

GETTING UNSTUCK FROM “SERVICE LAND”

FROM SERVICE-ORIENTED
MINISTRIES TO DISCIPLE-
MAKING MOVEMENTS

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International student ministries (ISMs) often get stuck in the land of welcoming and serving students. Hard-working ISM staff and volunteers pick students up from the airport, help them find furniture, teach them English, and organize trips across the nation. None of these activities, in and of themselves, are wrong. The problem comes when service sidelines evangelism and discipleship.

What can ISMs do to turn their service-oriented ministries into disciple-making movements? How can we fulfill our vision of reaching the nations here so that our international graduates go into the world committed to Church-Planting Movements (CPMs) and Disciple-Making Movements (DMMs)? This article explores these questions, probing what must and must not change in ISM, while also providing an example of how an international student ministry got “unstuck.”

The fundamental issue at the heart of Christian discipleship today is no different than two-thousand years ago. Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). He asks the same piercing question to His would-be followers around the world today. All international student ministries, staff workers, and volunteers must honestly ask: *Are we committed to self-denying, cross-bearing, Christ-following discipleship?* Once genuinely answered, we can then address the “What-next?” question. While Christ’s call

to follow Him remains unchanged, the context differs in the early 21st century.

International students today live in a world shaped by consumerism, technology, and globalism. A preoccupation with stuff is not new to the twenty-first century. However, when combined with globalism and technology, consumerism becomes a virus in students’ souls. Sown globally by the internet, it works in the opposite direction of self-denial and deceives us into thinking the good-life—true peace—is just one purchase away. Students might be curious about the things of God, but the latest phone, gaming system, or car seem much more real and satisfying.

When ISM is stuck in “service land,” students become customers or, even worse, mere consumers of our goods. Rather than cooperating for the good of the kingdom of God, we compete with each other for the greatest market share on campus. International students leave our ministry when they find another one offering a better spring break trip, better English teacher, or better water bottle. Students might indicate decisions for Christ, but any commitment fades once persecution or suffering threatens an abundant, peaceful life. The gospel-seed of Matthew 13 cannot thrive in the rocky soil of consumerism.

I do not want to demean all technology. Digital tools present unique opportunities, such as discipling students in Asia over Skype, sending links of the

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Magdalena film to former students in the Middle East, and connecting to students before they arrive here. We must train our students to fight against the scourge of internet pornography and time-guzzling video games. Most importantly, however, we must re-orient our ministries away from “service land” and toward disciple-making movements.

David and Paul Watson have advocated for the benefits of “contagious disciple making.”¹ In a November 2012 *Mission Frontiers* article, they explore how small groups



Photo Credit: Melissa Vacek

INTERNATIONALS AMONG US

BY NEAL PIROLO

Editor's note: Internationals come in very diverse categories, as you will see in this article, but all represent very accessible mission fields for the gospel.

More people travel internationally today than ever before. Political, economic, educational, social and religious factors have led to unprecedented movements of people. Most of us can expect to be exposed to new comers in increasing ways. I want to invite you to open your eyes to seven specific types of internationals living among us.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: At any given time, over one million international students from 181 countries study in the United States. Within a decade, most will be in positions of leadership in their home country. Your involvement can be as simple inviting them to a meal in your home or as involved as having one living with you for a semester.

REFUGEES: Fleeing war, famine and deprivation, refugees are flooding our borders. Sponsorship of a family can help them overcome the trauma of their flight to freedom and introduce them to the One who offers true freedom.

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PEOPLE: International business people visit the U.S. briefly for economic reasons, but Christians have unique opportunities to speak Truth into their lives.

ETHNIC COMMUNITIES: Internationals cluster in communities of their own kind for security and feelings of their home culture. They offer you a targeted opportunity to build relationships and tell them about our Savior.

UNDOCUMENTED ALIENS: Likely more than ten million people live in the U.S. without documents. Among many difficult issues associated with this, Christians find ample opportunity for the gospel.

INTERNATIONAL VISITORS: America is an attraction for millions of international visitors. The window is open briefly, but what an opportunity to show true Christianity.

MISSIONARY KIDS: Children of career missionaries may return to life in the U.S. having lived in their new home culture for no more than three years. They may appear to be Americans, but they need mentoring as internationals among us.

The frontiers of world evangelization are not only in Tibet, Saudi Arabia, and China. The frontiers of unreached people groups are also in your community. God has brought the internationals of the world to the doorstep of every church in America. Let's do world missions at home.

can engender movements of Christ-loving disciples.² They describe the benefits of groups—replicating more often than individuals, protecting against heresy, self-correcting, and keeping individuals accountable—then push for small groups along existing social networks. Through action and repetition, effective groups incorporate prayer, intercession, ministry, replication, obedience, accountability, worship, and Scripture. The biblical premise of the priesthood of all believers (I Pet. 2:9) drives such groups.

In our consumer driven world, what must ISMs do to engage international students in DMMs that will equip them to be part of CPMs when they return home?

1. **Disciple-making movements vs. service-oriented ministries.** ISMs should serve international students and meet their needs. But if we stop there, we will enable a consumeristic, “what’s-in-it-for-me?” mindset. We need to point students to Christ, disciple them to serve, and empower them to lead.
2. **Student-led vs. staff-led.** ISM workers must constantly empower students to lead: from small tasks like emceeing a Christmas party and cooking food for a student social to bigger challenges, such as leading a small group and running a leadership team. We must avoid the temptation to do the best parts of ministry ourselves so we can have all the best stories for our prayer letters.
3. **Groups vs. individuals.** Jesus ministered to individuals, but with some exceptions, He disciplined in groups: the three, twelve, and seventy-two. ISMs need to avoid the individualistic tendency to sequester students into one-on-one settings. Many students come from collectivistic cultures; they should be disciplined in groups.
4. **Simple vs. complex.** Too often our materials for evangelism and discipleship require a leader with experience, theological training, and access to particular resources. Simple tools, though, are transferable across cultures and time. ISM tools should be simplified to the point that anyone can lead, even brand-new Christians or, dare I say, non-Christians. God’s Word is living and active (Heb. 4:12) so let’s empower students with simple, Bible-based tools.

With all four points in mind, International Students Inc. in Dallas-Fort Worth developed the M:28 evangelistic Bible studies based on David Watson’s contagious disciple-making principles. Bridges International adapted M:28 to create a simple,


clear discipleship curriculum called the Profile of a Discipled Student (PODS). Both M:28 and PODS provide a simple tool that engender disciple-making movements led by students in a group setting.

Making changes like incorporating M:28 and PODS will either thrill or terrify ISM workers. It is scary: We must give up control. We must surrender our right to be the center of our campus ministries. We must empower international students in groups to lead our ministries to become disciple-making movements.

I personally have wrestled with these realities in North American and Western European ministry contexts. From 2004-10, I served with Bridges International, Cru’s ISM, in Houston. One day a colleague and I took a Chinese student from Rice University to lunch. As we munched on Caesar salads and breadsticks, we asked our friend if he would consider leading a Bible study next semester. He responded: “Why should I lead the Bible study? It’s your job, isn’t it?” Clearly, we needed sharper focus on student-leadership.

When I moved to London in 2010 to launch a new ministry, I re-thought my approach. We would rely on students to lead. I might suggest a weekly prayer time or new outreach activity, but the students must own it. Student leadership pervaded our tiny but fruitful ministry at King’s College London. Three years later, when we returned to Texas, we left a team of six student leaders composed of several new believers. Yes, we made mistakes. As any campus minister knows, student-leadership is strewn with tears, filled with disappointment, and plagued with frustration.

Two years ago the Bridges International team in Chicago decided to focus on student leadership. “We are not going to get anywhere if we just have a bunch of relationships and are always doing things to help students,” noted the team leader. “When they return home, we want them to walk with the Lord for a lifetime.”

Without constant focus on student-leadership, ISM will default to staff-led service-land. And without students leading our ISMs here, will they deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus back home? 

¹ *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Thomas Nelson, 2014).

² missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/small-groups-that-have-the-dna-of-a-disciple-making-movement