

Reaching the World from Home—The History of International Students Inc.

International Students, Inc. (ISI) is the oldest and largest foreign student missionary movement in America. As with other movements, God began with an individual who had a growing vision and calling.

The Right Time

At the end of World War II there was a push to establish parachurch groups that responded to special needs yet unmet by the Church. Some of these groups included Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), Youth for Christ, The Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, World Vision, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. During this same time, Dr. Bob Finley, founder of ISI, became increasingly aware of and burdened for the growing number of international students studying in the United States. While some individuals and perhaps a handful of churches across the country recognized the opportunity to reach the world from home, there was not a concerted movement to evangelize and disciple foreign students until Finley began ISI.

The Calling

The vision-seed for a ministry to international students was planted during a discussion between Finley and another missionary during a train ride in 1948. After this time, Bob Finley went to minister in China.

The seed was watered during Finley's first year in China while watching the growth of Chinese communism propagated not by Russians in China, but by Chinese students who returned home from studying in Russia.

In 1949 the vision-seed was again watered through a discussion with Dawson Trotman, founder of The Navigators. When Trotman later visited Finley in 1951, he asked what had been done about the vision for a ministry to foreign students. Finley replied, "Nothing."

This was the turning point for Bob Finley. The vision-seed was finally germinated. Finley wrote to Rev. Billy Graham, for whom he was now working, asking Rev. Graham's counsel and possible consent to return and establish an international student ministry in the United States. Although Graham advised Finley to remain in Japan, Finley resigned and returned to the U.S. to implement the unique and strategic vision for ISI.

The Early Years

In 1951, Finley recruited Max Kershaw and Carroll Lindman. Kershaw, based on the University of California Berkeley campus, began meeting international students arriving on ships in San Francisco harbor. Lindman was based on the campus of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. The Navigators loaned Warren Myers and Bill Michel to assist in the development of the new ministry, which was then known as FOCUS (Fellowship of Overseas College and University Students).

Finley's foreign mission ministry in the United States became officially established as International Students, Inc. in 1953. ISI's headquarters moved to Washington, D.C. and occupied two rooms of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Films building. Graham was now supportive and a member of the Board of Advisors. There were 33,000 foreign students from 128 nations enrolled in U.S. colleges in 1953, and four ISI area ministries.

Leaders with Continued Vision

January 1968, Finley passed leadership of ISI to Hal Guffey. Four years later in 1972, Guffey moved the headquarters from Washington, D.C., to Star Ranch in Colorado Springs, Colorado. One of Hal's major accomplishments during his 20 years as president was leading the development of ISI's friendship evangelism approach to ministry. During this time, more churches became involved with ISI and hundreds of international students found Christ and were prepared to return home as effective witnesses for the Lord.

In September 1988, Hal passed the leadership baton to Gordon Loux, who brought more than 25 years of management experience in the Christian community to his new position. Gordon had helped former presidential aide, Charles Colson, begin Prison Fellowship. He is also a founder, board member, and past chairman of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA). During his five-year term as president, Gordon led the ministry to focus only on international students. He moved ISI from being a loosely-knit association of ministers to an organization interdependent in the utilization of its resources.

In 1994, ISI named Dr. Tom Phillips as the new president. Tom came to ISI from a role as Director of Counseling and Follow-Up with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, with whom he had served for 20 years. During his seven years with ISI, Phillips emphasized that it would be young people who carry the message of revival to the world and international students who carry it to their own countries. He asked God to assemble "a band of holy men and women touched by God's hand" to reach out together to international students. Under his leadership, God increased the visibility of ISI and further developed the vision for working with churches and volunteers. Partnerships were developed with scores of other church and parachurch groups that also minister to international students. Phillips also oversaw the selling of Star Ranch and the move of ISI's Home Office to a corporate office setting.

Dr. Douglas Shaw picked up the leadership mantle in December of 2001. After growing up and receiving his initial education in Calcutta, India, Doug came to the U.S. over 33 years ago as an international student and earned both a M.A. and a Ph.D. at California Graduate School of Theology. Ordained in 1974, he served several churches in California in either interim/consultative roles or as senior pastor. He is the author of many articles and more than a dozen books and training manuals. In addition, Dr. Shaw has served with several parachurch ministries, including Living Bibles International, Christ for All Nations, the Joshua Project/Mission America, and Every Home for Christ.

Today's Leader

In January 2020, Dr. Seng Tan assumed the role of ISI President. A product of ISI, Seng was part of the international student ministry at Arizona State University in the 1990s, first as a student and later as campus staff. In his native homeland of Singapore, Seng served in church leadership and in the areas of discipleship, teaching, and worship. Beyond church work, Seng is a tenured professor of international relations at the Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore, where he also is head of a defense think tank. Above all, his desire is to work with the entire ISI family to glorify God together through ensuring that ISI completes the ministry it has received from the Lord.

As of this time, the number of international students in the U.S. has increased to over one million and ISI's staff continues to grow. Exciting ministry opportunities and resources are increasing the number of students who are coming to know Christ through ISI's ministry and that of other international student ministries.

All this, as well as an increasing vision for prayer throughout the world, gives us assurance that our goal of seeing every international student have an opportunity to say, "yes" to the Gospel can become a reality.