

Adventures in International Friendship

The future political leader of Nigeria may be shopping in your local supermarket. A future Japanese company director may be living in the house or flat next door to you. People from nearly every country in the world live in the UK. Some of them are brilliant, handpicked by their government or ours to study here. When they finish their course work, they will return to their own countries, often to become key leaders politically, militarily, economically, scientifically, academically or socially.

Never in the history of the Christian Church has a generation of Christians had a greater opportunity to reach the nations of the world than we in the UK today. If we believe in the sovereignty of God, then we need not doubt that God has brought them here for more than an education. He has a special purpose for His church and for these international visitors. Imagine the worldwide impact if even a fraction of these potential leaders, these influential opinion-shapers of their societies, came to know Jesus Christ while studying here, and returned to their countries committed Christian witnesses. Some would go back to countries we cannot enter as missionaries.

God has brought the mission field to the UK. You are invited to join other UK Christians who are reaching out in love and friendship to them.

Who are these prospective friends?

There are over 400,000 international students in UK higher education and 500,000 coming for English language courses. Adding further education students, postdoctoral students and visiting academics to these figures, a good estimate of the number of international students in the UK is 1 million. Other international visitors come as military trainees, diplomatic personnel, agricultural trainees, business people and medical researchers. They have enquiring minds and want to learn about British life. Many are scientists and engineers, but an increasing number are doing courses in business, finance and tourism. They may be here for a brief course of a few weeks, or may stay for several years. Most students are here for 12-15 months before returning home.

They are people away from home, in need of help, understanding and friendship. In meeting their needs, we fulfil Jesus' command to 'love your neighbour as yourself.'

They are people who have much to share with us. By interacting with them, we can gain knowledge of the world that we could never get from a book.

They are people who may come from countries that lack a witness for Christ, where it may be against the law to share God's word. We can share the Good News of Jesus with them here.

They are people who may be our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can learn about the church worldwide and experience international Christian fellowship while helping them continue to grow in their faith.

The Biblical Mandate

What does the Bible say about international student ministry? Psalm 146:9 expresses God's concern for the stranger, which is clearly seen in his provisions for them in Old Testament law (e.g., Exodus 22:21, Lev 19:34, 23:22, 24:22, etc). Romans 12:13 tells us to practise hospitality, and the Greek word for hospitality, *phioxenia*, underlines the principle of loving the stranger.

God's purposes are for the salvation of the whole world (Gen 12:1-3 and Matthew 28:18-20 for starters). International student ministry presents us with a strategic opportunity to present the gospel to people from all over the world and have a chance to disciple them too. Consider the people who became Christians in the book of Acts. How many of them were foreigners living outside their homeland at the time? The visiting

dignitary to Jerusalem from Ethiopia, the Italian military commander stationed in Caesarea, the business woman from Thyatira living in Philippi, the religious diehard from Tarsus working in the Jerusalem area...

Preparing for the adventure

As you begin this adventure in international friendship, seek to be as well informed as possible about world geography, politics, culture and religion so that you will be able to ask intelligent questions and freely interact in your first contacts.

Good resources for learning about the world abound. They include *National Geographic* magazine, *Sunday Times* and *Observer* articles, the *Guardian Weekly*, news magazines and Christian magazines with world news and world missions coverage. All these resources and an infinite number of further articles, magazines & books can be found by searching on the internet for helpful websites, such as the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk) which has profiles of many countries. Check out information about travel, world religion, culture and cross-cultural communication. The book/website *Operation World* by PJ Johnstone will give you vital information about the world and how to pray for its people. Television documentaries can be helpful.

When you meet people from other countries, show that you are genuinely interested in their home country. Even though you may have read a few books or have briefly visited their country, it's always good to ask your student friend to give you their own account of what it's like. Avoid asking about issues that they might find offensive or embarrassing.

Beginning the adventure

Friendships don't develop spontaneously. Someone must make the first move. New friendships depend upon one person's willingness to step out and approach another. Perhaps we have an embarrassing memory of having asked a Chinese man where he was from and discovered he was born and bred in Birmingham and spoke better English than we did. Such an experience can stick in our memory and make us shy of taking the initiative again. On the other hand he could have been a Chinese student just off the plane from Beijing. Pointing out the difference between a 20p and a 50p coin and showing him how to use a telephone could be the start of a friendship. But we must take the risk of speaking to him first.

Use your natural opportunities. International students may live in your neighbourhood or block of flats. They may be enrolled in classes with you or work in your company. You may meet them at a shopping centre, launderette, school gate or while sightseeing. Find out what is being done for international students at your local college, language school or university. All it may take is a phone call. If they have a 'welcome' programme or a friendship family programme, volunteer to help.

Ethnic, religious and international student groups sometimes sponsor dinners and cultural programmes. They may be advertised in local circulars or newspapers and are often without charge. You will be welcome, and attending such programmes can give you an opportunity to meet people from a particular country or culture, and increase your knowledge of the world.

In a number of locations, Hospitality Schemes link up individual students with local families or single people. Some are run by the university, others by Friends International staff. There is also the national HOST scheme where students can go and spend a weekend with a family in another part of the UK from where they live. International Advisers at the university should be able to provide information about HOST.

Friends International staff will be happy to discuss with you other possibilities for getting involved.

Developing a relationship: some practical hints

When you introduce yourself to an international student, speak slowly and distinctly. Make an effort to learn his or her name. Write it down if it is difficult and work at pronouncing it correctly. If you are given a westernised name, ask if that is what they prefer to be called.

'What country are you from?' 'How long have you been in Britain?' 'What are you studying?' These are appropriate questions to ask in getting acquainted. Then try to find out about their main interests and look for common denominators. Most people appreciate it when others are genuinely interested in them.

If you ask your friend about their impressions of the UK, encourage them to be candid. You might not like the answers, but it can give you a platform for dialogue (not argument). 'Have you found where to buy everything you need?' can be a very welcome question to ask a newly arrived student and often leads to a flood of other topics.

You will not feel drawn toward friendship with every student you meet. But if you do want to have further contact, exchange addresses and phone numbers. Never say, 'You must come and see me sometime.' Few would take you up on such a superficial invitation and you would be shocked and probably unprepared if they did. Make specific arrangements to see each other again soon after your first meeting. One of the best ways is to invite them for a meal or to meet you somewhere for coffee, allowing you a relaxed time to get better acquainted.

Not every cross-cultural contact will develop easily. Perhaps you have made an effort to befriend a student and were disappointed in the relationship. Don't let one negative experience keep you from the blessings and benefits God may have for you through friendship with people from other cultures. Keep trying.

Growing in friendship

Once we have accepted the risk of taking the initiative in making friends, we need to ask ourselves if we are willing to develop a deep and lasting friendship. Let's consider some of the ingredients of friendship.

Time together is an obvious necessity. Unless you are seeing your new acquaintance frequently, you are probably not developing a friendship. Evaluate your time realistically and concentrate on developing a quality friendship with one or two, rather than spreading yourself too thinly. Capitalise on your common interests.

You may enjoy the same kind of food or music, or have the same hobbies. Plan to share those things in your time together, by including your friend in your regular activities as much as possible. If you are wise in planning, you can make time work for you in friendship, rather than allowing it to limit you. Be sensitive to their schedule and invite them to join you at a time that will not conflict with their academic or work demands.

One of the great pleasures of any friendship is the privilege of helping one another. We express the love of Jesus as we respond in a caring way for a friend in need. Learn how to help them in a way that will not cause offence or make them dependent upon you. It may be more difficult to be vulnerable and allow them to meet some of your needs, but this mutual sharing is essential in a friendship.

Friendship is not just *doing* things together. It is *being* together. Social life in many countries is centred around conversation rather than activities. Your friend may enjoy just sitting and talking to you, exchanging ideas about many subjects. Be careful not to monopolise the conversation, which is easy to do if his English is limited. Set the example of being a good listener.

Healthy friendships are based on mutual respect. Your friend will not want to be treated as a lonely, needy foreigner, but as an equal. In all things, show respect for their ideas and beliefs, even if they differ markedly from your own.

A good friend is always sensitive to what is happening in the other person's life. If your student friend hears about the illness or death of a family member, gets sick or has an accident, they will need your support and encouragement. Your calls, emails and visits will be a further witness of your love for them. Immigration and academic problems are best left to the agencies ultimately involved. Direct your friend to the responsible authorities that can help them and be supportive. If they seem to have pressing financial needs, check with someone who can verify the need. If you want to help, it might be best to channel the funds through a Christian trust or your church rather than to give money directly.

Problems that international students face

Never does an international student need a friend as much as when they first arrive in the UK. Think of what might happen to a student who has just arrived here from another country. Their first encounter is with immigration authorities, where they may be questioned about his visa and passport. If their English is poor, they can be easily intimidated. Even if they can read and write English with ease, they may not understand the informal speech or accents of government officials, shop assistants and the man on the street. It can shatter their confidence until they 'tune in' to the many different speech patterns of the British. If they are going to a college where there is no welcome or home-stay programme, they may have to find a place to live on their own, go through a complex registration process and find their way in a new community. They can feel lost and overwhelmed.

In the West, individual initiative and freedom are highly valued, but many of the societies in the world are still family-orientated, with the individual having a clearly defined role within the family and community. The newly-arrived international student can feel deeply the loss of their support and direction. Their most immediate problem may be that of loneliness.

As you get to know a new international student, encourage them to talk to you about their problems, ask them questions, get them to tell you their feelings. An overwhelming problem may be whittled down to insignificance if they feel comfortable talking to someone about it.

Hospitality

One of the most basic things you can do to help develop friendship with international students is to extend hospitality. Most societies place high value upon hospitality and frequently invite acquaintances to share refreshments and food.

When you invite international students into your home for a meal, make sure they understand your invitation: the date, the time and how to get to your home. If possible, personally escort them to your home on their first visit. If you know just one student, ask him if he would like to invite a fellow countryman to come with him. He might feel more comfortable bringing a friend along.

Before the agreed date, send an email or telephone them to confirm the arrangements. Inquire in advance as to food preferences or prohibitions. As a general rule, don't serve pork to Muslims or Jews. Hindus don't eat beef and some are vegetarians. Rice dishes are popular with almost everyone. Most students from non-European backgrounds prefer fruit for dessert rather than something sweet, so have fruit available as an option.

Not everyone is as concerned about time as the British. Your guests may arrive later than the time indicated. It is best to prepare a meal that can be kept waiting. When your guests arrive, offer a beverage and don't rush into serving the meal. Your guests may offer you a small gift, perhaps a souvenir from their country.

If you pray before the meal, explain that this is your usual custom. Avoid long prayers and do not preach at them in your prayers! Be natural and let the Lord lead you in talking about and to God.

As the food is served, explain that it is normal in British homes to ask for more food if they want it. When you offer food again to them, explain that it is not the British custom to 'push' food on visitors. Take your time at the table. Meals are for socialising, not just eating. Ask questions that will draw your guest out in conversation. Do not worry if they seem quiet. In some societies, talking is discouraged at meals.

Be sensitive as to when your time together should end. Your guests may need to return home to study. Make sure they understand you have enjoyed their company and would be happy to have them remain longer. On the other hand, if it is getting late and you feel that the evening should close, you might mention the lateness of the hour and speak about continuing the contact another time soon.

Your international friends may ask you to their homes for an evening or they may ask you if they can cook a meal of their country in your home. If they need help, offer to take them shopping to find the ingredients for their cooking. Encourage a mutuality in hospitality by graciously accepting their invitations. In some cultures it is the host who is most honoured rather than the guest, so allow your friend to be honoured by your visit to them.

Activities with friends from overseas

Your time together and personal interaction will mean more to your friends than how well you 'entertain' them. You don't need to plan anything extravagant. The students may enjoy activities such as fishing, hiking, camping, musical or athletic events or simply joining you for a gentle game of football or tennis.

If you are attending an event where admission is charged, be clear in advance about who is responsible to pay so that no one is embarrassed.

Think about what you would like to see and do if you were visiting another country. Many students are fascinated by the British political scene, community events, school programmes, parades, weddings and even funerals. Don't overlook museums, zoos, castles, gardens, and parks. You could arrange a tour of a newspaper office, a factory or a cathedral.

As they become part of the family, your friends may want to join you in projects such as home repairs, decorating and gardening. They often learn to appreciate the British do-it-yourself approach to getting things done, and might even want to help with the dishes. Let them. But some students may be from affluent families, used to having servants do much of the work in their home. It might not occur to them to offer to help you, and you shouldn't be offended.

Peer group relations on campus

Christian students are in a unique position to adventure into international friendship. It's quite easy and natural to reach out to the Chinese student you see every day in class, or the Nigerian who lives next door to you in the hall of residence.

Many international students have said that British students are unfriendly. Perhaps it is the busyness of your own timetable, or a natural reticence to take initiative in meeting someone. It does take time and effort to build a close friendship. But Christians with vision and commitment to Christ will not miss the opportunity to be a witness to the nations that God has brought to their own campus.

Many colleges and universities have social welcome programmes to introduce new overseas students to British campus life. They are always looking for British students to help in these programmes. The help you give to new students on those first days will be remembered. And you may meet someone whom you will

want to befriend in a special way. If no programme exists on your campus, perhaps your Christian student group could help get one started. Talk to UCCF, or your local Friends International staff worker if there is one in your area.

Consider the possibility of having an international student live with you. Tell the accommodation office of your interest. If your campus or community has an intensive English programme, offer to help as a conversation partner. If you're studying a foreign language, arrange to swap tutoring with someone who speaks that language.

If you want to concentrate on students from a particular country or culture, consider joining an ethnic or language society. Concentrate on becoming good friends with a few. Encourage other Christians on campus to befriend international students.

It is best to develop international friendships with someone of the same sex. International students often misunderstand the friendliness of members of the opposite sex. In male-female situations, emphasise the group rather than one-to-one relationships.

Families of people from other countries

The wives of international students or businessmen often face greater problems than their husbands. They may have limited knowledge of English. Many come from cultures that protect women from the modern world. This may be the first time away from the assistance and support of family. Back home they may have servants to care for the home and children. Their husbands are busy with studies while the wives are unable to find a job or attend classes because of their children. Their only social contacts may be with other wives from their own country or culture who have similar problems.

British wives who show an interest in these women can make a tremendous difference in their adjustment to this country. And in the process of being a friend, you often win the privilege of sharing with them about the things that are most meaningful in your own life. Find out if there is a conversational English programme in your area for wives and volunteers to help. If there is not a programme, perhaps you could help start one. Friends International may be able to help you get started.

Consider joining an international wives' group or starting one in your area. Invite women from overseas to attend a women's group in which you are already involved or a Mums and Toddlers group at church. Take her to women's swimming sessions, aerobics, cookery classes or any of the things you enjoy. Many international wives have abundant free time and welcome creative activities to use it.

Your friendship will mean more than anything else to your international friend. As you befriend an international wife, think about practical ways that you can help her adjust to our society. Take her shopping and help her find shops that sell ethnic foods and spices. Explain British clothing sizes. Tell her about charity shops. Let her know about recreational opportunities and activities available for her children, including pre-school or day care centres. Help her find a good doctor and explain what to do for emergency medical care. Treat her as any other friend when it comes to special occasions. Think how much she would appreciate a special birthday party, or a celebration of the birth of a baby, or a party when her husband receives his degree.

Religion and international friendship

In the process of getting acquainted with people from other countries, ask them to tell you something about their religion and its practice. Many Muslims are quite devout and may be eager to share what they believe. Learn from them and earn from them the opportunity to share your own faith. Japanese and Chinese people may indicate that religion is viewed as superstition and has little meaning to them, but it will have influenced their parents or grandparents.

Most international students will view the UK as a Christian nation and will often ask questions about Christianity. Explain that while there are Christians in this country and we have a Christian heritage, only a minority are committed followers of Jesus. You might ask them what they know about Christianity and if they have read the Bible. Many from Africa, Latin America and Europe will tell you their countries are Christian. Ask them what Christianity means to them personally.

As a concerned Christian, you will want to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ to your international friends. There is no special technique or formula for how to go about this; Jesus never dealt with any two persons in exactly the same way and it is He who calls us to follow Him. We are a witness both by our lives and our words. While we should not hesitate to share with others what we believe, we should show respect for them and their beliefs.

Make Jesus central in your sharing. He is held in high regard by most people from other cultures and religions. Start out with His life and teachings and then move on to the claims He makes for Himself. Tell about His death and resurrection and how we may have forgiveness and new life in Him. Share your own personal testimony of how Jesus became your Saviour and Lord. Be sure that you are communicating rather than just preaching in a one-way conversation. Utilise the excellent Christian literature that is available. Get hold of videos, DVDs or helpful website addresses. Expect that God will guide you in your witness as He promises. Pray often for your international friend and ask the Holy Spirit to open their heart and mind. Do not let their interest or lack of interest in Christianity be a condition for your friendship.

Adventuring as a group

Challenge your church or group to consider adventuring into international friendship. First, the group needs to develop a vision for such ministry and understand what will be involved in terms of time and commitment. Friends International will be happy to send a representative to speak to your group and share a message on the Biblical basis for this ministry.

Christians who have never had an international student friend before may want some basic advice on meeting, befriending and learning to share their faith with them. Friends International staff can conduct a training seminar that will be of help.

A local co-ordinator or committee composed of members of your group should be appointed to survey the local scene, to learn how many students are in the area and what is already being done for them. Then activities and hospitality can be planned that will meet needs and not duplicate programmes that are already available.

There are many different approaches to ministering to overseas students and Friends International will be happy to help you design a programme for your community, using the potential of your group. With good leadership and organisation, many families and individuals can be encouraged and directed in their involvement and have the joy of knowing they are participating in the fulfilment of the Great Commission that Jesus has given us.

Where do we go from here?

People from almost every nation in the world are waiting at our doorsteps, waiting for our friendship and understanding. Waiting for someone... like you. Ask God to show you what He wants you to do in meeting the challenge of the world that has come to us here in the UK. As He leads, join the adventure in international friendship!

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Evangelistic/apologetic literature for international students:

Mere Christianity – C S Lewis

Basic Christianity – John Stott

Case for Christ – Lee Strobel

The Reason for God – Tim Keller

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