

Honors Capstone Thesis

**Developing an International Student Ministry at Northwest University**

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## **Introduction**

From its beginning, Christianity has prioritized missional outreach to people from around the world. One of Jesus' final commands to his followers was to go out and make disciples in every nation (Matt. 28:19-20a [ESV]). Some misinterpret this command, thinking one must go on trips overseas or become a foreign missionary to obey Jesus' call.

Initially, when I discerned a call to vocational mission ministry, I also thought that becoming a missionary meant I would go overseas to live in a foreign country for the rest of my life. My conceptualization of missions was narrowed by my limited experience with missions, as I only knew missionaries to be people for whom my family and I prayed and supported, apart from church members who went on short-term trips overseas. However, as I grew older and experienced a greater variety of Christian ministries, I learned that missions could also involve local ministry, including campus ministry and compassionate ministry to the homeless, sick, and foreigners. At this time, I began to realize God's mission is not confined to international travel.

Meeting international students while studying at Northwest University further broadened my understanding of missions. I explored downtown Seattle, learned classic hand clap games, went to school events, and ate countless meals at the school cafeteria with friends primarily from South Korea and Japan. I spent the majority of my time with international students. When I shared the gospel with two non-Christian international student friends and one made the decision to give her life to Christ, I realized the potential of how God's mission can be carried out through relational ministry to international students.

I discovered that even international mission ministry can be carried out in our local contexts, such as at a Christian college campus like Northwest University. International student

programs bring students from other nations to American universities, providing a significant opportunity to obey Jesus' call to make disciples of all nations. At Northwest University, international students do not necessarily sign the agreement of faith in Jesus before enrolling in their first classes. Some students are not Christian, while others are Christian and are seeking to grow in their faith. In this way, American students have an opportunity to witness to non-believers and help train Christian international students to become disciple-makers, so they can spread the gospel in their home countries.

One reason why I was inspired to continue in international student ministry at Northwest University was that I realized it was an opportunity to live out the Great Commission. As I ministered, I wondered about what loving and ministering to international students looked like ideally as well as how to build a stronger relational bridge between domestic students and international students. As a result, this thesis is focused on determining what an impactful international student ministry could look like at Northwest University, including one that continues on after the current leader graduates. Based on personal ministry experience, interviews, and literature analysis, I have determined intentional, relational outreach to international students to be the most fruitful and meaningful method to pursue.

### **History of International Education at Northwest University**

Because my thesis focuses on determining what a fruitful ministry looks like to international students in the context of Northwest University, it is helpful to identify the history and aims of the university's International Department. This section is based on a conversation with Dr. Li Lowry, the director of the International Department at Northwest University, who gave me a brief overview of the International Department's structure and history (personal correspondence, 14 October 2024).

The International Department began as International Student Services in 2013. At that time, there were about thirty or thirty-five international students studying at Northwest University, but no consolidated form of care or place where international students could go for help yet existed. Various Northwest University employees covered different logistical needs, such as the part-time academic advisor issuing I-20 forms; however, there was no central office for international students with employees specifically supporting international students' unique needs. In 2013, Li Lowry was hired to begin International Student Services. Her vision was to increase the population of international students at Northwest University and to establish a central hub where international students could go for assistance. They eventually established an office with a growing number of employees specifically tending to the needs of international students. Eventually, International Student Services shifted to being called the International Education Department. Dr. Lowry continued past relations with partner universities that sent international students to study here, while also making phone calls with educational recruitment agencies to recruit more international students who are the right fit for the university and setting up connections with new universities. The International Department recruits international students through such agencies, in-person trips to partner universities, Christian high schools around the world, phone calls, connections with pastors and Northwest University alumni, the recruitment portal, and by word-of-mouth. Staff and faculty, as well as leadership at Northwest University, have worked closely with the International Education department to recruit international students, such as athletes. Eventually, Northwest University reached steady numbers of about 165 international students, which was fairly significant in the context of a university of about 1,000 students in total. While COVID-19 brought a significant decline to

numbers of international students, as of fall 2024, there are now about 165 international students studying at Northwest University again.

The Northwest University International Department provides educational services to multiple groups of international students. The department provides a Center for English Language Education (CELE) program, in which students are taught English as a Second Language (ESL). Within the CELE program, students have a variety of goals. One group of CELE students study at Northwest University for a few years to reach proficiency in English, once they finish level 6 of the course. They want to improve their English capacities to better their work and intercommunication skills. A second group of international students within the CELE program study ESL, but then use their English proficiency to enter degree programs either at Northwest University or other higher education institutions (seeking an undergraduate, master's, or doctorate degree). Lastly, there are exchange or visiting students within the CELE program. Exchange and visiting students come from partner universities, mainly in Japan and South Korea, studying for a short term of either one semester or one year. Eight universities currently partner with Northwest University, and some students come specifically for an English for Aviation program. The difference between exchange and visiting students is that exchange students meet the English proficiency requirements, while visiting students may or may not. Exchange students and visiting students who do meet the English proficiency take a combination of CELE classes and undergraduate classes. In addition to the CELE program, there are international students who reach scores of English proficiency on the TOEFL or IELTS English test, who come as undergraduate, master's, and doctorate students but who do not need to undergo the ESL program that CELE has to offer. These international students fall in line more with traditional domestic students.

Within my ministry, I have mainly focused on outreach to CELE international students, and specifically the exchange or visiting students who study at Northwest University for a short term of either a semester or a year. These students mainly come from South Korea and Japan. According to Dr. Lowry, out of the various groups of international students, these students tend to need the most care. They live on campus, and some do not take classes with traditional domestic students. As a result, they need more community, friendships, and language support in the intensive time period for which they are on campus, including from other domestic students.

The International Department provides opportunities for learning the English language and covering technical procedures of studying abroad. For a more detailed explanation of their mission and specific tasks, see the footnote below.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the International Department also provides a significant opportunity for compassionate and relational outreach ministry. Dr. Lowry describes the International Department's work as "hard heart work" (personal correspondence, 14 October 2024). The International Department provides international students with a social network and family to whom they can turn when they face difficulties, as they are far away from their own families and social support networks. Dr. Lowry views the Department

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<sup>1</sup> *"The International Education Department at Northwest University (NU) is the hub of all aspects related to international students and scholars in graduate, undergraduate, exchange, Center for English Language Education (CELE) and short-term programs. International Education emphasizes four main areas of service: 1 – recruiting international students and scholars, 2 - providing support and assistance necessary for them to achieve their educational and professional goals, 3 - delivering academic English instruction and programs to students from around the world with the goal of developing dynamic leaders, scholars, and international professionals, and 4 - ensuring institutional compliance with U.S. immigration regulations that govern their visa status.*

*This includes marketing NU and recruiting international partners and students from abroad and domestically; processing international undergraduate and ESL applications for CELE; collaborating with graduate admission counselors and providing admission guidance for international students with streamlined admission processes; advising on immigration and personal matters with appropriate referrals; providing authorized immigration documents; conducting new-student orientations; and arranging programming for international students. In addition to serving international students and scholars, International Education Department offers study abroad and cultural immersion opportunities to NU undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students through its partners and universities in other countries."*

as a shelter for international students, caring for these students as they are in a more vulnerable state away from home. The International Department employees pick up international students from the airport and provide them with a comprehensive welcome orientation to what life will be like at Northwest University, providing them with logistical needs such as medical insurance. The department also puts on monthly events to provide newcomers with opportunities to experience Seattle (such as going to a Mariners' game or Wings over Washington) and American culture (such as pumpkin painting and a Thanksgiving meal). They also invite these students to share about their own culture during International Education Week. The International Department staff makes themselves available to students in their times of need, such as verifying their visa statuses, helping them across English-learning barriers, and taking care of students when they are sick or experience health crises. Through these practical methods and a genuine relational, caring presence, the International Department conveys the compassionate and hospitable character of Christ (cf. Deut. 10:18, 19; Matt. 25–39).

The International Department, stemming from their “hard heart work” of practical compassionate care for these students, also engages in the opportunity for relational outreach. Dr. Lowry emphasizes that the International Department seeks to carry out the university’s vision, including for Northwest University to reach out to people from every corner of the world (cf. Matt. 28:18–20). She recognizes that countries around the world compete for international students, as they bring unique perspectives and may become future leaders who can bridge cultural and political barriers between nations and cultures when they return to their home countries. International students who remain in the United States fill the needs for skilled professionals in various capacities as skilled migrants. By providing an educational space and relational community for international students, the International Department can provide a key

bridge for how Northwest University's goal of reaching the world can be achieved. In addition, while Northwest University is a Christian university, only traditional undergraduate students are required to sign an agreement of Christian faith before being admitted into the university. As a result, CELE, master's, and doctoral international students may or may not believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Consequently, not only can the International Department invest in Christian international students who may become faith leaders in their home countries, but the program can also provide a witness of Christ's love to non-Christian students.

In this way, while the International Department has a fairly short history, they have become intimately involved in compassionate, and relational ministry to international students at Northwest University. Dr. Lowry provides encouragement that students can also join in providing community to these students. She encouraged domestic students: "Don't be shy; reach out" (Lowry, personal correspondence, 14 October 2024). Many international students seem too intimidated to initiate contact, so even just starting a conversation with 'hello and how are you' can be the opening door to building connections with these students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Opportunities Within International Student Ministry**

While numerous possibilities exist for missions overseas, international student ministry represents a significant opportunity for domestic cross-cultural outreach. A large portion of students studying abroad in the United States come from unreached people groups. Unreached people groups constitute communities of indigenous Christians lacking a population substantial enough to productively evangelize to the non-Christians within their nation (Winter and Koch 2002, 19). Based on this definition, three out of the five countries that sent the most international students to the United States in 2022—that is, China, India, and Vietnam (Project Atlas 2022,



2))—can be considered unreached people groups. Additionally, the actual numbers are significant, as just over one million international students chose to study in the United States in 2023 (Statista, 2024), a precipitous rise over the previous year that may have still reflected pandemic-related travel restrictions. In a very real way, the unreached world has arrived on the doorstep of the American university.

By witnessing to these students, international student ministries in the United States can reach young adults who have a slim chance of being evangelized by Christians in their country of origin. To research successful ways of engaging this missional opportunity, Samuel Kirui interviewed twenty-two international students who converted to Christianity while studying abroad (Kirui 2020, 50). From those interviews, he discerned that one of the key aspects of international students' conversion process involves direct connection with Christians. The international students were deeply impacted by campus and church ministries' gifts of hospitality, Bible studies, and assistance in the process of acculturation (Kirui 2020, 73). This study reveals that international student ministries' missional efforts can play a key role in convincing international students to begin a personal relationship with God, as was the case for these twenty-two students. However, readers are left to speculate what level of formality of these "connections with Christians" is required to be effective. These efforts may be more organic and relational rather than slick programs or activities.

#### Culturally Appropriate Methods of Small Group Ministry

United States college students tend to be known for their desire to gather with others with whom they live in proximity—even those who may not share the same upbringing as they do. No wonder Christian small group ministry has been a primary point of relational connection on numerous campuses across this country. How international students might respond to this

preferred American approach deserves closer scrutiny—especially for those coming from cultures that show some reticence toward interacting with outsiders. Nationwide studies have found that during the 2020–2021 school year, 70.6 percent of the students studying abroad at United States universities came from Asia (Hanson 2023). Due to this significant percentage of the total number of international students, it is helpful to examine methods of ministry that work well in an Asian cultural context; admittedly, these approaches may not involve a formalized curriculum to reach people for Christ. Instead, friendship evangelism by roommates, friends, and classmates could prove to be the key factor—especially given certain interaction norms unique to Southeast Asian nations. Geert Hofstede, a social psychologist recognized for his leading work in the examination of intercultural interaction, created an Individualism Index examining 50 countries. In this study, no Asian country scored within the 20 most individualistic cultures, while 18 out of those 20 countries were located within North America, Europe, and Australia/Oceania (Hofstede 1997, 53). This finding reveals that while various Asian cultures display different degrees of individualism and collectivism, they tend to have higher degrees of collectivism than Western cultures, leading one to assume that forming a small group comprising people with similar backgrounds could prove appealing to attendees who might not yet consider themselves Christ followers. Understanding how small groups function within the context of Asian collectivistic cultures can help inform the construction of a culturally appropriate small group for international student ministry. Starting a small group led by someone potentially perceived as an outsider, however, may make this effort particularly challenging for Asian students to feel comfortable attending. An additional setback may be that in the United States university context, small groups tend to be designed with a more individualistic mindset.

Considering the Northwest University campus particularly, the majority of exchange and visiting students come from South Korea and Japan, which represent strong examples of an ingrained commitment to collectivism. South Korea is ranked 43rd out of the 50 nations studied in Hofstede's Individualism Index, with a score of 18 out of 100 (Hofstede 1997, 53). On the other hand, Hofstede's research presents Japan as more individualistic in nature with a score of 46 out of 100 (1997, 53). However, Japan is still much more collectivistic in comparison to the United States, which scored 91 out of 100 (Hofstede 1997, 53). As a result, studying small groups within South Korean and Japanese contexts can help determine if small groups are an effective method of ministry for international students coming from collectivistic cultures in the rather inclusive Northwest University ecosystem that frequently cites "community" as a guiding value.

In general, Hofstede defines *collectivism* as cultures in which "people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (1997, 51). In this way, collectivist cultures focus on a shared rather than independent identity. In South Korea, this shared identity expresses itself in a tendency for individuals to socialize with other Koreans because of *jung*, their mutual sense of attachment and belonging (Parks 2011, 201). This cultural value parallels the psychological concept of *homophily*, a social force that draws individuals away from diverse relations and toward people who share similar experiences and backgrounds (McPherson 2001 as cited in Parks 2011, 195). To measure this sociological phenomenon's impact on university ministry involving international students from Asian backgrounds, researcher Julie Parks engaged in an ethnographic study of four college students, members of a homogenous Korean American small group at California University, who were uncertain if they wanted to join the

diverse InterVarsity Christian Fellowship large-group ministry (IVCF) (2011, 198). She sought to determine what key factors contributed to their decision to join IVCF's diversified setting or to return to Korean American Christian groups (Parks 2011, 199). Based on the results of her study, Parks suggests that multicultural religious groups can create their own sense of *jung* by providing opportunities for shared experiences and for working together to achieve a common goal (Parks 2011, 208–209). Because this finding was based on a study of a Christian Korean small group associated with a heterogeneous ministry involving many people from various walks of life, one could hypothesize that culturally diverse, evangelistic small groups could also cultivate their own sense of *jung* to set at ease those potential members who originate from even the most collectivist cultures. By creating an atmosphere of genuine community, small groups can help facilitate the formation of friendships between Christians and non-Christians of different ethnicities—perhaps even durable enough to support presenting the gospel.

Clearly, a supportive environment marked by genuine friendship must distinguish a successful small group dedicated to including international students if it is to accomplish its intended purpose of developing a cross-culturally inviting community. Similar to Parks's concept of *jung*, Bill Hull argues that developing loving relationships among group members remains critical to the success of small groups (2006, 155–156). In this way, small groups cannot rely on a predetermined, universal formula; they need to foster an intimate, relational discipleship process. Hull and Parks both seem to argue that intentionally cultivating a community who enjoys one another's company (in this case, among international and domestic students) becomes not a frivolous task to distract from the main goal of developing strong Christian disciples; it functions instead as an imperative linchpin to the cross-cultural ministry's success.

With this presupposition in mind, locating a one-to-one comparative study involving Northwest University's other main Asian sending country for exchange and visiting students, Japan, proves more challenging. This is due to the limited scholarship on Christian missions to Japan. Nonetheless, a corollary may be found. While Parks's study reveals that small groups are an appropriate form of ministry within the Korean cultural context, David Hesselgrave's research examining the Soka Gakkai movement within the prominent Japanese religion of Nichiren Buddhism demonstrates small groups to a suitable method of religious propagation within that cultural context—a form of evangelistic effort. In less than thirty years, the Soka Gakkai movement exploded from fewer than 5000 families in 1951 to over 16 million Japanese adherents and followers in over thirty additional nations by 1975 (Dale 1975, 14, as cited in Hesselgrave 1978, 130). This growth begs the question of what factors contributed to this abundance of conversions. Hesselgrave asserts that one of the main causes of Soka Gakkai's extensive multiplication of devotees has been their small group strategy, also known as *zadankai* (1978, 145). These small groups provide a sense of belonging that encourages individuals to accept the groups' beliefs and perspectives (Brown 1963, 67, as cited in Hesselgrave 1978, 145–146). In this way, Hesselgrave's analysis of the expansion of the Soka Gakkai movement supports the hypothesis that small group ministry is one of the most productive methods of gaining converts among individuals coming from a collectivistic cultural background, thereby reinforcing the appropriateness of this approach as potentially suitable for the Northwest University context.

South Korea and Japan are just two examples of the multitude of collectivist nations around the world that send international students to the United States. Even relatively modest Northwest University welcomes students from China, India, and countries in Africa and South

America, thereby disrupting any simplistic view of what shape international student ministry should adopt. Additionally, Hofstede's Individualism Index reveals that cultures cannot be placed in strict collectivistic or individualistic categories; rather, they lie on a spectrum in relation to one another. Even so, this beginning point of research suggests that small groups which develop a keen sense of community represent a culturally appropriate method of ministry to people coming from collectivistic-leaning cultures.

#### Effectiveness of Interfaith Friendship and Conversation

Making Christian converts—while essential—can backfire when projected as the main goal of any ministry effort that neglects members' forming genuine friendships with those who may or may not ever decide to follow Christ. Nonetheless, Hull asserts that along with fostering an internal community of belonging, the small group must also persistently emphasize missional outreach (2006, 155–156). This missional outreach comes with the goal of gaining new followers of Jesus—best achieved by devoted believers befriending non-Christians. In 2017, the Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries surveyed a large, U.S.-based population to determine the most influential contributors to personal conversion. Practicing Christians, nominal Christians, and non-Christian participants alike preferred friends as spiritual conversation partners, with professional pastors and ministers coming in fourth in line as key factors (Everts 2019, 70). These results reveal that Christians do not need to have a ministry degree or extensive apologetic knowledge to initiate meaningful spiritual conversations with others; they just need to intentionally establish friendships with non-Christians. Moreover, many base this conviction on their own experience. In a related segment of that same 2017 survey of 796 self-identified Christians, 38 percent reported that they chose to receive Jesus' gift of salvation after engaging in a spiritual conversation (Everts 2019, 83). These testimonials highlight conversation about

faith as one of the main contributing factors of individuals' conversion to Christianity in the United States.

Doubling down on these survey results, local church pastor and author Don Everts, a former college campus minister, cites his own testimonial. He relates the story of unlikely friendship that he struck up with a non-Christian neighbor, fueled by “unhurried conversation” (Everts 2019, 62). He writes that pleasant, meaningful spiritual conversation came naturally from that position of friendship (Everts 2019, 63). His experience indicates that genuine friendship and spiritual conversation mutually feed into each other. Evangelism does not need to be forceful; it functions most effectively when it flows from the fountain of friendship. Just as close connections among group members facilitate more vulnerable, honest conversation, loving relationships with non-Christians makes conversations about faith more personal and approachable. In this way, small groups that foster an environment of authentic relationship between Christians and non-Christians can lend opportunities for spiritual conversation as evangelistic outreach.

Overall, current research suggests that international student ministry holds significant opportunities for evangelism and discipleship. Also, the sparse examples evident in available scholarship indicate that especially within collectivistic cultural contexts, friendships facilitate spiritual, evangelistic conversations. As a result, building intentional community and relationships would need to be a key component of any small group curriculum for it to succeed in a Northwest University context. What remained to be seen is whether the way that Christian conversions typically occur in communal cultures translated into a host nation dedicated to individualistic values. Perhaps learning from the experience of proven campus ministers and international student ministries could ensure that the small group curriculum used at Northwest

University builds on insights already made within the field. I was especially interested in investigating existing campus ministers' practical advice on how to cultivate a community of belonging (*jung*) in a small group setting with my Japanese and Korean friends.

### Seeking Examples to Follow

International student ministry began in the United States after World War II. At that time, Protestant foreign missions experienced significant growth in general, as did the beginning of the unconventional mission field of international student ministry (Chinn 1979, 2). At this time, Christians began to realize the opportunity of international missions at university campuses. Leiton Chinn in his survey of the history of international student ministry writes that while there may have been some individuals and churches involved, "there was no concerted, nationwide movement to evangelize and disciple foreign students until 1953 when International Students, Inc. was established" (1979, 2). Bob Finley recognized the lack of people ministering not just to college students in general, but specifically to international students. After realizing the missional need, Finley began the ministry of International Students, Inc. The mission statement of International Students, Inc. (ISI) is to "share Christ's love with international students and to equip them for effective service in cooperation with the local church and others" (International Students, Inc.). Today, ISI provides an active ministry presence on over 950 university campuses around the world (International Students, Inc. Seattle). The "oldest and largest foreign student-missionary movement in America" is International Student, Inc. (ISI) (Chinn 1979, 2). Since then, other ministries have also been developed for international students including some of the most significant ministries being the Southern Baptist International Student Ministry (Chinn 1979, 7), Intersity Christian Fellowship (p. 9), Campus Crusade for Christ (p. 10), and Navigators (p. 12). However, for the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on International



Students, Inc. as it is the largest representative, has a significant presence in the Seattle Washington area, and is the main international student ministry that has sought to reach students at Northwest University.

By learning from International Student, Inc. leaders, experiencing their ministry, and analyzing dissertations written about developing international student ministries, it seems the majority agree that central elements of international student ministries are friendship and prayer. These sources agree on the simplicity of what international student ministry can look like. The vast majority of sources on international student ministry, as well as the ministries that I have experienced, focus on the relational foundation when it comes to ministering to international students. In Western culture, the tendency is feeling a need to speed up the process, to obtain surface-level friendliness without deep friendship, and to develop one's own program or system. Friendship-based ministry may seem slow, inconvenient, and overly simplified (Bader 2008, 60). However, those who have spent years engaging in the ministry affirm the need for the basic building-block of friendship.

Dr. Li Lowry, director of International Education at Northwest University, acknowledges the loneliness of many international students as they left their social networks and families. She encourages that when one demonstrates with sincere words and actions to international students that they are cared for without an agenda, they will see Christ's love in us (personal correspondence, 1 March 2024). Tim Weston, area director of International Student Institute based in Seattle, is in agreement that the "core of success is spending a lot of time with the student[; i]t's profoundly simple" (personal correspondence, 16 February 2024). Rather than building a program, or even a Bible study, it seems that relational ministry geared towards the specific student's or students' needs is most impactful. In fact, Donald E. Bader, in his

dissertation regarding an outline for international student ministry acknowledges that Bible studies especially in larger groups become difficult, as the range of English proficiency levels leads to frustration or boredom (2008, 76). Larger group methods can remain at the surface level and Bible studies can become English lessons, or the content can be misunderstood. Instead, Bader pushes for friendships, citing 1 Thessalonians 2:8 to support his claim that “genuine friendship often provides the context in which teaching about Christianity may best be introduced to others” (Bader 2008, 60). Friendship forms a necessary bridge. Mark Hanna, who has logged years of experience with internationals, acknowledges that “even though in the United States we have broadcasts and telecasts and churches and Bibles everywhere, the vast majority of those people from other cultures and other religions do not know the gospel[; t]hey don’t understand it unless someone goes to them individually and cares and explains.” (McDowell 1991, 23). Even when ministers just reach one student at a time, from the basis of a friendship, these Christ-followers can explain the good news about Jesus to students who otherwise may never be given a genuine opportunity to understand. From the place of one-on-one friendship, Professor David Reese at Northwest University answered “Tom’s” (a pseudonym) questions about Christianity, shared the Gospel of John with him, invited him to an international-friendly church, and eventually, Tom and his wife and son all wanted to get baptized (personal correspondence, 16 February 2024). Also, from this place of friendship, Mark Eilers, an active volunteer within the International Student Incorporated Seattle-based ministry to international students, watched as multiple international students made the decision to follow Jesus after a group trip to Yellowstone, in which international student ministers like Eilers relationally invested in the students (personal correspondence, 16 March 2024). These international students would not have been given the opportunity to truly understand the gospel

apart from this place of personal explanations and care. Moreover, as Dr. Lowry pointed out, even if the student does not convert to Christianity, the friendship was a valuable opportunity for the student to experience God's presence and love (personal correspondence, 1 March 2024).

On the basis of insights from these interviews and dissertations, it is clear that friendship is crucial to addressing international students' loneliness and to building the bridge to sharing Jesus' love and good news with them. However, Bruce A. McDowell in his theology of international student ministry, citing Mark D. Rentz's work that appeared in *Newsweek* in 1987, warns that "more than one international has said, "Americans are very friendly, but they don't make good friends" (25). What does it mean to forge genuine friendships with international students? The minister needs to be growing in a personal relationship with Jesus while at the same time earning the international student's trust through "the highest respect for both their culture and religious background, a keen awareness of their spiritual needs, sensitivity in addressing those needs, good listening skills...and Godly love" (Bader 2008, 74). Cultural appreciation, thoughtfulness in conversation, and love are key components of being a good friend to international students. Hospitality is also key. Many international students are disappointed when they do not get to be in an American home, and such hospitality shows genuine care (cf. Matthew 35:35–36; Hebrews 13:2; Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9) (McDowell 1991, 31). I have witnessed international students' gratitude as international student leaders invite such students over for meals, or even when events provide opportunities to eat familiar food (e.g., Japanese meals after service at Eikou Christian Church, International Christian Career Builders events with Japanese food, and cooking Korean food together in a dormitory kitchen). From experiencing International Student Incorporated and Northwest University International Department events, international students also appreciate being welcomed into experiences of

American culture and the surrounding area, from raking a ranch, to going on hikes, to watching a Mariners's baseball game. International Student, Inc. regularly seeks to provide such opportunities, including an annual Mount Baker ski trip for the past 60 years (Seattle ISI). International students have come to experience all the United States has to offer, so it is very meaningful when domestic friends give students those opportunities. Lastly, international student friendships need to be marked by flexibility. This may be one of the most important components of the ministry. According to Bader, "rather than designing a program and then searching for people who can fit in, the disciple maker should exhibit enough flexibility to adapt himself towards the disciple's needs, life situation, time schedule, learning style, and personality" (2008, 74). International student ministers build their ministry off friendship; they are to build the friendship on the particularities of the student they are reaching. In all, it seems fruitful international student ministry friendships are marked by cultural sensitivity, good listening, love, hospitality, American experiences and exploration, and person-based flexibility.

In addition to friendship, international student ministry leaders have found that prayer needs to be the foundation of the ministry's beginning, direction, and empowerment. Bader emphasizes making prayer a habit. He underscores the need to pray daily, including for God's guidance, for God to provide specific students who he wants reached, and praying for those friends who God brings (2008, 75-76). Eilers acknowledges that being led by the Spirit in prayer is key to determining the balance between conversations of lighthearted friendship and presentations of the gospel (personal correspondence, 16 March 2024). In this way, prayer is especially important in the ministry context of flexible friendship, as ministers rely on God to regularly show them what he wants the ministers to do next for the particular international student they are ministering to (Tim Weston and Dave Reese, personal correspondence, 16

February 2024). However, prayer is not only key within the work of ministry, but also in the work of raising up new ministers. Jeff Nelson, the Seattle coordinator for International Students Incorporated emphasizes how they beg God to send more harvesters into the field (Matthew 9:37-38) (personal correspondence, 23 January 2024). We are to pray boldly for God to bring fruit, opportunities to share the gospel, deepening friendships, and more international student ministers because that is the authority we have in Christ (cf. Matthew 21:21-22). However, McDowell acknowledges that our boldness in prayer must be held in tension with the humility that we need the Spirit to do any spiritual good in ministry (cf. Luke 10:38-42) (1991 35-36). In this way, the minister is encouraged to use prayer as the means for ministry direction, empowerment, and provision. Through prayer, God also changes the heart and perspective of the minister himself or herself. Prayer helps us to recognize that God is the One Who brings the outcome and Who enables fruit, helping us to be receptive to direction that He may give us to obey when reaching out to international students.

While there seems to be a multitude of studies and ministry efforts involved in reaching international students on secular campuses, focus on reaching international students at Christian campuses seems to be lacking. Literature also addresses international student ministry in general, such as the dissertations written by McDowell and Bader mentioned in this thesis thus far. However, a lack of research into the unique situation of ministering to international students on Christian campuses underscores the need of this vital ministry. It seems that many ministers may not realize the significant presence of non-Christian international students at Christian universities. From personal experience, I had not met International Students, Inc. ministers in the Seattle-area until Professor Dave Reese, a professor within the International Department at Northwest University, introduced me to them. However, now, I have had the chance to learn

from their ministry methods and they have invited Northwest University international students into their gatherings through Reese, a few others who are involved with international students at Northwest University, and me. This rarity may reveal a weaker connection in general between Christian universities and local international student ministries in comparison to secular universities.

### Missing the Forest for the Trees

Even the most well-intended ministry efforts can harbor hidden motivations that undermine their effectiveness. Western individualistic, efficiency-oriented culture strengthens the temptation to turn evangelism into an efficient program with quantitative measurements of success, feeding the ego-driven need to feel like a leader has achieved their intended goals. Last school year, I began a Christianity 101 small group at Northwest University and continued to engage in relational outreach to international students. However, basing my identity in my performance, I felt immense pressure to share the gospel as much as possible and help at least one student start following Jesus for the first time. My perspective did not arise from naivete, however; I even researched and wrote an extensive integrative seminar thesis for my intercultural studies major on the contributing factors to Japanese and Korean students' conversion to Christianity via small groups (see Ward 2024). If such radical life change were possible with God, I was certain that my friends from South Korea and Japan would respond positively to a small group designed specifically for them. My heart was seemingly in the right place, but I could not see that I had equated a successful small group with achieving one convert whose story would ultimately prove that the entire effort was worthwhile. I felt sustained pressure to develop the "perfect" small group curriculum that would eliminate barriers between Jesus and non-Christian international students, enabling them to see their need to be saved.

Without realizing the error, I had drifted into territory that others devoted to cross-cultural ministry have long recognized. In their textbook on intercultural communication, scholars Moreau, Hay Campbell, and Greener assert that “when missionaries see those among whom they minister as people rather than objects (‘targets,’ ‘receptors,’ etc.) it can keep them from abusing their power” (2014 p. 38). Throughout the past academic year, the Lord has convicted me of my performance-driven striving and reminded me how ministry is primarily relational. According to philosopher Martin Buber’s terms, I had adopted the “I-it” perspective of viewing international students as objects to be converted rather than living the “I-thou” perspective of international students as people with inherent worth and meaning made in God’s image. While I had intellectually learned the concept of ministry as relational before, I had to live it and make mistakes to fully grasp it. I learned from other international student ministers who prioritize listening well, asking thoughtful questions about culture and language, and seeking opportunities for radical love. I have learned I need to rest in and rely upon God’s way of sacrificial, patient love. Conversations come naturally and God’s goodness is shown through one’s way of loving the students, rather than advertising the gospel forcibly.

Looking back on my experience striving to reach Asian students at Northwest University, it seems that for the context of Korean international students the most helpful approach includes a small group—albeit one that may not resemble typical gatherings of domestic students. Instead, this small group could focus more on worship, prayer, and conversational discipleship. It may be easiest to start with Korean international students (because of their value of *jung*) and then see if we can invite other domestic students who choose to invest in friendships with them. Meanwhile, among Japanese international students at Northwest University, it seems that a more purely

relational route is key, with fun events, conversations, and opportunities of showing them God's love proving more advantageous to fostering legitimate connection.

### **Hypothesis**

At first, I thought I would base my ministry to international students on a relational outreach small group. My vision for the small group was a "Christianity 101" theme. We would cover basic concepts of Christianity in a way that helped non-Christian international students explore their own beliefs in comparison to Christian beliefs. At the same time, Christian international and domestic students could join the group so they could know how to teach basic Christian ideas such as salvation, lordship, and the Holy Spirit, so they could become stronger disciple-makers. My initial perspective was that the small group would form the core of the international student ministry. Meanwhile, Christian students would engage non-Christian students relationally outside of the group and we would have fun gatherings to help build stronger connections.

However, throughout my five semesters of leading a small group—three of which have had a focus specifically on reaching international students—international students make up a minority rather than majority of the group. During my second year in the fall, I transitioned the focus of my small group to the basics of Christianity. I advertised the group through a video played during the international student welcome orientation. While a good number of international students came to the small group during the first week or two, after that, most stopped coming. It seems that for non-Christians, covering basic topics of Christianity was not the most appealing method of evangelism. Second semester of my second year, two Korean international students regularly attended, but it seemed they mostly came because they were my good friends. During this last semester of me leading a small group, I advertised the small group



more relationally rather than advertising it to all international students at their orientation, however, international students still have made up a small percentage of the group. My hypothesis of the reasoning behind this is because of a blend of the language barrier, non-Christians' lack of interest, and the life group being a different format than what Christian students are used to. The small group has been more effective in identifying domestic student friends who want to grow stronger foundations for their faith and disciple-making capabilities. While small groups do not seem like the best of methods for reaching international students, I do wonder if it could be used as a way of identifying and pouring into domestic students who are willing to get involved in relational hospitality and outreach to international students. It seems that relational ministry is key. I need to learn how to raise up new students who care for international students, and learn how to engage in relational ministry myself, so that I can better show them how to do so as well.

My most fruitful moments of ministry have not necessarily taken place in the context of structured small group time, but in more spontaneous, relational moments. Consistent conversation and time spent together over meals, hanging out in the dorms, and going to fun events together has helped to build relationship. I have found that when I allow the Holy Spirit to lead me in acts of love and in listening well in conversation, he shows me opportunities to build up relational trust and to bridge to the gospel. I have needed to rely on a divine partnership and his way of seeing and speaking to students, instead of just on my ideas and ways of ministering. Through those conversations, I have challenged Christian international students to take next steps in following Jesus as Lord together, and have had opportunities to share about Jesus with students who do not yet know him.

In this way, I initially viewed an effective international student ministry in a systematized way. The ministry could be built around a small group and planning fun events for international students to hang out with domestic students. While those can be good components, I realized that turning the ministry into a program is not the solution. I also have needed to let go of quantified measurements of success, such as how many students I can minister to, or whether or not I see non-Christian international students profess newfound faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior while they are on campus. Systematizing ministry dilutes and distracts. Relationship is key, just as it was for Jesus and for the primary disciple-makers of the New Testament. Additionally, ministry cannot fully be done alone. As a leader, I need to regularly pray for international students, asking the Lord who and how He wants me to pursue. As well, I must be generous with my time and energy in forming those friendships. Meanwhile, I also need to invest relationally in other domestic students who can cultivate a compassionate burden for carrying out genuine friendships with international students.

### **Methodology**

I began my research for developing an international student ministry by getting involved in international student ministry myself. I continued to seek to form friendships with international students, while at the same time, leading the small group and then starting to lead International Student Club, putting on fun events and connection points between international and domestic students. My first year here, I spent time with international students and formed deeper friendships especially with two Japanese girls who stayed for the whole year. The two Japanese friends, some other domestic students, and I often went to the cafeteria together, had movie nights, went to school events, hung out in each other's dorm rooms, and went on adventures such as to downtown Seattle and out for sushi for my friend's birthday. These regular

connection points and conversations led to a deeper friendship with these two girls. I also led a small group both semesters, but that was largely separate from my relational engagement of international students.

Towards the end of my first spring semester, I had the opportunity to share the gospel with those two Japanese international student friends and a domestic student friend, and one of the two international students decided to start following Jesus as Lord and Savior. That summer, I led a small group with that domestic friend and the international student who started following Jesus, as well as a few other domestic student friends who wanted to be involved in the friend's growth in following Christ. Having domestic partners in the process of sharing the gospel with my Japanese friends and through beginning the discipleship process with the Bible study helped immensely. These domestic partners were also friends with the Japanese girls, so their relational equity and trust enhanced the discipling interactions. They knew good questions to ask, how the girls probably were feeling, and how to walk through discipleship as friends. I also could bounce ideas off of my domestic friends, and I was not leading alone in that way. It was a similar format of discipleship to how Paul partnered with Silas, Apollos, and Barnabas.

The following school year, I began focusing my small group on reaching international students, calling it Christianity 101, going through my church's basic discipleship tools (the One-2-One and God test<sup>2</sup>) and then going through Alpha discussion content in the spring semester (a resource that has been used around the world for people interested in exploring the gospel).<sup>3</sup> I continued in relational outreach, hanging out with international students in general and also forming closer friendships, especially with two Korean students, one of whom was a strong

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<sup>2</sup> To see more about the One-2-One and God Test resources, visit <https://www.everynation.org/one2one/> and <http://www.thegodtest.org>.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about the international ministry that shares the gospel in a relevant way, go to <https://alphausa.org>.

Christian and the other was not. Those two girls were some of the most consistent in coming to the Alpha content Christianity 101 Life Group. I also began partnering with ISI (International Student Incorporated) for bringing international students into fun events. Lastly, this semester, I began interning with the International Department, have continued to lead a life group (now with the focus of raising up disciple-makers instead of doing outreach), engaged in relational outreach, and have put on more fun events and Conversation Partners with International Student Club. I have been reflecting upon and learning and growing from that personal experience of ministry.

I have engaged in an iterative process of building a plan for an international student ministry while simultaneously researching the international student ministry. As a result, in addition to observations of personal ministry, I have also interviewed key international student ministry leaders (especially through International Student Incorporated) and have interviewed some people from the International Department at Northwest University as well. I have also supplemented interview and observational research with research into literature on the topic of international student ministry and theories of cross-cultural evangelistic outreach and discipleship. Through the interweaving elements of ministry observation, interviews, and exploration of literature, I am building a basis for an international student ministry within the context of Northwest University that can be adapted and applied elsewhere as well.

### **Analysis**

By observing my personal ministry, I have encountered the truth of international student ministry leaders' advice they gave me in interviews: relationships are key. It can be difficult to build a curriculum because when one tries to systematize or formulize the process of ministry, fruits of evangelism, relationship, and discipleship easily get crowded out. If I was to summarize

my experience, that is what I would say needed to be changed. The key is finding ways to genuinely love and pour into a few (even just one) international students relationally, and look for opportunities to witness to the gospel and share Jesus' love. The key also seems to be raising up other domestic students who are willing to do the same: share their life with international students, and love them in radical ways. As students observe international students in relationship and pray to the Lord about how to love radically, they will discover simple but meaningful ways of showing love. For me, this has involved anything from consistently pursuing quality time with them as an American student when the majority of their friends on campus are other international students, intentionally speaking and writing encouraging words to them, seeking to learn about their language and culture, and giving them gifts.

I am still learning what the balance looks like between relationship and opening the door to the gospel. It seems that other domestic students show themselves if they are willing to be intentional. International student ministry leaders cannot force domestic students into caring. Typically, students need to intrinsically want to welcome and get to know international students. However, that care and valuing of international students can be directed in the line of witness by the international student ministry leader. Whether Campus Ministries, the College of Ministry, or the International Department choose to implement these ideas, this process has shaped my thinking of what lies ahead in the ministry God will direct me into. I have learned the importance of prioritizing relationship over events and numbers and of being led by the Spirit instead of only my own detailed planning. I want to continue to learn what it looks like to mentor others and raise up new ministry leaders in future ministry as well.

**My plan for International Student Ministry at Northwest University to pass on for future leaders:**

- I. Assess your plan for maintaining your spiritual vitality and growing—abiding in the Lord.**
- II. Pray to God about which 1–2 international students He wants you to prioritize.**
  - a. Make it your mission to find out how to love and care for those specific students
  - b. The students may come as a group of two or three too, as group friendships may come more naturally with international students
- III. Pray to God about which 1–2 domestic students He wants you to invest in and mentor.**
  - a. These are the students for whom you are modeling about how to engage in relational outreach to international students. They are the future leaders.
  - b. Start a small group with them or a regular meeting time to talk about disciple-making.
  - c. Help them pray about an international student they can pursue in friendship.
- IV. Find groups that you can connect with to participate in their fun events, rather than coordinating the details of starting a lot of events on your own.**
  - a. For instance, I have partnered with these groups:
    - i. Northwest University events, such as Student Activity Board (SAB) events, movie nights, and athletic events
    - ii. International Department events

- iii. One of my friends started a Korean pop dance club that I joined with international student friends
- iv. International Students Incorporated
- v. International Christian Career Builders
  - 1. This event happens once or twice per month, including career training sessions over a Japanese meal with international students.
- vi. Eikou Christian Church in Bellevue
  - 1. This is a Japanese Christian church in the local area, which welcomed me and my friends. Sometimes, they provide a Japanese meal as well after service.

**V. As you continue to invest in the domestic student raising leaders, if they are the right ones, you may ask them to look for other students whom they can mentor so they can start leading that group.**

**VI. As you leave, stay in touch with those domestic student leaders and your international student friends.**

#### Specific Aspects of Relational Outreach at Northwest University

- Build time with international students into your relational times:
  - Eating meals at the cafeteria, getting drinks from the Aerie, studying together, going to Northwest University events, and enjoying personal favorite hobbies
- Ask international student friends questions about their culture or home.
- Learn some words from Japanese and Korean with them.

- Look for opportunities to bridge into conversation about the gospel, or into discussions about their Christian faith (if they are believers).
  - Ask for ways that you can be praying for your friends who are Christian.
  - I have found that my Korean Christian international student friends really enjoy gathering as a small group to play guitar and piano and sing worship songs, having a “share time” of how God is working in our lives and how we can pray for each other.
- It is better to have consistent connection with a few than sporadic contact with many international students. This principle explains why it is better to have multiple people engaging in relational outreach on a deep level with a few than one person trying to engage everyone.
- Look for ways your specific friend feels most loved or what they most enjoy
  - Writing him or her an encouraging note
  - Holding anime or K-drama movie nights
  - Playing tennis or volleyball, going for a run, going to the gym together
  - Helping them get a library card or bank account
  - Being intentional to spend time together every day
  - Going out for sushi or Korean barbecue for a birthday or special occasion
  - Having your friend over to your house, maybe for Thanksgiving, Christmas, or spring break
  - Doing Korean pop dances or Japanese pop dances together



For applying these ideas to other campuses, much of this advice is relational and organic; it can be adapted. This ministry is not much of a program, but more of a relational mentorship and engagement process. It can be adapted to almost any context, with proper consideration of the specific university's unique culture, international student demographics, and size. Because the ministry is mostly relational, it can even comprise small groups of domestic students coming together to form friendships with and witness to a few international students. From that beginning point, the ministry can grow.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, I have learned that relationship is key to international student ministry. My ministry began with a friendship. I loved Jesus and I loved my non-Christian Japanese friends. I wanted them to experience his love and know him. After seeing the fruit of one of those friends give her life to Christ that first year, however, I wrestled with trying to systematize a successful ministry, worrying about creating the outcome. I became overwhelmed with my own inadequacy and lack of answers for how to see more students come to follow Jesus and become disciple-makers themselves. Over time, I had forgotten that I cannot "remake, reshape, or reform hearts. But [the Lord] does" (Schmidt 2023 38). I felt insufficient for the task of sharing the gospel and Jesus' love with international students. I did not know where to start or how to go about it. I wanted to obtain a cookie-cut formula that if I do this, I will see many international students become Christian and those who already are Christian start sharing the gospel themselves.

Maybe you do not think that this thesis is written to you, since you cannot lead a whole international student ministry. Maybe you do not even sense a call to vocational ministry like I do. Maybe you feel inadequate and have a significant number of questions and doubts like I have. That is understandable.

I can recommend that Northwest University puts on more international-domestic student events, raises up a paid position in Campus Ministry for an international student ministry leader, or builds a curriculum for a life group for international students. I could make a claim for that. I do recommend that for Welcome Weekend, there should be more intentional encouragement to first-year domestic students to seek out international students and opportunities for them to connect. I also recommend that the International Department creates fun opportunities for international and domestic students to hang out, like what past International Student Club leaders and I have attempted to do. Lastly, it would be helpful if Campus Ministries provided training for how to build relationships with non-Christians, how to share the gospel, and how to go about the discipleship process.

However, on the basis of the fruit that I have seen in international student ministry and where the Lord has led me, that is not our primary need. We need you. We need students, faculty, and friends of Northwest University who are imperfect and do not have all the answers to engage cross-cultural ministry. We need people like you who have experienced the love of Jesus to carry his love in relationship with even just one international student. Ask the Lord whom He wants you to pursue. Look for the opportunity to pursue that student. Seek ways to get to know him or her, provide for that student's needs, and ask thoughtful questions. Let the Spirit lead you in how to love well, and when and how to bridge to the gospel. You will make mistakes, but the Lord is the One Who brings the outcome through your imperfect yes. Find other domestic students who are open to befriending international students, too. This ministry is easier done with others than all on your own. Encourage your friends to join you.

Ministering to international students is hard work, and those who say yes do not always see the numerical, quantifiable fruit they wish for, such as numbers of salvations. However, this

ministry is essential because students are lost and need a Savior, and even Christian international students need relational support and encouragement in their faith. There is a great harvest, but the Lord needs harvesters (John 4:34–38). After all, “[h]ow then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ““How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”” (cf. Romans 10:14–15). The Lord brings salvation, healing, freedom, new life, and breakthrough. The Lord gives us wisdom, opportunities, discernment, insight, love. But he uses people to share the good news and he uses people to reach out in love. **We need you.** Will you say yes? Will you look for an international student to love, befriend, and pray for?

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