

Reaching International Students Why it's the church's job

by Ellen Livingood

Imagine a city the size of San Francisco populated entirely by future global leaders. While its citizens come from almost every nation on earth, they all speak, or are quickly learning, English. The boundaries of this city likely reach all the way to your back door. Then imagine that in four years, most of this city's population will be gone, but another 800,000-plus new citizens will take their place.

This "city" is the international student population studying right now in the US. (If you live in some other Western nation, or any world-class city, you likely have a similar influx of international students.) Where once the vast majority of these internationals were clustered in graduate programs in the top universities, today thousands are enrolled at community colleges and smaller universities, bringing them to virtually every church's doorstep.

A Unique Window

For two, four, or more years, these students are detached from the controlling influences of their religious environment back home. These cream-of-the-crop young adults are open and curious about Americans and their religion. Many are lonely and looking for friends. Yet during their years here, the vast majority of

these international students will never be invited into an American home, much less make a Christian friend.



Missing: An Integrated Church Strategy

It is amazing that many churches focus large amounts of time and money to penetrate closed countries around the world. Yet they fail to take advantage of the barrier-free opportunities they have to reach the future leaders and influencers of those very same countries during

the time they are living next door.

Consider This Idea ... Involve small groups

One church in central Ohio encourages their small groups to invite several international students to join them for dinner once a month for three months. This approach reduces the fear factor by making it a group effort. This limited commitment is "do-able" for any group, and it creates a climate where individual friendships can germinate naturally. In addition, this approach allows church members to get involved with international student ministry any time during the year rather than being limited to an August/September launch or holidays when people's schedules may be busiest.

While some church leaders believe it is important to reach international students, they choose to take an outsourcing approach. When asked how international student ministry fits into their global missions strategy, they reply that they leave that ministry up to para-church specialists in organizations such as ISI (International Students Inc.) or InterVarsity. Many churches that do engage in ministry to international students separate it from their global missions efforts. This segregation robs both students and church of maximum benefit.

God's Missions Strategy

The book of Acts reveals God's two-pronged missions methodology: He both sent witnesses (example, Paul and Barnabas) to where the church did not exist, and He sent unreached people to where the church already was (example, the international crowd at Pentecost). Church history demonstrates God's ongoing commitment to both approaches. The unprecedented flood of global peoples He is moving to the West today emphasizes His commitment to that strategy. (This wave also includes a broader Diaspora of peoples; we will address other aspects in subsequent issues.)



Strategic Reasons the Church Should Engage International Students

The friendship equation

Valuable as they are, full-time para-church workers cannot provide a sufficient quantity of the one ingredient essential for reaching internationals—personal friendship. Many international students crave friends, particularly to improve their English through conversation with a native speaker. “Conversational English and free suppers are your ticket to meet students, especially undergrads,” says Derrah Jackson, Midwest regional field director for ISI.

Typically, after about three or four contacts, these students begin to ask why their new American friends are reaching out to them. Sharing faith then comes very naturally, a matter of answering the questions of the new international friend. Usually it is much easier to talk about spiritual issues with international students than with an American neighbor because internationals are curious and don't have the cultural taboo that frowns on discussing religion. One student told her

American friend, “You built a bridge from your heart to mine, and Jesus walked across it!”

However, not all international students are responsive. When churches are strategically engaged in the outreach, their leaders can provide encouragement and support when ministry is challenging.

Cross-cultural passion and skills

“Missions” seems unrelated to real life for many believers. But a friendship with an international student translates the Great Commission into a real, live person. Prayer

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is transformed when “the lost” are now represented by someone whom believers know and care about. And the challenges missionaries face in crossing cultures are suddenly appreciated in a new way when church members wrestle themselves with understanding and being understood by a new international friend. Missions takes on a whole new meaning and importance.

Some churches require that any adult applying to participate on a short-term trip first develop a friendship with an international student. This helps potential short-termers understand that the key to ministry is relationship rather than task. And with good preparation, it sensitizes future short-termers to at least some of the cultural issues they will face overseas.

Consider This Idea ... Help Students Connect to Christians Back Home

International students who become believers while studying abroad may return home to face loneliness, hostility from their family, even outright persecution. Churches can contact organizations such as ACMI (see resources on page 4), their own missionaries, or mission agencies to connect students to believers in their home country, helping to bridge this difficult transition.

Family ministry

Many churches look for short-term family missions opportunities because parents want their children to have a cross-cultural experience. While the options for overseas ministry with kids are sometimes limited, one of the



most effective and easiest family ministries is international student outreach. Host families don't need to add additional activities—they can just invite international students (and their families, if they are here) to participate in what their family is already doing. In the process, children learn a lot about other cultures.

Non-threatening beginnings

Crossing cultures can be intimidating, but international student ministry has easy, one-time events where your church members can experience this type of outreach and overcome initial fears. Picking up new arrivals at the airport, helping to host a Thanksgiving dinner at the church, or delivering furniture to newcomers are just a few examples.

Hospitality practice

Rich Mendola, director of International Friendships, Inc., says, "I believe that a lifestyle of hospitality is the greatest key to mobilizing Christians for involvement in fulfilling the great commission." The New Testament

lists hospitality as a prerequisite for church leaders, yet developing and practicing hospitality is not usually an intentional church activity. International student ministry allows church members first to watch others practice hospitality and then do it themselves in the context of high-impact ministry.

Discipling future church leaders

The local church is a place where international students who become believers can come to understand how the body of Christ functions. Of course, Western church practices are not the normative pattern for churches in other parts of the world, and most students will return to places where the church will look very different for a variety of reasons.

Yet international Christians can still learn much in their adopted Western church that they can apply back home where many of them will become key leaders. For example, could they sit in on elders' meetings to understand how leaders make decisions and shepherd others? Could they learn from exposure to the church's children's ministry?

Consider This Idea ... Host an Alumni Forum

Several years ago, Park Street Church in Boston invited a number of former international students who had been part of their fellowship to return for a reunion and conference. Nineteen professionals came to spend time hearing from each other and from speakers, and to dream about what ministry could look like in their regions of the world. The gathering was a great success as these influential Christians from around the globe encouraged one another and their Park Street friends.

Inviting former international students back to participate in a missions conference or other event can expand the congregation's commitment to reaching out to the current group of international students. It can also raise awareness of the impact of kingdom professionals after they return to their home country.

Mentoring in real life

Another unique contribution churches bring to international student ministry is the opportunity to connect these students with American Christians in similar professions. For instance, an international student studying engineering who comes to Christ can develop a friendship with a Christian engineer and see how he or she lives out faith in the workplace. Or future business leaders can watch how a believer runs a company based on Christian values.

These mentoring relationships are a great way to use the marketplace gifts of the believers in your congregation. And first-generation international believers benefit because they will have few such models when they return to their home country where mature Christians in the workplace are a rarity.

Missionary sending

International student ministry is not just an evangelism and discipleship opportunity but a missionary sending one. International students return to be salt and light in their home country without needing to learn the language, get a visa, or adapt to the culture. They immediately reintegrate into extended family and community

Consider This Idea ... Repurpose an Under-used Missionary House

As more missionaries shift to shorter, summer home assignments, some churches find their missionary home underused. Redesignating this space for international student housing and/or ministry can be a great way to continue seeing a year-round global impact from this resource.

in a way that expatriate missionaries never could. Churches need to wake up to the huge potential of “sending” such workers who require no financial support but benefit from ongoing mentoring and nurture.

Leading the way for global professionals

A growing number of marketplace professionals is beginning to head overseas to live as very intentional, incarnational disciplers. International students who go home as committed believers can be the crest of this new wave, leading the way for others from Western churches. What could your church learn from them?

International Student Ministry Resources

- [International Students Inc. \(ISI\)](#) – A ministry dedicated exclusively to reaching internationals on hundreds of campuses. They have extensive materials to help churches and individual Christians do international student ministry with excellence.
- [International Friendships Inc. \(IFI\)](#) – Focused on ministry primarily in Ohio, IFI mobilizes more than a thousand volunteers from dozens of churches.
- [The Association of Christians Ministering Among Internationals \(ACMI\)](#) and ACMI-Link – This umbrella organization offers an annual conference (a great place for churches to learn how to launch an international student ministry) and connections to ministries in hundreds of schools and countries around the world.
- [Ambassadors for Christ](#) (Chinese resources) – This ministry focuses on Chinese intellectuals with extensive resources for distribution both here and in China.
- [InterVarsity](#), [Bridges](#) (a ministry of Cru), and [Navigators](#) focus on international students on many North American campuses. Various denominational ministries such as [Chi Alpha](#) (Assemblies of God) and Baptist Student Ministries (check for local chapter) also reach out to international students. Hundreds of smaller, local ministries are also effectively reaching these students.

If you are a church missions leader

1. Do you know what international student populations exist in your area? Do you have contact with the international students office of nearby colleges and universities? Have you offered your services to host internationals for Thanksgiving or Christmas?
2. If you have an international student ministry, have you brought the leader(s) together with your missions team to brainstorm how the ministries could be mutually beneficial?
3. If your church has a focus on a particular region or people group, have you researched where there is a population of these internationals studying in your country? Even if you discover a student population some distance away, are there ways you could be involved in helping to reach them?
4. Are your volunteers sufficiently prepared? What training is available (see resources previous page)? Are you utilizing the international student ministry staff in your area to help prepare your people to do ministry well?
5. Do you use international student ministry as a training ground for those going overseas?
6. When short-termers return, do you proactively plug them into international student ministry?

If you wear an agency hat

1. What personnel or other resources can you offer churches to improve their international student impact?
2. Could you help churches connect their international students to national churches or workers in their home country? Are your church partners aware that you can help them in this way?
3. How could international students who are believers contribute to your global efforts? Have you considered how you could recruit them and/or build partnerships with them while they are here in order to generate long-term fruit? How could your agency build a powerful triangle by partnering with churches and their international students?

Interchange Postings

Catalyst's *Postings* e-newsletter is a monthly publication designed for mission agency personnel and local church leaders involved in collaborative global efforts. The practical articles highlight what churches and agencies are doing to mobilize believers, especially those of younger generations, to expand the Kingdom.

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