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Church officials said the move is a milestone, after the region has received help for more than a century.

"They've turned the corner," said Homer Trecartin, president of the Greater Middle East Union and former world church undersecretary. "Many years ago people from other parts of the world risked their lives and some gave their lives to help the people of South America. Now they feel it's their time to do the same for other parts of the world starting with four of their best pastors."

The South American Division will loan four incoming Inter-Division Employee budgets to fund the pastors serving in the Middle East. The division will reassess the program after three years.

The denomination established the Greater Middle East Union last month, with officers calling the region a "world priority."

Trecartin said he hopes other world divisions will follow South America's lead. That division's commitment, he said, will also strengthen the church in its own territory.

"They know that when those workers go to other parts of the world and they return home they will bring back a different world view," he said. "The church in South America will be stronger and they'll help prepare leaders for the world church."

South American Division Executive Secretary Magdiel Perez Schulz said administrators are still deciding on the four pastors from among nine candidates. Perez Schulz said each candidate speaks good English and in addition to theological training has professional experience in administrative leadership, music or cross-cultural ministry.

Perez Schulz said each of the four pastors will be requested to send a short report and photos every few weeks, which will then be emailed to each of the division's 3,900 pastors. He said he hopes this will inspire the division to provide for support for the Middle East, including additional volunteers and supplies.

"We are very happy that we can help the world church in this way," Perez Schulz said.

The Greater Middle East Union headquarters is located in Beirut, Lebanon.