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Cultural Learners: Dordt Students Reflect on Off-Campus Studies

Daniel Moe

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May 25, 2022

*This article is part of our ongoing series: **Living with Intentionality**. Our lives are a series of decisions of how best to love others, care for our creation, seek good, prevent harm, and glorify God. We will highlight these articles where fellow believers make very intentional choices that can expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and the life of the mind—can accomplish.*

Daniel Moe—Oxford Semester

In the spring of 2021, I had the incredible opportunity to study abroad at the University of Oxford in England through the Scholarship and Christianity in Oxford (SCIO) program. As soon as I began college, I knew that I wanted to fit a semester abroad into my degree plan, but I had no idea which program might be right for me. However, later in my freshman year, I was in England visiting family and decided to take a quick train ride to visit Oxford, and I absolutely fell in love with the city and the university's rich history and academic culture. After walking through the centuries-old libraries and cobblestone streets, I knew I wanted to come back and study at the same desks that generations of scientists, politicians, and theologians had sat at before me.

Looking back, my semester at Oxford has proved to be one of the most formational spiritual experiences of my life. First, the semester was a lesson in trusting God's providence. While I was flying over the Atlantic, the United Kingdom imposed a new national lockdown because of rising COVID-19 cases. So, when I landed in London, I had no idea what the semester might now look like, or if I would even be allowed to remain in the country. Even after learning I would be able to stay, living in another country (especially during a pandemic) involved daily moments of uncertainty, even about mundane things like navigating confusing, winding streets while biking on the left side of the road. However, the uncertainty and occasional discomfort from living in a different country led me to trust in God's providence more than ever. That perspective ultimately left me with an incredible sense of peace about uncontrollable circumstances and

enabled me to better see God at work in the “ordinary” moments of life, which is a perspective that has continued to bless me since returning to the U.S.

Studying abroad also led to a renewed investment in personal spiritual disciplines. Being a student at Oxford challenged me to learn in an entirely new way by relying exclusively on primary research literature, spending countless hours researching and writing weekly essays, and defending my work during one-on-one tutorials with my professors. This new pedagogy was challenging and sometimes overwhelming. Thus, I found a renewed investment in spiritual disciplines to maintain my energy and focus. Even when I felt busier than I had ever been before, I found I needed to spend more time in prayer, studying Scripture, and doing devotions to gain the strength and energy for my studies each day. Likewise, without the same extracurriculars and opportunities to find the rest that I had back on Dordt’s campus, I found new ways to rejuvenate while abroad. Specifically, I took time to slow down, get away from my studies, and enjoy God’s creation by biking through the English cities and countryside, as well as having thoughtful discussions with my peers long into the night. These intentional habits developed through my study abroad experience have only continued to draw me closer to God and those around me ever since.

Morgan Stoltzfus—Chicago Semester

Initially, I had chosen the N-SPICE study abroad program in the Netherlands. It’s been on my bucket list to study abroad, and I was excited to experience a different culture, to live with a host family, and to grow my faith in a completely different culture. I was packed, ready to go, and in line for my pre-flight COVID test, when I received an email informing me that the program was canceled due to the resurgence of COVID.

I was devastated. I planned on returning to Dordt, but then I caught wind of an opening in the Chicago Semester program. I remember that it sounded like an incredible opportunity to grow my career skills and learn in a different environment through an internship. I jumped at the chance, and three days later I was moving into a small studio apartment in the heart of downtown Chicago.

Looking back, it’s a little insane to me how quickly and effortlessly everything fell into place. For me, it’s evidence that God’s hand was at work through it all. The chaos of it, from start to finish, strengthened my trust in Him and gave me peace knowing that His plan is ultimately better than any I could’ve come up with.

During my time in Chicago, I was able to witness the church in action in ways I had never seen before. There’s brokenness everywhere, but in Chicago it was difficult to ignore, as racial inequality and poverty were so apparent everywhere I looked. It left me both heartbroken and desperate for change as I witnessed it daily. In the midst of it all, I found hope in seeing churches pouring everything they had into aiding communities affected most by these issues—Churches that looked beyond the four walls of their building, and sought ways to serve, grow,

and heal the brokenness and injustice of the broader community. It strengthened and encouraged my faith to witness fellow believers taking the call to love their neighbors with an urgency and conviction. Even more so, it was inspiring to see the incredible changes in some of these communities when the church takes such an active role in being the hands and feet of Jesus.

In retrospect, I can say with full honesty that I'm so glad I ended up in Chicago instead of the Netherlands. While I'm sure Europe would have been incredible in its own way, being in Chicago was a reminder for me that we don't necessarily need to be crossing borders to serve a broken world. There's so much we can do as the Church in our own communities to love and serve our neighbors. My faith is stronger now, knowing that God is working through so many Churches and believers to bring healing, justice, and growth to broken communities.

Caden Zonnefeld—Oxford Semester

I applied to Oxford with the intent of sharpening my capacity as a cultural learner. I have come to believe that a fundamental misunderstanding of the other—whoever that may be—contributes to many of the difficulties our world faces today. I grapple with this disconnect when I fail to recognize the cultural and experiential influences that shape the deepest desires of my neighbor. Often it feels as if I am speaking another language; thankfully, while this may seem like a cause for despair, hope is not lost. Learning about another's culture takes a step in the direction of mutual understanding and ultimately wholeness.

Filled with the excitement of possibility and aspiration of improving as a cultural learner, Oxford term began. The enthusiasm of beginning anew soon wore off and I was confronted with the reality of grief. Amid an environment punctuated by new people, places, culture, and weather, I was forced to reckon with past grief in a unique and poignant way. In a place where I had hoped, even expected, for my faith to be nurtured, God felt distant, and I felt despair. I lamented the slowness and difficulty of growing as a cultural learner. Bereft of the guise of a self-sufficient faith, I longed for change.

As I experienced the difficulty of God's silence, a fellow cohort member invited me to an evening service at Trinity Church. The longing of my soul was met during that time of worship, as I heard the Gospel clearly despite the disappointment I felt. I had been missing the work of God before my eyes as I struggled to understand faith beyond the scope of the Dutch Reformed tradition that I call home. In the following weeks I continued to attend Trinity and was impressed by their commitment to fellowship and enjoyment of being part of a church. The friendly faces that became my temporary church home also became a source of hope. This hope manifested into an appreciation for the catholicity of the global church that affirms Jesus Christ as Lord.

Though my experience studying away at Oxford was animated with growth as a cultural learner, memorable experiences, challenging conversations, and new perspectives, I left most grateful

for the simple yet powerful act of friendship. I wrestle with the innate human desire to be loved for who I am; yet I often end up trying to earn love. I doubt the reality of love from those who I cherish, and I feel the weight of this burden often. Oxford gave me the opportunity to be extracted from the connotations of my family, reputation, and talents. Only then, as a person free of expectation, was I able to learn that I could be loved as I am...and that is a taste of the love of the divine.

Thanks to these students for sharing their journeys, and may it challenge all of us to step from our comfort zones and participate in serving and healing divisions in our local church communities, to develop spiritual habits that enrich our lives, and to embrace the grace and love of our Heavenly Father.