

Opportunity

December 2024 • March 2025

friends
INTERNATIONAL

Welcoming the Stranger

Growing Friendship and Faith with International Students

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Welcoming the Stranger... and their families!

Christmas is nearly upon us. Excitement is building, especially for households with younger children or for those with grandchildren to cater for. Although this is the season of goodwill, at several times during the last year our international student friends have had cause to seriously question whether that goodwill still exists.



Last summer's anti-immigration riots and changes in government policy have led many future international students to question the feasibility of study abroad and students must now consider additional factors. Will they encounter hostility as foreign nationals? Can they bring their families? And what level of security is in place?

Universities themselves are aware of tensions and ironies. Since UK student fee contributions were effectively frozen from 2012 to 2024, universities are under pressure to balance the books and monies from international student numbers are a valuable source of income. And yet ensuring the wellbeing of international students who choose to remain in their own indigenous group, accessing courses online rather than in person and not engaging with the wider community, is a challenge for university international offices and institutions.

Churches and Christian student groups make an offer that is not replicable elsewhere. Genuine Spirit-filled hospitality that welcomes the stranger 'mind, body and spirit' is a gift that is literally 'out of this world' and can't be replicated. At Friends International we seek to offer real friendship borne out of Christlike commitment to reach into the human condition and point to a hope-filled future that is not found elsewhere.

So do enjoy the stories in this edition of Opportunity and please be encouraged that your involvement with international students is worthwhile, and the friendship and faith you offer to international students could be the best Christmas presents they'll receive!

Alan

Alan Tower

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For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat...I was a stranger and you invited me in.
Matthew 25:35



Past, Present and Future



Raquel Medina, Centre Team Leader for Friends International in Norwich, recounts her journey from journalism to her current role sharing faith with international students.



My dream is for a ministry that works across different locations in Norwich, reaching out to more international students and responding to new opportunities.

I'm from the Canary Islands. I grew up in a Christian home and came to faith during my teenage years. I remember always wanting to do or be something extraordinary: an archaeologist, a missionary in India, a war reporter...so I studied journalism in Madrid and worked for five years as a news writer.

It was a spiritually and professionally formative time, when God was preparing me for the next steps. In 2005, I moved to UK and did an internship program with a church in central London. My experience at university and those years in London working with international students opened up a clear calling for me. In London, I met James and we got married, before moving back to Spain to work with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). At the end of 2013, we returned to the UK, now with our daughter in tow. In my childhood dreams, Norfolk never looked exotic or adventurous. Yet God had something extraordinary in store for me.

Norwich is a city full of opportunities for the ministry with international students. Since the end of the pandemic, the work has continued to grow and more doors are opening to Friends International. The main university, UEA, has a high proportion of internationals and there is also a smaller arts university, and language schools in the city. We run a café, an international spouses' group and a Bible study every week, plus trips and special meals on the weekends and hospitality.

My dream is for a ministry that works across different locations in Norwich, reaching out to more international students and responding to new opportunities. One of my biggest joys is to walk alongside and support students as they experience homesickness, grief, joy, friendship and faith along their journey.

Offering Community and Connection

Migration has become one of the biggest issues of our time. Fiona Barnard, our staff worker in St Andrews, asks how should Christians respond to increasing migration and what can be learnt from Friends International's approach?

Looking at my diary for the coming week, I foresee encounters with people from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, the US, Brazil, Ukraine, Taiwan, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Iran, Mallorca, Poland, Germany, Korea, Lebanon, China, Tajikistan, Japan, Congo - and some surprises. Jesus' call to go to the ends of the earth to reach, preach and teach the nations is both vast in its scope and right in front of my nose. On the windy east coast of Scotland, it means being at the university chaplaincy, English classes, a 'Faith and Storytelling' group, badminton club, Christian Union and church. While debates about migration rage and divide the UK, the Bible offers an alternative missional perspective. As Home Office and Border Control, local councils and NHS grapple with limited resources, fear and prejudice, Christians are invited to grasp opportunities with the resources of vision and faith, practical compassion and a heart for those living without Christ. What then can Christians learn from Friends International's approach?

First, we see the person standing right in front of us, created and loved by God, however they came to be here in the UK. We pray that the Holy Spirit will introduce us to those for whom He is seeking, so when we meet them we say "Ah, it is

you!" They may have come to an event we advertised, appeared in a group, made an online request or sat next to us on the bus. With Jesus, we celebrate the person in all their unique mix of personality, culture, background and dreams. It is noticeable that those who offer meals to international students are often the ones keen to do crafts with the refugees in my English classes because they have God's love in their hearts. A little experience has taught us to be understanding over blunders when someone has just been deposited in a foreign country or is unfamiliar with language subtleties. We recognise the demands from family we never meet and the homesickness behind the smile. For them, when Jesus is made visible in Christians, it is winsome good news.

Second, we listen to stories and share ours. Migrants are not problems to sort or projects to manipulate. They bring personal tales of joy and grief, trauma and hope, humour and wisdom. In 'Faith and Storytelling', half the evening is spent sharing experiences on a given topic which have shaped us. Genuine listening comes with wonderful receptivity to hear Bible stories related to the evening's theme and to reflect together on how our lives can fit into God's big narrative. One student confessed, "It was like therapy. I had never told anyone that before." There is power in being heard, and in the presence of prayer and care of the Holy Spirit, it is transformative.

Third, we offer community and connection. For someone dislocated, used to having family always around, this is so attractive. They notice the café team or CU Bible study or church service where different ethnic groups and ages and backgrounds are like family. In my church, a pastor from Congo preaches, a Dutch couple are responsible for worship and families, an American for the tech, Koreans serve coffee and kimchi, a Nepalese nurse welcomes at the door. Friends International partners with Christians of all shapes and sizes who are united in the desire to introduce the nations to Jesus, one by one. While the world aligns itself into clans and cliques, Jesus' body

relishes the rich variety of languages and cultures and ways of doing things. We grow in the challenges and delights of receiving diversity as a gift rather than a reason to exclude. The migrants we encounter are rarely from one category: students become part of the workforce, refugees become students, temporary fruit pickers and labourers and restaurant staff become residents. Children and partners of academics frequent schools and leisure centres and live next door. Surely God's varied and colourful people, praying, loving, humble, teachable, transformed by the Gospel and full of the Holy Spirit are the very best placed team players and missionaries, to discover, explore and follow Jesus' great commission to go right where they are.

In St Andrews, much of the work of Friends International takes place in low key relationships rather than big events. Recently a Lebanese woman bounced up to me in church, "Fiona, do you remember me? I am back. I have got my PhD and now I am teaching here. My friend told me about this church and the Korean meal afterwards – and today, I was surprised I know everyone: you from chaplaincy years ago, and that couple who invited me for Christmas, and the pastor who I met at a meal. See you next week!"

Migration



Families



“ Meeting Friends International was the moment when our life in the UK began to transform from dark days to bright nights. Zahra

Welcoming Families



Rules which allow international students to be joined by their families while they study have been tightened but Madeleine Bonicel, Centre Team Leader in Nottingham, says that welcoming student families is a key part of Friends International’s ministry.

As I stood outside the Students’ Union Welcome Zone early in 2022 welcoming any January starters, I saw two Middle Eastern men walking up the stairs. “Hello, are you international students or scholars?” I asked. “Yes! We are from Iraq and studying for a PhD.” They had been in Nottingham for six months but had not met or talked to any British people apart from the people in their lab.

When I asked if either of them had brought family with them, Abdul* told me about his wife Zahra* and young family. They were with him in Nottingham but had not been out of the house much and hadn’t met other people. This is the sad reality for many international families that come to the UK and Ireland. Women can be isolated and children will often have to wait for a space in school.

In such situations Friends International’s Come and Meet Each Other [CAMEO] groups can be critical to the wellbeing of international

families up and down the country. Zahra and her daughter started coming to the CAMEO group in Nottingham and appreciated the chance to practise their English, meet new friends and learn about British culture. Zahra was able to meet new people and ask questions about bringing up children in the UK - from chicken pox medication to nursery applications! Abdul began attending the Globe Café. The family also started attending other church groups such as the tots group, and Abdul enjoyed a men’s evening with guys from the church.

After two and a half years Abdul is now gently curious about the Gospel and Zahra recently led a CAMEO session telling people about the country she grew up in and sharing more about Iraqi food and culture. In 2022 we celebrated 21 years of CAMEO in Nottingham. So many women and children have been welcomed and loved. Our prayer is that this will continue for many years to come.

*Names changed for security reasons

Prayer Diary

December 2024 • March 2025



Eighteen weeks of prayer points



Thank you for your continued prayers and support for international students.

Christmas

Week 1
2nd Dec

Friends International, UK and Ireland

All over the UK and Ireland our teams and volunteers are planning and organising Christmas events that present the Christmas story to international students in fresh and innovative ways. Please pray that people will come with open hearts and receptive minds to hear the message of hope and that they would be drawn to Jesus and be willing to commit themselves to live as Christian disciples.



Week 2
9th Dec

Warren MacLeod, Edinburgh

We held a Thanksgiving meal with international students focusing on the theme of gratitude and faith. This is a great opportunity for local Christians to chat with students about why Christians value thankfulness. Many of these students then end up coming along to Christmas events. Please pray that the students who attend would be moved to consider faith for themselves.

Week 3
16th Dec

Charis Chi, York

International Christmas Gathering: We are organising a Christmas-themed afternoon tea event. It will include a short Christmas talk and a carol service in York Minster afterwards. Please pray for the truth to be spoken into the students' hearts to know the real meaning of Christmas.

Week 4
23rd Dec

Ivana Bajic, Stirling

We are organising a special Christmas Global Café party with games, singing carols, exchanging gifts. This is the first time some students will hear the Christmas story and it's a reminder that we never stop speaking about Jesus to the nations that are among us, especially from countries where Christianity is not welcomed.

Week 5
30th Dec

Baiba Strause-Kalmere, Canterbury

Please, pray for our outreach to Japanese students. We have been organising a Christmas meal with an evangelistic talk to our Japanese friends returning home mid-December. Also pray for our Christmas hospitality scheme happening in British homes in December and that more hosts offer to take part in the scheme.

New Year Aspirations

Week 6
6th Jan

Matthew Brindley, Durham

Give thanks that the Wednesday English conversation class has been advertised within the university and pray for good numbers of international students to attend regularly this year. As we look at opportunities for deeper connections with local churches and new ministry activities in Durham in 2025, please pray that the Lord will build the house.

Week 7
13th Jan

Kirsten Wynn, London

With over 200,000 international students studying in London, we'd love to grow our staff team. Please pray for God to bring us some new colleagues in 2025. Also please pray for the planning of London International Outreach. For partnership with local churches and CUs, team recruitment, accommodation, training programme and venues for our evangelistic events.

Week 8
20th Jan

Matthew Ojo, Portsmouth

Give thanks for all who have been partnering with us in Portsmouth to reach international students. Pray for students that have been impacted already during the last autumn term and for fresh opportunities for local churches to get involved. Give thanks for the Christian International students who we have been able to support.

Week 9
27th Jan

Ruth Duffin, Leicester

In January we have a day away planned in the Leicestershire countryside, a chance for students to explore the Christian faith more deeply. Pray that students will come, feel able to ask their questions and engage with the sessions.

Week 10
3rd Feb

Susan Caddy, Southampton

As the new semester starts at our local universities, give thanks for Christian Union students as they reach out to their fellow students. Pray for the University of Southampton Events Week and for many international students (who make up a third of the student population) to come with open hearts and minds to meet Jesus for themselves.

Week 11
10th Feb

Rebecca Davies, Glasgow

Please pray for Rebecca and Rob as they speak at the international outreach events during Glasgow CU's Mission Week in February. In the past these dinners have attracted around 100 students per night, many of whom have previously been to international café. Please pray that the Gospel would be proclaimed clearly and that students would consider Christ.



Week 12
17th Feb

Helen Morrissey, Exeter

Exeter Evangelical Christian Union events week takes place in February. Peter Teagle is speaking at the international events track. Pray that many will hear and come along. Pray too that this will be an encouragement to the British students to see and participate in this cross-cultural evangelistic opportunity on their doorstep.

Week 13
24th Feb

David Hubbard, Reading

Christian Union events week. Pray for the speakers at the international track, and that the CU would be organised and motivated to be on the lookout for internationals and be brave enough to invite them to the event talks.

Week 14
3rd Mar

Rebecca Davies, Glasgow

Please pray for our Philip Project weekend away! The Philip Project aims to grow Christian international students in their ability to handle the Bible cross-culturally. The weekend away is a key element of the programme each year and a point where students reflect on their time abroad and how God is calling them.

Recruitment and Growth

Week 15
10th Mar

Madeleine Bonicel, Nottingham

Please pray for Lydia as she leads the team, supporting international students through their exams and assignments this term. Pray that there would be more workers for the harvest in Nottingham. We are in the process of recruiting for another staff worker to focus more on students in the city centre and at Nottingham Trent Uni.

Week 16
17th Mar

Lilli Jones, Guildford and Jonnie Green, Oxford

One of our team in Guildford has gone back to America and we are considering hiring an admin assistant / staff worker. Please pray that we make a good decision and that we would find the right person to join our team. In Oxford, please pray for a good turnout to our supporters' evening, and that we would be able to increase the locally given support to Friends International in Oxford.

Week 17
24th Mar

Mike and Rachel Hill, Birmingham

Please pray for a further staff worker to join the Birmingham team to expand outreach into the city centre universities. Please pray for the international track at University of Birmingham Events Week to be well attended and for the Lord to speak through the talks and conversation.

Week 18
31st Mar

Baiba Strause-Kalmere, Canterbury

Pray for fundraising efforts for our incoming staff worker Barath Soundappan. We are encouraged by some gifts and hope he can start working with FI soon once he has reached the target to work at least two days a week.



The summer that was...



Summer Events



The Manchester International Outreach took place during July. 144 people from 27 different countries attended our international café evenings and some stayed on for the Bible discussion. Over the course of the summer, local churches held different social events and invited international students to their churches.



The Norwich International Summer Outreach took place in August. It was a great encouragement to the local team. Friendships flourished, and students reconnected with God. One Japanese student said the garden party was one of his most beautiful moments in the UK and wanted to start studying the Bible.

In Cambridge our team and volunteers ran sports, trips, English practice and evening café activities. As a result, we're now celebrating the baptism of a Chinese student, and holding Bible studies with other students who want to explore faith.



This year saw the second Belfast summer outreach programme. Our multinational team organised evening cafés, Bible discussions and a beach trip. All the students we met are on a journey and we saw how God was using these two weeks as a chapter in the story of their lives.

Welcoming the Stranger...



Sharing Friendship and Faith with international students - Friends International 2023/24 staff survey

We give thanks for all that God is doing in the lives of international students in the UK and Ireland through Friends International and our partner ministries. Our mission is to work with the church to communicate the Good News of Jesus to international students in both word and deed and in whole life cross-cultural discipleship.

To work with the church...

Across the various Friends International locations there is a great team effort with staff, volunteers, church groups and others working together to reach out to international students in towns and cities across the UK and Ireland. It is encouraging to learn that we are now working with 35 more churches [388] than we were in 2022/23. In some cases churches have the capacity to run their own ministry and work with us to achieve that. In other settings churches send volunteers to work together to deliver international student ministry under the auspices of Friends International.

... to communicate the good news of Jesus to international students in both word and deed...

Every location is different and we celebrate the diversity of models of ministry linking international students to local Christians including: welcome meals, hospitality schemes (Local Link), international student cafés, English classes, Life Leadership courses, and a plethora of other creative ideas! In total in 2023/24 Friends International teams and volunteers made contact with 12,790 international students, an increase of 807 on the previous year. Every year is a bit different, but these numbers are returning to pre-

pandemic levels and beginning to grow again. The good news of Jesus is communicated in many ways, in relationship, through evangelistic events, and Bible studies just to mention a few. In 2023/24 the survey showed that 1,200 international students took part in our Bible studies up from 974 in 2022/23 – a significant increase, praise God!

Wonderfully, our staff reported that 67 international students came to faith over the course of 2023/24. Of course God works in many ways and we also celebrate lives being changed, hearts softened, friendships grown and other things that are harder to measure like students becoming more open to faith. We trust that God will continue to draw these international students to Himself into the future. Nevertheless, it is a joy to see international students wanting to make commitments and starting out as new followers of Jesus during their time with us.

... and in whole life cross-cultural discipleship.

International student discipleship is a key task as we seek to envision and encourage young Christians to serve in the mission of the Church back in their

home countries or wherever God takes them. In 2023/24, 71 international students from 34 countries participated in Philip Project courses – ‘training Christian international students to understand and share God’s Word’. Many of the Bible study groups noted above include Christian international students and we encourage them to serve here in the UK and Ireland on our teams and in Christian Unions and local churches.

We very much value all those supporting Friends International’s ministry through praying, volunteering, giving financially, and sharing friendship and faith with international students. We know that while there is much to celebrate there is so much more to do – new locations where we would like to establish a Friends International ministry, joining and supporting with what churches are already doing. We will continue to adapt and innovate to meet changing demographics and international student needs. And please pray with us that God will continue to change lives and give us more to celebrate and be thankful for in the years ahead.



Staff Survey



388 churches worked with



12,790 international students contacted



1,200 have attended Bible studies



67 became Christians

71

took part in Philip Project courses



from **34**

countries – ‘training Christian international students to understand and share God’s Word’



Pat Kershaw

Pat Kershaw, a key pioneer whose vision and commitment played a critical part in the formation of Friends International 40 years ago, has died at the age of 90. Pat, with her husband Max, worked for International Students Incorporated (ISI) establishing international student ministry in a number of university locations across the United States. In 1983 they arrived in the UK on a reconnaissance trip to investigate the possibility of starting a similar ministry in this country, supporting international students.



Pat remembers the time well: "We arrived in England on Guy Fawkes Day 1983 with a list of names of evangelical leaders to contact. We spent the first year driving around the country meeting leaders of Christian ministries, pastors and Bible colleges, in an effort to learn what was happening in outreach to internationals. Our approach was always to listen and learn first."

So with a clear vision the work began, bringing existing initiatives in Bournemouth, Guildford, London and Cambridge together, and to see what else was possible. Over several years the Kershaws sought to establish a ministry organisation in which staff were career missionaries, based in cities for long-term ministry to international students. Max died in 1986 but Pat stayed on to help the new organisation get settled before returning to the US in 1989, where she remained in ministry. We give thanks for visionaries such as Pat who went before us in establishing the ministry of Friends International.

Legacy Reminder

In a survey of older people, which asked them to name areas where they wished they'd done more with their lives, they spoke about doing things that lived on after they'd died. As Christians we are used to thinking about how we can use what God has given us to bless others in the future. One way to do this is by leaving a legacy to Friends International that will help us to reach and disciple new generations of international students. If you would like more information about how to include Friends International in your will, then



please visit www.friendsinternational.uk/donate/legacy-giving or call 01920 460006 for more information. Alternatively, just scan the QR code.

Jenni Johnston

In July, Jenni Johnston joined Friends International as our Fundraising Manager. Here she describes the journey God has taken her on.

I began my working life as a primary school teacher in Edinburgh and then spent three years living in Cambridge and working at Eden Baptist Church where I first heard about the work of Friends International. From a young age, I have always been excited by world mission and the thought of seeing people from every tribe, tongue and nation standing before the throne of God. My time studying at Oak Hill College helped to grow this desire and equipped me to serve God more effectively in making disciples. The experiences I gained raising personal support during my studies at Oak Hill, and through my time as a fundraiser with Tearfund, have prepared me well for my new role. It is so encouraging working for a mission with which I not only share their vision and values, but I am also passionate about their work. I live in Northern Ireland with my husband Connor, and I work remotely.



A Global God

John Stott stated that "we must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God."

The potential for international student ministry, as part of global mission, is hugely exciting! By supporting our work, both prayerfully and financially, you are enabling us to reach international students with the good news of Jesus, and disciple and equip them to share the Gospel in their communities when they return home. We are so thankful for your partnership in the Gospel and we are grateful to all who choose to financially support our ministry.

Your donations are not just financial transactions, but we view them as an expression of your faith and commitment

to the Great Commission. The mission field is on our doorstep, and your partnership makes a profound difference in helping us grasp this opportunity in front of us. Without your donations, we would not be able to fund our vision to see international students transformed by the good news of Jesus and fully engage with the mission of the Church in the world.

You can donate by visiting www.friendsinternational.uk/donate/ or scanning this QR code



FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL

Celebrates

its 40th anniversary in 2025



Since 1985, when Friends International was launched, we've seen God at work in exciting ways, constantly expanding our vision to support international students across the UK and Ireland, befriending them and introducing them to Jesus. Today, with international student numbers now standing at around one million annually, God has enabled us to establish a network of local centres across the UK and Ireland and discipleship programmes, which mean we can support tens of thousands of international students each year offering them hope, friendship and faith. Throughout 2025 we want to celebrate what has been achieved in the 40 years since it all began, and look forward to the next stage of the journey as we seek to reach and bless more international students with the love of Jesus.

We are staging a series of celebrations around the UK and we would love you to join us for these special occasions. Please book your place NOW to avoid disappointment.



Edinburgh Saturday 26th April – lunchtime
London Saturday 10th May – lunchtime
Manchester Saturday 17th May – evening
Cardiff Saturday 31st May – morning
Belfast Saturday 7th June – evening

Please go to www.friendsinternational.uk/40th-anniversary-events/ for more information and to book your place for what promises to be a memorable occasion. Alternatively, just scan this QR code to go to the event page.

We look forward to seeing you there.

