



THINK RETURN

(From the beginning...)

A brief overview of a returnee focus

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

Colossians 2:6-7

friends
INTERNATIONAL

*transforming students
transforming nations*

"For the first few days I felt that I could not sense Him in this huge country. Why does He hide His face?"

Disciples not converts

"To see international students transformed by the good news of Jesus so that they fully engage with the mission of the Church in the world."

This is Friends International's mission statement, and on an individual level is our hope and prayer for each of our international friends. In showing unconditional love to the stranger amongst us, it is our desire and the greatest expression of that love that they would come to know Christ personally and make a difference for Him in the world. A one-off commitment or raised hand does not constitute a relationship: Jesus calls his followers in Matthew 28 not to go and simply convert people, but to make disciples by teaching and baptising them. That means we need to share and show the word in love, teach the word and train them up, then send them out to serve the world, and this all with a view that Christ would be worshipped amongst the nations.

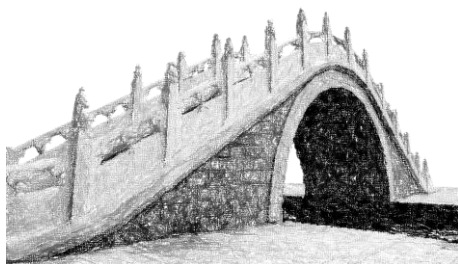
From the beginning

Jesus' pattern was to begin discipling from his first meeting with a person. One thing international students/scholars usually have in common is that they will return home at the end of their study period – we need to have this in mind when we first meet them. When is that likely to be and to where are they likely to return? We need to try to understand something of their life story and background, and to feed that into our discipling of them from the beginning – not as an after-thought should they make a profession of faith two weeks before they return. In short, we need to be 'thinking home' from the beginning.

The reality of returning home

The sad reality is that many (probably the majority of) returnees who have made a profession of faith whilst studying abroad fall away from the church and that commitment within two years of returning. We need to help build a bridge between both the church and their experiences abroad (in the UK) and the church and the life they will return to in their home country.

"The first day I got back I talked to a couple of friends about believing in Jesus. Before I could go any further, I learned from their eyes that they treated what I was talking about as a cultural experience."



Preparing returnees

What are the challenges?

Reverse culture shock is essentially the counterpart of culture shock, and affects people as they return to their home culture and context. It can often be worse than the culture shock they experienced when they came to study abroad, partly because it's unexpected. It can last several weeks to several months.

There will also be *specific cultural and church challenges back home* relating to family and societal expectations, work, church differences and religious practices, which may conflict with or hinder the returnee's new faith.

How can we help them 'bridge the gap'?

- Help them to understand the process of reverse culture shock and consider some possible scenarios together. Initially students may reject the idea that transitioning home might be difficult. Do persevere and make the most of the resources on the next page
- Invest time in intentional discipleship to focus on challenging issues they may face back home. For example work pressures, family expectations and religious practices and duties (particularly regarding death and the after-life). How does their understanding of the Bible relate to these issues?
- Run *Think Home* and *I.D.* courses (see resources)

Personal walk with Christ

- Show the Bible as their key life resource, by teaching and modelling how to live by it. Ensure they understand the central truths of the Gospel, have an overview of the whole Bible and can feed themselves daily from it
- Similarly by teaching and example, help them to see what it means to make Christ Lord of one's whole life, e.g. Lord of career and family
- Help them to set good habits now (when they have fewer time pressures) through teaching, example and tools – personal Bible reading and prayer
- Encourage them to read the Bible and pray in their own language – bilingual Bibles can be particularly helpful. Some students will find it initially easier to read the Bible in English and find the translation in their mother tongue more difficult or strange – strong encouragement may be required keeping in mind the goal of bridging the gap

Witnessing to others

- Envision them for mission: help them to reach out to their friends and be missionally-minded – by example, training & enabling. Help them to give a reason for the hope that they have in a sensitive way. Consider with them how they might talk to friends and family back home about their new faith (i.e. Col.4:5-6). Some returnees struggle to balance their enthusiasm for sharing with sensitivity, which can easily cause rifts

The Church

- Teach them a Biblical view of church (what the church is for, their role in the church, challenges, accountability, need for fellowship), and expose them to different styles of prayer, singing, and group Bible study
- Encourage serving, giving and interdependence within the body of the church. Are they being treated like celebrities at church?
- Link them to a local church or fellowship group which functions in their own language if there is one (N.B. Be aware of possible pastoral gaps – we need to coordinate care & discipleship between fellowship groups)
- Link them up with a church or returnee fellowship at home – people who can relate to their experiences abroad and their struggles returning

Your on-going role

- Try to keep in contact with students upon return (for a period, maybe up to two years), to encourage and support; maybe visit them?!
- Above all, pray for them and with them, modelling obedience to and dependence upon the Lord

In all of this, trust in the sovereignty of God. You may need to focus less on reaching the masses and more on deep discipleship with a few, and re-shape your ministry to aid that. If you build real community here, they'll miss it back home and will be more likely really to search for it there.

Finally and to reinforce one of the above points, make sure discipleship really does happen; if you're a local volunteer do communicate with your local Friends International staff worker, and don't assume someone else is doing it.

“When all these difficulties and shocks come together, it is easy to get discouraged. The most essential thing at this time is to know how to keep firm.”

Resources

- *I.D.* – a 10-part discipleship course for international students
- *Think Home* – used alone, one2one, as a weekly meeting or whole day course
- *Back Home* – 30 days of Bible readings and reflections for returnees (upon return)
- *Sea Turtles* – website for Chinese returnee resources 海归: www.seaturtles.org.uk
- *OMF 'Preparing for Return'* – informative short video: vimeo.com/3282557
- *New Horizons* – book on returnee adjustment, ISI (International Students Inc.), 2008
- *Home Again* – book on preparation for re-entry, Nate Mirza, Dawson Media, 2005

For more on how to access these or other resources, or for information on follow-up links and how to link up people securely, please contact:

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