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Transformations at That Edge of the World: Forming Global Christians Through the Study Abroad Experience

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Morgan, R. J., & Smedley, C. T. (2010). *Transformations at that edge of the world: Forming global Christians through the study abroad experience.*

Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.

Reviewed by Genesis J. DeLong

In our increasingly interconnected world, the cross-cultural experience has never been a more relevant or important tool for preparing students to become global Christians with a tested, authentic faith and an ability play an active role in the global community. However, with a growing number of colleges and universities placing a high priority on global engagement, faith-based educators face the challenge of providing quality study abroad opportunities that support their institutional mission and facilitate spiritually transformative experiences for both students and the global community whom they serve (Morgan & Smedley, p. 16). *Transformations at the edge of the world: Forming global Christians through the study abroad experience* seeks to address this and other challenges by bringing together a collection of 13 thought-provoking essays written by a diverse group of faculty and study abroad practitioners from a variety of Christian faith-based U.S. institutions. Consequently, the stories and insights presented throughout this book provide the reader with a rare glimpse into the best practices and methodologies behind many of the most successful faith-based off-campus programs today. The result is an inspirational book that borders on a how-to guide for study abroad programs and a catalyst for all higher education professionals to understand the transformative power of the cross-cultural experience and to take an active part in the goal of forming globally engaged Christians.

Transformations is divided into four sections—each with a specific theme—that take the reader on a journey inward toward self-reflection, then outward toward a global focus. Each chapter contains one essay in which the author or authors discuss an aspect of the section's theme through the lens of the educational program(s) in which they are involved. The book's editors, Ronald J. Morgan, associate professor of history and director of ACU in Oxford for Abilene Christian University, and Cynthia Toms Smedley, director of educational immersions at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns, provide their own helpful insights throughout the book with the goal of stimulating readers "to tap the rich potential of the study abroad setting" (p. 234).

In part 1, "The Journey Inward," contributors from Abilene Christian University, St. Olaf College, University of Notre Dame, and George Fox University focus on individual spiritual formation and emphasize the need for students to experience a feeling of dislocation in order to engage in self-reflection and discover who they are in the world. In chapter 2, John D. Barbour of St. Olaf College articulates how travel abroad can truly impact the life of the traveler when approached from the viewpoint of a pilgrim rather than a tourist:

The kind of tourist we criticize asks only: “Am I getting my money’s worth? Is it worth it?” The pilgrim should ask: “Am I worthy of an encounter with the holy, worthy to enter this church, mosque, or temple?” Many tourists judge the worth of the culture they visit and never examine what travel reveals about their own culture’s values. The pilgrim, in contrast, should judge himself. (Morgan et al., p. 53)

The book shifts its focus from self-reflection to community in part 2, “Inward Journey to Outward Living: Community as Teacher,” as contributors from Gordon College and the University of St. Thomas discuss how they approach spiritual formation by intentionally immersing students in community, liturgy, contemplation, and service during their time abroad. For example, in chapter 5, John Skillen of Gordon College describes how students in the Gordon in Orvieto program learn to adapt to a slower, more contemplative lifestyle that teaches them the value of developing spirituality within the context of community.

The focus on community continues in part 3, “Coming Face to Face with the Social Other: Bridging Intercommunal Divides,” with emphasis on the transformative power of the face-to-face encounter. Here, authors from Abilene Christian University, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities’ (CCCCU) Middle East Studies Program, and Westmont College stress the importance of bridging cultural divides by entering the world of the “other” and truly experiencing the world from a new point of view. Chapter 9 presents a unique cultural setting as David P. Holt describes the feelings and challenges students experience while living as minorities in a Muslim culture during the CCCU’s Middle East Studies Program. Chapter 10 provides a different perspective on the cross-cultural experience within U.S. borders by relating students’ encounters with the “other” during Westmont College’s San Francisco Urban Program.

Finally, the authors move from community to a wider global focus in part 4, “The Year of the Lord’s Good Favor: Cultivating Solidarity with the Global Poor.” Here, authors from Azusa Pacific University, the Creation Care Study Program, and Goshen College provide insights into programs that focus on a Biblical approach to serving poor communities. In a change of pace from the focus on undergraduate programs throughout the rest of the book, chapter 11 highlights Azusa Pacific University’s Master of Arts in Transformational Urban Leadership program, which immerses students in urban poor communities through field internships and research and service collaborations with indigenous organizations throughout the world (Morgan et al., p. 196). In this chapter, Richard Slimbach uses the Incarnation of Christ as an example of what it means to develop true empathy for the poor:

Jesus didn’t remain in a sequestered religious or cultural “bubble,” nor did he conduct “mission trips” from the heavens to earth. He became little, weak, minority, vulnerable, dependent, and misunderstood. He entered the world’s pain, problems, and thought systems through direct, firsthand encounters that involved costly identifications. (Morgan et al., p. 194)

In *Transformations*, readers become privy to both painful and joyful accounts of students' personal growth as the authors use journal entries and letters from their own students to describe transformative experiences that have taken place during their programs. Additionally, the authors share their own personal insights into specific methodologies that have facilitated spiritual growth and transformation in their programs. For example, in chapter 1, Janine Paden Morgan of Abilene Christian University describes her use of liturgy and the Bible story of Jacob to teach students about God's faithfulness during the ACU in Oxford semester. In keeping with the book's how-to feel, Morgan shares these liturgies at the back of the book as a resource for study abroad practitioners who may want to incorporate this idea into their own programs.

For faculty and practitioners with direct involvement in the field of study abroad, *Transformations* provides inspiration for creating meaningful off-campus experiences that bring students into a deeper faith and a Biblically-based global mindset. By employing a distinctly Christian approach and providing an in-depth look at a wide variety of successful faith-based off-campus programs, this book stands out as truly unique amongst the books currently available on the topic and sets itself apart as an invaluable resource for practitioners in the field.

However, this book is not limited to those directly involved in the field of study abroad. I recommend *Transformations* as a resource for professionals in all areas of Christian higher education, since it educates readers about the transformative nature of off-campus study and the importance of the cross-cultural experience for today's college students. As Morgan emphasizes in the book's conclusion, the transformative potential of off-campus programs is only as strong as the broader institutional commitment to that vision (Morgan et al., p. 235). To this end, *Transformations* provides the basis for facilitating an important dialogue on our campuses centered on the shared goal of forming globally engaged Christians ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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Morgan, R. J., & Smedley, C. T. (Eds.). (2010). *Transformations at the edge of the world: Forming global Christians through the study abroad experience*. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.