

## *Encountering Mission*

# **A Backpacking Semester in the Shadow of Global Missionaries**

**Adam Lee**

Statistics shape an artful attempt to introduce the story of Concordia University Irvine's Around-the-World Semester: two professors, twenty-eight students, twenty weeks, ten countries, five continents, three thousand pages of reading, one hundred pages of writing, and just one backpack. These make great stats for physically bringing admissions tours to an intrigued halt on campus or for impressing marketing consultants hired to identify university distinctives. These numbers also tell the story of God's transformative power in the lives of students willing to be physically, intellectually, and spiritually challenged for one semester of their college lives.

Since the program first embarked five falls ago, our three circumnavigations have involved seventy-five students with unique projects in twenty-four different countries. Each trip focuses on different nations, cities, texts, and different missionary groups and individuals. We are currently recruiting and accepting applications for our fourth trip, which will depart next August probably for Japan, China, India, Greece, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Morocco, Ghana, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

In each of the ten countries, we spend two weeks to volunteer with missionaries, study language basics, read local texts, and compose travel writing about our time there. Reading includes contemporary novels, folk tales, and sacred texts; writing includes journalism, ethnography, and creative nonfiction. As an example, in Turkey we studied the Qur'an, read Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*, and helped serve Syrian and Iraqi refugees from ISIS.

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*Adam Lee has been teaching university English, Literature, and Writing since 1994, two years after his first backpacking trip to Europe. In the following two decades he has traveled to every inhabited continent, crossed the borders of more than 110 countries, and taught local students or trained national teachers in South Korea, China, Mongolia, Japan, Hungary, Nepal, India, Kenya, Rwanda, and Brazil. During this decade he has been planning and leading all four of Concordia University Irvine's biannual Around-the-World Semester®. Between this program and other summer mission trips, he has written a Travel Writing textbook, taken about 200 university students through more than 50 countries to study literature and language, serve with various ministry organizations, and of course write travel stories about what they have seen and learned.*

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View *Missio Apostolica* 23, no. 2 (2015) at <http://lsfm.global/>.

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Throughout the trip, students witness and often get to practice ten quite different forms of missionary work: person-to-person evangelism, church planting, oral Bible teaching, music and street theatre outreach, orphan and widow care, medical missions, refugee relief work, VBS/EFL and campus ministry, human trafficking awareness, and community development. Students are exposed to ten different missionary personalities, leadership styles, examples of living in community, and visions of how God calls and works through His servants.

God started early in preparing me for this type of vocation. Summer vacation trips in my family didn't have any tension between recreation and education: to travel was to learn through visiting museums, exploring historic sites, and listening to our dad's church history stories. Through hearing many missionary tales as a child, collecting international stamps in my youth, and then reading world literature in college, I grew to imagine that my vocation might be travel itself. This program has been the greatest challenge of my 22-year career, but also the most rewarding, tapping into all of my life interests in missions, travel, writing, and literature.

Students apply for this program for a variety of reasons: a desire to do missions, a longing for adventure, an interest in résumé-defining experience, or perhaps even to find themselves. We select members based on our observations of their strengths; God selects them based on their weaknesses.

Being part of a 20-week long, 24-hour-a-day, 28-member learning community is an unprecedented opportunity for academic as well as spiritual growth and transformation. God often uses this community itself as a witness for Him as people observe the students travel, study, and serve together as a "family." The rigorous curriculum and intense faculty-guided experiential learning seeps from the primary texts we read into classroom discussions and then out into the streets, cafes, parks, and temples of each city we visit.

We have found that, and are still learning how, the academic demands of our trip reduce the temptations for students to arrive with a superior or colonial mindset. Both our missionary guides and those we serve are resources for, as well as authorities on, what needs to be studied and learned. The nature of this program forces us into the posture of learners. Hosting a team of engaged listeners, missionaries and teachers have found that the simple act of re-telling stories of how God called them, how Christ has worked through their ministry, and how the Holy Spirit is leading them actually encourages them with reminders of God's faithfulness and provision. Missionaries themselves often become our service projects as we study under them.

This program could be dismissed as ten loosely connected short-term mission trips, carrying all the negative baggage associated with them. It could also be dismissed as a merely academic trip that therefore never truly engages in actual

missions. If not planned, recruited, and supervised conscientiously, it could easily devolve into a beach party semester abroad.

We've seen, however, that God creates something greater with the accumulated whole of the academics, service, and travel in the lives of our students. When God calls them to future missions, fears have now been removed. When God calls them to donate to missions, they now have ten missionaries to support whom they know firsthand. When God calls them to serve at home, they now have hearts to serve and share the hospitality that they received as travelers and strangers in foreign lands. When God calls them to become full-time missionaries, they now have ten role models to follow.

God has allowed us to see teens come to Christ in a Nepali village, scores of people saved on a mountain in Ethiopia, and one female student from a large Asian nation ask to be introduced to Jesus during a homestay. God has allowed us to be in the right place to witness His kingdom at work through the local congregations in many cultures, to worship Him in many languages, and to be welcomed by new Christian brothers and sisters all across the globe.

We're still learning the value of making study abroad programs more missional and, conversely, making our mission trips more academic. Christian universities could be designing and sending more such hybrid programs to teach students how to dream missionally with their futures and demonstrate how to live missionally with their vocations.