

Ivan Chung

abstract

International students represent an often-forgotten group in diaspora missions, but have an incredible potential for global and local impact, as well as ministries among international students. This article introduces the cultural, social, and spiritual potential of international students and ministries among them, and suggests strategies as to why and how they can impact the world on many different levels.

The global ministries of the local church and Christian institution have often resulted in the pouring of resources towards many cross-national excursions and adventures and have stimulated the curiosity of American church world-wide travelers who may desire more excursionary ministries. Unfortunately most of these trips do not understand how God has been changing the cities, the world, and thus missions. To reiterate what Alan McMahan stated in an earlier edition of the Great Commission Research Journal:¹

¹ McMahan, Alan. "Church Growth by Another Name: Challenges and Opportunities for the Future of a Movement." *Great Commission Research Journal* 1 no. 1 (Summer, 2009): 16.

The U.N.'s population division reports that there are two hundred million international migrants on the move worldwide, a number equal to the population of the world's fifth most populated country, Brazil. It is more than double the number of international migrants recorded twenty-five years ago in 1980.² By the year 2010 the estimated number of international migrants will be almost 214 million.³

With thirty-eight million migrants, the United States hosted the largest number of migrants in 2005 (20% of the worldwide total), followed by Russia with twelve million, Germany with ten million.⁴ From 1995 to 2000 immigration accounted for 75% of the population growth in the U.S.⁵

Much of the migration today is motivated by perceived economic and educational opportunity. Immigrant professionals and international students from the Southern and Eastern hemispheres are moving to the North and the West, mostly from urban contexts abroad to other urban centers, especially in the U.S.⁶

32 The global church as well as the general population has been scattered across broad geographical areas but has also been brought together in close geographical proximity in urban contexts and new host countries. The result is often the influx of culturally sophisticated and highly motivated learners in our American cities.⁷ International student enrollment in U.S. higher education institutions has increased by 8% during the 2008–09 academic year, to a record number of 671,616.⁸ Here are some personal examples from my undergraduate and graduate international student mentor groups at Biola University.

A graduate student from Jordan, who was born in Jerusalem, was raised in the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination. He studied engineering in Iraq, served in the military in Jordan, and worked as an engineer in southern Yemen and in Turkey. During those years, his ministry started to blossom, and he started preaching in various Arab churches throughout the Middle East and engaged in ethnic reconciliation efforts there. He served on the Board of Trustees at a

² Report of the Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 10. Copies available from: www.gcim.org.

³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, Migrant Section available from <http://esa.un.org/migration/p2k0data.asp> (accessed 20 August, 2009).

⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *International Migration Report 2006: A Global Assessment*, 17.

⁵ Report of the Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 85. Copies available from: www.gcim.org.

⁶ Gardner, Deborah. "Record Numbers of International Students in U.S. Higher Education." November 16, 2009. <http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=150649> (accessed May 17, 2010).

⁷ Salem, Paul and Charis. "Welcoming International Students Strategically." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 45 no. 2 (April, 2009): 206.

⁸ Gardner, Deborah. "Record Numbers of International Students in U.S. Higher Education." November 16, 2009. <http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=150649> (accessed May 17, 2010).

Christian university in Beirut, and now has brought his family to the U.S. to be further equipped in the area of apologetics and discipleship for further ministry to Arab-speaking nations.

Another graduate student, along with his family of seven, was a survivor of genocide in Rwanda and Burundi. In 1994 he was under his bed for twenty-six days during the frightening ordeal. Since then, he has experienced much-needed healing and has been a sought-after speaker and peacemaker in churches where even the pastors formerly betrayed their own congregation members to be murdered. His work with World Vision and in American churches have opened opportunities for lay leaders and pastors to be trained in reconciliation ministries to warring tribes and people groups like the Tutsis and Hutus and in other countries such as Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Still another undergraduate student leader in my international programs is an ethnic Korean and a direct descendant of the famous Genghis Khan (as Korea was one of his short-lived conquests). He and his family have been almost nomadic missionaries in “east Asia”, constantly moving from city to city, and language group to language group, establishing churches and education centers as they migrated. Fluent in both Mandarin Chinese and Korean, he has been an ESL translator the last couple years for Biola University. His family’s work took him back overseas this past summer, as they traveled sometimes by foot to visit various ministries of ethnic groups, some of which had only one Christian witness within that language group.

These are only some of the many illustrations of God bringing the nations, believers, and their experiences to our doorstep. They come with rich cultural histories, and with elaborate understanding and practice of church ministry. Because of the now well-known shift of the “center of gravity”⁹ of Christianity towards the southern and eastern hemispheres, they now represent the majority church as well as indigenous ministries within their home countries to unreached people groups. Because they also represent some of the most urbanized and educated groups in the south and east, many of them are already highly influential in church and marketplace leadership, and will continue to be so as the global economies provide greater incentives to return to their home countries. Many immigrant students arrive in the U.S. already established in a thriving, local church from their home countries, and ready to learn from the churches as well as the universities in the U.S.

⁹ Johnson, Todd and Chung, Sun Young. “Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33–AD 2100.” *International Review of Mission* 93 no. 369 (April, 2004): 174–177.

However, I have found that many local churches as well as Christian universities and seminaries in the U.S. have been generally ignorant and resistant to the idea that the most informed and well-equipped missionaries in our midst are not from the U.S., and these students are already making preparations to enter a broad range of marketplace and ministry fields in a multiplicity of nations and urban centers. One of the reasons for this ignorance among Christian organizations in the U.S. relates to the historic social challenges in American evangelicalism, such as the ethnocentric notions of *Manifest Destiny*¹⁰ and *American Exceptionalism*.¹¹ These concepts shaped the motivation for the American missions movements around the world, as well as inter-political decisions in relation to our national neighbors, such as America's initial dealings with Mexico in the 1830's to 50's. Another reason for this unawareness has been the American evangelical participation in "white flight" especially during the mid 20th century, a movement of retreat from and abandonment of the urban centers, to move towards the relative safety of greater ethnic and socio-economic homogeneity. These trends have produced generations of suburban expansion among generally homogenous communities without much multicultural competence. Many evangelical churches and schools were birthed in the midst of these movements, and so the teaching and practice of missions is done based on the prevailing thought that one still needs to travel thousands of miles in order to learn a different culture. Therefore the immense resources from America's suburban churches are often poured into the short-term missions enterprise, with hopes of the great adventures of international travel. In short, there is present in America's majority-Caucasian churches a romanticized view of missions and an exotic attitude towards extended cross-cultural interaction, especially if it pertains to the sharing of the gospel.

Yet we encounter a strategic opportunity when we see God bringing nearly all the dispersed nations to the urban centers around the world, especially in America where theological and ministry education is plentiful and effective. In 1975, at Boston's Park Street Church's World Missions Conference, a former international student gave a transforming message entitled, "The Great Blind-Spot in Missions Today."¹² This message demonstrated the incredible strategic potential among immigrant students, and how it had been neglected by the church. I believe that

¹⁰ The expression used to justify U.S. expansion, imperialism, annexation of neighboring lands, and its destiny to establish cultural hegemony from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

¹¹ The idea which conveys America's uniqueness even among so-called *developed* nations in ideology, history, and values.

¹² Leiton E. Chinn, "International Student Ministry: 'Blind-spot' to Vision." (presentation, Lausanne Diasporas Strategy Consultation, Manila, May, 2009).

this ministry towards and with immigrant students has become even more strategic since 1975. Here are some reasons why:

ministry towards immigrant students is biblical.

Scriptures is replete with stories and doctrine for anyone who would read it with the eyes of the global sojourner, migrant, and marginalized. Acts 8 is an example when Philip was taken to a cross-national ministry within his home country while already ministering in neighboring Samaria.¹³ Jerusalem was an urban center for many global sojourners for religious reasons, and this government official from Ethiopia was no different as he was seeking to re-enter his own culture with renewed spiritual fervor. The interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian official was one of cross-cultural, theological education where the official becomes an *international student*, and because of this experience, the Ethiopian official's faith multiplies in the next 200 years producing tens if not hundreds of churches along the Nile upstream towards modern day Sudan. Because of at least one good host or educator, many international students today return to their home countries with renewed confidence in the Lord, and vision for ministries.

35

In Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah writes from his home city of Jerusalem to the Jews in exile in Babylon, in order to encourage them to be *international students* of the city in order to “seek the prosperity” of the city that does not belong to them and that they would even consider evil and an enemy, because “if the city prospers, they too will prosper.”¹⁴ And because in Babylon, Daniel was considered an insightful and wise immigrant student, he becomes an important cross-cultural official for more than one empire. Many international students are a blessing to the city, churches, and schools where they attend. They become cultural informants and teachers for many future missionaries and provide much-needed insight for churches.

ministry towards immigrant students is a means of practicing and developing a theology of hospitality and welcome.

Both cross-cultural hosts and their guests can function as agents of teaching and learning. Just as Abraham hosted three visitors who gave him the good news that a son would be born to him at such an old age, international students can be people for whom the host (and usually the dominant) culture could practice hospitality. Hospitality is considered a lost art in our western, cosmopolitan, individualistic

¹³ Acts 8:5–13, 26–39

¹⁴ Jeremiah 29:4–7

culture.¹⁵ But we certainly can recover it, especially if we see our guests as ones who bear precious gifts for the hosts. Global students certainly can offer more than just financial revenues for the institutions and government.

ministry towards and with immigrant students is a grand source of cultural information and teaching.

Many of my non-international students are beginning to realize that they do not need to go far to access the resources of a multicultural learning community. If the domestic hosts are willing to learn and sacrifice their cultural hegemony, international students could be some of the best cultural informants, perspective givers, and trainers for missions trips, urban outreach and immersion excursions, cross-cultural studies, sociology, interviews, and community development courses.

36

ministry with immigrant students creates a place of global church networking and mobility.

Many graduate international students have been in high levels of church leadership, and understand the plight of churches in their home countries. Because they have been empowered to study abroad, they are usually very mobile in church ministry and know many people who could provide ministry opportunities, jobs, internships, long-term field partnerships in missions, and long term global relationships. One of my students from Jordan (described above) has connected some of our undergraduate short-term missions leaders to ministry opportunities among Arab-speaking and Muslim friends.

ministry towards immigrant students provide opportunities for care and compassion for people in cultural transition.

Often, international students who are resistant to receiving the gospel in their home countries are much more open to it as they study abroad, mainly because the process of cultural transition creates more openness to new things, people, and ideas. The feelings of shock and disillusionment open people to a level of friendship and dialogue that was not possible prior to their travels. The responsiveness and willingness to learn is often quite evident among global

¹⁵ For further discussion on the theology of Christian hospitality, see Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

students, especially when they are shown hospitality and care during their initial days in their new surroundings.

ministry with immigrant students offers a chance to create a place of mutual enculturation, leadership, and reconciliation.

Instead of assuming the international students are primarily responsible for their own *assimilation* into the dominant culture, rather, we should seek to create an environment where both guest and host culture would be responsible for building bridges towards each other. This *mutual enculturation* makes cultural humility, desire and collaboration essential for a healthy and diverse learning community to take place, and prevents the status quo of the dominant culture from being pervasive. It would be a place where good servant-leadership is nurtured, and social equity is a strong value intrinsic to the church or institution, and not only for ministry training.

37

ministry with immigrant students is usually a deeply urban ministry.

Ministry among international students should also imply ongoing ministry among ethnic enclaves and immigrants in the cities. Not only are cultural parallels apparent between international students and the pockets of ethnicities in the urban areas (i.e. Chinatown, Koreatown, etc.) where they would feel “at home”, but international students could be the best resource for evangelization, outreach, and initial discipleship in partnership with churches and institutions. The international student ought to be the teachers of how to love and know our global neighbors.

ministry with immigrant students is a way to reach unreached people groups.

International students themselves are sometimes from unreached people groups where there may be few or no self-supporting Christian witness. Or, they may have grown up in the vicinity of those unreached people groups. This reality provides whole new strategies for local churches in the west that want to be involved in frontier missions, but do not know how, or do not know people who could connect them. Beyond merely praying for and financially supporting overseas missions, and engaging from a distance, chances are that the Christian international students are connected to various indigenous ministries in their home countries.

ministry towards and with immigrant students broadens local church participation.

The breadth of possible ministry to international students is tremendous, and merges many spiritual gifts and skills from hospitality to relocation services, from care for children to administration, teaching, compassion, service, leadership, intergenerational and intercultural ministries. Ministry to international students can include participating with Christian internationals to provide Christian witness to state university and community college international student groups. Ministry with international students can also mean collaborating with Christian internationals for diaspora outreach ministries. Helping with global student family transition or ex-patriot re-entry challenges should be a part of the church's global ministry. Teaching English is a necessary global ministry, as is language acquisition of local, non-internationals for cultural interaction in the city and for missions. Both "long-term" and "short-term" missionaries will benefit from doing ministry among international students, as this is one way of engaging in world missions locally.

38

ministry towards and with immigrant students is where the global meets the local—diversifying and multiculturalizing global missions AND internationalizing families, churches, schools, and diversity programs.

Through many decades of polarization and segregation, the local churches in America that have the resources to have a global ministry (typically the "white" suburban churches) often perceive local urban diversity ministries and education as being "provincial", "divisive", and "political".¹⁶ This perception is typically one of a *globalized* culture. In turn, the local (typically lower socio-economic, "storefront") urban churches perceive the global ministries of the suburban churches as being "frivolous", "out there", and "unconcerned about what's happening back 'home'".¹⁷ This attitude is common to a *diversified* culture.

Usually international students, because of their typical upbringing in more privileged, wealthy homes, are much more connected with the globalized cultures, and thus receive more ministry from globalized cultures. However, I believe that connections and reconciliation could be made through our urban immigrant communities, who are already providing cultural commonalities with international

¹⁶ Christa Olson, H. Stephen Straight, Judy B. Krutky, Jarred A. Butto, "Bridging the Gap Between Internationalization and Multicultural Education" (presentation by American Council on Education, NAFSA Annual Conference, Washington D.C., May 27, 2008).

¹⁷ Ibid.

students of which most globalized, suburban churches are not aware. These immigrant communities may be part of the “brain drain”¹⁸ of their home countries, but also send billions of U.S. dollars back to their families at home in the form of remittances despite their own urban poverty. This immigrant and international connection is also where the smaller urban churches could become internationalized and how suburban churches could become more diverse.

ministry towards and with immigrant students is low in cost but high in output.

Ministry towards and with international students costs very little (the students provides most of the transportation!) for local churches, but the potential for global/local impact is huge, not only for mere enrichment or service, but future collaboration, intercultural ministries, and global church and ministry partnerships.

These are reasons why this seemingly unromantic side of missions—engaging in ministry with international students—could be one of the most strategic, and could provide local and national churches opportunities for global/local ministries they could ever have imagined.

Ivan Chung is the Director of International Student Services and Adjunct Instructor at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University. He is a graduate of Wheaton College (B.Mus., 1997) and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (M.Div., 2005). Currently, he is also working on his Doctor of Philosophy in Intercultural Education. Ivan has been a pastor in inner city Milwaukee, Chicago, Houston, and New York City before joining the faculty at Biola University.

¹⁸ A phrase that describes the emigration of professionally trained, formally educated personnel to another more opportunistic country or region.