are translated. In agreement with the elders, it is planned that for the first half of 2021, I will be there once a

month, mainly for the welcoming of the English-speaking attendants and now and then also for the preaching in German. On the other Sunday some of the present attendants will be there to care for visitors. We also hope to recruit members from the GfC churches in Unterseen and Brienz who have a good command of English for this purpose.

Regular attendants of the English Service:

It is our desire and prayer that no-one will be left losing their spiritual home. We are in contact with the regulars and the following can be said:

- The two families could be integrated into the local churches in Berne and Unterseen. The youngest child of each family is warmly invited to join the Sunday school and the Teen's group there.
- One couple plans to join the church in Brienz. An elderly couple cannot attend church anymore. Monika and I will further on keep in contact with them.
- Regular visitors, one working part-time in CH, others regularly on holiday, were confirming they were happy to be part of the local church.
- Some others, Swiss regulars, plan to join local congregations and hopefully find a spiritual home there.

Tourists in summer:

We do hope that the numbers of English-speaking tourists will rise again and with them the need for English services. We have the possibility to go back to *all-English services on the first and third Sunday of the month, from June to September*. Some of the regulars have promised to support us when needed. Thank you!

As already mentioned, we are glad that the four open-air services are increasingly organized and supported by the GfC church of Unterseen and the young people from other GfC churches of the Bernese Oberland. In 2020, due to the extraordinary situation, we were reaching out to mainly German-speaking Swiss tourists and others from neighbouring countries. In future we hope it will be again possible to reach out to English speaking tourists from traditional destinations as well as those from India, China, and Arab countries.

Organization:

For the time being I am still responsible. On the homepage it will be clearly communicated that visitors of the English Fellowship for the time being are integrated in the German speaking congregation. A programme will be issued twice a year and circulated as until now, mainly by e-mail.

All this in mind, it is with a heavy heart that we make these changes, but "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to weep and a time to laugh, everything has its time ..." (from Eccl. 3)

We look ahead, knowing that it is the Lord's work. He was with us in the past and he will look after his sheep also in the future. We are missing the many contacts but are glad, that fellowship with God and his people will never end.

December 2020

Pastor Peter Kunz