

# ***International Students: A Strategic Component of Diaspora Missions & the Great Commission***

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## **Introduction:**

Making disciples of Diaspora Peoples is both a growing opportunity and responsibility, as well as a challenge for the Church. It is a growing opportunity because of the increasing trend of migration of peoples, and also a responsibility for the people of God to welcome and love the foreign-born coming to our communities, campuses, and churches. Making disciples of international sojourners, whether they have become permanent residents or are temporarily living among us, is a challenge because they represent myriads of cultures and different kinds of groups, each with their own distinct needs. Most Internationals are immigrants or refugees, while others may be business people and other professionals, researchers, military personnel, seafarers, laborers, au-pairs, overseas domestic workers, short or long-term visitors, diplomats or government officials, academicians, and students.

During the opening plenary address of *Global Impact'16: International Student Ministry Consultation* held in the Czech Republic in May, the leader of the Czech student ministry that is part of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, recounted the history of the start of the movement. An international student from the Netherlands enrolled in a Czech university and disciplined several Czech students who then became the founding leaders of the indigenous student ministry.

While we were in Manila for the AMA 12th Missions Convention in April, we visited a thriving church that was started by a ministry that gave priority focus to discipling international students.

The focus of this article will be on ministry among International Students, who are a relatively small segment of the broad scope of Diaspora Peoples, but who represent a highly strategic component of the goal of “making disciples of all nations”. The immediate next generation of the world’s transformational leadership are in the world’s universities and colleges, and a steadily growing percent of students are coming from other countries. They may grow in professional and spiritual formation while studying abroad, and become nation-builders after they return home. Many, if not most, international students do return home, either within a year of graduation, or eventually years later as seasoned professionals, adding to the brain-gain and leadership potential for their countries and surrounding region. According to [Project Atlas 2015](#) of the Institute of International Education, the current number of about 5 million international students is projected increase to 8 million by 2025.

## **I. Why is International Student Ministry (ISM) Highly Strategic in Relation to the Great Commission?**

### **A. Strategic Elements.....International Students & Scholars are:**

1. already among us, here and now, on our campuses, in our communities, and in our churches; we do not need to wait to go somewhere abroad, in the future; we do not need to get a visa, medical exams and vaccines, or purchase a plane ticket
2. sufficiently conversant in our language in order to study in our schools, or may be in a language institute to enhance the learning of our language, and appreciate the opportunity to practice our language with us (and while we do not need to be fluent in their native tongue, we could have them teach us some expressions of their language)
3. generally curious to learn about our culture, history, country (city, town) and may wish to have host-country friends who can be cultural mentors
4. often more open, curious, and responsive to learning about Jesus Christ while living abroad, such as has been seen among Chinese scholars and Japanese students
5. freer to consider the gospel if they are away from a restrictive society, culture and religion that may be hostile towards Christianity
6. possibly from “unreached people-groups” where the Church does not yet exist or is in an infant stage; or from a ‘closed’ country that does not allow missionaries
7. appreciative of hospitality, and welcome relationships of mutual intercultural interaction, as well as the intergenerational social context of host-families where younger children, parents, and grand-parents are valued along with peer-age adults;
 

[“The main missiological lesson is....found in John and Edith Hayward’s hospitality to a dusky stranger back in 1929. The Haywards professed no great love for the masses, nor did they devise even a single ingenious scheme for evangelizing the world. They *did* love one stranger. What the church in India, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan would look like today had the Haywards not welcomed Bakht Singh into their home is a matter of speculation. The fact is that without their hospitality two of the most significant movements in twentieth-century Asian church history probably would not have occurred”, *Thinking Small: Global Missions and American Churches*, by Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missiology*, April, 2000]
8. potential world leaders politically and in their professions, nation- builders, and transformation agents [China’s First Hundred by Thomas LaFarge recounts the profound transforming influence on China by the first group of returning Chinese students from the U.S. from 1872-1881, some of whom became Christians]
9. cultural informants or "instructors" who may advance missions awareness. Two mega-shifts in missions in the 19th and 20th century were spurred on by the informants role provided by international students:
  - a.) In the 3rd week of the July-long Moody student conference at Mt. Hermon, MA, 1886, a special "*meeting of the ten nations*" was held in which students from 10 countries shared briefly about the need for missionaries in their part of the world. Those "Macedonian calls" fueled a response that resulted in 100 of the 251 students signing a

pledge of willingness and desire to be missionaries. The missionary passion coming out of the conference was the initial thrust that led to the formation of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions in 1888. The SVMFM produced over 20,500 missionaries on the field, and thousands more who supported the missionary movement. [Student Power in World Evangelism, David Howard, Inter-varsity Press, 1970]

b.) Dr. Ralph D. Winter's development of the Unfinished Task of World Evangelization in relation to the "hidden peoples"/unreached peoples concept effected a paradigm-shift in mission understanding and strategic planning. What contributed to the emerging "people groups" missiological-view of Dr. Winter? He told me in effect, that the Fuller Seminary School of World Missions where he taught at, had 10 students and 100 faculty...and went on to explain that he was a "student" learning about church growth and evangelism among the world's great diversity of cultural sub-groups, from a 100 "teachers" ...his international student informants

International students may play a tremendous role in the advance of missions understanding and needs, and will continue to be valuable instructors, if we are willing to listen and learn from them

10. potential gifts and ministers of God to the host nation and Church; an African seminary student was instrumental in the conversion of a veteran priest, who later became a bishop and played a significant role in the evangelical renewal within his denomination; Christian international students need to be encouraged and allowed to utilize their spiritual gifts and ministry experience while they are studying abroad, and the host-country church has a responsibility to disciple Christian internationals in their congregation.

### **B. Returning International Students Impacting their Country/Region**

A newsletter from a tentmaker friend in a restricted access country states that "more than 500 from our university have gone abroad during the last four years. Under the conditions of their scholarships, most of the students will return after graduation to take up positions at our school". Hopefully most of the returnees will bring back positive influences to their school and society, but some may be carriers of negative baggage.

One of the compelling strategic components for ISM is that Christian returnees are Christ's ambassadors to their own people and culture, and should be encouraged and equipped to return home with the conviction that God is sovereignly sending them home as His witnesses.

A survey I conducted for a paper was taken of ISM workers to list some Christian returnees who have made significant contributions in the advancement of the gospel and building of Christ's Church in their region. Some of the returnees came to Christ while studying abroad, and others were already believers, and discipled during their international sojourn. Here are only some of the returnees cited in the survey:

\* John Sung, who came to Christ in the US in the mid-1920's and returned to China as an apostle and revival spread like wildfire throughout the Far East.

\* Many of today's top evangelical leaders of the Church in Malaysia and Singapore were disciplined as students in Australia in the '60's and 70's. Adding to the ranks are graduates from the 80's and 90's, such as Dr. Patrick Fung, the first Asian International Director of Overseas Missionary Fellowship, who was part of the Overseas Christian Fellowship of Sydney.

\* Two sisters from a highly restrictive country came to Christ as international students, disciplined by a student ministry, and returned home to have a very fruitful ministry until they were kicked out of their country. They have continued to have a highly successful ministry in other neighboring countries of the restricted region.

\* 1) Student in Portugal: In the 1980's Procel DaSilva Armando was sent by the government of Guinea-Bissau, West Africa, to study law in Portugal. He came to Christ and disciplined with the Christian Union of Portugal. After returning home he exercised courage and faith to decline situations that would compromise his convictions and as a result was promoted highly to serve his nation. Lindsay Brown summarizes the story in Shining Like Stars with, "...in Portugal as an overseas student was able to become a Daniel at court back in his home country. We should never underestimate the influence that someone with courage can bring on the whole direction of a culture".

2) Student from Portugal: a high-school exchange student trusted in Christ in the U.S. and returned home and engaged in a university ministry. Later he became the national director of the campus ministry and entered into partnership with two international mission organizations to launch an ISM at two universities in Portugal. He also is a key leader with the Portuguese Bible Society. (Lausanne Occasional Paper #55).

\* A contemporary Japanese returnee has planted 70+ churches

\* A contemporary Chinese returnee has planted 7 churches, a specialized ministry, and a campus fellowship

\* Niijima Shimeta (aka Joseph Hardy Neesima) stowed away to America and became a Christian in 1866. After attending Amherst College, MA, he graduated from Andover Theological Seminary and became the first Japanese ordained Protestant minister in 1874. He returned to Japan in 1875 to start a Christian school that became Doshisha University and also Doshisha Womens College of Liberal Arts.

### **C. ISM Benefits Local Churches & Ministries**

Local churches and ministries are discovering how enriching it is to have a ministry among international students because:

1. of the benefits and significant global impact that's possible with a very modest ISM budget; high-yield but low cost

2. ISM provides a tangible dimension to a church's mission vision, with engagement options for the congregation to participate in...beyond prayer and financial support of overseas missionaries and ministries

3. ISM incorporates the broad range of church members available for involvement, from children to retirees, and utilizes their varied gifts for service---hospitality, helps, administration, teaching, mercy, evangelism, leadership, etc.

4. returned or retired missionaries back home are extending their cross- cultural mission service by ministering among international students from the country or cultural-linguistic group they served overseas; we had several missionaries and other returned expatriate government, military or business people involved regularly in our church-based ISM

5. many people who have a desire to serve abroad but are not able to, are having a fruitful ministry with international students from the country or region of the world they had intended to go to; it is not unusual to hear volunteers say that they had a desire to be a missionary when they were younger, but circumstances changed their direction in life, and are now being global missionaries at home, and sometimes in their homes.

[“before the Haywards were married, Edith wanted to go India as a missionary, but she could not. The Lord instead enabled her and her husband to host, disciple and prepare a vessel for His work in India and other parts of the world...Bakht Singh...while living with them as a newly converted international student, little did they realize that their guest would one day be the...greatest evangelist and church-planter in India in the 20th century; from Brother Bakht Singh of India, by T.E. Koshy, 2003] [Edith Hayward had committed herself to missionary service in India... when instead she decided to marry a businessman, her “spiritually-minded” roommate and best friend boycotted the wedding, convinced that Edith had stepped out of the will of God; from Note 19, Bonk, Missiology, April, 2000].

6. international students are ready-made language and cultural teachers and mentors for anyone going to the students' countries for long-term or short-term missions, study abroad, work, or simply a visit

7. international students may provide a critical linkage for ministry/mission in their homeland, either personally after they return home or by giving a positive introduction and endorsement of missionaries to their family, friends, and networks; returnees could be gatekeepers that open the door for ministry by foreigners in their country [our own daughter did a study-abroad in Quito, Ecuador and was invited to the home of a former international student who was part of our church’s ISM...and later our daughter returned to Quito for 9 months of short-term missions]

I have heard of returned students who either opened the door for missionaries or closed the door to missionaries, depending on their good or negative experiences in the missionaries’ homeland.

8. ISM provides great “pre-field” cross-cultural experience for those planning to serve in another country [“The most effective way workers can prepare to serve overseas is to invest one or more years ministering with international students. Ministering to international students needs to be given a stronger emphasis in the preparation of mission candidates. Workers who minister to

international students long before going overseas were shown to be much more effective than their peers”, Tentmaking: Business as Missions, Patrick Lai, 2005]

9. the reality is that most Christians are not "called" to serve as long-term professional missionaries or to be self-supporting "tent-maker" missionaries in another country, but will remain in our homelands. Nevertheless, staying home does not mean we cannot engage in cross-cultural, global ministry....ISM is one avenue for engaging in world missions at home.

## **II. From Mission Field to Mission Force**

While ministries and churches have traditionally viewed international students as a mission field, more attention and priority should be given to discipling Christian international students to discern their calling and stewarding their gifts as God’s agents of the Great Commission, whether they return home, remain in the host country, or go to another country. Our church-based ISM created an evening worship service by and for internationals to deliberately provide a variety of ministry opportunities within a church context. As a result, the international worship team leader went to seminary and then returned to his home country in South America as the first “returnee” Episcopal/Anglican priest.

## **III. Ministry as an International Student: A Priority to Implement**

Christian college students should be encouraged to commit to a semester or year abroad as an international student and in effect, be an intentional student “tentmaker”. Besides the academic and personal rewards of the studying in another culture and country, the student will both minister while abroad and return with a greater appreciation for and skills to engage a world of growing cultural diversity and “glocal” mission opportunities. Returned study abroad students are a natural pool for ISM involvement. This strategy is “ISM in reverse”. Campus ministry movements, such as InterVarsity USA, are to be commended for intentionally prioritizing “study abroad” and establishing a study abroad department.

## **IV. Global Recognition & Networking of the ISM Movement:**

One way to share the vision of ISM with the global Church and to encourage and equip denominations, mission agencies, campus ministries, local churches, and other ministries for outreach among international students, is to develop a global network of ISMs which will also resource, and equip one another to enhance the development of ISM in their area and context of ministry.

The Lausanne movement included International Student Ministry, in conjunction with Diaspora ministry, as a new emphasis for world evangelization at its 2004 Forum in Thailand, and subsequently established the International Student Ministries Special Interest Committee in 2007, which then evolved into the ISM Global Leadership Network(GLN). The Lausanne ISM GLN, comprised of national and regional ISM leaders, hosted a regional Asia-Pacific consultation in Singapore in 2009 and again in 2015 under the directorship of Terry McGrath, the founder and former director of ISM New Zealand, who is the Lausanne Asia-Pacific ISM Regional Facilitator. In 2014 the Lausanne ISM GLN, became a linked network of the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, and conducted a Manila-wide ISM training hosted by

the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches and the Philippine Missions Association. The Lausanne ISM GLN seeks to pioneer ISMs in strategic locations where it does not exist and to enhance existing ISMs, primarily through encouraging regional ISM networking, resourcing, and equipping events.

## **V. Challenges**

### **A. Continual Need to help God's People Really See Internationals**

God repeatedly emphasized in the Old Testament the command for His people to love and care for widows, orphans, and foreigners (aliens, strangers, internationals). But often people don't extend help, friendship, or hospitality to marginalized people because they don't "see" them. Their eyes may notice a foreigner, but their heart looks past the stranger. We need God's grace and love to truly see international students in our midst and feel compassion for them, just as Jesus felt when he saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, as lost and distressed. Seeing and feeling with God's eyes and heart will direct our steps towards genuine welcoming of foreign students and other strangers.

I was at a conference that had four workshops related to ISM. A question was asked of the participants, "Are more American students noticing or seeing international students?" The unanimous reply by representatives of different campus ministries was "no". The greatest pool of potential friends and witnesses to international students are their fellow host-national students, but they are practically blind to seeing the mission field sitting next to them or residing on the other side of their dorm-room wall. Who will encourage the local students to lift up their eyes and see the world, ripe for harvest in their classrooms? Who will challenge them to ask the Lord of the harvest to send forth workers into the global mission field on their campus? Who will encourage campus ministries to invite Christian international students to join them, or if contextually appropriate, to form a culture/language specific fellowship?

### **B. Need for Training the Next Generation of ISM laborers**

The first generation of the contemporary ISM movement is at the stage of winding down their race and should be passing the baton to younger leaders. How appropriate and needful that the Lausanne Younger Leaders Gathering (Jakarta, Indonesia, August, 2016) included both Introductory and Advanced workshops on ISM, and established on-going mentoring of younger ISM leaders by veteran ISM workers.

In addition to mentoring the next generation of ISM workers, there is an urgent need for advanced academic training and research in ISM. Nearly all of the current ISM staff have not had any formal academic training in ISM because it hardly exists. There is an occasional introductory course on ISM, but no degree with any emphasis or concentration in ISM. It would be irresponsible and a failure of stewardship if this present generation of veteran ISM staff does not address the need to prepare the next generation of ISM staff. It is time to establish some academic courses and possible Masters degree with an ISM focus, so that the next and future generations of ISM workers can at least have an option for academic training and research in ISM, to go along with non-academic training opportunities (e.g. organizational training and ISM conference workshops). This author had the privilege of convening the first two North American

consultations to explore the establishment of academic training in ISM. Such a possibility is now within reach in collaboration with the Lausanne Global Diaspora Network(GDN). The GDN seeks to encourage the inclusion of diaspora missiology at Christian higher education and theological institutions and recently produced Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology that was presented at the 2016 AMA Mission Convention in Manila. One of the chapters of the compendium is on ISM. An equally valuable compendium on diaspora missions that also has a chapter on ISM is, Global Diasporas and Mission, vol. 23 of the Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series.

### **C. Need for Contextualized Reentry/Returnee Preparation and Discipleship**

The need for culturally relevant and contextualized pre-departure reentry training and discipleship, and post-return follow-up, as well as informing home country churches and fellowships of the issues returnees face has been an on-going challenge for ISMs. Stories of a significant number of returnees who became believers abroad, but fade from Christian fellowship after returning, keeps this issue a high priority. Perhaps the most developed ministry to address this critical need is the Japanese Christian Fellowship Network ([jcfn.org](http://jcfn.org)) that was formed by Japanese students attending the 1990 InterVarsity “Urbana” Missions. A primary resource for international student reentry preparation is Think Home: A Reentry Guide for Christian International Students, that is translated or adapted in several languages and countries, is available at: <http://ism.intervarsity.org>. A bibliography of Christian international student reentry resources is available from the author.

## **VI. Resources**

**A. Websites:** a list of national and regional ISM websites is available from the author

### **B. Lausanne ISM publication and ISM bibliography**

<https://www.lausanne.org/networks/issues/international-students>

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