

## Returnee Visits – a complete guide

Friends International strongly encourages staff to make returnee visits; they are an integral part of our work. We would suggest that they are valuable for anyone keenly involved in international student ministry. Returnee trips are often fantastic experiences and can make a significant contribution to ministry. This paper aims to give you some guidelines and answer some FAQs. They are culled from the experience of several FI staff.

### WHY?

Returnee visits have the potential to take our ministry to a whole new level:

- They give us insights into culture which are difficult to gain from a book or seminar
- They renew and deepen friendships
- They give special encouragement to returnees and may help them in their faith journey
- They enable us to meet and work with key returnee 'welcomers' in the places we visit
- They give new focus and priorities to our UK-based ministry and our discipleship of students

### WHEN?

#### ...in your ministry

There is no set 'right time' to make a returnee visit. Obviously you need to have built some friendships with students who have returned home. Equally your ministry supervisor/church leader may have advice about the timing and when you could draw maximum benefit from such a trip. A sabbatical trip is an obvious time to include a returnee visit. But you don't have to wait 7 years before making the first one!

#### ...in the year

This will depend on the pattern of your working year. For some the summer is a good time; for those involved in summer outreaches it probably isn't. Chinese New Year can be a good time to include if you are visiting East Asians as they are likely to have time off work. But then again, they may be visiting family in a different city from where they live. How many weekends should you include to have more chance of seeing working friends and visit churches etc.? Weather conditions in certain countries can be a factor, e.g. it's best if possible to avoid excessive heat or monsoon time!

**Overall**, it's good to plan ahead, ask questions, take advice and pray.

### HOW?

#### Before Going...

1. **Communicate well** with your ministry supervisor/church leader. Share your vision for the trip and keep them involved in the process.
2. **Should I go alone or with others?** There isn't one answer to this. Some travel with a spouse or colleague, a church friend or team member, and enjoy the fellowship this affords and the chance to reflect together. For others they would prefer or it's more practical to travel alone and renew specific friendships. There can also be the option of a combination of these things e.g. being with someone for part of the time and travelling solo for the rest.
3. **Think in advance what you want to get out of the trip** e.g. to understand more of the culture/to connect with returnees known to you/to visit some churches? Your aims may well include all of those but the advice is to have realistic aims of what you can do in the time. On your first trip

you probably want to renew friendships, invest time in returnees and get a feel for the culture. On further visits your aims may change and develop. Questions to ask:

- Who and why do I plan to visit: e.g. to help with someone's discipleship; to network with those who were seekers? How will this affect my use of time (even if I am as flexible as possible)?
- How can I make sure I observe and learn more about the culture surrounding returnees, including Christian and church life, rather than just 'planning to encourage' or 'looking through tourist eyes'?

4. **How long should my trip be?** This will depend on where you are going (e.g. to visit several countries or one/to go to Europe or further afield/to connect with one or two returnees or many more). Your home circumstances will also play into the decision. If you are leaving a family behind you may not be able to go for as long as if you are single and have no special family responsibilities. If you are on sabbatical you may have greater freedom than if you are in the middle of a term. Staff have done 6-week trips, but found them very tiring, or 2-week ones and sometimes found them frustrating because there wasn't enough time. But a week in one European country visiting one or two returnees could yield as much depth as 6 weeks with lots of travel and seeing numerous returnees. If possible, it's good to build in some holiday at the beginning, end or middle of your visit.
5. **Plan well ahead.** It can be very time-consuming to plan a returnee visit. You will need to liaise with those you plan to visit, work out a rough schedule and plan travel. In addition you may have to arrange cover with colleagues and volunteers for your ministry responsibilities back home.
6. **Check if you need a visa** for any countries you will visit. In many cases, you won't or you will be issued with one on arrival at the airport, but make sure. If you do need a visa, it can be helpful to check with others who have travelled to that country for any advice or tips about the application.
7. **Ask others (your ministry team, Friends International staff, students):**
  - **For country specific info** e.g. best ways to travel/cultural sensitivities/sim cards and phone connections
  - **For any key contacts** in the places you will visit either of returnees or church contacts. It may be that you can serve to connect people whom you don't actually know yourself.
8. **Who will pay for the trip?** Returnee Trips are a legitimate ministry expense and so we shouldn't feel embarrassed about raising finance for them. Some pointers and ideas:
  - You can *budget* to pay for returnee visits. If you are part of the FI salary system or similar you can ask for a returnee trip to be included in your next year's budget and part of the finance you need to raise. If you work for a church, you can approach your church pastor and/or treasurer about a possible subsidy.
  - Share your desire to make a trip with your international student team, home group and church friends, and also your supporters and prayer partners if you have them. Some people are very happy to give to help finance a trip - they can see its benefit but can't go themselves. Some supporters only give to specific 'one-offs'.
  - Returnees themselves often help. This is particularly so if you are travelling to e.g. the wedding of a returnee friend. They may very generously offer to pay for flights or accommodation.
  - Once in the country, returnee friends – and their families - are often very generous in providing or paying for accommodation and most meals.
  - For Friends International staff, your Branch/Development Group may consider part-funding a trip from the City Fund if you have one. However this would depend very much on the state of local finances.
  - Are there any trusts known to you who might consider a donation for such a trip if you can prove the worth of it?

- Overall, don't let finance put you off planning a trip. Those of us who have done such a trip can testify that God often provides in amazing ways.

## 9. Packing

- **Are there specific resources** you could take along to help those you will be meeting?
- **Take small gifts** (UK mementos) for those you will meet, or from whom you will receive hospitality, or for the wider family if you know you will meet them. It's worth taking quite a lot. You'll find yourself in unexpected situations when a gift might be useful. Remember to budget financially and luggage-wise for gifts. And keep luggage space for gifts you will be given!

10. **What about Insurance?** It's vital you buy adequate travel insurance. Friends International has a Business Travel policy available for all employees travelling abroad on FI business, to include returnee visits. If you work for a church, check to see if you can be covered by a church policy.

## WHAT?

### While there

1. **Go for depth rather than width.** It will be tempting to visit lots of places and see lots of people but you may just end up tired rather than achieving the various aims you had before starting – look at the Why section again and reflect on how best to achieve those aims.
2. **Be aware that your returnee friends may have a different agenda to yours!** They may well want to show you all the cultural and natural places of interest and treat you to wonderful meals in restaurants; in fact to 'pay you back' for hospitality shown while in the UK. All of that is part of the experience but can be time consuming and detract from your deeper aims. But sometimes it's taken out of your hands and you just have to go with it and enjoy it!
3. **Aim to meet families as well as individuals** where possible. Remember your returnee friend may be experiencing family pressure or opposition. A positive meeting with a UK friend may help to ease some of the suspicion or concern about your friend's foreign experience. Plus you will gain further insights into the culture and understand much more of the pressures on your friend.
4. **Try to balance group meetings with individual ones.** It can be very helpful (and fun) to meet with a group who were together in your city or who are now in the same city. This can help networking and connection, and ideally could lead to an ongoing returnee network. At the same time, conversations can be quite superficial in a group and some returnees who are more shy or afraid of losing face may not open up so well.<sup>1</sup>
5. **Aim for more than one meeting with returnees close to you** or whom you particularly want to encourage. Returnee friends can be a bit shy, want to treat you, or be embarrassed that their English level has declined and so not open up quite so much at first. Often deeper conversation happens on a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting. Aim, if possible, for a combination of relaxed time together (e.g. visiting tourist sites) and time for more serious discussion/Bible study etc. This also should mean that one day's conversation has time to sink in and mature and can then lead to other discussion topics.

<sup>1</sup> Friends International staff have arranged in advance a meal for as many as could be gathered in a city so that they met each other, including some key people who might be more intentional in following up others, then arranging 1-2-1s afterwards.

6. **Think of and write down specific questions** you have for your friends about the culture/their experience of returning home e.g.:
- How was it coming home? What did you experience?
  - Do you sense that you really "belong" in the church you go to? If not, what might you do about this?
  - Are there new ways you could be serving? (This last one especially for those who are in "consumer-mode" and not really active in serving others.)

**And write down answers/observations.** At the end of the trip it may all become a blur of impressions and not so easy to look back and recall all you have learned.

7. **Be prepared for last minute changes of plan.** Everyone is at a different place on the organised/laid back spectrum, but arrangements and timings are not always viewed as they are in the UK. Returnees are known to liaise amongst themselves and change your plans! The best advice when plans are suddenly changed is to 'go with the flow' and see what God does.
8. **Be a good listener.** When we do returnee visits we should really be listening and learning with eyes, ears and hearts open. The very act of listening deeply can be a bigger help to returnees than any specific advice offered. Also, a visit with the agenda to 'assist' can really get in the way of our own learning especially if we offer advice without any real understanding of the surrounding culture. Any visit should be approached with humility and a desire to gain new insights to students' country, family/work situation and church environment and challenges.
9. **Ask people to pray for you.** This seems obvious but is vital. Ask them to pray for safety and God's over-ruling of travel arrangements, but also for meaningful and maybe unexpected encounters and experiences.
10. Most of all **ENJOY IT.** A first returnee trip just has to be experienced and enjoyed. When you (hopefully!) make your 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> visits (!) you will have far more of an idea of what to expect and how to draw value from the trip. **Come back and inspire and challenge others** with what you have learnt!

## AND FINALLY

### On your Return Home

- Be sure to build in time to **recover physically** from what can be a demanding schedule.
- **Follow up** conversations/issues shared with returnee friends you've visited
- Most of all, build in **reflection time** – to write up notes of observations and impressions.
- Then **share** those in different forms: in prayer letters, with those involved in international student ministry with you, your church leaders, small group or congregation, etc. That way the lessons we learned and encouragements we received from our trip can be shared more broadly, and others might be inspired to make similar trips.
- Start thinking about your next returnee trip?!