



Growing Friendship and Faith with International Students

OPPORTUNITY

THE FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE

WINTER 2025

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Longing for Home

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to Engage**

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Welcome!

Leading Thoughts

'All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord'.

Psalm 86v9

friends
INTERNATIONAL

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Sometimes it seems right to take a look at something through a different lens or from another perspective. No doubt you will have noticed that Opportunity magazine has undergone a significant redesign. We hope you like it and we trust that the new format will serve to further enhance news and stories from the world of international student ministry.

Continually, we are working through how best to innovate or refresh our methods to reach more international students with the gospel. You might remember when we organised welcome teams at major airports – but then universities started doing that and we didn't need to. When we saw the need for values-based leadership studies, we worked with others to develop and adapt what existed to craft the Life Leadership course. In more recent times, we've reviewed our Life UK and Philip Project resources, made improvements and

provided online options, and we are now relaunching the Friends International student app on an updated platform. In each case our aim remains the same – to reach international students – but the packaging and presentation can, and needs to, change with the times.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses explains to the people how to move forward after 40 years journeying through the wilderness. There are key tasks to complete and things to remember – about who God is, what he has done for his people, and how sticking

close to him is the best way to navigate the next decades. At Friends International we have been celebrating our 40th anniversary and this has been a happy and healthy celebratory time. We have remembered and had reports from those who started the ministry in small but creative ways. And we have celebrated God's amazing and wonderful work, even through us, his imperfect people. Now we need to look ahead. Our vision and our message will remain the same, but we'll continue to explore fresh and innovative ways to reach international students with the Good News.

Alan

Alan Tower

“I really love how the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to people from every nation.”

New Staff: *Interviews*

In recent months Friends International has welcomed a number of new people onto our staff team. We met up with two, **Iain MacGowan** – Centre Team Leader for Bournemouth, and **Matthew Brindley** – Centre Team Leader for Durham.

“I’m delighted that I can commit to international student ministry through my role.”



Iain MacGowan

Why have you decided to join Friends International?

Iain – International student work has long been part of my life: I love international students and spending time with them and learning about their cultures, and I really love how the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to people from every nation.

Matthew – International student ministry is such a strategic part of global mission. I really enjoyed my interactions with international students during my time at university and as a Reach trainee, so I’m delighted that I can commit to international student ministry through my role.

What do you think are the key challenges international students are facing at this time?

Matthew – Loneliness and a dependence on smartphones for everything. From talking to AI about relationships instead of consulting other humans, to struggling to understand how anyone could write an

essay without AI tools. There is so much we can offer them, but they need to recognise their need first.

Iain – There’s a lot of upheaval in the UK that can overflow into the lives of international students coming here. But the main challenge is for those who come to follow Christ; to be prepared to go back to the home culture where they may face isolation, loneliness and possibly persecution.

How can you help?

Iain – Whatever situation you find yourself in life, you can still be fruitful. Our goal is to teach not just the skills but the sense of long-term purpose and hope the Lord gives all Christians no matter where they find themselves.

Matthew – Offering them hospitality, the chance to join a friendly and comfortable community where they are able to grow in confidence and build relationships with others.



Matthew Brindley

“There were fresh faces, unfamiliar streets, confusing slang, and even different scents.”

The Hidden Struggle:

Loneliness Among International Students

Arriving in a new country is often described as exciting, full of opportunities and new experiences. Yet, beneath this positive portrayal the reality for many international students in the UK and Ireland can be quite different. Far from home, family, and familiar surroundings, thousands of students each year find themselves battling feelings of isolation, homesickness, and cultural displacement. Surveys reveal that most international students say they miss the familiarity of home and many feel homesick weekly.

Joylynn, an international student from Malaysia, described her first few weeks in the UK: “There were fresh faces, unfamiliar streets, confusing slang, and even different scents. Whilst I maintained my composure on the outside, I will admit that it was intimidating trying to navigate an unfamiliar culture when I first arrived.”

Her words capture what many feel but rarely express – the quiet exhaustion that comes from constantly adapting, decoding social cues, and trying to belong.

The Emotional Reality of Studying Abroad

For many, studying in the UK is the culmination of years of hard work and sacrifice. It often comes with immense pride and high expectations from family back home. However, the reality of settling into a new environment can be emotionally taxing. The cultural differences, unpredictable weather, and the absence of a support network can create a sense of detachment that builds

into loneliness. Everyday activities – eating alone, attending lectures where everyone seems to know each other, or walking back to an empty room – can be daunting. Over time, this can affect not only emotional well-being but also academic performance and physical health.

Why Loneliness Happens

Loneliness among international students is often misunderstood. It’s not simply the absence of people, but rather the absence of meaningful connection. Many international students attend classes full of peers yet still feel invisible. Language barriers, different social norms, and fear of rejection can make it difficult to form friendships with local students. Additionally, the cultural emphasis on independence in the UK

can clash with the collectivist values that many students come from where community and interdependence are central to daily life.

Social media can be another contributing factor. While technology allows students to stay connected to loved ones back home, it can also intensify homesickness. Watching friends and family continue their lives without them can make students feel even more detached from both their home and their new environment.

The Search for Belonging

The longing for home is universal. It's not just about missing a physical place but yearning for the emotional comfort it represents – safety, understanding, and belonging. For international students, this longing often becomes a daily undercurrent in their experience abroad.

As one student put it, "I thought studying in the UK would make me feel free and independent, but some nights I just miss hearing my mother's voice in the kitchen." These small moments of nostalgia are powerful reminders that home is more than geography – it's connection.

Universities in the UK have recognised this issue and are increasingly offering support systems, from counselling services to international student societies and mentorship programmes. However, reaching out for help can still feel daunting. Many students fear that admitting loneliness might be seen as weakness or failure, especially when studying abroad is often framed as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Finding Home Away from Home

Despite the challenges, loneliness does not have to define the international student experience. Small, intentional actions can make a difference. Friends International's network of 68 International cafés is key here, as are cultural events, weekends away or a simple cup of coffee with a team member, which all serve to create opportunities for authentic connection. For many, bonding with fellow international students becomes a source of solidarity – a reminder that they are not alone in feeling alone.

It also helps to build routines that bring comfort: cooking familiar food,

calling family regularly, or finding spaces that feel welcoming. Church too, can play a crucial role in fostering inclusive communities where every student, regardless of background, feels seen and valued.

The Deeper Meaning of Home

Ultimately, loneliness reveals something deeply human – our universal desire for home. In this world, finding a lasting sense of belonging can feel elusive. Places change, people move on, and circumstances evolve. Yet, the longing for connection remains constant. This search for connection is reflected by the increasing numbers of international students reaching out to Friends International – some 13,500, up 5% on the previous year – where they can experience support, friendship and community through Friends International's network of international cafés, local link connections and local events and activities. Finding faith in Jesus can also feel like coming home as often for the first time international students find their true identity in the One who is 'the way, the truth and the life'.

"It's not just about missing a physical place but yearning for the emotional comfort it represents."





Moving Forward Together: *Innovating to Engage*



It's often said that *change is here to stay* – and for Friends International, that's an opportunity we're eager to embrace. While the gospel we share remains timeless and unchanging, the way we communicate its truth must continually adapt to our ever-shifting cultural context.

A Fresh Look for the Friends International App

Our student-facing Friends International App continues to be a great success, with thousands of downloads each year. It's a vital tool for helping students discover local activities, connect with staff and volunteers, and explore faith at their own pace.

The App has just received a major update – combining a rebuild of its back-end systems to keep things running smoothly together with a refreshed, contemporary design. While word of mouth remains the most common way students hear about our work, the App serves as a 'ready-to-go' resource: a welcoming entry point for those already connected to our Centres and an easy way for new international students to find out more.

Sharing the Christian Voice

Increasingly, media outlets approach Friends International to seek a Christian perspective on issues that affect international students. Through these opportunities, we aim to offer clarity and encouragement – help local churches and ministry groups engage positively with international students and understand the wider issues they face. When our stock of the **Life UK** booklet ran out, we took the opportunity to make a shift – re-editing and releasing it digitally rather than in print. Being online makes resources easier to access, more flexible to update, and far more cost-effective.

Social media, supported by our website, continues to play a key role in our communication. It allows us to share timely updates, highlight challenges and opportunities, and

celebrate the amazing stories of transformation we see across our Centres. Our **Stories of Celebration** feature testimonies from students, volunteers, and staff – powerful reminders of God at work through this ministry. We've also expanded our video resources, creating content around specialist topics such as mental wellbeing.

Looking Ahead

As we look to the future, we remain committed to finding fresh, relevant, and Spirit-led ways to connect with this generation of international students. The message of Jesus Christ is unchanging – but our methods must always keep moving forward.

Together, let's continue to innovate, adapt and reach more international students with the good news of the gospel in the years to come.



Growing Friendship and Faith with International Students

PRAYER DIARY

18 WEEKS OF PRAYER POINTS

WINTER 2025

Pray for really good engagement from international students – that they will have open hearts to receive the message of the gospel as it is shared.

Helen Morrissey



CHRISTMAS



Week 1
01/12/2025

Madeleine Bonicel – Nottingham
Charis Stirling – York

In Nottingham we are hosting our annual Christmas Celebration event. Pray that many international students would come and hear the true reason for Christmas, and for hearts to be changed.

In York we are inviting international students to take part in our Christmas choir and nativity play. Pray that everyone taking part will not just enjoy the cultural experience, but encounter Jesus in a unique and personal way.



Week 2
08/12/2025

Matthew Ojo – Portsmouth
Lilli Jones – Guildford

In Portsmouth pray for meaningful conversations with students at the Christmas dinner we are planning. Pray that they will enjoy the cultural experience of Christmas and that the good news will impact their lives.

In Guildford pray for hosting happening over Christmas, and for the Christmas lunch that our chaplaincy provides for over 600 students, many of them international, and for the volunteers who help at the event.



Week 3
15/12/2025

Bethany Marsh – Aberdeen
Ruth Duffin – Leicester

We are holding a combined Aberdeen Uni and RGU iCafé Christmas dinner event. Please pray that the gospel is clearly communicated and that hearts of everyone there are softened to hear what is being said. We are partnering with the CUs in Leicester for a joint carol service. Pray that this event will be a good way to reach out to students and to share the real message of Christmas.



Week 4
22/12/2025

Debbie Cook – Ipswich
Graham Stockton – Manchester

Please pray for our 'Carols round the Christmas Tree' event in the Waterfront building at the University of Suffolk.

Please also pray for the Manchester iCafé Christmas party when an explanation of the true meaning of Christmas will be given. Pray for a clear presentation of the gospel and receptive hearts.



Week 5
29/12/2025

Sally Miller – Lancaster
Adam Kinnison – Bath

Pray for the International Dinner and Chaplaincy Community lunch and for opportunities to share why Christmas is important with international students and that they would be keen to attend church services over Christmas in Lancaster.

Pray for many international students in Bath to attend Café International Christmas meal, and be drawn to read the Christmas Across Cultures booklet we give out as presents.



EVENTS WEEKS



Week 6
05/01/2026

Matthew Brindley – Durham
Tim Stanyon – Loughborough

Churches in Durham, along with Friends International and the CU, plan to launch an international café at the beginning of January. Please pray as we recruit, train and support students and volunteers. In Loughborough pray for the team running weekly gatherings and meeting with international students in Tim's absence while he's on sabbatical. Pray that international students would be impacted by the CU's events week.



Week 7
12/01/2026

Helen Morrissey – Exeter

Pray for the Events Week being run by Exeter's Christian Union. Pray for really good engagement from international students – that they will realise that these events are for them and will have open hearts to receive the message of the gospel as it is shared and for the follow-up course in February.



Week 8
19/01/2026

Lydia Panter – Nottingham
Mike and Rachel Hill – Birmingham

Pray for our team as we support the CU Events Weeks in Nottingham. Pray for Penny Wang as she delivers several of the lunchtime talks, and that both universities would make their events welcoming and accessible for international students, and that the Christian message may hit home. Please pray for the Events Week at University of Birmingham which always attracts many international students.



Week 9
26/01/2026

Ivana Bajic – Stirling

We are organising the mission week at Stirling University together with our guests from Agape Slovakia student ministry. Please keep us in your prayers as we will be organising different mission events for international students. Please pray for our protection, open doors and opportunities to be ambassadors for Jesus at Stirling Uni. May the Lord lead our steps towards students that are longing for him.



Week 10
02/02/2026

Kim Becker – Belfast

Belfast CU Citywide Events Week, 'Purpose Belfast' 2-6 February 2026: Pray for our three international meals with an evangelistic message hosted by the three Christian Unions in Belfast. Pray hearts are stirred and the message is clear. Pray too for the lunch time and main evening events when international students often join.



Week 11
09/02/2026

Lydia Bown – Southampton

Pray for Lydia and Phoebe as they support the CU during Southampton University's Christian Union events week, and that the CU would reach many international students with the gospel.



Week 12
16/02/2026

Monika Terpstra – Glasgow

Please pray for two of our volunteers and co-workers from a partner organisation who are giving talks at the Glasgow University CU International track. Also please pray for the CU events weeks at University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University as they are popular with international students.



Week 13
23/02/2026

Harriet Ngugi – Cambridge

Pray for the events weeks at both universities, that international students will respond positively to invitations, come along, and form genuine friendships with CU members and volunteers. Pray also that the talks will spark meaningful conversations and engagement about Jesus.

PRAISE AND THANKS



Week 14
02/03/2026

Madeleine Bonicel – Nottingham
Raquel Medina – Norwich

Give thanks for the six students who gave their lives to Jesus last year in Nottingham. Pray that they would continue to walk with him, growing in knowledge, love and understanding. Praise God for a student that recently came to faith in Norwich and a number of others attending Bible study and open to the gospel. Pray for the ongoing Bible study group.



Week 15
09/03/2026

Gail Willows – Oxford

Please give thanks for the launch of a new post-grad group in Oxford and for the international students we have met. Please pray for ongoing relationships and gospel conversations.

EASTER



Week 16
16/03/2026

Kirsten Wynn – London

We thank God for our fellow-workers in churches, CUs, and other mission agencies who help us to reach out to the 178,000 international students in London. Praise God for partnership in the gospel. Also pray for our Easter Special as we share the Easter message with students.



Week 17
23/03/2026

James Adair – Sunderland

During the lead up to Easter we are advertising events so that international students can hear the good news of the Easter story. Please pray that many students respond and learn more of the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection.



Week 18
30/03/2026

Monika Terpstra – Glasgow

Every March, churches and Christian Unions in Glasgow organise the Mark Drama. Performances are typically attended by many international students, who as a result, read Mark's account for themselves with local volunteers. Please pray that international student audience members will come to know the risen Jesus for themselves.



One Gift: Eternal Impact



“This wasn’t just a donation. It was a spiritual investment.”

How legacy giving is transforming international student ministry for generations to come.

What will your legacy be?

For Lynette and Peter Teagle, long-serving members of the Friends International staff team, a surprise legacy gift from a faithful prayer supporter became a turning point in their ministry. The couple had served in Birmingham, Oxford, and Bath, and were stepping into national roles that required increased financial support. The bequest arrived just in time.

“The legacy came unexpectedly,” Lynette recalls, “but it allowed us to free up local funds and focus on developing our roles – Peter in evangelistic speaking and myself in staff development. More than the

financial help, it was a deeply personal reminder of a relationship that had lasted decades. Even in her 80s, our supporter travelled from northeast England to Oxford to see how God was working among international students.”

As a loyal supporter who never worked abroad but had an unwavering commitment to global mission, her legacy gift to Friends International became a lifeline – still enabling gospel outreach to international students today.

This wasn’t just a donation. It was a spiritual investment – one that continues to bear fruit. Elsewhere, a substantial legacy gift from a former Friends International staff worker enabled the relaunch

of ministry in a local Centre. The gift provided seed funding for a new Centre Team Leader, covering part of their first three years. Without this legacy, the ministry might never have restarted.

“I’ve seen with my own eyes the change that comes when someone meets Jesus,” says Joan Davies, a committed supporter from Colchester. “One student from Malawi became a Christian while studying here. He had asked me to pray for him that he would have an influence for good in the Malawian government. Later he became Minister for Trade and Industry in his country.”

Joan added, “I may not have gone abroad, but God brought the world to my doorstep. Through legacy giving, I can still be part of his global mission”.



To find out more about how you can include Friends International in your Will, please visit www.friendsinternational.uk/legacy-giving or scan this QR code:



Welcoming the Stranger: *Sharing Friendship and Faith*



While the previous 12 months have been dominated by our 40th anniversary celebrations and the events that took place in the UK, our teams and volunteers continued with our core mission of growing friendship and faith with international students in the UK and Ireland. Official figures show that a near record 730,000 international students came to the UK to study last year in our universities, as well as the thousands of foreign language students at UK language schools.

We're reaching more international students

On average each Centre is in contact with 385 international students every year. In total Friends International were in contact with nearly 13,500 (a 5% increase on the previous year and the most that we have ever recorded), and two thirds [65%] of our Centres saw an increase in numbers of international students they were in contact with. We long 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. And the more we reach, the greater the potential there is for global impact as former international students go on to serve God around the world in their churches, communities, and wider society.

Wonderfully the survey also shows that we know of 80 international students who became Christians in the last academic year. This is the largest number we have ever recorded and substantially up from the 67 who came to faith in 2023/24. It is of course God

who changes lives, and it is very encouraging to see him at work in this way. There was a small year on year increase to 1,219 international students attending Bible studies (many of which are evangelistic in nature) and it is often through this context that international students commit their lives to Jesus.

While 2024/25 has been a difficult year for international students with concerns over immigration, changes to government policy and rising visa costs weighing heavily, we give thanks to God that against this backdrop of uncertainty our teams are reaching more international students than ever.

Scratching where they're itching...

Through our staff and volunteer teams we host a plethora of activities such as The Big Weekend Away,

**Friends
International
2024/25
Staff Survey**

where international students can hang out in a relaxed environment, enjoy each other's company and build lasting relationships. Over the last 12 months our teams ran 68 international cafés that were attended by 1,500 international students every week. Elsewhere there were summer outreaches, graduates' dinners, and even recycling and knitting clubs!

It is encouraging to see Friends International staff being asked to partner with university staff as chaplains and 25 staff now have a formal role in university chaplaincy. This gives increased and direct access to international students and sometimes the potential for using university facilities for activities. We are being invited to contribute to international student induction programmes and speak about Friends International activities in these settings. In Stirling this year, our team were asked to run a 'Big Global Café' in the main university concourse during a freshers' event. It was a great success and university staff have asked for a repeat with the January intake of students.

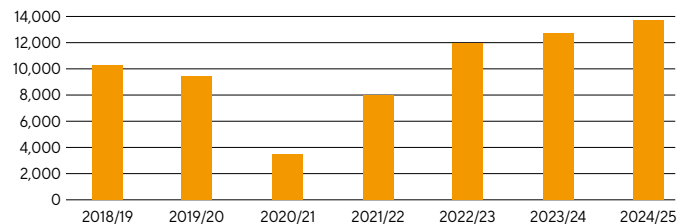
As the international student

population makeup changes, our teams are seeking to innovate to meet different and 'hard to reach' groups. A wide range of activities are being tried including sport-related events, book clubs, walking and running groups, cooking and baking evenings, leadership courses, discussion groups, trips of cultural interest, hikes and weekends away. Activities that involve food, are interactive and good fun, are effective in encouraging international students to come and stick.

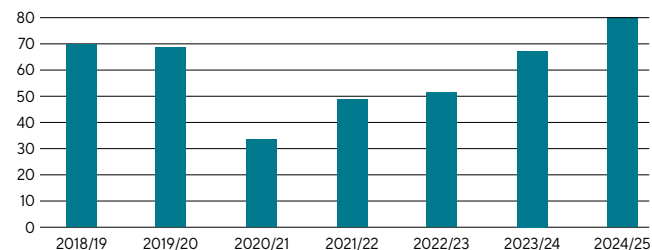
International students from countries such as India or Nigeria may need to find work to contribute financially to their course fees and living costs and as a result have less time than some other students to engage with extra-curricular activities. Others are not used to mixing with people from outside their own social group and need to be encouraged to engage in social settings with international students from widely different countries and cultures. In all this at Friends International we are seeking to make contact with as many international students as possible, including ones from 'hard-to-reach locations', and

demonstrate the love and presence of Jesus to those international students that may never have encountered Christians previously but are perhaps isolated, lonely and needing support. Please pray that we will find the individuals that God is bringing to us; those who are open to friendship and open to Jesus, that they would find a community to be part of and find the One who can transform their lives and give them purpose and direction.

STUDENTS CONTACTED



CAME TO FAITH



News

App Updated To Improve Connections With International Students

Friends International has introduced a major redevelopment of its Student App, which has already surpassed 95,000 downloads. The App serves as Friends International's key digital tool, connecting international students to local events, guides, and Christian communities across our 46 Centres. The upgrade will modernise outdated technology, improve speed and accessibility,

and introduce a new bespoke personalised interface. Rebranded to align with Friends International's family of communications platforms, this fresh investment will ensure the App remains free to international students, and will strengthen relationships with existing international students and others searching for community, friendship and faith in an uncertain world.



Jasime Svanda

New Starters – September 2025

In September, we were delighted to welcome four new members to our team. After patiently waiting since his appointment last Christmas, Iain MacGowan (Centre Team Leader, Bournemouth) has now joined Friends International. Jasmine Svanda (Staff Worker, Colchester) joined us after returning from Sofia, Bulgaria, where she worked with international students, having previously served as a UCCF Relay Worker in Colchester. Feiyi Duan (Sheffield) and Jennie Tan (Nottingham) have both become Apprentice Staff Workers following two years on the Reach programme. It is especially encouraging that all our recent Apprentice Staff Workers have progressed to full Staff Worker roles upon completing the programme.

Reach update This year we are welcoming nine new Reach trainees in eight Centres from York to Canterbury. Our aim is to equip these young, committed Christians to be thoughtful and skilled lifelong cross-cultural ambassadors of Jesus.

Reach Coordinator Luke Hammond says: "We meet with them week in, week out, serve alongside them, and shape their learning as we listen to their reflections. The team are supportive providing cross-cultural training and local-but-global missiology. Please pray that each trainee embraces every opportunity, serves their Centre faithfully, and grows in supporting our mission as we, in turn, support them throughout this transformative year."



Relighting the Flame:

International Student Ministry in Paisley



Caron Peter



Paisley, which is situated to the west of Glasgow, is an historic town dating from the 12th century. Recently, parts of the town have faced decline, but the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) has brought fresh energy and diversity as rising costs in Glasgow have encouraged students away from other universities.

The Paisley campus, which was founded in 1897 as the Paisley Technical School, has now grown into a university with a global reach and is home to over 6,000 international students, with over half from countries where the gospel is difficult to share.

Friends International's presence was first established in 2004. We set up TableTalk, to help international students understand local culture and make friends, and ran a hospitality programme and offered Bible study. However,

since 2018 our work has been led by local churches who continued to welcome students, offering hospitality and sharing Jesus and most recently an international café.

My personal journey in Paisley began in 2023 when I moved to Paisley. As I walked through the town, I noticed the growing number of internationals – hearing languages familiar to me as an Indian, but many I couldn't recognise. I began praying for a way to serve these students. When I discovered that Friends International was seeking to

relaunch its presence in Paisley, I knew it was an answer to prayer.

This ministry has been both encouraging and stretching. Our immediate goal is to restart a vibrant iCafé, a welcoming space for international students to relax, build friendships, and encounter the love of Christ. We are also seeking to partner with local churches, encouraging them to see international student ministry as part of their mission.

Looking ahead, our vision is to see a thriving community of students and volunteers who together reach every international student in Paisley with the good news of Jesus. Through Bible studies, Alpha courses, and ongoing discipleship, we long to see lives transformed and the light of the gospel shine brightly in this town once again.



Why Legacy Giving Matters



Much of Friends International's work is funded by churches and individuals who give regularly. But legacy gifts are different. They're long-term, strategic, and often transformational.

- They allow new ministries to launch.
- They sustain staff in critical roles.
- They ensure future generations of students to hear the gospel.

Leaving a gift in your Will to Friends International is simple to do – and it can change lives for decades.

Your Invitation

Would you consider including Friends International in your Will?

Your gift will be a source of encouragement, provision, and spiritual legacy for those who follow in your footsteps.



To learn more, visit www.friendsinternational.uk/legacy-giving or speak to your solicitor about adding Friends International to your will. Alternatively click this QR code.



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