

# Opportunity

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**friends**  
INTERNATIONAL



## The Ministry Moves Online

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Growing Friendship and Faith with International Students



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# Leading Thoughts

In January we would never have been able to guess what the ministry would look like, just three months later, in April!



We were planning events for Easter, booking venues for training events, and looking forward to summer outreaches. Then, in a short period of time, everything changed and the way we engaged with international students had to adapt quickly.

I am so impressed by the creativity and commitment of Friends International staff and volunteers to make new things work. The level of adaptation is challenging, but we are doing really well.

The truly remarkable thing is that the friendship and faith we offer to these students is more imperative now than ever before. We are finding these to be fruitful times of increasing questioning from international students who may feel isolated and confused, abandoned even. We are showing that friendship is real, and we are stepping in to provide much-needed companionship, a platform for sharing our lives and our purpose in life.

We have further levels of decision-making to come, as universities wrestle with damaged budgets and international students decide where to study. This will affect streams of finance as well as what programmes we can put on.

The ministry has moved online – and you will read about it in this edition of *Opportunity*. As you can imagine, we are thankful for video calling to be able to continue doing so much of what we do.

We deeply value your partnership in sharing the journey with us of growing friendship and faith with international students. Thank you, and please pray as we seek to serve more international students in more university centres around the UK and Ireland.

*Alan*

**Alan Tower**  
National Director

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“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...”

Romans 15:13



## Testimony

# “I was still an atheist, and had lots of doubts about Christianity...”

This is Lee, a Chinese student in St Andrews. His journey to faith is an example of God using lots of different people and ministries to draw the student to Himself.

An early catalyst in his journey was attending a Christmas meal hosted by Friends International volunteers in St Andrews. The hosts gave each student a small tract about Christmas and Jesus, and this sparked his interest.

Lee was very burdened by his worries. Another international student, who himself had come to faith a few years earlier when studying in another British city, told him about the promise in Philippians 4:6-7. He then suggested he tried praying and giving his worries to God. This is how Lee describes it: “I was encountering many problems and much trouble. My Christian friend told me, ‘Give your pain and sorrow to God, because God can bear the pain for you.’ I felt a sudden relief and my burden was taken away after I tried entrusting my sorrow to God. This increased my interest in exploring and learning more about God.”

Later, Lee joined the befriending scheme for international students run by the university Chaplaincy and coordinated by Fiona Barnard. His befriender was a post graduate student with a strong faith, and they had many faith conversations. He also joined the local COCM fellowship and the Navigators Bible study group.

It was during an Easter retreat, run by the Navigators, that was particularly significant for him. Lee said: “I realised how sinful I was and that I didn’t deserve what I had, but that God still accepts me and sacrificed himself for my sins. I decided to follow Jesus.”

**Stuart Newland**  
Navigators and Friends International Affiliate

I would like to devote my life to the work that God assigns me. I think my old has gone and my new has come!



# Moving the Ministry Online



Friendship is a large part of what we do; in fact, it's in our name! But what happens when you can't meet people face-to-face?

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown, all our events, activities and outreaches to international students could not continue in the same way. So, we moved online. Now, International Cafés have become Zoom Cafés and Bible discussion groups are held in Zoom breakout rooms.

Here you will read how Friends International staff and volunteers have adapted what they do, so that friendship can continue, and new faith can flourish.

## GLASGOW Ministry During Lockdown

Monday morning. The alarm rings. We get up, get ready for work... and of course stay at home.

Ministry has changed since the lockdown: some events have been cancelled, but much is happening through Zoom, the video-calling software. So, we spend large chunks of time in front of our screens.

We find that in the midst of lockdown, with students confined largely to their rooms, what we do fills a need. One student from Hong Kong recently said: "International Café is one of the most important things in my week – life is so boring!"

We may have tired eyes, and get frustrated with technology, but we're glad we're able to continue in ministry, and even more glad that while life has changed so much, God has stayed the same.

Kate Pearce and the Glasgow Team



## CAMBRIDGE The Challenges of a Zoom Café

How do you shift your weekly programme to an online programme? That's the question we're all figuring out.

For our Zoom Cafés we try to have an interactive game each week, as well as time to just chat in smaller groups. Forming these groups is a challenge. In a real café setting our students can move from table to table and chat with people they choose, either in a larger group or in a one-to-one conversation. That is much harder to emulate at a Zoom Café, and we're still working out how to provide something akin to that.

Our concern with an online programme is how to engage students as individuals. Zoom events can be fun and encouraging but don't provide the chance for heart-to-hearts. So, alongside having an online programme we are seeking to make sure the students are linked personally with a volunteer in some way and being looked out for.

We are grateful to all our volunteers for graciously and boldly embracing so much change so quickly.

Jenny Hunter and the Cambridge Team



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We are so grateful to our volunteers

## BOURNEMOUTH

Online Ministry as a Reach Trainee

On a Wednesday afternoon in mid-March, I was sitting on a comfortable chair in the university chaplaincy, eating a friend's birthday cake, and reading some passages from the Bible and the Qur'an with some Christian and Muslim friends.

After that, I walked over to another building to help run Global Café. There, sitting around a table with international students and chatting about life (and Coronavirus!), I did not yet know it would be the last time I would see many of them in person.

Later that evening, I went to a Christian Union meeting. If I had known it would

be the last meeting of the term, I might have stayed longer!

That used to be quite a standard day in my life as a Reach Trainee, and those meetings were some of the highlights of doing Reach. Now, the highlights of the week are seeing those students' faces on my laptop screen... a strange new world that brings lots of challenges but also exciting opportunities.

In Bournemouth we put on daily events for international students, such as workouts, quizzes, games and time for conversation, and two weekly cafés. We have had students join who are now back home in France, Germany, Japan, Thailand, India, Italy, and we even met up with some students in Saudi Arabia on Easter Sunday to discuss the

resurrection of Jesus! I have also started meeting two students for one-to-ones since lockdown started, one a new believer and another a Muslim student from Turkey. I am not sure these one-to-ones would have started without lockdown!

**Antje Loddeke**  
Reach Trainee

Reach Trainees together on Zoom



## We Need You

We need your prayers and support more than ever to take the new opportunities that are arising. Please use the prayer diary to pray for the ministry and please consider making a financial gift, which can be done here: [www.friendsinternational.uk/give](http://www.friendsinternational.uk/give)

# International Students in Lockdown

## Stuck in the UK

In the first weeks when the UK saw a surge in Covid-19 cases, the university informed the students that all classes were to move online. This was particularly challenging because in my course practical assessments in the workshops account for 50% of our final grade, so there was a major shift in lecturers trying to substitute this by giving out theory-based assignments as a replacement.

In the following weeks when the lockdown was issued within the UK, the university definitively stated all campuses were closed for the academic year and that all international students should travel back home. This resulted in a mass exodus of the international students on my course. After confirmation that I could travel home, I found out that Australia had closed its borders. This meant I was stuck in the UK.

Contact with my family has become more frequent compared to other times; mostly check-ups and constant nagging to obey the law and stay inside! If I did have the chance to head home, I would definitely do it.

**Ria**, from Australia and studying Aircraft Maintenance Engineering

## Going Home would be a Financial Burden

Half of my classmates were supposed to go to Mexico in April to a nature reserve in order to complete their Tropical Ecology module. This was cancelled, along with many other travel programmes the university normally conducts. This caused a lot of stress.

For me going home to Hungary would have been a financial burden to my family. As a care worker in my part-time job, and therefore a keyworker, I am very blessed to be able to stay here and make some money.

One thing I miss is going to church, which is closed now. I hope to be able to meet them again soon.

**Albert**, from Hungary and studying International Wildlife Biology

# 35 Years of Reaching International Students

In 1985 Friends International began. Now, 35 years later, we look back at the journey with thankful hearts.

It started as International Student Christian Services through the work of the Kershaws, an American couple who came to the UK to work in partnership with British churches to reach international students.

Even before this, various groups and individuals, such as Bryan Knell and Shirley Fraser, had followed the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger, showing Christ's love and sharing the good news.

From the beginning, effective partnership with local churches and student-aligned organisations and mission agencies was key.

Over the years God has provided committed staff, many with cross-cultural mission or student ministry experience. Some have even catalysed international student ministry in other countries, mentoring emerging leaders and advising on engagement with educational institutions.

Exciting initiatives have been born: the Philip Project, Word Alive's International Student Track, the International Student Ministry

Ireland Project, the Reach Programme, to name but a few.

Despite these achievements, we only reach a small proportion of international students. This has led us to launch our 'Vision for Growth' this year, which seeks to place new staff in areas with little known outreach and to strengthen teams in existing centres. The first few appointments have been made, with the hope of more in the coming years.

Now, abruptly, in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, we face new challenges but have also seen amazing new opportunities. Like everyone else, we wonder how different the world will become. Uncertainties abound but we can trust in a God who knows the future.

We thank God for all He has done, and we thank you for your generosity of time, talents, tithes and prayers.

**Stroma Beattie**  
Chair of the Trustees



Our first logo – International Student Christian Services



## Looking Back: What Has Changed?

Sue Burt has been with Friends International for 27 years. She shares with us what has changed over the years.

**How have international students changed?** They've become perhaps more 'sophisticated', more widely travelled and better connected with home. As such they have different 'felt needs'. What hasn't changed is that they are still seeking and open to meaningful connection and friendship.

**How has Friends International changed?** When I joined, all the staff could fit into one lounge in a house in London, and we did – monthly! Now we hire a large conference centre to accommodate staff and many others. The staff has grown in number, become more diverse in age and much more international. We've added affiliates and formalised a Reach programme. And we've embraced much new technology. Yet, it has remained a caring and focussed organisation which has kept its same core values.

**How has the ministry changed?** In my early years we didn't use email (it was still quite new). I wondered if it would ever catch on! Landline calls and post were our only means of communication. Now we hold conferences by Zoom. In addition, universities and other institutions are providing much more social activity meaning we constantly have to innovate.

### What are you most thankful for after 27 years?

So much! For God's calling to this amazing ministry, for 14 years heading up local ministry and nearly 13 of engaging with our returnee focus; for God's constant provision for all my needs, including financial; for being part of the vibrant, supportive Friends International family, and for our vision which never ceases to thrill me!

**Sue Burt** Staff Worker in Bournemouth and Head of Returnee Ministry



Three former Friends International National Directors: (L-R) Dave Pepper, Richard Weston, Gordon Showell-Rogers



# 'W' 2020



## "Amazing" Numbers Join Word Alive 2020



The number of international students who joined in early April for Word Alive's first ever online International Student Track, has been described as "amazing" and "unexpected" by the organisers.

The series of talks, followed by Q&As and then discussion groups, took place online over four days and averaged 182 participants each session, over double the number who joined in 2019 at the Prestatyn site in North Wales.

With the Coronavirus sadly cancelling the Word Alive conference, the International Student Track part of the event moved online. Rowland Hughes, Friends International Staff Worker and leader of the organising team for the International Student Track, said: "The numbers were just amazing, around twice the number we usually get at Prestatyn. In the afternoon the discussion groups were led from 18 different locations – with one in Vietnam!"

Kirsten Wynn, Friends International Staff Worker in London, led one of the discussion groups and said: "We've had students from China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore join in. Some are still based in the UK, but some are linking in from their home countries."

After each talk the discussion groups would start, enabling the students to question and deeply reflect on the Bible and what had been said. Kirsten continued, "It's been a privilege to hear them grappling with the Bible story. In our group we have a few who aren't yet Christians but have faithfully turned up for the talks and subsequent discussions."

The International Student Track is a combined effort between Friends International and OMF Diaspora. Word Alive, an annual evangelical Christian conference, is expected to be back at Prestatyn, North Wales, in 2021.



## Latest News



### Summer Teams

Due to the Coronavirus we have had to either cancel or radically change all our summer teams. At the time of writing, Edinburgh and Cambridge have fully cancelled, while the others are weighing up options to use local teams only. This means no volunteers will be used from outside the cities.

### Furlough

For most of our staff the ministry continues, as busy as ever. However, for a number it has become increasingly difficult to continue in the present circumstances. Therefore, Friends International will be using the government furlough scheme for a small number of our staff.

### New Website

We have just launched our new website. It is now easier than ever to find resources, pray, sign-up and support the work. Have a look for yourself: [www.friendsinternational.uk](http://www.friendsinternational.uk)



### PrayerMate

The PrayerMate App is a handy way for you to keep track of our weekly prayer points. Our Prayer Diary content is replicated in the app so you can pray on the go. Find out more here: [praynow4.org/friendsinternational](http://praynow4.org/friendsinternational)

# NEW WEBSITE!

Now it's even easier to find resources to help you grow friendship and faith with international students.



Find resources such as:

- Bible Studies in Simple English
- Hints for Hosting International Students
- Reverse Culture Shock Explained
- Toolkit for Working with Chinese
- Building Cross-cultural Friendships



[www.friendsinternational.uk](http://www.friendsinternational.uk)