

## **International Student Ministry: *Preparing Internationals To Take The Good News Home***

*by Kevin King*

### **Introduction:**

In 1997 I was part of a team of missionaries who came to NYC with a vision to reach unreached people groups and least evangelized nations with the gospel. Our vision was not unusual, but our strategy was counter-cultural. Contrary to commonly accepted missions practices, we had no intention of sending missionaries to these unreached people groups and least evangelized nations. Rather, we came to NYC with the belief that our greatest impact would come from reaching and training internationals temporarily living in NYC to return to their home countries, share the gospel and plant contextually reproducible churches.<sup>i</sup>

To be honest, we had no idea if this would really happen. We had few models on which to base our hopes, and our first seven years of ministry did not give us much encouragement. While we saw many internationals come to Christ, we saw little evidence that they were equipped to reach their friends and family with the gospel in contextually appropriate ways when they returned to their home countries.

Out of these challenging years, however, came significant realizations which resulted in key changes to how we approached and trained internationals during their time in NYC. As a result of these changes, during our next seven years of ministry we saw five new churches planted overseas as the direct result of internationals who had come to faith in NYC. Of course we are continually learning and finding areas to improve, but the change in outcome indicated to us that we are moving in the right direction. What key realizations and changes led to such a shift in the effectiveness of these internationals as carriers of the gospel to their own cultures?

Reaching people groups requires intentionality and serious consideration. It also requires us to think and do ministry differently than when working with Americans. In our ministry to internationals in NYC, we have learned that continuous reevaluation of our methods and activities exposes gaps between our vision and the methods and practices we use to accomplish our vision. Because of what we have seen in the last seven years, we are convinced that our model of reaching internationals in the West is a strategic and powerful way to reach the world.

The purpose of this paper is to help you to think critically about your vision for international ministry and to consider whether your current methods and activities are moving you closer to or farther away from realizing your vision. My intention is not to give you a specific plan for your international ministry, but rather to encourage those of you who already recognize the international opportunities all around you to pause and think critically about *how* you do international ministry. I want to challenge you to achieve greater effectiveness toward your vision, resulting in lasting fruit in distant nations. The following two case studies, based on real life examples, will serve to illustrate the core ideas of this paper and are each followed by discussion questions to stimulate critical reflection.

### **Yi Ling's Story:**

Yi Ling came to faith through a campus Bible study. She was very excited about her new faith and quickly got involved with a campus ministry, attending worship gatherings regularly. She was passionate as she talked with other students her age and encouraged by all the support she received from her new believing friends. She joined the campus ministry at various regional and national conferences they attended and went weekly to an exciting young church with lively, professional multi-media worship services and a seminary-trained, polished pastor.

After her time in America ended, Yi Ling returned home with an excitement about Jesus, church and her new faith. Unfortunately, things were not as easy as she thought they would be. Sharing her experience of Jesus with others was difficult because she was not familiar with talking about God in her mother language. When she did manage to do so, she was generally viewed as one who was just influenced by Western religions. She was no longer surrounded by believing friends, and there were no churches within a reasonable distance for her to attend. She eventually located one small group of believers meeting in a home, but most were not her age,

instruments were not used in worship, and the teaching was just not what she had experienced in America. As her interest in connecting with this small group of believers slowly diminished, her passion to walk with the Lord slowly faded as well.

Unfortunately, Yi Ling's story is far too common in international student ministry. In order to prevent this story from happening too often, it is necessary that we think deeply about *why* things turned out the way they did for Yi Ling. While I don't want to place too much weight on the activities of man in determining spiritual outcomes, it is similar to God's design in the physical realm; how a mother feeds and natures her baby will have a great deal of impact on the emotional and physical health of that child. As we reflect on Yi Ling's story, let's consider several questions about her situation and some things that could have been done differently in her discipleship.

**Questions to consider:**

1. Why was Yi Ling not able to connect her new faith easily to her home culture?
2. Why did Yi Ling struggle in her faith *when she returned home*?
3. Why did people view Yi Ling as adopting a Western religion?

**Why was Yi Ling not able to connect her new faith easily to her home culture?**

As we disciple internationals in their faith, it is important to remember that their home culture is very different from our culture.<sup>ii</sup> This means that we must be thoughtful about the clothing we wrap our Christian message and discipleship in. Another way to say this is that Christianity and the gospel is always clothed or wrapped in a culture. When internationals come to faith in America, or in any other foreign country for that matter, they are accepting the gospel wrapped in American or foreign clothing. Often, their whole understanding of following God is an *American* expression of faith or church or sacrifice, which is very different from what an expression of following God might look like in their native culture.

Yi Ling struggled in her faith because she was quickly pulled into an atmosphere of church and Christianity that would be far different from what she would experience when returning home.. She was not able to connect her faith to her home culture because her faith was identified too much with the foreign culture. Another way of saying this is that Yi Ling was not able to *contextualize* her faith.

Before we put the blame too quickly on Yi Ling, it is important to remember that we should never expect a brand new believer to know how to contextualize their faith. This is like asking a person to naturally ski down a snowy mountain when they have never worn skis before; it's not going to happen without training. It is difficult enough for any believer to understand how their faith is contextualized, let alone expect a new believer to easily switch between the different cultural clothes of Christianity. Kids who learn to ski well are those who were introduced to skiing at an early age. Skiing quickly became a natural experience for them and therefore never felt foreign. In the same way, internationals who carry their faith home to their native cultures well are those who experienced faith and intimacy with God in those native cultural forms very early in their faith.<sup>iii</sup> Foundations are forever, so be careful to quickly and consistently have the international believer experience his new faith in native cultural clothing.

Early in our ministry all our evangelism, Bible studies and discipleship were done in a way and a language (English) which didn't promote contextualization. We also had a weekly worship service where internationals could join with Americans to experience church. We sang American songs and taught from a Western perspective. We didn't realize that we were forcing clothing on our international friends which would look utterly foreign to their families back home. We had to make *major* changes in our approach. Below is a short list of several things we began to do, which you can also do to help internationals contextualize their faith and to prepare them for being effective carriers of the gospel when they return home.

1. Disciple new believers from the same country/culture together. This helps them to process faith and Scripture through their own cultural lens.
2. Have new international believers pray in their native language as often as possible.

3. Have new believers read the Bible in their native language as often as possible.
4. Disciple new believers to share their faith with their family and friends in their native language.
5. Encourage new believers to write poems or songs to God in their native language. This will move them toward worshipping God in their mother tongue and their *heart* language.
6. Think carefully before you invite new international believers into an American fellowship or expression of church, as this may lay a cultural foundation for their faith that is very different than their native culture. Ideally, new believers would be grouped in a discovery Bible study with others from their culture which would then transition into a home church.

### **Why did Yi Ling struggle in her faith *when she returned home*?**

The answer to this question lies in the fact that Yi Ling's spiritual struggle began *when* she returned home. During her time in the West Yi Ling seemed strong in her faith, but things changed after she left her foreign context.

This is a very important question in discipleship with internationals, because we are primarily working with a population that is *temporarily* with us and will return to a place and context very different from our own. When we disciple an international it is important not only to think about what we are doing here, but also what they will experience *there* in their home country; we must think about what context to which they are returning. What they will experience *there* should significantly impact what we should do *here*.<sup>iv</sup> If an international is returning to a country that is resistant or hostile to Christianity and believers meet commonly in small places led by ordinary people, then it may be worthwhile to consider if one's early experiences of Christianity should be very different from that.

In the context of the American church I have seen many internationals' whole identity of Christianity develop around energetic, professional worship services with highly trained communicators and then return home to find nothing which compares. Yi Ling was invited into an experience of Christianity that did not have any similar native comparisons in her home city. She went from a large fellowship with many people her own age to a small group of Christians praying in a home without any of the Christian media and professional elements that she experienced in her foreign church in America.

When we expose internationals to expressions and experiences of Christianity that are highly manufactured through lights and amplifiers and public speaking techniques, not to mention beautiful buildings and all kinds of programs, is it possible that these become props to the new believers' faith that they become dependent upon? Many times internationals seem strong in their faith but when they return home and all the props are removed, they drift away. We could say that we did not give them sufficient grounding to stabilize them for when they returned.

It was very difficult for Yi Ling to understand and experience God separate from all the unnecessary things that were so connected to her foundational experience of Christianity. In our ministry, after realizing the actual effect of our Americanized church service, we stopped this expression of church and moved to small communal house churches that are highly reproducible in any culture. This was a significant change but one that has made a very big difference to seeing fruitfulness and reproducibility in distant countries.

Below are several questions to think about that may help you disciple your international friend to return home well.

1. What will the new believer experience in terms of church or community or fellowship when she returns home?
2. What are the three most important spiritual characteristics/qualities/disciplines that are necessary for the new believer to thrive spiritually? How are they being developed into his life?
3. Can the new believer's current discipleship and church experience in America be easily reproduced *by him* in his home country?

### Why did people view Yi Ling as adopting a Western religion?

In some ways the answer to this question is a continuation of the first answer above. Different cultures have different values and highlight different life questions they seek to answer to find meaning. Myth, religion, and philosophy all seek to answer these different life questions. The Gospel *is* Good News for all cultures and peoples; however, a certain culture or people group may not view the news as good if the message given does not directly answer the questions they are asking. When I say the gospel is wrapped in cultural clothing what I mean is that the gospel is presented or understood in a way that only answers the questions of that particular culture in their particular way of thinking about the world.

Yi Ling's earliest foundations in the faith were saturated with an understanding of the Gospel that was wrapped in American cultural clothing. The Bible studies, discipleship and sermons that she heard, during the foundational period of her faith, primarily focused on answering the questions that we have, with our understanding of life, and in a way that we consider relevant. When Yi Ling returned home and began sharing her ideas with her family and friends these ideas did not attract anyone because they didn't connect with the life questions their culture was asking. It was as if she was sharing clothing that people considered silly and out of place. She was sharing news that neither seemed good nor relevant to their lives.

Below are some suggestions for minimizing the transfer of foreign cultural clothing.

1. Review the points above under question #1 on page 2.
2. Disciple through discovery rather than direct teaching. I highly recommend the discovery Bible study method because the focus is not on the teacher who is giving applications related to their life questions, but rather on the student interacting with the Word and allowing it to answer and address their life questions and beliefs.
3. Be very selective in bringing the new international believer into American Christian contexts or experiences.

### Lu Peng's Story:

Another international student, Lu Peng, came to faith and was very passionate about learning and knowing more about Jesus. I guided him in studying the Word and we discussed the importance of daily reading on his own. When we got together he talked much about what he was learning and filled his blog with things that God was teaching him. I was happy that he was so enthusiastic but noticed that many of the things on his blog were in-depth concepts. As with most students, school life became hectic and he told me he was having difficulty reading the Word. In spite of this, he continued to blog about the things he was learning. After a few conversations it became clear he was spending about 3 hours each week listening to sermons of different teachers online, but he was not reading the Word of God himself.

*While it appeared that he was growing stronger, the reality was that he was actually growing weaker.* He was not developing the necessary daily discipline of self-feeding and hearing from God himself, but was rather being spoon-fed what others discovered. It is similar to a child who breaks open a cocoon to help the butterfly get out, only to find that relieving the butterfly of that difficult process also crippled it from ever flying. The point is not to negate the importance of teaching in the church or in discipleship but rather to identify what is crucial and to think about how we will disciple people in those foundational essentials. Since I had a close relationship with Lu Peng, I advised him to stop listening to sermons online and instead spend all that time reading the Word *in his language* and hearing from God on his own. Since then, although it was difficult and there were some setbacks, he has been reading approximately 20 chapters of the Bible each week, discovering God's truth for himself and growing deeply in his faith.

Lu Peng began to share with his friends and family what God was teaching him. Within six months he was leading a discovery Bible study with unbelieving friends and had led his mother to the Lord. By eight months he had baptized five other people during a trip to his country. Lu Peng is currently leading a Chinese speaking house church with a group of other new believers.

Our desire in NYC is to see this kind of fruit again and again. Through Lu Peng's story I would like to highlight some principles we learned that have helped foster this kind of fruit. In order to adopt these principles, however, we had to make changes to our thinking and methods in discipleship. While I believe these principles are especially pertinent in ministry with internationals, most of them are generally true for all new believers. As we reflect, let's consider the following questions:

**Questions to consider:**

1. What gave Lu Peng a strong foundation? What threatened that foundation?
2. Why did Lu Peng begin to share with his friends and family?
3. How was Lu Peng able to lead a Bible study so soon after becoming a believer?

**What gave Lu Peng a strong foundation? What threatened that foundation?**

When discipling a new international believer it is critical to consider not only *what* is good but also *when* something is good. A major focus of discipleship is to emphasize first things first. In our American Christian culture the practice of listening to sermons online is so normal that we automatically consider this to be good. However, if we think a bit more deeply and ask probing questions we may conclude that the real essential and foundational thing for a new believer is hearing and learning from God in His Word. One of the questions we often ask when discipling internationals is, "If I only have 2-3 months with a new believer what do I want him to leave with?" One of our answers to this question is that we desire new believers to return home as *self feeders* from the Word with a high value placed on the authority of Scripture. While listening to sermons appears good, it may actually be hindering the spiritual development of the person, making them overly dependent and thus ill-prepared to return home. Although this is a more difficult path of discipleship, it is well worth the effort for giving a more stable foundation.

This same principle is true, for example, of Christian books. Contemporary American Christianity is filled with book after book about every topic one can think of. While many of these books may be helpful at the appropriate time, we want to be very careful that a new believer doesn't try to grow spiritually through books about Christianity rather than through the actual truth of the Word of God itself. Many things that may have value in the right situation can be the very things that threaten a strong godly foundation if introduced too early. For those working in international ministry I wouldn't recommend suggesting them at all.

**Suggestions:**

1. Focus solely on reading and studying the Word of God.
2. Avoid introducing internationals to sermons, books, seminars, workshops or conferences for at least the first year.
3. When it is appropriate to suggest other resources point them toward native resources from their countries rather than foreign resources.

**Why did Lu Peng begin to share with his friends and family?**

We have found that internationals who are discipled with English materials, pray in English and read the Word in English usually have a difficult time talking about God in their own native languages. These people feel very awkward about sharing their stories with their family and friends because, as many have said, "it just feels weird talking about God in my language."

This is a huge red flag! Language and culture are intimately connected. A people group's values, beliefs and questions of life are deeply connected to their language. When internationals say that it is difficult to talk about God in their language, basically what they are unknowingly communicating is that the gospel is not relevant for their culture. This kind of statement says to me that I have discipled someone into an understanding of the gospel and Christianity that is completely foreign to their native culture. I have realized my fault in this far too many times. I realized that these internationals are not only unprepared to return home but are actually hindered from

thriving or being fruitful carriers of the gospel to their family and friends who speak their language. Over the past seven years we have begun incorporating native language in our evangelistic and discipleship approach. We have seen positive fruit from this change in Lu Peng and others.

Another contributing factor to active sharing was Lu Peng's understanding that sharing what one is learning about God is a normal part of living as a follower of Jesus. Prior to becoming a believer, he was in a weekly discovery Bible study which ended with each group member naming a person they would share the story with that week. Telling others what God was teaching him was part of the DNA instilled even before Lu Peng came to faith.

After coming to faith, Lu Peng was asked to think about all the people in his life who needed to hear about the message of Jesus. He then wrote out a list of about 30 people he realized God wanted him to share with. I encouraged him to pray and circle the names of five people the Holy Spirit was leading him to share with first. Week after week in discipleship, we met to talk about how the sharing was going and to pray for those he was talking to. The point is that if we want the people we are discipling to be abundant seed sowers then we must be very intentional. Sharing with others needs to be part of the DNA of the discipleship, communicated often, followed up consistently and prayed about regularly. Below are some suggestions for fostering the spread of the gospel from the new international believer to his family and friends.

1. Have the international read the Bible in his language.
2. Have the international pray in his language even if you do not understand.
3. Talk often about how you are sharing what God is teaching you with others.
4. Pray and plan for this new believer to share with others, and then follow up.

#### **How was Lu Peng able to lead a Bible study so soon after becoming a believer?**

When doing international student ministry we do not know if a person will become a believer in the beginning of their stay with us or at the end. Sometimes we may have several years with internationals and other times we only have a few more months before they return home. If we desire for a new international believer to share with family and friends and possibly even start a Bible study with them when they return home, then we have to think deeply about what we are hoping they reproduce.

A basic principle we often talk about in NYC is, "the more simple the more reproducible, the more complex the less reproducible." Most discipleship materials I have come by are highly complex and therefore unlikely to be reproduced by the new believer.<sup>v</sup> In the West we are so focused on information that we have a difficult time narrowing down and making something simple. There are so many good things we want the new believer to learn that when they leave they can't reproduce anything. It is for this reason that I encourage us to focus on the most foundational, important and basic things in evangelism and discipleship. It is also true that we must utilize a reproducible *process* in evangelism and discipleship that can be done by anyone. The discovery Bible study method that we use is simple and highly reproducible, so much so that after demonstrating for a few weeks we have unbelievers in our Bible study groups facilitate the entire process. Since we have internationals leading from the beginning, when they become believers they are already confident and comfortable and have little fear or hesitation in doing a new study with others. Lu Peng was able to easily start a discovery Bible study shortly after becoming a believer because he had already been facilitating a study for many months prior to becoming a believer. This method can be used in both evangelism and discipleship.

Some questions to think about regarding reproducibility:

1. What are the most basic principles a new believer must understand in discipleship?
2. Could internationals easily reproduce what they are doing? Is the process simple?
3. Is your evangelism or discipleship dependant on materials that are only in English?

**Story Review:**

As we think about both stories, there were common themes threaded throughout. Both stories were about spiritual stability and reproducibility. Both were about grounding new international believers in the most essential faith areas so that they could remain stable as they transitioned back into their native cultures, without being dependant on unhealthy props or hindered by foreign baggage. Both were also about reproducibility. There were strong elements in both stories that related to how well the returning international was prepared to reproduce what they learned and experienced during their foreign visit with their family and friends in a culturally appropriate way. It is these two areas that should be primary for those with a vision to reach the world through their international ministry.

**Conclusion:**

Reaching internationals is a strategic way to reach unreached people groups from around the world. It can also be a strategic way to see churches started in least evangelized countries as the gospel is carried back and takes root. In order to impact foreign countries we must think beyond simply reaching individuals *here* and consider how we can be a part of reaching communities *there*. We must consider how to disciple new international believers in a way that doesn't hinder them from spreading the gospel because the good news they bring home has been unnecessarily wrapped in foreign clothing.

In order to more effectively accomplish our vision, our team has made significant changes in our experience of church and ministry. In the areas of evangelism and discipleship we have changed our thinking and practice related to language, methods, essential elements and simplicity. We believe these changes have resulted in developing reproducing disciples who have been more effective and prepared to reach their friends and families back home.

The stories of Yi Ling and Lu Peng were intended to help you think critically about your ministry. Evaluating how you have evangelized and discipled people, as well as considering what has occurred when they returned home, is the first step to making the necessary adaptations and changes to be more fruitful in accomplishing your vision. My prayer is that the fruit of your work will extend far beyond the individuals that you invest in here.

If you would like more information or would like to be part of a discussion about reaching internationals to reach the world, please contact us at [www.nycinternationalproject.org](http://www.nycinternationalproject.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Missions has changed in many ways. Missiologists now realize the strategic opportunity for impacting the world by focusing on internationals and migrant communities. "Formerly, American Christians often felt that foreign missions necessarily involved crossing an ocean, but that 'saltwater missiology' is obsolete today. Today, American Christians need to readjust their thinking of missions as something we go to 'over there,' in light of the fact that the 'ends of the earth' have come over here." (Fritz Kling, *The Meeting of the Waters*, 78) While I understand the *necessity* and the advantages of sending missionaries overseas, I also believe fully in the strategy and effectiveness of reaching internationals and immigrants here and seeing them carry the gospel back home to their people. We have an unprecedented opportunity to impact the world by opening our eyes to those internationals all around us.

<sup>ii</sup> Understanding culture is crucial for those who desire to do ministry with people from other cultures. Missiologists have long realized the importance of understanding culture in the task of establishing the Gospel among a people group because they know that it is necessary if we are going to see the gospel spread in that culture.

Effective missionaries overseas think often and deeply about contextualization. They have learned from past mistakes that it is very damaging to the believers and the national church of a country if foreign missionaries bring the gospel to the people in foreign cultural clothes. Most missionaries understand well that their understanding of the Gospel, church and ministry is shaped very much by their own culture and so they are careful to evaluate this and try to strip as much of their foreign cultural dressing off as possible. In contrast, often we ISM workers think little about contextualization. We think little about the cultural clothing of our church experience and the cultural forms of discipleship we use in America. Just happy when an international comes to Christ, we want to quickly invite them to church and get them into a discipleship class or process. Since ISM workers are often times doing ministry in their own culture, it is easy to forget that the things we do in terms of church, discipleship and ministry are heavily clothed in American/Western cultural baggage. This may actually be detrimental to the spiritual health of the internationals and will very possibly hinder them from being effective carriers of the Good News to their networks back home.

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<sup>iii</sup> Grounding internationals in the simplest and most reproducible expression of a biblical value (i.e. church, worship, etc) is especially important with a seeker or brand new believer. A mentor of mine has always said, "foundations are forever". The foundation that we give to internationals in the beginning is usually the one that will stay with them for their lives as a believer. People tend to develop real preferences and understandings of biblical values during the emotional time of early faith. It doesn't take long for new believers to develop strong ideas about what it means to follow Jesus, including how do I share my faith, how often should I share it, how do I worship, what is the church, how does the church operate, how do I pray, and so on. If we thoughtlessly expose seekers or new international believers to the American expression of church, worship, discipleship, evangelism, etc., then it is likely that their understanding and preference will be formed by those early experiences. Without knowing it we are shaping this new international believer in all the American clothes of Christianity and thereby hindering him from being effective in carrying the Good News to his own people group and culture.

<sup>iv</sup> Our vision should also significantly impact what we do with international friends while they are here. Only considering what they will experience there may not lead us to realizing our vision. If our vision is to see the gospel spontaneously spread and small communities form then we have to question if our methods will lead the international to that.

<sup>v</sup> They are also heavily written from an American cultural perspective.