



**iinsight**

*A Journal for International Student Ministry in the UK*

# Christian Unions and International Student Ministry

**CUs: Help or Hindrance in International Student Ministry?**

*Alistair Reid*

**An International Student's Experience of CU Life**

*Ailene Chou*

**The Birth & Growth of International Student Ministry in a CU**

*Fred O'Loughlin*

**friends**  
**INTERNATIONAL**

*transforming students  
transforming nations*

---

*Insight welcomes your comments and responses to the articles featured.  
Please address all correspondence to **[insight@friendsinternational.org.uk](mailto:insight@friendsinternational.org.uk)***

# a word from the editor

## ENVISIONING A NEW GENERATION: CHRISTIAN UNIONS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT OUTREACH

This issue of *Insight* features a topic that is very close to my heart.

But then, that is not surprising; my experience of international outreach in the Christian Union not only confirmed a call to missions and provided a basis for the whole direction of my life, it was also the means by which I met a certain Singaporean Christian called Lynette who was to become my wife (and the rest is history!). Lynette, however, was an international student who chose to persevere in a CU where the majority didn't even manage to fully welcome the international Christians who tried to join their ranks, let alone turn their thoughts to cross-cultural evangelism. Her feelings towards undergraduate Christian Unions have therefore always been more mixed.

### Challenging Preconceived Notions

A while ago, we realised that our polarised views might be twenty years out of date. So, last year we called together a group of undergraduates, international and British, and asked them what was really happening on the ground, in CUs around the country. The results (summarised at the end of this editorial) were enlightening.

Firstly, from what was said around that table, the basic issues we struggled with at Liverpool University in the early '90s were still true – British CUs<sup>1</sup> are often forbidding places for some international students. The cultural majority dominates and the general lack of age and experience of CU members is a real handicap in enabling international Christians to settle and find a home amongst their British peers. Some try and fail to integrate into CU life; most never even try. A good number find Christian community elsewhere – in local churches or culturally-specific fellowships. Many simply fall by the wayside.

The students at our consultation felt there were two 'types' of international Christians – those who manage and even thrive in the British student environment, and those who adopt a more 'survivalist' approach, mixing largely with those from their own cultural background, or at least just with other internationals. The reason our articles in this issue do not pick up on this very strongly may be because our writers speak of what they know from the perspective of CU 'insiders', while many of the Christian students who opt out of the CU have already fallen off our radar.

### Learning by Doing

On the other hand, in contrast to what we attempted at university in the early '90s, it seems that university CUs these days are far better equipped and supported to reach out to international non-Christian students. Perhaps the combination of summer outreach teams, weekly café-style outreaches up and down the country, as well as international ministry internships such as the Reach programme and the emergence of an international track in some CU missions, has meant that many more CU members now have the chance to see practically how it is done, and have the opportunity to see how the purposes of God can be worked out in the lives of people very different from themselves.

Fred O'Loughlin, one of our contributors for this issue, was just such a CU member. Having participated in a summer international outreach, he directly applied what he had learned to his own locality and has seen lives changed (including his own). Likewise, both Alistair Reid and Ailene Chou have seen the amazing potential for international outreach from the CU, whilst not being under any illusions that CUs are not naturally the easiest places for internationals to know they belong.

### Cross-Cultural Training in the Christian Unions

Readers will notice that a significant amount of what follows in this issue is linked to Oxford. But while that is our immediate point of reference, I can safely say that, having had experience not only of collegiate universities (mostly Oxford, though I am discovering Durham) but also 'red brick' universities (Liverpool, Warwick and Birmingham)

1. We refer mainly to the Christian Unions organised or aided by the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) but acknowledge the presence and contribution of other campus ministries such as Agape, the Navigators and Fusion.



and also 'new' universities (Birmingham City and Oxford Brookes, and indirectly Leicester De Montfort), the observations made by our writers apply across all these institutions, albeit to differing degrees.

In these contexts I have done a lot of CU training – now more than ever. Though it remains a great privilege, it is also a significant challenge, and one which constantly sends me back to review my training material. There exists a tension between treating undergraduates as fully adult, and realising that they are still young and need help with developing social communication skills. I prefer to risk aiming too high than too low. Better to stretch them than patronise them, I feel. So I teach understanding worldviews and introduce them to some of the ways different cultures relate to the truths of the Cross of Christ and grapple with the realities of discipleship.

It is exciting to see agile undergraduate minds get to grips with these things from the start. But it seems I always underestimate how much help students need in even the practical basics of how to make friends with a stranger, how to talk to someone meaningfully without resorting to the English small-talk cues of sport and pop culture. I love to see folks light up when they understand how their Iranian friend might relate to the gospel, but then that supposes they have an Iranian friend in the first place. It is nigh on impossible to imagine something you have zero experience of, and such training is most fruitful when they can see an international café in action and are, in effect, doing it already. Those with the brightest minds can still be socially awkward, and one thing that 18 to 21-year-olds just don't have a lot of is the social awareness that comes with life experience. It would be ridiculous to expect it of them.

Each of our writers for this issue is young – all graduated in recent years – and so have fresh experience to draw upon. Fred has become a 'natural' international student evangelist through his experience in the CU. Ali led his CU in international outreach, worked as an international apprentice in a local church and is now supporting CUs in the region as a UCCF Staff Worker. Ailene shows us how CUs can be a rich place of discipleship, where Christian unity and community truly transcend national and cultural differences. This perspective is uniquely invaluable in that it shows how mutual effort by both international and local students can close the culture-gap in a CU which is already partly cross-culturally aware. Together, their insights remind me that nowadays I find myself on the other side of Paul's advice to Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers..." (1 Tim 4:12) Surely, these people are an example to us!

As I reflect on what has been written, on our consultation and on our own experience, I feel that it would be a travesty to overlook or underestimate CUs and their potential to be at the cutting edge of international outreach. We 'older' Christians sometimes roll our eyes at CU attempts to organise themselves, as if everything church-based or parachurch ministries do is so good in comparison (or that we were so much better at that stage in life). Rather, staff-workers, volunteers, local churches and parachurch organisations need to do all we can to support, encourage, train and empower Christian students ***to do what really only they can do*** – to be Christ to the international students ***right there with them*** on their courses and corridors.

In Christ,

**Peter Teagle**  
Editor



## A Consultation with: The Oxford University Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (OICCU) i-team.

On May 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, a small group from the Christian Union at Oxford University (OICCU) met with Peter and Lynette Teagle to share their experience and thoughts on reaching out to international students. This was intended to be a fact-finding initiative to come to a better understanding of this topic from an up-to-date undergraduate perspective. Thus, all the students present were actively involved in various areas of international student outreach.

### Present:

Peter and Lynette Teagle

*Friends International Oxford city leaders.*

Mark Ellis

*OICCU International Secretary (Mansfield College, 2<sup>nd</sup> yr.)*

Alicia Wright

*(New College, 2<sup>nd</sup> yr.)*

Jeremy Evans

*(St John's College, 4<sup>th</sup> yr.)*

Hin-Tai Ting

*(Corpus Christi College, 3<sup>rd</sup> yr.)*

Vivian Tong

*International student from Hong Kong*

*(Corpus Christi College, 2<sup>nd</sup> yr.)*

Julia Wickenden

*(Regents Park College, 2<sup>nd</sup> yr.)*

Email contributions from:

Christopher Damant

*(Merton College, 2<sup>rd</sup> yr.)*

### A Focus on Friendship Building

The conversation focused mainly on the social interaction aspects of international outreach. The practical aspects of sharing the gospel were very much secondary considerations, compared to discussing how to contact, befriend and build on relationships with internationals.

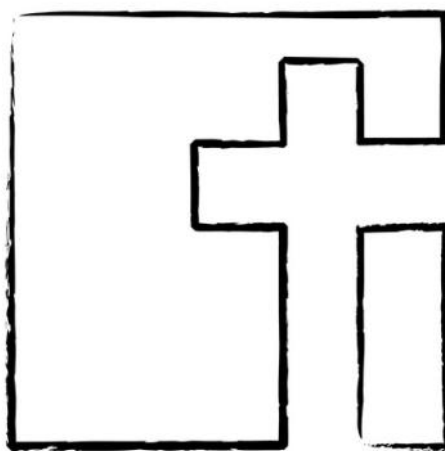
The group felt that the initial experience of Oxford for many internationals is often one of stress, though not always unpleasant. Ability in English, especially to think and speak in English twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, pushes their competency to the limit, even for those who use English extensively in their home country. Many 'norms' are challenged and the experience is tiring. Nevertheless, people are generally friendly to internationals, even if superficially so.

Most of the group had noticed a strong tendency for internationals to stick together as mixed international or national/linguistic groupings.

It was noted that there were generally two 'types' of international student: those that throw themselves into the college experience and those who don't. The former get along well and are soon socially indistinguishable from home students. The latter slip off the radar quite easily. It was suggested that this is true of many universities, but that the proportion of the former group would be larger in Oxford due to (a) the higher language ability required by the University, and (b) the collegiate system. Those present agreed, noting that the former group is still very much a minority. This means that there are still large numbers of students struggling socially who are not easy to spot in the social life of the wider university.

For those attempting to build friendships, it was noted that it was easy to misinterpret social cues both ways. Attempts to be friendly could be rebuffed simply through not understanding intent. As an example it

was said that the British student experience of some Singaporean students is that they can often be friendly, but do not form close relationships readily. Conversely, some Christian Singaporeans have been wary or even judgmental of British Christians, being unable to distinguish between cultural expressions of nominal and evangelical Christianity (such as drinking alcohol). It could also be said that Christian language and cues are equally and mutually confusing between the groups.



*The OICCU Logo*

### The Postgrad/Undergrad Divide

Regarding the divide between postgraduates and undergrads, the discussion reached a helpful conclusion: that within colleges, the culture and structure of college life is such that meaningful interaction between them is effectively zero, but once outside college, especially on neutral territory such as the CU-led international café, Café 360, this is a different matter entirely. In communities outside college, post/undergrad distinctions are much reduced, and friendships and evangelism can and do take place meaningfully. This, of course, might also vary according to the cultural grouping of the students. When it was pointed out that in Oxford approximately 70% of postgrads are international, compared with only around 10% of undergrads, this was not seen as a significant issue. The students present felt that 10% is still a large number of students to reach. The conclusion to this was that OICCU do not feel any lack of 'mission field'.



The question was also asked as to the relative virtues of holding events advertised as being especially for international students. Vivian, an international student from Hong Kong, was enthusiastic in her support for this, as she said she would have felt emboldened to attend knowing that it was relevant and welcoming to her as an international. The CU have been generally wary of singling out internationals as a special category. It is possible that, while some internationals may not wish to be identified like this, the majority of those who are less bold to attend something not especially designed for internationals would appreciate it and respond to something advertised in this way.

### **The Work of a Minority...?**

Asked why the majority of CU students did not seem concerned about international student outreach, the answers were felt to be many and complex. There probably is no main answer, although apathy, thinking it was the 'i-team's job', and an inability to 'know what to do', were mentioned as reasons. Fear of causing offence by mistaking local students for internationals was highlighted, although Hin-Tai, a British-born Chinese student, helpfully suggested that there were tactful ways to identify students who might be local.

Approaching and sitting with internationals at the dining table in hall was discussed as a strategy for initiating contact with international students. The conclusion was that this was a tough call. It is rewarding and definitely appreciated by many internationals, but difficult to do, socially rather awkward, and not always easy to develop past a one-off. But, as the international secretary pointed out, it is sometimes necessary to 'take the plunge'.

In all the discussion, it seemed that the international café was by far the main place where friendships with internationals was taking place, rather than in college. It is here that a community is being formed outside the normal structures and norms of college life, where barriers are more easily lowered. As long as international students attend the café, there seem to be no insurmountable problems in making friends cross-culturally. How students hear about the café and start to attend, though, is another matter, and the greatest perceived need is how to deepen friendships made at the café and how to pursue these outside the café context.

### **Conclusion**

The consultation concluded with the summary that while there are many acknowledged hurdles to making friends with international students, few of these are actually preventative. The main challenges, therefore, are (a) the **visibility** of international students (where they hang out, where they retreat to, what social groupings they are dependent on), and (b) the fact that for many local students, building links and friendships with international students is unavoidably **costly**, but ultimately worthwhile.

## CHRISTIAN UNIONS: A help or hindrance in international ministry?<sup>1</sup>

By Alistair Reid

*“Christian Unions? Waste of time! Just a bunch of immature, disorganised students, who are here one year and gone the next. They’re unfriendly to internationals, limited in vision, and only reach out to UK students. Don’t bother with them!”*

*“Christian Unions? They’re fantastic! A great bunch of impressionable, flexible students, who have a unique opportunity for a short time. They’ve got energy, they’re forming lifelong convictions and they live and work with internationals. Invest in them!”*

What is the truth about Christian Unions (CUs)? Are they a help or a hindrance in international ministry? Perhaps we naturally incline towards one view or the other, depending on our background, our experience and the current practice where we work. Many of us will be ardent supporters of CUs, spending much of our time working with them as gospel partners, while others will seek to avoid CUs, partnering more closely with churches instead.

In this article I hope to assess the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and limitations of CUs in international ministry. I hope to engage not with the straw men with which this article began, but the reality on the ground. It should be said that the research I have undertaken for this article has been informal and small-scale, and cannot claim to be comprehensive of each and every situation. I also inevitably speak from my own standpoint and experience – first as a member of a CU, then a church worker ministering among international students, and now a Staff Worker with UCCF, all in the same city – and so my perspective is limited<sup>2</sup>. However, despite the lack of a large quantity of empirical research, I hope to draw some helpful conclusions.

### The CUs Themselves:

#### Developing Generously Welcoming People

We all know how God generously welcomes into His family sinners who have rejected Him into His family. We know how God has done that for us as individuals, and we know how God will do that for people from every nation. And we know that just as God welcomes people

from every nation, so as members of Christ’s body it is our joy to reflect that welcome towards brothers and sisters from every nation. This is an area where Christians should be gloriously distinctive. But is this happening in CUs?

The suggestion is sometimes made that CUs are unnecessarily hostile places for international students. It seems that there is some truth in this, although the reality is considerably more complex. One Christian international student wrote the following to me:

*“It’s sometimes hard for international students to be involved. I don’t have too much problem on that but I often see some other international students not having great involvement among their college [CU] circles. Perhaps they are shy because of their different background and perhaps British students need to be more open to them despite this.”*

Another wrote this:

*“I think the problems of integrating into CU are the same as those in College. But I guess it’s slightly easier [be]cause we have a common topic (Jesus). But, the general problems still remain.”*

However, another international student explicitly stated that his reason for not attending CU was “not that they weren’t inclusive – in fact I’m very good friends with the leader of the CU” but for other reasons. An international student who actively got involved in the CU said this:

*“I arrived as an international student and was warmly greeted by the CU people who were helping out in ISW [International Student Welcome]<sup>3</sup>. As for College CU, I met my lovely reps when they went door-knocking around the college. I thought it was a good way of getting to know the other Christians in college.”*

And another said this:

*“One of the joys [of being involved in CU] is seeing the universality of the gospel and the many similarities between local Christians and Christians where I am from.”*

1. By ‘international ministry’ I am referring to three things. (1) Ministry among Christian international students (2) Evangelistic outreach to non-Christian international students (3) Ministry among Christian UK students in so far as it pertains to ‘international’ concerns – e.g. encouraging UK students to be involved in (1) and (2); encouraging a global vision among UK students in terms of mission-mindedness etc
2. It is also, of course, *my* perspective, and does not necessarily reflect the views of others in UCCF.
3. *International Student Welcome* is an initiative in Oxford run at the start of the academic year which joins postgraduate groups, churches and CU. See below for some further discussion.



In fact, the majority of those I spoke to felt warmly welcomed to their CUs, contrary to the opening criticism. However, it is also true that some international students do not feel welcome, and that is sad however small the minority. One church leader I spoke to suggested why he thought that may be:

*"CU culture is naturally the majority culture. People don't mean to be unfriendly but the assumptions of how life works, the way in which people relate, the experiences people share (and assume others share) are British. For internationals to get involved they have to be willing to invest across culture which isn't easy."*

Another church worker reflecting on his experiences as the International Secretary of his University CU agrees:

*"CUs are often very British in culture (from the way meetings are run, to cultural-reference laden banter) and internationals can struggle to fit in if there isn't a deliberate attempt to make everything accessible."*

It has to be said that the nature of CUs as student-led groups means that that 'deliberate attempt' is often faltering. It may well just not occur to a group of 18 or 19-year-olds to explain things using simple English, or to make a conscious effort to avoid conversation laden with references to British culture. They may even lack the awareness that their conversation is laden with such references.



It is no surprise that churches are often better able to cope with these difficulties. By nature CUs are extremely limited in their demographic – university students – whereas churches will be almost always broader – in age, in background, in circumstance, in experience, and often in cultural experience and understanding as well. Having older and more experienced leadership often means that these issues have been thought about and acted on, and within the congregation there are likely to be people who have experienced different cultures and are familiar with interacting with a wider range of people. I think of one Chinese visitor who came to our church and was immediately invited round to someone's house for lunch – she became a Christian some months after that!

Similarly, in the larger churches that are often found in university towns and cities, there may well be people employed specifically to look out for international students, to make them feel welcome and to ensure what goes on is culturally appropriate. When such experience and manpower is contrasted with one 19-year-old International Secretary trying to keep these things on the agenda of his or her CU, it is unsurprising that churches can often feel more welcoming for international students. In addition, international

students often settle more easily either in a church or in a group which caters for people from a particular place or culture, such as the Chinese Christian Fellowship, or the Singapore Christian Fellowship.

However, it has to be said clearly and loudly that we are dealing with huge generalisations. While there is certainly some truth in what has been discussed, the criticism is rather too sweeping. After all, CUs are made up of those who are members of churches, and so the weaknesses (and strengths) of one will also be apparent in the other. Churches, too, can often be uncomfortable places for international students, where British culture predominates and people rarely make an effort. (To balance the story I mentioned earlier, my suspicion is that the vast majority of international students are *not* invited back to a home on their first visit.)

This is especially true in larger churches where congregations may be divided along demographic lines.

A 'student service' is unlikely to be all that different in behaviour and feel from a CU. This fact is often behind the development of specific church ministries geared towards international students. And on the other side of the coin we should not forget that there are many international students who have been actively involved in their CUs at every level, from membership to being on

the Executive Committee, and have had a wonderful time. As I said at the start, the majority of those to whom I spoke are in that category. And there are many British students who have actively sought to welcome international students to CU. One current British student wrote to me about *"how important it is to be welcoming and supportive towards international students who may be unfamiliar with our 'British' mannerisms, quirks and political correctness."* While students are young, they are not inevitably immature. I am constantly impressed by the maturity and hardworking nature of the majority of those involved in CU leadership and in the CUs in general.

The fact that these are generalisations, and that all of us have room for improvement in our welcome to international students, means that we need to recognise that the problems that I have outlined so far are problems to which each and every one of us and our ministries are prone, for they are problems which stem from a deeper source: our hearts. By nature we look out for ourselves and don't reach out across boundaries like the Lord Jesus. While cultural awareness, experience and good teaching will often be helpful in addressing these issues, our hearts are what really need to change. John Piper writes the following:

*“Far more important in the long run than any particular strategy of racial reconciliation and harmony is that more and more Christians glory in the grace of the gospel of justification by faith alone. When we are thrilled by the unspeakable freedom of being right with God in spite of the magnitude of our sinful corruption – and that others of every race and ethnicity enjoy the same freedom with us – there will be a humility and a love and a zeal to magnify grace that dissolves ethnic hostilities.”<sup>4</sup>*

Any progress we see in our churches, CUs or our own hearts is because of the grace of the Lord Jesus, which means that there is both room for improvement and hope for change for us all.

I want to suggest that a much more positive, gospel-hearted response to the generalisations outlined above is to pray for, invest in, and work with CUs, rather than to reject or ignore them, and also to reflect on the state of our own ministries in this vital area. While our attitude to others is a heart issue, it is often the case that those in CUs and churches will not even have thought about the way that their conversation, jokes and language may exclude international students. We can have an impact on the cultures in which we live and work, by praying for, teaching and modelling this welcome.

One of the great things about working with CUs is that people are shaped by their university years, and so a change in thinking at that crucial student stage could have profound implications for the rest of their lives. The International Secretary of one university CU said this:

*“I have been part of the International Team and have been so encouraged and surprised by how quickly meaningful friendships develop and [by] the boldness with which we speak about our Lord. International student work sets many people, including myself, firmly outside your comfort zone, but in that place of vulnerability we realize how dependent on God we are. It has certainly grown my faith.”*

While CUs, just like churches, have weaknesses in their welcome of international students because of cultural assumptions and the natural inwardness of our sinful hearts, they are a tremendous opportunity to raise up a group of people who are culturally aware and generously welcoming, just like our God.

### **The CUs and Their Mission: Developing Strategic Evangelism and Global Vision**

We all know the beautiful and rich plan of God to bring all nations into his family. We all long for that day when we will see the *“great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the Lamb.”*<sup>5</sup> And we know that as Christians it is our joy to share God’s heart for all nations. As those involved in international student ministry, we are also aware of the tremendous gospel opportunities that exist in the UK among the nations. I work in Oxford, and people from many nations are on our doorstep. 16% of the undergraduate population of Oxford University, and 61% of postgraduates are from overseas, and they come from over 140 different countries.<sup>6</sup> Many of those countries will be places with little or no Christian witness and so the opportunity to share the gospel with these people is not only exciting, but urgent. What are the CUs doing to reach this group of people? Are CUs parochial and inward looking, skilled at reaching British students but weaker when it comes to developing a global vision and reaching out to the world on their doorstep?

While there is inevitably an element of truth in such an analysis given the majority-British make up of both CUs and universities, it seems that the majority of CUs are switched on to a global vision and local opportunities, and are looking to make the most of them. This global vision is an area where UCCF<sup>7</sup> has been historically very strong, and still today one of UCCF’s core values is *“generous in world mission: endeavouring to give and send so as to reach the students of the world.”*<sup>8</sup> From the Cambridge Seven in the 1880s, through to the founding of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (the forerunner of UCCF), and from there to the founding of CU movements across the world<sup>9</sup>, the evangelisation of the student world has been hugely impacted by the CU movement.<sup>10</sup>

In my experience, that UCCF core value is still very much in evidence. Just last week one of the CUs with which I work held a World Missions Fair where many missionaries came to share their experiences with students. Such evenings are a common feature of CUs up and down the country. UCCF also co-ordinates summer mission trips to IFES movements around the world. Last year there were 16 such trips involving nearly 150 students. These can have a huge impact long beyond the mission, both for the students who visited and for those who were visited, especially as they usually happen in

4. John Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian* (Crossway 2011), p176

5. Revelation 21:9 (NIV, 1984)

6. [http://www.ox.ac.uk/about\\_the\\_university/facts\\_and\\_figures/index.html#aoxford\\_international](http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/index.html#aoxford_international) Accessed 15/11/12

7. The Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship. The Christian Unions in the UK are affiliated to and receive support and resources from UCCF. See [www.uccf.org.uk](http://www.uccf.org.uk)

8. <http://www.uccf.org.uk/about/mission-vision-values.htm> Accessed 15/11/12.

9. These CU movements are affiliated to IFES (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). See [www.ifesworld.org](http://www.ifesworld.org)

10. See Oliver R. Barclay and Robert M. Horn, *From Cambridge to the World* (IVP, 2002) and Lindsay Brown, *Shining Like Stars* (IVP, 2006) for scores of wonderful examples and exciting stories.



places where gospel ministry is small. It was great to see one CU praying for a GBU<sup>11</sup> movement in Italy during a weekly prayer meeting following a visit by some British students to help run a mission. UCCF also run a programme called *Relay Homestart* and *Relay Homestart Islam*<sup>12</sup>, which sends students to work with other IFES movements following an initial discipleship and training year in the UK as part of the Relay programme. There are graduates of the *Homestart* programme serving in diverse contexts such as Brazil, Turkey, Belarus, Slovakia, Greece and many other European countries.

International outreach is also very much in evidence in term-time as well. In particular, international cafés run by CUs are bearing fruit. I know of one university in the Midlands which regularly gets over 50 international students to their café. One student confirms this:

*"I've enjoyed my time in the iTeam, mainly with the café. It's a great avenue to reach out to other international students, [such as] J, who came to know Christ last year."*

A Relay worker shares her story of recently setting up an international café:

*"(The) best thing is that café has got to the point where there's a real sense of ownership from the people who come – willing to contribute/bring things/keen to catch up. We run it fortnightly and theme each café – world music/chocolate etc. Next one is Royal Family themed (just bought a pack of Royal Family masks!), and we're going to do 'Royal Sports' including jousting, corgi racing (with woodlice?!) and having a cream tea. People are often hesitant about Bible study (looking at Luke) but once they come they are incredibly open to asking questions and discussing things."*

Of course, the clarity of this vision at a national UCCF and even local CU level does not guarantee that it is shared by every member. It does seem that more students get involved in summer outreach overseas than in term-time international ministry here in the UK. One International Secretary said to me that *"it took constant effort to place international outreach on the agenda and keep it there. Not that the rest of the Executive Committee were hostile to international work, but it simply gets neglected if it isn't continuously raised."* This statement encapsulates the tension in many CUs: international ministry is often

thriving, but it is often not on the radar of the average CU member. A Relay Worker's comments seem to confirm this by implication:

*"There's a core team who are really behind [the international café] but we'd love to get the rest of the CU to see café running so they can get excited by it as well."*

And an international student actively involved in the international team of his CU said this:

*"Everyone in the CU should break down that mental partition that reaching out to international students is a different task to reaching the British students. If everyone is able to see those around us as people who need to hear the gospel, then there will be that natural urgency to bring the good news. It shouldn't be the case that just because there are international students and some Brits involved with iTeam work, the rest of the CU doesn't need to bother."*

While it would be fantastic for many more CU members to be involved in evangelistic outreach to international students, it is not surprising that more are not. The majority of CU members will have more British than international friends, and so it is natural that their evangelistic efforts are focussed on their existing friendship groups.

Wonderfully, however, there are many individuals who are already switched on to the great opportunities that exist through intentional cross-cultural friendships. The impact this can have is often felt far beyond the individual, and far beyond university. I recently heard the story of how one British undergraduate began sitting with international students who were eating supper by themselves. She quickly got the rest of her college CU group involved and it is now a regular feature of their CU life. One of the church workers quoted earlier further develops this point:

*"It took me a long time as a student to wake up to the opportunity of reaching them with the gospel, or even to simply being more intentional in making friends with internationals. One of the most valuable things CUs can do is to simply put international students on their members' radar."*

Following graduation he worked for Friends



11. *Gruppi Biblici Universitari*, the Italian equivalent of UCCF

12. See <http://www.uccf.org.uk/relay/homestart.htm>. Relay Workers are recent graduates working with CUs and being discipled for one year after university. <http://www.uccf.org.uk/relay/what-is-it.htm> Accessed 16/11/12

13. <http://www.uccf.org.uk/about/mission-vision-values.htm> Accessed 16/11/12

International and now works with students in Asia. He is a great example of someone for whom understanding these things has been hugely influential.

It should also be said that CUs have truly unique opportunities to reach international students. The student-led nature of CUs means that they have privileges on campus that churches or non-student-led parachurch groups could never have. The UCCF website explains that *“students are best placed to reach other students for Christ. Giving maximum integrity with university authorities, maximum creativity and maximum opportunities for evangelism.”*<sup>13</sup> These privileges range from booking rooms to advertising to being accredited with and supported by student unions. A good example of this working out in practice is at a university near London. There had been an international café a number of years previously which had been co-run by the CU and another parachurch organisation. However, when this organisation was banned from campus by the Student Union, the café folded soon after. It has recently been restarted with great success run by the CU alone. And such stories of CUs taking these opportunities could be replicated up and down the country.

These contextual advantages are invaluable and should be treasured. There is no other time of life when Christians have such an opportunity to share their life with non-Christians, as they live, eat and work together. And there is no other time of life when people are so open to forming their worldview, meeting new people and thinking about the big questions of life. CUs can have a huge impact in this formative time, and so must be supported and encouraged.

Of course CUs could be doing better in their international outreach – who couldn't? – but the reality is that there is a great deal of fruitful international outreach being done by CUs up and down the country, for which we should thank God. And once again, this analysis serves to remind us that we should reflect on and pray for our own ministries, and that we must keep setting the gospel before ourselves and the groups with which we work, rejoicing in how it is for all nations, and encouraging people not to fit God into their life story, but to fit their lives into God's great story.

### Conclusions and Applications

As I have pondered these matters and written this article, I have become more aware of the weaknesses of CUs. There are the two criticisms that I have examined in this article – Are CUs unwelcoming? Are CUs inward-looking? – but there are many other concerns and weaknesses that could be made in addition to these. One such concern is that the majority of international students are postgraduates, whereas CUs focus on the undergraduate population. Another is that CUs are constantly changing in membership and leadership, and so there is little consistency or continuity. A further concern is that CUs are unskilled in international ministry – they don't know

how to relate to international students, contextualise the gospel, or lead international-friendly Bible studies.

But I have also become more convinced of the value of CUs. CUs give tremendous opportunities to invest in students in a way that will last a lifetime and could impact many others around them all across the globe. History amply bears this out. And CUs also have wonderful opportunities to reach out to international students here in the UK. These are unique opportunities that should be grasped with both hands, and that are already bearing fruit.

So how should we respond? I would like to suggest, as I have hinted throughout, that partnership is the way forward. Every group has its weaknesses and strengths and joining together both combats weaknesses and multiplies strengths. There are many excellent examples of this partnership that I have experienced myself. Here in Oxford there is a great initiative called International Student Welcome (ISW) which takes place at the start of the academic year. Here postgraduate Christian groups, churches and CUs all unite to welcome international students and share the gospel with them. As part of ISW 2012, the OICCU [Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union] put on a café every evening, ran an advice stall in the city centre and welcomed people off the buses. OICCU volunteers also helped with ISW events by helping on the doors, serving food, setting up and washing up. Following ISW there were around ten OICCU students meeting up one-to-one with international students to befriend them and proclaim Christ.

A further excellent example of gospel partnership can be seen in the International Outreaches which happen through the summer. Here churches and CUs are involved in missions co-ordinated by Friends International with great success.

Friends International have greatly served the CUs I am involved with through their staff mentoring one or two involved in international work, through offering training and equipping where CUs are less skilled, through supporting our mission weeks and through co-running an international café on one of the campuses. These are all very practical and simple ways in which, by working together, we can join our strengths while combatting our weaknesses. As we work together, I trust that CUs will increasingly grasp a global vision and the local opportunities, and will increasingly see to make the most of them.

So, yes, of course CUs have weaknesses and limitations, as does every organisation. But they also have huge opportunities and potential, and we must therefore work together, investing in them, praying for them and serving them, for the salvation of many more international students and for the glory of God.



## UNIQUELY PLACED TO UNITE: An international student's experience of CU life

By Ailene Chou

*"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" — Revelation 7:9-10*

This verse is often used as a rallying call for international student ministry, and for good reason. The God of all languages takes delight in His people bringing the best of each culture in worship to Him. In the new creation of Revelation 7:9-10, worshipping in such a great and varied throng brings us joy because we share in the pleasure God takes in it.

Quite a different picture, however, emerges when these tribes and people worship in a fallen world. The picture is less of a united multitude praising God and more of a fragmented mob squabbling at the Tower of Babel.

### Community Across Cultural Differences

Part of the blessing of the CU is that it is uniquely placed to unite, not only across different congregations but also among the different tribes and peoples. Coming into the CU as an international student is coming into community as one of the many different people the CU seeks to unite. We have everything and nothing in common.

We have everything in common: one faith, one Lord, one baptism. We are all redeemed people bought with the blood of Christ, learning to be thankful for God's grace and to worship him in the context of being students. The usual cultural gel being absent, the fact that we have everything in common is deeply comforting. While at university, an international student has to search desperately for some common ground; we start in the CU with the assumption that we are all part of God's family. The foundations have been built not by our own effort but by God's grace, and that means that we cannot lose these foundations.

We also have nothing in common, at least in an earthly sense. As international students, we speak, think, behave and respond to situations differently. It is discomfiting to find out how much we do not understand, despite the fact that we are among 'family' and often speak the same language. I have felt excluded from effusive discussions about 'Blue Peter', confused by the use of the word 'fit' to describe good-looking, rather than athletic, people, and bewildered by how the washing up is done. I had assumed that being among God's family in the CU meant

that I would immediately feel comfortable, and experiencing the gulf between expectation and reality was difficult.

It is often said during CU talks on international student ministry that an international student's cultural differences should be acknowledged and attempts to make him or her into a British person resisted. While that is often helpful advice, the source of discomfort rarely stems from feeling that one's culture is being overlooked. The CU, by God's grace, is one of the few places where people take an interest in an international student as a person, rather than as a cause.

While more effort is taken to connect with a student from another culture, the assumption that our relationships within the CU are built on the unshakeable foundation of Christ permits the CU to ask important life questions and share things about their own lives, rather than simply dancing about the usual 'getting-to-know-your-culture' questions. CUs should thus be a fertile place for discipleship, regardless of one's nationality or background. I felt far more accepted to be asked how I was doing with prayer or quiet time, than to be asked how my family celebrated Lunar New Year. At the same time, effort was taken to explain things to me which helped me overcome some cultural differences of the superficial sort: a friend from the CU kindly showed me a few Youtube videos of 'Blue Peter'; one of my CU houseparty lessons was on the new application of the word 'fit'; washing up together with my college CU group quickly acclimatised me to how the dishes are done, British-style.

### Refinement in Progress

The main source of discomfort, however, was the challenge to some of my deeply ingrained ways of thinking and life. For example, my culture is big on honouring God with faithful diligence in daily work. We are also a very conservative culture, associating pubs with vice. Within the CU, I met faithful believers who shared neither of these views with the same tenacity. Some were deliberately less diligent so that they could invest time with people over coffee instead. Others would sit with their friends in pubs, speaking well into the night about things of God, redeeming my culture's image of pubs. It was clear to me that these were God-fearing men and women seeking to live life for God in a way that I had not hitherto been challenged to live. This process of re-examining the

good and the bad in my own cultural mindset was extremely uncomfortable and even painful. But I was learning to appreciate the expressions of worship in a different tribe and people, worshipping alongside them and getting a glimpse of what Revelation 7:9-10 might look like.

This was discomfort arising out of being refined. What looked to be a mixed blessing was in reality an unqualified blessing. When the CU focuses on worshipping God together, difference becomes a joyful thing to us because we experience something of God's pleasure in it as the creator of all tribes, peoples and cultures. While seeking to encourage and exhort people from a different tribe or people, it is inevitable that we will make them feel uncomfortable and even cause offence. But in the context of God's grace and the unity of the body, that is not a bad thing. As we genuinely share

our struggles in learning to live for Christ and let ourselves become a means of God's grace in the lives of each other (UK to international student, and vice versa), there is not the time or reason to scrutinise or take offence at every difference.

As an international student, I have been greatly encouraged by the CU and in particular by the way in which they have challenged my thinking about honouring, worshipping and serving God daily. It is exciting to see God work in different ways, cultures and contexts. It helps us appreciate just how big and in control He is. There is a much smaller chance of that happening if we stick only to our own tribes and peoples with our fixed ways of doing things, even if this will make for a more comfortable experience. Let us not be afraid of letting sanctifying discomfort thrive in our CUs as we work towards the image given to us in Revelation 7:9-10!

## STARTING SOMETHING NEW:

### The birth and growth of international student ministry at CU level

By Fred O'Loughlin

In the middle of December 2010, I was asked to be the International Secretary for De Montfort University Christian Union (DMUCU). Despite being part of an incredibly diverse University, DMUCU didn't have any form of international work set up, so it seemed like a great challenge. Frankly, I thought it was a bad idea to appoint me as the one to take it on. I brought my feelings of inadequacy to God in prayer, and during this time I was reminded of the fact that we don't do these things on our own; God partners with us.

#### Partnership Through Prayer

This idea of being partners with God was a consistent theme throughout the year. I decided to accept the post, and was faced with an example of God's faithfulness a few months later, when I started thinking about setting up an international café. I didn't really know how to go about this, so I sat down and prayed for God to send someone to help me. It didn't take God long to answer as the very next day a local student worker approached me, suggesting we team up and run an international café on campus!

We decided to start the café in the first term after the summer break. Over this summer I became increasingly aware of the amazing thread that runs through the Bible about God's heart for reaching out to all the nations. Verses like Isaiah 49:6 began to hold my attention. The context of this verse is God the Father speaking to His Son. It challenges us to think much bigger about God's

plans for mission:

*"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

#### Catching and Sharing the Vision

One country or people group is far too small for Jesus. So we too should be thinking far bigger. I began to share these thoughts with my friends in the Christian Union, in particular, the Committee. I didn't want to start a movement that was separate from the CU, as it was my hope to integrate the international café into the work of the Christian Union, that we might see the CU become exactly that: a union of Christians from all backgrounds, nationalities, and races, as it should be. I talked about it so much that some began to joke about how it was all I ever spoke about! Gradually, though, the excitement was catching on. God is inspiring, His gospel is motivating, and it was great to see others being fired up about His love for the whole world.

The first week back after the summer, I discovered that there was such a thing as International Welcome Week before the official Fresher's Week. Despite the incredibly short notice, we managed to get together a team of people and some flyers, and then set out, inviting people to the café. As many of us know, an enormous need within international students is



friendship. They are strangers, in a foreign land that doesn't often welcome them. So, from the start, I encouraged all our helpers to think in terms of forming sincere friendships.

### **Friendship and Integrity**

This meant a changed perspective: we were not going out to give out flyers; we were going out to make friends. The first time I went distributing flyers, I only gave out two. This is because we went for coffee with the first two people we met. We sought to be genuine and sincere in our friendships. We really did want to get to know the international students as individuals, following in the pattern of our Trinitarian God, who invites strangers from foreign lands into a genuine relationship with Him.

We were upfront about what was to happen at the café as well; we didn't want to hide Jesus as though He were an embarrassment. We found that many people were surprisingly receptive to Him. Eyes lit up at the mention of Jesus' name. At the first café, when we announced the optional Bible study was about to begin elsewhere, the room completely emptied of people! They had all come to hear about Jesus! In fact, it was extremely difficult to organise with so many people wanting to studying the Bible.

I encouraged the team of helpers throughout the following year to remember that God's heart is for genuine relationships; people are deeper than their skin. The international students felt part of a family and we would eat in each other's homes, go for walks together, and some people even went swimming together. Our genuine relationships were not bound to a two-hour café on a Wednesday afternoon; rather, we were sharing our lives with them. Towards the end of the year one of our new friends said to us: *"Knowing you is the best gift God has given me."*

### **Encouraging Wider Participation**

I also saw it as a major part of my role to encourage greater involvement among the rest of the CU, so I was constantly asking to give notices at CU meetings, to come to the Executive Committee meetings, as well as inviting individuals from the CU to come and visit the café. Some came only once, some stayed the whole year.

We continued proclaiming the gospel. Each week we did a new Bible study. It was a great privilege to encourage people who had never led a study before to do so. The helpers started taking our new friends to their churches, and doing additional Bible studies outside the café. It was great to be partnering with other helpers in making friends, and sharing the gospel with the amazing people we were meeting. We had the honour of seeing some of our friends become Christians and even go on to lead some of the Bible studies themselves! In fact, an exciting part of all this was in getting the international students to become helpers by doing the same, by inviting them to cook or lead a study, though we had to make sure the time was right and that they were suitably prepared for it.

### **Challenges and Concerns**

As a team of students working on a new initiative, however, there were the inevitable challenges along the way. The café was often quite demanding, so it was a struggle to balance my university work with it. Looking back and given the chance to do it all again, I would work harder at being better organised and would have been faster at accepting when people offered to help with organisation. Too often, things were done at the last minute and sometimes only came together by God's grace! I would also have really promoted the Christian Union weekend away to the international students, as it is a great way to link CU and I-Café.

We had to learn how to listen to others and explain our faith clearly, especially when we encountered young or new Christians misunderstanding things about Jesus and the gospel. Addressing these was often quite awkward, but I realised they had to be resolved. On one occasion, an international student who was already a Christian visited one of the local churches, but he didn't like it and so started telling people that that church was evil!

I've been interested in reaching Muslims since coming to university, and while we invited many Muslims to come to the Café, very few did and they didn't stay around for long. I have come to the conclusion that either real work needs to be made to integrate Muslims into the community of the café, or perhaps that other methods should be used to reach them. The community at international cafés satisfies a need for many international students, but this seems less of a need for Muslim students and we might see more gospel sharing and friendships if we went to them instead of asking them to come to us.

One thing that had been on my mind for the whole year was that, at the end of it, I would have to hand the leadership of the café over to somebody else. I saw it as part of my role to disciple the helpers as we went so that they could lead the café when I left. Eventually I handed over to two people who I hope, with God's help and partnership, will take the international work even further. We were learning throughout the year, but God was alongside us. There were many challenges, but we were able to conquer them with His help.

Despite small beginnings, the impact of international ministry on DMUCU can be seen in several ways. It is now a far more open CU, but the biggest difference we saw was in the café leaders who became more confident in their faith as they led Bible studies and shared the gospel. Many leaders did one-on-one Bible studies outside the café, one leader ended up spending the summer in China, and a group of us, including some of the international students, did an international outreach over the summer. I'm praying that in the coming year the café will get bigger, be more integrated into the CU, and that God's salvation would increasingly be brought to the ends of the earth.

## the contributors



**Alistair Reid** has lived in Oxford for five years and has recently married Jess. As a student he was involved in the OICCU while reading Music at Exeter College. Following graduation he worked at St. Ebbe's Church as an apprentice for two years, specifically working with international students. He now works as a Staff Worker for UCCF in the Oxford and Buckingham regions.

**Ailene Chou** grew up attending the Methodist church in Singapore. She was an international student from 2007-2011, first in Oxford and subsequently in New York. As an undergraduate she served as International Secretary for the Oxford University Inter-Collegiate Christian Union as well as being active in the Malaysian and Singaporean Students' Association and the Singapore Christian Fellowship. She has now returned home and works in the civil service.



**Fred O'Loughlin** graduated in 2012 from De Montfort University, Leicester. There he spent his last year as the International Secretary for the Christian Union. He has a on-going interest in culture, worldviews and in reaching people of other religions. He is currently living in Birmingham and is doing the year-long 'Relay' internship with UCCF.

## the insight team

**Sue Burt**  
Head of Returnee Ministry

**Peter Teagle**  
Area Team Leader

**Lizi Ross**  
HR & Communications  
Manager

**Patty McCulloch**  
Head of Training

**Fiona Barnard-Smith**  
Staff Worker

**Jack Bentley**  
Communications & Media  
Coordinator

**Lynette Teagle**  
Staff Worker

**iinsight**

Winter 2012





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

---

**friends**  
INTERNATIONAL

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

01920 460006  
[info@friendsinternational.org.uk](mailto:info@friendsinternational.org.uk)  
[www.friendsinternational.org.uk](http://www.friendsinternational.org.uk)

©2012 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.