

Opportunity

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friends
INTERNATIONAL

Shining Light into the Darkness of Mental Health

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Leading Thoughts

What's your favourite season? For some it's Autumn with its turning colours, crisp leaves underfoot, warm clothes and a fire in the grate. While I love all these things, shorter days and falling temperatures are concerning and I find myself yearning to get beyond the shortest day to the promise of lighter days and sunnier times.



Light is vital for life, from plant life to food formation and even our own wellbeing. Jesus said he was the 'Light of the World' and his desire is for his followers to walk in the light. The last 18 months have

been difficult for us all and international students are not exempt as they get used to living in a new country and adapting to a different culture without the support of family and friends. Join with us as we explore how Christians can be a 'light in the darkness' for international students.

Reading Mervyn's testimony as he realised his mental health was suffering, will help you understand the situation many international students are facing and how Christians can support them. Despite the pandemic Friends International has continued to grow and in this edition you can read about Sunderland,

one of our newest Centres, and the lessons they learned during their first year. We don't just want to help international students while they are studying but to disciple and equip them for a lifetime of ministry. You can read about how the Philip Project and Affiliates programmes achieve this and how you can get involved.

Finally, we want to say a "big thank you" to everybody that has supported us through this year, either in prayer, giving financially or taking part in Just Say Hello, just to mentioned a few.

You really are making a difference.

Alan

Alan Tower
National Director

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"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12

”

Mervyn's Story

Testimony

Mervyn is an international student. He comes from Hong Kong and is studying at Cambridge University.

"My mental health took a drastic hit at the beginning of the pandemic. Anxiety that probably arose from the virus spilled over into other parts of my life. I was consistently downcast and didn't have energy for much, including talking to friends.

I was initially reluctant to get professional help – I thought I could get better just by 'thinking differently' – but then I realised I was breaking down without reason and I finally agreed to see a psychiatrist. With help from her, and support from friends and family, my mood gradually improved.

Supportive Friends and Family



It was wonderful to have plenty of friends in Cambridge, both in church and in the Christian Union I am a part of, so I knew I wasn't alone. This was especially reassuring when the pandemic complicated travel plans. I knew that even if I couldn't fly back home, someone could put me up and I wouldn't find myself without anywhere to stay.

I think the hardest part was knowing that my family were always worried about me, because they were several thousand miles away and wouldn't be able to offer much help if something went wrong.

I felt God wanted to say to me that He would be by my side as I took my time to recover, never leaving or forsaking me. I took great comfort from praying and reading the Bible. I know God cares for me deeply; He wants to hear about your pain and walk with you in it. I found the Psalms in the Bible very helpful because they are full of people in deep anguish seeking help. Psalm 13 shows hope amidst pain, which encouraged me deeply. Often, I didn't know what to pray but the Psalms would help me.

"I didn't know what to pray but the Psalms would help me"

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Mental Health and Wellbeing



Survey reveals one in four international students suffering with mental health issues

Student life is full of new experiences, but as well as learning to cook, managing finances and being separated from family and friends, coronavirus has meant students were isolated and cut off from the buzz and rhythm of normal student life. For international students, living in a foreign culture and without the support of friends and family, the situation has been even worse. A survey

by Friends International found that one in four international students across the UK and Ireland are suffering from mental health issues.

Sarnai, an embryology student from Mongolia, studying at the University of Dundee, highlighted the situation; "Everything was ruined. I lost my hope, and depression was all over me. My hope was being lost day by day."

"We are seeing significant numbers of international students who won't leave their accommodation"

As a committed supporter of Friends International you will know that providing friendship to international students is a core part of our DNA. For many international students the staff and volunteers of Friends International have been their lifeline throughout this challenging time.

In Sarnai's case, Becky, a Friends International host, was able to step in and provide support. She explained, "I have hundreds of examples of how Becky supported me when I was struggling during difficult times. I've not only made friends, I've also had a family in Dundee".

Mike Hill, Centre Team Leader at Friends International Birmingham, thinks the situation is critical. He said, "We are seeing significant numbers of international students who won't leave their accommodation due to anxiety, depression or concerns about self-image".

God's light can penetrate any darkness

We know issues with mental health and depression are having a profound effect on international students, but we believe that God's light can penetrate any darkness.

Will you pray that these international students will not be overwhelmed and consumed by fear and anxiety, but instead they will be open to God and His love for them?

Secondly, will you prayerfully consider if you can make a donation to support our work, coming alongside international students to support those with mental health and wellbeing issues at this critical time?

Our strategy is simple. We want to increase the number of staff and volunteers in local centres around the UK and Ireland so we can reach more students. Your donations will also help us develop additional video resources and raise awareness of mental health issues as well as teaching international students, where and how to find services that can help.

To make your response as easy as possible you only need to complete the response slip included with the Opportunity, or alternatively you can make a gift by visiting our website at www.friendsinternational.uk/wellbeing.

Finally, I want to thank you for your commitment and generous support to Friends International. It will make a difference in so many young lives at this critical time.

May God bless you,

Alan National Director



Sunderland - One Year On

One year after the opening of our new centre in Sunderland, we interviewed Centre Team Leader, James Adair, and asked him to describe the highs and lows of the previous 12 months and the lessons he'd learned.



What's been going on?

In my first year, I have spent a lot of time on building relationships with Christians in the area and local churches as well as reaching out to international students with the gospel. I have been preaching at local churches while sharing with them the work of Friends International and our hopes and vision for the ministry in Sunderland. I have been working hard to get a team together from several

different churches to help me with our outreach to the students. I have also been meeting with students both online and offline (when permitted) to read the Bible with some and grow friendships with others. I would arrange trips to local landmarks and places to take the students to and host them at my house (when permitted). Now a year on, I am thankful that we have started a new student globe café, with volunteers from churches in Sunderland.

“Starting any new ministry is always challenging, but doing so in the thick of Covid has been especially challenging”

What have been the lows and challenges of the year?

It has been a tough year at times, starting any new ministry is always challenging, but doing so in the thick of Covid has been especially challenging. Making initial contact with students during the epidemic was difficult especially when the University campuses were closed and I had to try and reach students through online events and word of mouth. Another challenge has been getting volunteers to give up their time to help serve in different ways. Many are already busy serving in their church contexts, so that has been tough having a lack of people and resources.

What have been the high points and how have you been encouraged?

To have been able to meet with students and hold Bible studies which has been a great joy. To have had opportunities to share Christ with others has been a privilege. The student globe café is now up and running, and we are welcoming international students from

as far as Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Canada, India, Romania, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and China... the list goes on.

The joy of meeting a student from India in a local park, who for months and months had been all alone during the lockdowns and was so happy to meet me, he kept hugging me. That moment was a reminder of how lonely many international students have been during this past year and what it means for them to have people who show them genuine friendship and support.

What lessons have you learnt?

I have learnt to be more patient that's for sure, trusting God's timing more. I have also learnt to take a step back during the times where it seems there has been little or no fruit. When it's been tough-going I have to remind myself of Jesus' words in the parable of the growing seed [Mark 4: 26-29]. Although I may not always see spiritual fruit in this ministry all the time, I can stand back and be confident that God is at work.

Being an Affiliate

The Affiliates Network offers resources, training and networking to those who have a passion for serving and reaching international students.

"We don't just want to help international students while they are studying, but to also disciple and equip them for a lifetime of ministry"

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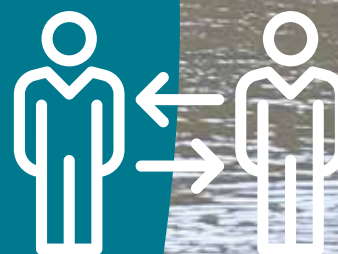
"I think for me, the meaning of being an affiliate is to be a part of the bigger picture. With the connection to Friends International I find out what is going on in other parts of the country and learn from the best practice of other groups, as well as linking with people in a similar position to myself through the Affiliates Network. I have access to the wisdom of experienced people, who I can ask questions of and discuss ideas with. I've been able to access Friends International resources and ensure I'm not reinventing the wheel when planning or making a resource. There are the networking opportunities and the potential to place students that move on from us in churches in almost any part of the world. It is great to meet up and share together, while receiving good, targeted teaching at the annual conference."

Stuart Aitken
Transformations Leeds

"Being an Affiliate was really valuable. My husband and I had some experience but it was our link with Friends International that enabled us to constantly grow, whether it was through training in specific cultures, new models or tools of ministry, new research or finding contacts for international students returning to home. We especially loved going to Friends International conferences and feasting on lots of new ideas and insights - we always went away refreshed and energised.

Recently, I accepted a job in a London church. However, I've learnt so much from my colleagues at FI which I've brought into my new role. I want to keep learning from them, and wonderfully, being an affiliate allows me to do that."

Kah Foon Gillespie
All Souls Langham Place
Church, London



To find out more about becoming an Affiliate scan this QR code or go to www.friendsinternational.uk/affiliates





Latest News

Did you say "Hello"?

In October we encouraged churches to step out and welcome international students, with our Just Say Hello campaign. Thank you to every church that took part and made efforts to say "hello". International students who have recently arrived in this country appreciate the offer of genuine friendship and support, and our Just Say Hello initiative can help you make the most of this opportunity. Go to www.friendsinternational.uk/hello to download free resources that will get you thinking and praying for international students.



New Appointments

- Please welcome David Hubbard, Centre Team Leader in Reading. David is currently spending his time supporting the 'Small World Café' which is run by Reading University Christian Union and local church volunteers as well as meeting local church leaders already involved in international student ministry. Please pray for him as the ministry develops.
- We also want to welcome Manuela Vitelaru as Communications Coordinator. She replaces Jack Bentley who left us last month after over 10 years in the communications team hotseat.

Reach

We are excited that 12 new trainees have joined Reach, Friends International's cross-cultural discipleship training programme. This year's intake are a truly international mix with eight nations represented, including Angola, Mexico, China, Switzerland and USA. Please pray that they will be inspired, to make great contributions locally, and readied for future fruitful service wherever that might be, with Friends International or elsewhere.



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A Taste of Christmas Hospitality

Sometimes we don't know what we are doing. Sometimes we don't know the effect of what we are doing. Sometimes the offer of help or a simple welcome can have an outcome far beyond what we could imagine. The gift of a smile, a listening ear or some precious time, can mean so much to an international student who is looking for a reminder of friends and family, a loving home or just something familiar.

What could this mean at Christmas time during the coldest and darkest months of the year? Many Friends International groups have special activities in December to introduce the Christmas story to international students and share the story of how Jesus came to earth in a strange place and grew up in a foreign land, not dissimilar to their own experience.

Why not consider Friends International's Local Link programme which offers a way for local church members to give international students a taste of Christian hospitality and an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with them. You can find out more at Local Link - Friends International. You might be surprised what God has got in store for you.

www.friendsinternational.uk/local-link



The Philip Project

The Philip Project equips Christian international students to understand and share God's Word when they go home. The course comprises monthly training days, one-to-one mentoring and a weekend away.

As the Philip Project welcomes back students and physical meetings begin again, we talk to Abel, a Nigerian student who joined the Philip Project while he was at Nottingham studying. He recalls; "I was in a new environment, away from my home and my church yet I was welcomed warmly at Cornerstone Church. I learnt a lot from the Philip Project: how we look at the Bible text, by chapter, book and testament, relating it to the whole Bible; thinking of our hearers and getting the message to them in 15 minutes!

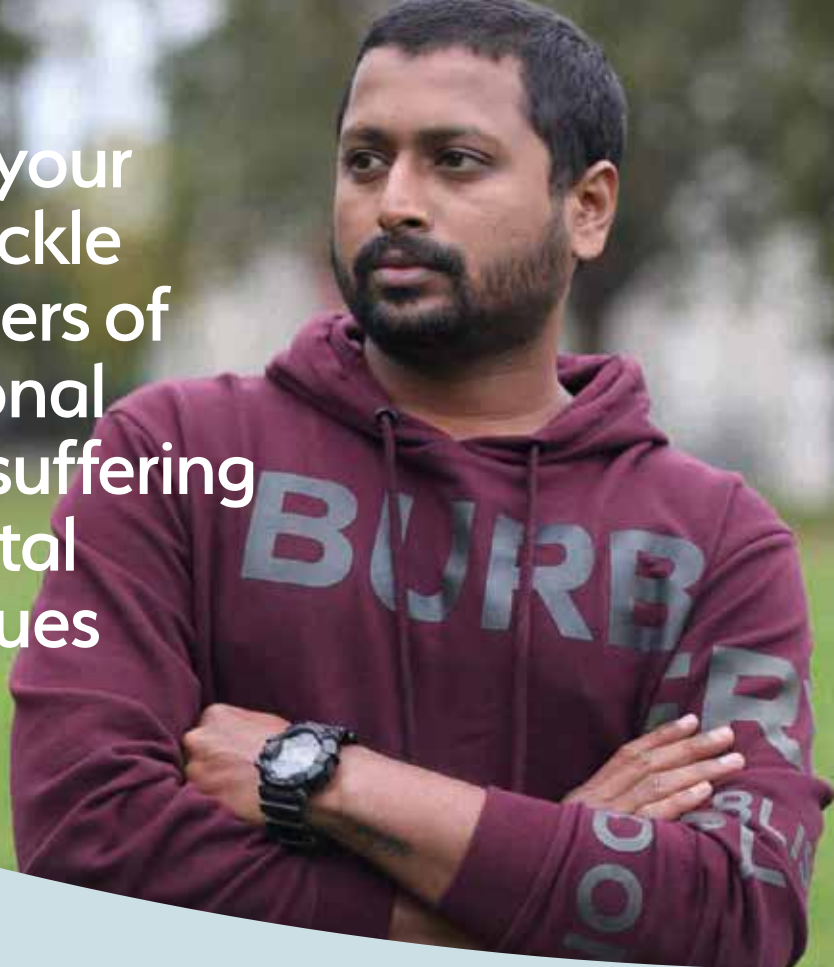
"When I returned to Uganda, I was asked by my church, All Saints Cathedral Kampala, to lead a cell group in our suburb. Having gained confidence from the Philip Project, I have been able to start Bible study fellowships in the two organisations I have worked in since and lead prayer meetings wherever I go."



To find out more scan this QR code or go to
www.friendsinternational.uk/the-philip-project



We need your help to tackle the numbers of international students suffering from mental health issues



International students have experienced unprecedented levels of disruption, and it's taking a toll on their mental health. A survey by Friends International revealed that one in four international students across the UK and Ireland are suffering from mental health issues. Please help us support them at this critical time.



Will you pray that these international students will not be overwhelmed and consumed by fear and anxiety, but instead that they will be open to God and His love for them.



Secondly, **will you prayerfully consider** if you can donate to support our work, coming alongside international students to support those with mental health and wellbeing issues at this critical time.

Please use the response slip enclosed, or give online at
www.friendsinternational.uk/wellbeing