



A Journal for International Student Ministry in the UK

Returning Home

**Walking the Second Mile with International Students:
*Discipleship Issues for Returnees***
Stuart Bullington

**Preparing for Nanjing, not Nottingham!
*The Mainland Chinese Returnee's Encounter with Church***
Debbie D

**To Return or Not to Return:
*Thoughts on Returning to Muslim Society After Coming to Faith in Christ***
Rahab Chandler

Insight welcomes your comments and responses to the articles featured. Please address all correspondence to:
insight@friendsinternational.org.uk

©2013 Friends International Ministries. *Insight* is published by Friends International Ministries, a registered charity.
Registered Charity Number: 1094095.

DISCLAIMER: Articles published in *Insight* are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or Friends International Ministries.

a word from the editor



'Home'. For most of us, the word carries connotations of belonging, of a place where one is accepted and where life makes sense.

Yet, for those who have spent some time in a foreign culture, as our international friends have done in coming to the UK, returning home can feel very different from that.

For, imperceptibly, they will have embraced aspects of that culture. The individualism and 'personal space' that were experienced as loneliness in their early days here, are now appreciated as independence. The 'independent study' that felt so alien initially, is now valued against the need to conform and achieve harmony back home. Reverse culture shock can make going home a very uncomfortable transition.

If in addition to all that, our international friend has adopted a new faith while overseas, then there is a double transition to make. Questions of identity come to the fore. What does it mean to be a Christian in Thailand, where to be Thai is to be Buddhist, or in Iran where to be Iranian is to be a Muslim? What does a decision taken alone in a foreign country mean back home, where decisions are taken corporately and for the good of the family and community? Or where work pressure makes it so difficult to attend church? And what happens when church life feels very different from how it was experienced in the UK?

All of these factors go some way to explaining the depressing statistics of those who fall away from apparent professions of faith, made while studying overseas. They should also be a 'wake-up call' to those of us involved in this ministry. Our job has to be much bigger than welcoming international students and giving them an opportunity to understand the Christian faith, vital though those are. Nor is our job done when a student makes a profession of faith, even if we ensure that we have disciplined them in the (Western?) basics of faith. Returnee issues must inform our discipleship.

If we are to take seriously the challenges of the articles in this issue, then we may have to re-think how we do international student ministry and how we decide our priorities. My prayer is that this edition of *Insight* will start many of us on that journey.

A prayer for our returnee friends:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Colossians 2: 6-7 (NIV)

Sue Burt
Guest Editor



Walking the Second Mile with International Students: Discipleship Issues for Returnees

By Stuart Bullington

My Personal Journey

Her smile did not change when I finally asked the question I was most interested in, “Were you able to find a Christian group after you returned?” But, as the conversation across the table continued, somehow I never heard an answer. I realized, after one or two more attempts, that I was not going to hear one.

I was in a coffee shop in China, visiting a returnee who had given every indication, while studying in my hometown in America, of having a sincere desire to learn about Jesus. Was this evasive person with the frozen smile sitting across from me the same sincere seeker we thought we knew? What had changed in her heart after her return home?

Several years went by. I began to ask others who share Christ with international students what they had learned from visiting their former students in China. How many who had made professions of faith while overseas were meeting regularly with Christians back home? The answers seemed to fall within a range—about 15-25% (this is anecdotal, not scientific). And this percentage was perhaps on the high side, being based on returnees who had stayed in touch with their foreign mentors and welcomed a visit.

While this statistic gave me some small cause for joy (at least some students were continuing on in their faith!), it also made me ponder whether the recurring loss of 75-85% of our most promising new believers, year after year, was really an acceptable outcome. Could we not do better than this? My pondering only increased as I learned of similar—or even worse—statistics regarding Christian returnees in Japan and other Pacific Rim countries.

My discomfort with what I was learning drove me to find out more. After moving to Hong Kong in 2006, I continued my research into returnee issues as a doctoral student. I shifted my focus to Mainland China, and eventually wrote a doctoral thesis about returnee fellowship groups in China. As I interviewed Christian returnees for my

fieldwork, I listened to their stories—stories about facing overwhelming circumstances for which they were totally unprepared. I came away from this feeling that, with God’s help, I had to begin working together with international student ministries in the West to prepare our students better for the crucible in the East.

The Second Mile Principle

While preparing for a ministry training event earlier this year, my mind was drawn to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:41(NIV): “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.” In its original context the verse provides guidance for Christians in situations of compulsion or persecution. However, the principle it contains—living out Christ’s love by offering service beyond what is immediately required—has a wider application. As we think about the work that God has called us to do, I believe that the second mile principle offers us guidance on a transition that needs to take place in the way we relate to international students.

The first mile is exactly what we have been doing for years: welcoming students to the UK, helping them to adjust to life here, offering help and friendship, and sensitively sharing, as God grants us opportunities, the good news about Jesus. We certainly cannot abandon this approach—this is what we are all about! But, in view of the struggles of our returnees, is God perhaps calling us now to walk a second mile?

In other words, is God calling us to not only walk with our students in the UK, but to also walk with them on the long journey back to their homelands after graduation? And if so, how shall we do this? How will we prepare them well for the journey home while they are still among us? How can we continue to help them after they return?

Figure 1 shows how the second mile is different from the first. It is future-oriented, focused on anticipating and meeting the needs of returnees (which our students will soon become!). Because of our special

Figure 1:
A Comparison
of the 1st Mile
and the 2nd Mile
in international
student
ministry.

The 1 st Mile	The 2 nd Mile
Welcoming students to this country	Preparing students to have an impact back home
Meeting their current felt needs	Meeting their not-yet-felt future needs
Hospitality focus	Discipleship and missional focus
Broad – includes everyone	Narrow – new Christians and serious seekers only
Emphasis on adjusting to life in the UK	Emphasis on finding God’s vision for discipleship and mission back home
UK is the destination	UK is the training ground; home is the destination
Discipleship (unconsciously) teaches students how to become British Christians	Discipleship (consciously) teaches students how to become indigenous Christians in their own cultures

concern to protect and nurture, in advance, the spiritual lives of returnees, we walk the second mile only with new Christians and serious seekers.

The Three Phases of the Second Mile

A long walk will pass through different kinds of terrain, but the various parts all belong to the same journey. Likewise, walking the second mile has three distinct phases.

1. Training and discipling students for the home context (not for ours!).
2. Preparing students for re-entry.
3. Connecting students with Christians back home.

The first phase lasts throughout the entire walk; the second and third phases become important as the student prepares to leave the UK. We will now expand on each one of these phases and how they might affect our practice of ministry.

Phase 1:

Training and discipling students for the home context (not for ours!)

Discipling for the home context, also known as *contextualized* or *appropriate* discipleship, simply means that we are preparing the students to live as Christians in their own cultures, not ours. The questions raised, the challenges presented to Christian belief, and the temptations and trials that Christians have to endure can be very different in different cultural contexts.

Just to give an example, what do you think Christian returnees in Taiwan identify as one of the biggest challenges to their faith? It's often given as the reason why many fall away. Perhaps you already know the answer: ancestor worship.

Now, of the Taiwanese studying in the UK who attend Bible studies or other discussions of the Christian faith, how many have studied what the Bible says about ancestor worship? How many have worked out, with a mentor, exactly what they will do the next time their family members ask them to participate in it? Would it not be better to work through this issue thoroughly in the UK, rather than waiting until the student is back home, far from any other Christians, and being urged by parents and siblings to worship at the family shrine?

Working through returnee issues in advance is always a good idea. In actual practice it can be quite challenging:

- Students are not always keen to think about their home context while they are enjoying their stay in the UK; so they may not ask for help in the areas where they most need to be prepared. Like parents, we are the ones who need to plan ahead for their future needs.
- Even when we are aware of the issues they will face, it can be hard to know what to say. What *does* the Bible say about ancestor worship, after all? How could I possibly lead a Bible lesson on this topic when I understand it so poorly?
- Sometimes the "right" answers in our culture are just not appropriate in the student's home culture. We can, with the best of intentions, give advice that our students will never be able to follow.

The practice of contextualized discipleship is complex and deserves a fuller treatment than we can give it here. The main principle, borrowed from Stephen Covey, is simply this: *Begin with the end in mind*. From the first contact with an interested student, the goal of our Christian witness is to prepare that student to thrive as a Christian back home, not just to meet his or

her immediate needs. We need to think carefully about every aspect of what it will take to equip our students to "thrive" in their native soils.

While thriving may require many spiritual disciplines and skills, a foundational aspect is returning with a sense of purpose. Returnees who sense God's call to return, who return on a mission, who know why they must go back—like

Moses or Nehemiah—can find strength in God to accomplish great things. Part of our task as disciplers, then, is to guide and inspire them, in the words of William Carey, to "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."

To summarize, my thesis here is that the right place to measure success in our ministries is *among our returnees, not among our students in the UK*. We must look for the long-term, enduring, positive changes in our returnees that came about because of their time with us. In John 15:16 (NIV), Jesus said to his disciples, "I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." Is this lasting spiritual fruit apparent in the lives of our returnees? If not, then perhaps we need to rethink what we are doing with students here.

Flight	Time	Gate	Remarks
2340	8:42P	S16D	On-Ti
470	6:10P	D5	On-Ti
396	8:41P	D8	On-Ti
2024	9:05P	B10	On-Ti
476	9:28P	C16	On-Ti
2864	9:55P	B14	Now 1
390	5:56P	N6	Now 7



Phase 2:**Preparing students for re-entry**

In the weeks leading up to our students' return home, we enter another phase in our second-mile walk with our students. This phase can be called "pre-return preparation", and the goal is to impart some just-in-time information that will reduce the shock factor and disorientation that students often experience after re-entry.

What is re-entry? The basic definition is: re-entering your home culture after living overseas. But, experientially, it is:

- A bad surprise!
- A time of intense conflict and emotional upheaval.
- An unexpected culture shock which can last from about 6 months to one year (or even longer!).
- A turning point, decisive for the student's future.
- For Christians, a time of testing—perhaps the greatest yet experienced (ref. Luke 8:13)

The emotional adjustment is often harder for those who stayed abroad for a longer time, had more foreign friends, and who adapted more to a foreign culture. In short, the better the experience abroad, the greater will be the feelings of grief and loss after returning. There is a wide range of intensities in the experience among returnees.

If you have been doing the right kind of discipleship, then you have been preparing your students for re-entry all along. But an additional orientation (one-on-one, in small groups, during a weekend retreat) can equip the student in a focused way for the immediate challenges to come.

One of the best tools available for this orientation is *Think Home*, based on Lisa Espinelli Chinn's original guide for students studying in the United States. It guides students through a thoughtful and Biblical evaluation of the personal changes that have occurred since arriving in the UK and prepares them well for going home with a new, Christian identity. For disciplers, Nate Mirza's *Home Again* is a helpful guide on how to become a better mentor to returnees.

The goal of any pre-return orientation is to help students develop their own well-thought-out plans for re-entry. As they return home and face the inevitable conflicts that ensue, they can follow their plans and know exactly how they will respond to each challenge. Major life decisions should not be made on the hoof, in the heat of battle.

Phase 3:**Connecting students with Christians back home**

We can begin with a general observation, based on years of experience in Asia: connected Christian returnees survive and thrive. Isolated returnees die—

no matter how well they were disciplined! The general rule of thumb is three months—that is, returnees who get involved in a good church or Christian fellowship within three months after arriving home generally thrive. Those who don't make the connection during that time find it harder and harder to get involved in any Christian group.

This is the third phase in our second-mile walk with students: proactively introducing them to Christians back home. Anything we can do from the UK to help them make a connection is worth trying. In general, I recommend connecting them first to returnee-friendly churches and returnee fellowship groups, which, if they are available, will provide them with the most appropriate, congenial, and supportive communities.

The most important connection of all is the one with you, or whoever has been their mentor in the UK. Don't abandon your 'children'! Staying in touch via Skype, texting, or email is especially important during the first six months, or until the returnees are stable and involved in Christian community back home. Keep studying the Bible with them, encourage them to connect with Christians, and pray with them through their re-entry struggles and conflicts. If concerns about security inhibit you or your students from communicating freely, work out some security measures (VPN, secure email, encryption, etc.)¹ with them before they go.

Finally, if time and budget permit, go and visit them. It will be a great learning experience for you and a real encouragement to your returnees. It will inform your efforts to continue mentoring them (and others from similar contexts) as you meet their families, see where they live and work, and hear of their struggles.

For the sake of God's glory among the nations, and for the sake of our returnees, let us commit now to begin learning how to walk the second mile with our students.

1. If you would like to receive some guidelines on safe communication, especially in email, with sensitive countries, please contact the Friends International office. (Details on the back page)

Preparing for Nanjing, not Nottingham!

The Mainland Chinese Returnee's Encounter with Church

By Debbie D

A significant number of Chinese profess faith in Christ whilst studying abroad. Many, however, do not settle in church on return to China. This article introduces one key reason - differences between church experiences abroad and in China - and suggests ways we can build bridges to church in China¹. These comments arise from reflection on visits to returnees in China, conversations with colleagues and my doctoral research about Chinese returnees who professed faith in Christ abroad. Returnees' experiences vary; what is said below will not apply to everyone. However, evidence suggests it will have relevance for more than the 100+ returnees I know.

Church in China: Brief Comments

Although people often place Chinese churches in two categories, registered and unregistered (or, somewhat unhelpfully, 'official' and 'underground'), reality is more complex. Some unregistered ('house' or 'family') churches operate clandestinely; others limit attracting attention whilst realising that the authorities know about them. Members of others have been arrested, perhaps when they became too big or caused difficulties for officials. A Google search for 'Beijing Shouwang Church' reveals comments (probably varying in accuracy) about one such church, albeit with a controversial approach. Freedoms and restrictions vary from place to place and time to time.

Returnees attend registered and unregistered churches. Most returnees I know are in unregistered ones, meeting in apartments, hotels, business premises and the like, having found larger registered churches too impersonal for close fellowship. I know three who regularly attended two churches: a middle-sized registered church with English language outreach, opportunities to serve and a young-marrieds group, and a large house church, with a famous pastor, committed to unrestrained preaching of the whole Bible. They have since settled, two in the registered church, the third in another smaller unregistered church. Registered or unregistered, churches vary.

Teaching varies, as elsewhere; so does the degree to which registered ministers experience and follow restrictions on teaching. However, experts observe that the Chinese Church is, more than many others, largely Bible-based and evangelical. The growth of Christianity in China is famous. Whilst the government undoubtedly

wants to control this growing social force, it also recognises that the church can help maintain social stability, for example through welfare initiatives, such as poverty relief, marriage counselling and elderly care. This affords opportunities to share the love of Christ.

Barriers

Church invisibility is an issue. Despite growth in registered churches, some cities still have none. Even Beijing (population 15 to 20 million) has probably only eight; these also have registered meeting points but a returnee needs to enquire to find. Unregistered churches exist but limit their visibility; returnees need contacts to find them, be trusted and accepted.

Because there are relatively few, registered churches in large cities tend to have large congregations, with people leaving quickly after the last hymn. This may be because others are queuing for the next service, or because of a lack of trust arising from history and past experience of constant surveillance. One Chinese writer suggests that mainstream Chinese church theology has traditionally emphasised personal devotions and prayer, but said little about how believers should behave together. Familiarity with Chinese religions which emphasise individual temple attendance, leaving as soon as obeisance is done, may also contribute. Getting to know people can be hard.

Some are disappointed not to find a replica of their UK church, perhaps discouraged by formality or old-fashioned music. Once, accompanying a returnee on her first trip to church, I noted strong points (the sermon, young people, an invitation to a Bible study), but she was unimpressed, essentially because it was different from her UK church. Some feel uncomfortable in a congregation older than themselves, but this is changing as younger people attend large city churches. Some churches are hierarchical or wary of returnees. This can be hard for new returnees, used to attention and encouragement to ask questions. Others go to international churches and mistake the fact that they are not allowed in - since only foreign passport-holders may attend services in foreigner-led churches - for unfriendliness.

Returnees told me there were constraints on their registered church in preaching certain subjects (for

1. Family and work pressures are also very important factors, but limited space precludes discussion here



example, the Second Coming); then I heard that subject preached in a registered church elsewhere. The ratio of trained ministers to church attendees is low, although numbers of Bible colleges and their graduates have grown. Christian websites and bookshops are increasing.

Sects are prevalent in China. These include international organizations such as Jehovah's Witnesses, but also indigenous groups such as Eastern Lightning, who believe the Messiah has already returned as a Chinese woman. One returnee told me that the Christian aunt who helped her when she returned from the UK, later joined a cult. Nor is China free from the prosperity gospel.

Some simply do not seek church. We sometimes misunderstand motivations for attending church in Britain. Life can be quiet, boring and lonely. Practising English and meeting friendly people are major draws. Some want to join this club of 'good people', even to the extent of being baptised to 'get in' or repay the kindness of a British friend. How often do we ask leading questions like "Do you believe in Jesus?", which can provoke the response "Yes" because it is the respectful thing to say, rather than more open questions like "What does Jesus mean to you?"

Some see no need for church if they have God. This can stem from a culture where religion means visiting temples to pay gods off or pray for good fortune. It can also stem from individualism experienced in the UK, even in the church. Teaching which focuses on Christ's death as payment for sin, and the reconciliation of the individual with God, but not *also* explaining that God is building a kingdom, or a people, risks obscuring the importance of church.

Academics, policemen, government employees, especially those at senior levels, may be wary of revealing their faith by attending church; senior positions often require Communist Party membership.

Many are simply overwhelmed by a combination of work, family and social pressures which are hard for us to understand in the comparatively relaxed UK. Something which seemed so exciting or romantic abroad may fade when family or work demand your attention on Sundays, and the only church you know is two hours away by public transport. Matthew 13:22 is apt.

What Helps :

Well Before Return

Some settle quickly, happy to be with Christians who share language, culture and context: "We're sharing. We're emotionally connected," one said. Shared struggles deepen their faith. Some become church leaders. Yue*, for example, was encouraged to pray and read the Bible in Chinese, and also tried leading worship in the UK. British friends introduced her to a returnee fellowship in China. From there she moved to a house church and later into leadership.

Family identity: flourishing returnees identified themselves not only as children of God but also as members of a new family. Church friends were referred

to as family, with shared purpose, values and identity. They had a whole Bible perspective (which some learned in UK, others in China), identifying the Bible story as their own. This related to a habit, learned early, of regular prayerful Bible reading.

It is essential to explore with prospective returnees what the Bible says about the Body of Christ and the believer's place in it: what church is, why it exists and why they need it. Resources like the Friends International I.D. Course can help. To help them apply such teaching and distinguish essential elements of church from mere cultural trappings (e.g. a particular kind of music or building), we can encourage students to visit one or two other UK churches (including a Chinese one). We can then discuss their experience, helping them develop a more Biblical view of what makes a 'good' church, and preparing them for church experience in China which may cosmetically be quite different from their UK church.

Many of the returnees I met who are bearing spiritual fruit, experienced Christianity as being something Chinese whilst in the UK, making transition to church in China smoother. Christianity did not become a past cultural experience, belonging in the UK. That UK Chinese Christian experience varied; the important thing was that they saw, heard and felt Christianity as Chinese. Some attended Chinese churches; some went to British churches but attended Mandarin speaking, Chinese-led small groups; others went to a COCM camp; some met with Chinese friends for Bible study and prayer in Chinese.

A Chinese colleague warns against molycoddling new Chinese believers (e.g. giving regular lifts to church), instead urging practising commitment to church attendance in the UK, ready for China where it will be more difficult (in terms of distance, time and distractions).

Before Return

Some returnees who are now leaders actively prepared to serve on return, spending a year or the months before visa expiry, serving in church or a mission agency. Before seeking a job, Ming deliberately sought a church in China where he could serve and grow. Li works in his home city but commutes at weekends to another city to lead a returnee fellowship; he is praying for a job there.

In some Chinese cities there are Christian returnee groups; they form bridges to help overcome culture shock, find churches and persevere in Christ. Although there are cities with no such group, or even a contact to introduce returnees to church, contacts are increasing. Please try to find your new Christian friend a contact before they leave. Your starting point could be your local Friends International staff worker; they should be able to contact LINC who will know what to do next. Or ask COCM, or contact me, through Friends International. If that all fails, I suggest you recommend your friend seek a registered church, praying and patiently waiting for God to lead them. When their face becomes familiar they may be invited to other meetings. But pray and stay in touch!

We should not underestimate our continuing importance to returning friends: Su's UK friends helped her contact Christians in China and stayed in touch. She also found nourishment meeting UK Chinese friends over Skype. Hearing about business as mission here, then attending a conference for returnee Christians, led her to help lead a group for Christian business people in her home city.

After Return

When Jing returned she felt lost; family and friends thought her faith weird and she could not make friends in the registered church. However, a UK friend kept in touch, over Skype, praying and encouraging her. Reading Ephesians together was pivotal. She accessed sermons online too². After a few months God led Jing to a house church where she found fellowship.

Finally, some advice from a returnee much used by God to help others: he urges returnees to be humble entering the Chinese church and to recognise that whilst they may feel they know much from experience abroad, leaders in China also have experience and reasons for what they do, some having walked with God for many years. Although returnees may perceive shortcomings, they should pray for God's guiding and exercise patience before jumping to 'correct'.

I have known such encouragement from this ministry; I hope you do too. It seems appropriate to end with James Hudson Taylor:

"The use of means ought not to lessen our faith in GOD; and our faith in GOD ought not to hinder our using whatever means He has given us for the accomplishment of His own purposes." — *A Retrospect*³

Suggested Reading

Two excellent websites:

China Source <http://www.chsource.org/en/> and sister site <http://chinesechurchvoices.com/> (Especially good article: The Church Today, part 2, 11th November 2013.)

Books giving an overview of Chinese church history, different kinds of church and the general situation (at 2006):

- *Jesus in Beijing*, David Aikman (2006 edition)
- *China's Christian Millions*, Tony Lambert (2006 edition)
- *The Chinese Puzzle*, Mike Falkenstine (2008): less history, but a lively analysis of the church situation current at time of publication.

*All names are pseudonyms.

© All Rights Reserved.

2. The website which helped Jing so much: <http://www.seaturtles.org.uk/>

3. Taylor, J. H. (1894), Toronto: China Inland Mission. Available as an eBook from Project Gutenberg, at <http://www.gutenberg.org>



To Return or Not to Return: Thoughts on Returning to Muslim Society After Coming to Faith in Christ

By Rahab Chandler

As we develop our creative outreach to the growing population of Muslim international students among us, we trust that God will work in the lives of many and bring them to faith.

However, it has become increasingly urgent to consider much more fully the issues faced by those who come to faith in Christ - becoming a Believer from a Muslim Background ('BMB') - when they return home. Even the decision itself, to return or not, can be a hugely stressful one, demanding God-given wisdom and guidance.

We need to recognise that for those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord while in the UK, the situation is usually very complex and serious, requiring considerable time and thought in preparing them to return, with their particular context very much in mind. Most who do return will face some extremely difficult issues. Those who choose to remain will face their own set of issues. As for 'returnee thinking', the very decision to return or to remain is relevant to us because both are to do with the student coming to faith and moving onto the next stage, being able to live in their new and very different identity, whether overtly or covertly.

Furthermore, even if a person chooses to remain in the UK, their identity will always be bound up to some extent with the family and country they are unable to return to, and the privilege of truly belonging *somewhere* can easily be denied them, potentially leaving them in a desolate no-man's land.

Return or remain: A Hard Decision

We need to recognise that preparing students who have become BMBs to *return* cannot carry the same assumptive weight as for preparing others to return. Preparing them to decide under God what they should do seems the better, more pastoral perspective, and the UK church needs to be prepared to be family, possibly like never before. Readers may be interested to know that a project called 'Joining the Family' is currently underway, being put together by a core group under Mahabba UK (www.mahabba.co.uk), to develop training for British churches on caring for and discipling BMBs. Initiatives like this will help us in the care and decision-making of our international students.

The reality is that most Muslim international students who come to faith while in the UK *do* choose to claim asylum in the UK on religious grounds. That fact in itself speaks volumes about how hard it is to return to a Muslim society as a converted believer, especially as most Muslim students come from large, closely-knit families from whom they would certainly not choose to be

separated except for matters of very great significance. For most, to remain in the UK is not a soft option but one of two very difficult options.

"To return to Iran with an altered religious identity would mean certain death for me; it is simply not an option." —Female, Iranian student.

The challenge we face is to be really practical and not super-spiritual. It might be easy to rejoice in the bravery of an individual who has chosen to return home but we must never make light of the reality they face. Yes, facing certain persecution is a Biblical lesson to be taught and understood (2 Tim 3:12). Yes, the glory of living and even dying for Christ is a lesson we all need to take to heart more (Phil 1:21). No, we should not persuade believers from a Muslim background to remain here if they feel clearly led by God to return. But we must never take the likely persecution of another lightly, especially when by persecution we mean possible, significant harm.

So what issues do Muslim international students who have come to faith while in the UK face if they return to Muslim society?

- The challenge of altering (or not) their official religious identity: to do so could lead to imprisonment (even immediate) or at least much local upset within family and community, with the possibility of being ostracized. It is often this step that 'blows the issue wide open'.
- Interacting with family: how much to reveal and when to do it; living 'a lie' with the great discomfort of doing so; harsh treatment if they 'own up', being disowned or cast out.
- Living with the expectation to follow Islamic lifestyle and religious practice because that's what *everyone* else does: the severe discomfort of being seen to be Islamic while wanting to be a Christian.
- Meeting other believers is often impossibly hard: needing to travel long distances for fellowship and needing to justify the travel to family and friends; possibly only internet fellowship available.
- Sporadic fellowship and therefore seriously limited discipleship.
- Uncertain Christian growth resulting in confusion of theology and identity.
- Coping with life's normal challenges like illness with a Christian perspective, trying to avoid cultural or religious traditions, solutions or remedies which feel dishonouring to Christ.

- The need to find a spouse: resisting family plans while hope of meeting a suitable believer is so small.
- Severe loneliness: inability to connect closely with family anymore, sparse contact with believers; possibly suicidal thoughts because it's just too hard to be that alone.
- **Loss of IDENTITY.** All of the above issues contribute to severe loss of personal identity: who am I now, to whom do I now belong? (How easy it is for us to exhort others to find their identity in Christ alone while we live surrounded by believers!)

We don't have to look far to learn of or meet students whose story is very close to the above set of challenges or who have chosen to remain in the UK precisely because this is what they would certainly face. Although a number of countries from which we draw international students do state that to leave Islam and convert to another religion is punishable by death, in reality – not least because of international scrutiny – the death sentence is rarely carried out. However, imprisonment, privately-organised beatings, removal of spouse and/or children, being cast out of family and community are still appalling things to face. For some Muslim students, the thought of bringing such dishonour on their families and being the (perceived) cause of so much unhappiness can be enough to prevent them from returning. Remaining in the UK without telling their families the full reason for their doing so will not be uncommon.

An important and excellent source on these issues is Ziya Meral's report 'No Place to Call Home'¹ in which the author gives carefully-researched information on the range of official punishments in different Muslim countries, as well as giving empathetic insight on issues that BMBs face.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Is returning possible then? Some *do* return, although the number will be fairly few and when they do, it can be a real challenge to maintain contact with them once they have returned, especially when internet provision is poorer or more limited than here in the UK. Indeed, some return to moderate communities like parts of Central Asia

or East Africa where conversion is strongly disapproved of but is not actually illegal. Life is certainly possible but is likely to be lonely and extremely challenging unless there is a BMB fellowship or a mature community of other believers close-by. This group would have to welcome a BMB with all the complications of relating to a person who is possibly quite different culturally and who is being watched by an unhappy, 'shamed', Muslim family and community. Whether such a family could or would allow the student to remain amongst them is highly questionable because of the dishonour both felt and imposed on the family by the wider Muslim community but this will vary from society to society.

The reality is that even in split populations, where Islam and Christianity exist alongside one another in comparative peace – usually because the Christians avoid confrontation of any kind, including any visible evangelism – a returning student who has left Islam for Christianity is highly likely to find himself between a large rock and a very hard place: on the one hand no longer part of his family's Muslim environment and on the other, met with a degree of suspicion and very cautious welcome by local Christians who are understandably fearful of religious conflict.

How then can we prepare them to stand firm in their faith? Most of us would agree that there must be room for a degree of practical compromise to enable the student to get back to their country, to facilitate re-establishing their life and finding a footing for their new faith in the hostile environment, trusting that with time the way to reveal their faith will become clearer, trusting that the hearts of loved ones might be softened by the Holy Spirit.

As with other students who are intending to return, the best scenario would be that a mature believer should take the student's nurturing and discipleship on as soon as possible after (or even better, before) the decision to follow Christ, with a clear agenda for returnee preparation: thorough Bible teaching, Bible-handling skills, a clear conviction of the Spirit and the fullest possible expression of support by God's people. They need to be given realistic expectations, encouragement but not false or overly-optimistic

1. This report is available as a free download on the Christian Solidarity Worldwide website: <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=94&search=no%20place%20to%20call%20home>
Or, it can be bought from Amazon: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Place-Call-Home-Experiences-International/dp/B005JDFP58>



assurances. They also need guidance on how to tell their family: the way this is done and the timing of it can make a big difference to how badly the family reacts. BMBs need guidance on details like:

- How soon should they 'come out' with this news?
- To which family member will they say it first?
- How will they say it? Skype, phone, personal visit, email or what?
- What will they say? Will they say "I have become a Christian"? It might be better to start with, "I have met some Christians and they have become my close friends", followed later by "I am reading from their book and it is very good" and thus little by little preparing the family for full revelation.

How about consideration of the following issues:

- The student's family meeting - by Skype or whatever means - the Christians the BMB is in touch with? This could help significantly, especially as relationship is so hugely important in Muslim cultures.
- The student could be helped to prepare an explanation about how they are following Jesus but still love their family just as much as ever and want to remain close to them.
- By what ways could the BMB show that their character and life are changed for the good before they explain the reason for this? (This does beg the question of how this will happen if the student remains in the UK. How might it happen in that situation?)
- What might happen if the news reaches their family before they get a chance to explain themselves?

"Ruth, a young lady who has returned to her country, was fortunate to be put in close contact with an expatriate couple working as tentmakers/ English teachers in her town... she explained how lonely she has felt and how she has struggled with worries ... She is still determined to follow Christ, but I fear for how she might (not) continue to grow if this lady were not there to continue discipling her. We continue to keep in touch on Facebook but it is intermittent at best. Very often I can only pray for her, trusting that the Lord has His hand on her and will never let her go." — Friends International staff worker

How hard it has been for Ruth but thank God for His people nearby who can offer support!

These are frequently occurring issues and very important to get right, so far as it is in our power to do so.

Of course, as with other international students who have come to faith or are returning as seekers, the best way to help a returning Muslim student to succeed and to stand firm is to link them with either a local fellowship in their home town which is likely to embrace the BMB, a mature, local believer (if trustworthily identifiable) or with an expatriate worker who can step up with friendship and support. We must thank God that He has placed His people almost everywhere! That fact does not make the situation simple but oh, how much it helps! In fact, having

a person to link the student with might be a make-or-break point when it comes to the possibility of being able to return.

Nurturing 'Not-Yet-Seekers' and Those Who Remain

The reality though, is that the majority of Muslim International students we meet will not return as believers or even as clear seekers. But many will have met true Christians for the first time, had any number of discussions, debates, or gospel conversations with us and are returning home with a different opinion of Christians and Christianity, less certain that Islam does in fact own the truth. We need to give such students 'returnee' consideration. Returning not-yet-seekers will need ongoing contact and encouragement from their UK Christian friends and much prayer to move them from one who is now better informed to being a genuine seeker. Once again, linking with Christians in their home environment is the most helpful scenario. A familiarity with internet sources of Christian teaching is also a significant help.

So what about those who come to faith, seek asylum – a long and arduous process - and are granted it? What issues do they face as they seek to live here in the UK, away from all that was previously familiar and loved by them, including of course their closest family members? Speaking with a young man who has been in the UK for the ten years since coming to faith, the pathway to any degree of success in remaining is that of UK Christians becoming his new family. It isn't usually enough to simply talk of a local church becoming their wider family, it needs to be closer, more intimate than that. In the course 'Friendship First' (<http://friendshipfirst.org/>), produced by Interserve, drawing on his pastoral experience and academic research on BMBs, missionary practitioner and academic, Tim Green, says, "The story doesn't end when someone turns to Christ; it actually just begins ... You give birth to this 'little baby' but then the real work starts. The last thing you're going to do is throw that baby out in the cold." BMBs need to be nurtured, not just as disciples but as 'infant' family members in need of much tender care. Given good care, many grow fast and stand firm.

Much more needs to be said and written about international students who become BMBs than can be contained in this article. We are only scraping the surface here, for how might we deal with husbands or wives who come to faith or return as seekers but without their spouse being like-minded? The issues are huge, but we can and must submit our uncertainties in this to our great God who loves our BMB friends much more than we do.

May He continue to guide us forward in our thinking, grant us wisdom in our reasoning and make us truly useful in the care of Muslim international students who start out on a journey towards faith or who come to faith. Whether they are able to physically return or not, we trust that the transforming of Muslim students will contribute to the transforming of Muslim nations.

Resources for Returnees

By Sue Burt

CLANS www.clans.co

We all know that we need to help connect returnees with believers and churches back home. Increasingly, we also recognize that one of the key factors in helping returnees deal with reverse culture shock and survive the transition period, is being able to connect with others who share a common experience. One way to help both things to happen is to connect up returnees in a network once they return home.



Friends International, in partnership with IFES Europe International Student Ministry Network, have developed a system to facilitate 'returnee networks' and to link students into them. This is called *Clans*.

As it says on our website:

A clan is a "group of people united by some common trait, characteristic, or interest". The experience of living and studying abroad brings unique opportunities and challenges. Coming home is not always easy. Our aim is to help you meet others who have had a similar experience (your 'clan').

Clans aims to help international students **returning to Europe**¹, who have been involved in a church or Christian group (such as an International Café), to connect with one another after they go home. Please do point any European returnees to the *Clans* website.

1. For security reasons, *Clans* is presently limited to Europe. In time it may extend to other countries. N.B Turkey is not included in *Clans*.

The I.D. Course

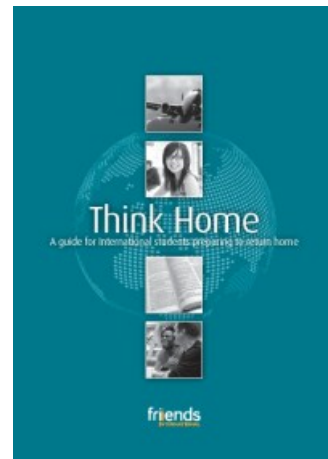
The I.D. Course is a 10-session series of discussional Bible Studies aimed at discipling international students for living for Christ here and back home. Topics covered include how to make decisions, relating to parents, male/female relationships and religious customs concerning death and the after-life. Each chapter begins with discussion questions to act as a bridge into the Biblical material, and case studies.

The ID Course comes as two booklets:
Student and
Leader Notes



Think Home

A workbook to help your international student friends prepare for their return home. Originally published by our partner organization in the United States, International Students Inc, it has been re-designed by Friends International with the help of UCCF. Some chapters of *Think Home* are helpful for all returning students, seeking to help them think through how they, and back home, will have changed during their time in the UK. Several chapters also deal with the changes associated with becoming a Christian while overseas. *Think Home* can be used as a personal workbook, or better in a one-to-one or small group discussion. Some Friends International staff organise *Think Home* days where they cover some of this material.



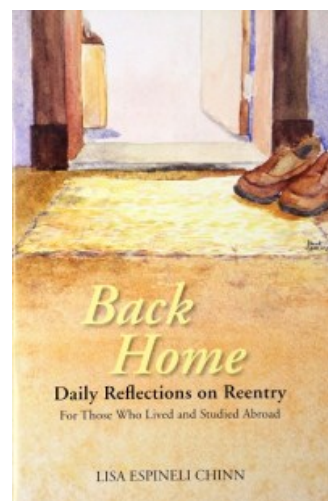
There is a Chinese version of *Think Home* which also addresses specific issue of returning to China. This can be purchased from www.cocm.org.uk

There is also a Japanese version. For details please contact the Friends International office.

Back Home

Another resource from Lisa Espinelli-Chinn who wrote the first US edition of *Think Home*. *Back Home* is a 30-day series of Bible readings and comment. It aims to provide short but relevant daily reflections for the first month back home when reverse culture shock and other issues can bombard returnees, allowing scant time or energy for daily devotions.

Back Home is an ideal going home present for your Christian international student friend!



To purchase these resources or for more information on any of them please contact the Friends International office using the contact details on the back page of this issue of *Insight*.

the contributors



Stuart Bullington is preparing to serve in Chinese returnee ministry with OMF Diaspora Ministries in the UK. His work with returnees began with a move to Taipei, Taiwan back in 1998. Over the eight years that followed, he reached out to many Taiwanese returnees from the US and UK and learned firsthand about their struggles. After several years in Hong Kong, Stuart's family returned to the US in 2009, permitting him to finish a D.Min. degree at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His doctoral thesis reported on the work of returnee fellowship groups in providing help to students and scholars who return to China's cities as new believers.

Rahab Chandler has lived in various cultures, including living in a Muslim society where her desire to share her faith with Muslims became a passion. She currently works with international students in the UK.



Debbie D. is a Friends International Affiliate and an OMF Diaspora Ministries Co-worker. After leading the Nottingham Friends International work for seven years, Debbie stepped down to concentrate on a problem: so many Chinese students who profess faith in Christ abroad appear to fall away on return to China. Having completed a PhD about Chinese returnees, she now helps churches preparing students for return. If you would like to receive her quarterly bulletin of stories, tips and resources, or to discuss your Chinese student ministry, please contact her through the Friends International Support Centre.

the insight team

Sue Burt
Head of Returnee Ministry

Peter Teagle
Area Team Leader

Patty McCulloch
Head of Training

Fiona Barnard-Smith
Staff Worker

Lynette Teagle
Staff Worker

Jack Bentley
Communications & Media
Coordinator





For comments, queries and submission details or to request to be added to the regular *Insight* mailing list please email: insight@friendsinternational.org.uk

friends
INTERNATIONAL

The Rowan Centre
All Nations Christian College
Easney
Ware, Herts
SG12 8LX

01920 460006
info@friendsinternational.org.uk
www.friendsinternational.org.uk