

Igniting Young Adults' Vision How a Challenge Engaged Students in Missions

While Park Street had a large budget for this project, these ideas can be applied on a more limited scale. Don't miss the "downsizing ideas" at the end.

"How do we mobilize a new student generation to be passionate about global outreach?" the missions committee of Park Street Church in Boston, MA, asked themselves several years ago. The answer surprised them.

The context of their discussion was the church's bicentennial which coincided with the 200th anniversary of the beginning of the American student missions movement. Park Street determined to invest \$200,000 in a special missions effort to highlight this bicentennial milestone. But what did God want to accomplish through this unique opportunity? And how could it be a catalyst for renewed student missions passion?

The initial assumption was that Park Street would sponsor some type of special global conference for students, but other such events were already in place. Out of a series of dreaming sessions emerged a totally different con-



cept—a competition for missions project funding. The idea sprang from a popular, non-profit competition run by a nearby university each year.

"In the summer of 2010, a team of 34 American volunteers traveled to South Africa to help launch a sustainable tutoring program. Our team served as mentors in township schools, building relationships with the younger students to encourage them and provide academic support. We were consistently awed by the students' attentiveness and dedication. It motivated us to work even harder to help them gain the study skills that would enable them to succeed in school and beyond, and potentially enter college.

"Even two years later, a number of our South African students remain in contact with their tutors. Meanwhile, the experience inspired our team to use their education to serve others—many are pursuing callings in public service, medicine, or teaching. One student is planning to join a non-profit in India.

*Kathleen Breeden Hudson
Mamelodi Township Initiative team member*

The Social Change Challenge

It was decided that the Park Street challenge would focus on projects that promoted the gospel and made a differ-

ence in the world through social change. Preference would be given to proposals that lined up with the church's current priorities, but the major requirement was that the proposal had to revolve around a project that excited the students and fit their own vision. The competition would be open to grad and undergrad students in New England, and no set amount of individual prizes was determined in advance. Students were required to work in teams.

Interest and excitement generated immediately!

Participants were required to submit a preliminary application. Each received individual feedback, and the church brought in speakers with grant-writing experience to provide some training. Applicants were also encouraged to go to their professors and let them know what they were doing and why they were doing it. In some cases, that enlisted more expertise and resources for the project.

Eventually 50 written proposals for local and global projects were submitted. A panel of judges was assembled, and each presenter/team had seven minutes to introduce their proposal in person. At the end of the day, winners were selected based on the strength of the proposal and how the project lined up with what Park Street wanted to fund. Some projects were fully funded; other grants provided partial funding, dependent on whether the students could find the rest of the monies elsewhere. Some church members offered to match grants for certain projects.

Some Surprising Outcomes

One of the winning teams created a machine that made interlocking, stabilized bricks and made them faster and more efficiently than current systems. The goal was to provide a sustainable business to support a ministry ministering to abandoned children.



Another Park Street project was the Global Medical Education Project which partnered the Boston University School of Medicine with Yemeni medical students. One result was a published medical study on khat chewing (an addictive habit with negative health and social impacts) with continued discussion-based seminars and a follow-up survey on students' willingness to confront patients about the dangers of this widespread habit among the people of Yemen.

"Some of the best stories developed from projects that didn't even win," recounts Missions Pastor John Chung. "One of the teams that made the finals but was not ultimately selected had poured their hearts into developing a project for street children in Africa. They had established an advisory board and everything. The lack of church funding wasn't reason enough for them to walk away. They did it anyway! We love that we have seen projects happen just because the contest itself was a catalyst!"

One of the projects addressed a problem in South Africa where poorer, black students have difficulty getting accepted into college. "We have lots of students here whose major experience in life is taking exams and getting into college!" Chung says with a laugh. "The question was how to leverage that expertise to help under-resourced South Africans. They launched a project for Harvard students to spend a summer there, but they also wanted to make the effort self-

sustaining. So they reached out to the University of Pretoria and challenged them to send their students into the townships to do tutoring. It took three or four years for the school's administration to get on board, but the American students were persistent. Now 80 Pretoria students are going into townships every week at the university's initiative.

The Church's Engagement

One Burmese student was part of a winning team which focused on a project in her home country. To help ensure success, Park Street's missions committee sent one of their members to Burma to do training on accountability with the nationals leading the project. The open dialog about partnership accountability was well received and an ongoing relationship developed. Park Street continues to underwrite this project—the only funding to continue for the initial grant recipients.

The Light of Hope project was awarded \$10,000 to employ youth in Lusaka, Zambia, in making and selling interlocking, stabilized soil blocks. The goal was to enable the local Light of Hope ministry to provide important skill training and employment for community youth while also building a venue for ministry to them.



Team members spent seven weeks

in Lusaka in the summer of 2010, providing engineering and financial management training. At the time of the team's departure, block production was upwards of 240 blocks per day. Since then, several jobs have been completed, and Light of Hope has contracted the machine out to other clients. A regular Bible study for youth has grown from a few people to include the entire Light of Hope soccer team, providing weekly discipleship. One team member returned last year to follow up and will take a team this year to address additional needs.

Participants' evaluations:

"I not only learned about the practicalities of development work, but also to trust in God throughout the

ups and downs. The experience deepened my heart for developing communities and international health. I have continued to explore those topics during my first year in medical school and know that they will shape my future career path in working with underserved populations."

Team Member Tiffany Yuh

"The project transformed the direction of my life and career. Not only was this overall project my first opportunity to apply my engineering training to the challenges of the developing world, but I was able to do so in



such a tangible and personal manner that I made a commitment to use my education to target the most urgent problems afflicting the poor. The experience reinforced how much I still

have to learn. This past year I continued gaining experience by building bridges for rural communities in Bolivia and will continue this fall with my Fulbright research in the Philippines. None of this would have come to fruition without the support of Park Street to empower us early in our aspirations to serve, and I am sincerely grateful for the privilege of doing God's work in the field."

Team Member Daniel Jimenez

Some of the other projects are completed. Others continue and are still in the church's "missions orbit" but without ongoing funding.

"The stories continue long after the one-time gifts were handed out," Chung adds. "At first we were concerned that it was going to be once and done, but the impact often has continued. And the testimonies have been incredibly positive; they've warmed our hearts.

"The whole process has also created a new norm,"

Chung continues. "All the new freshmen heard from the upperclassmen, 'This is what we do over the summer.' It's created an expectation that you invest your summers to change the world!"

"We went into this effort with some trepidation," Chung admits. "But we came out feeling incredibly excited. So we would like to keep on doing this, but on a smaller scale. Our ideal would be to offer it at least once every four years to involve each generation of students.

Downsizing Ideas and Other Suggested Applications

1. **Small grants have high impact.** You don't have to have \$200,000 to make this type of project successful. Even one \$3,000-\$5,000 grant can stimulate significant involvement.
2. **Recruit congregational support.** Challenge members of your congregation to match whatever grant money you designate from your budget. Seeing the excitement of young adults and the creativity of their ideas will encourage those with financial resources to contribute to make the dream a reality.
3. **Offer a matching challenge.** Teams whose proposals are selected or approved could be asked to raise the initial funds, then the church would match those gifts, up to a certain level.
4. **Flip the roles.** Invite organizations your church is interested in supporting to present project proposals and set up a panel of judges, at least half of whom are young adults. Suggest that each proposal incorporate opportunities for significant involvement and leadership on the part of Millennials.
5. **Apply the concept to funding missionary projects.** Invite your missionaries to submit project proposals for funding. Establish criteria for inclusion and send out teams of two to three church members to critique the top contenders. Each visiting team should include not only a church leader but also a younger adult. On return, these teams should be able to report and advocate for "their" project.
6. **Use endowment funds.** Park Street's initial project funding was drawn from a missions endowment. If your church has such discretionary funds, consider using some monies for this type of project that has high potential for molding the next generation of global Christians.

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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