

Connecting With Internationals

(Article section 2)

Here are some tips to help you get started meeting internationals and building relationships:

Do Your Homework

Spend time getting to know different cultures that are in your area. Look up census data online to help you to get a general idea of what nationalities are nearby. (See the websites listed in the sidebar.) Then when you “by chance” meet someone from one of those groups, you will at least have a couple things to say that will connect with them, and let them know that you are interested in their country and culture. These people are proud of and very connected to their home country. They actually appreciate your interest in their country and culture as much as or more than your personal interest in them. Read articles and books, cook their foods, and learn a couple words in their language. Then when you meet one of them and connect, BAM! He realizes you have an interest in his identity.

Be Willing To Learn

Ask them questions about their country and their way of doing things. Even if they are from a country you know almost nothing about, show an interest. They may be glad to teach you, and then you will be able to use that knowledge with others. Ask about their foods, and tell them you would like to try them. (In most other cultures it is not impolite to “fish” for an invitation.) It may be that they have not yet asked you over because they figure you wouldn’t like their food. So you may have to make the first move. Ask about their

family back home (if applicable). Tell them you are interested in traveling to their country, unless that’s a lie. (For me, it never is. I want to go to all these countries! They love to fantasize with me about it, telling about their uncle in the big city that would greet me at the airport, their grandma in the village I could stay with...) And who knows? Maybe God will open a door for you. Those contacts are invaluable if you ever do get an opportunity to go to that country.

Establish Common Ground

How do you meet a total stranger with whom you have little or nothing in common? I suggest you study some of their culture and learn about recent events. Without it, friendliness alone might not pull you through, though a good dose of friendliness does a lot! Often you can connect without specifically talking about their country. For example, if you meet a man from Cameroon, mention what you do know about another country in the continent of Africa. If you can, tell him you had a good friend who spent some time in Ghana. I’ve had whole conversations start from simply talking with interest even just about their region of the world or nearby places. They will be glad to sense that your world isn’t as small as the average American’s. Remember, you are trying to establish a point of relationship. Be relaxed and friendly--you have nothing to lose! Hopefully you know something about that country so you can build a connection with them and gain their confidence. If not, find a way to be enthused about it and let them know that you are genuinely interested in their country. The first conversation opener, though awkward, can be turned to your favor if used with warmth and genuine interest.

Greetings

When greeting internationals, speak clearly. They are used to hearing a quick “hey-howsitgoin?” from most Americans who don’t really care to know the answer. Very few American give them more than a quick “Hi” or “What’s up?” Use longer and more respectful language like “Good afternoon, sir. How are you today?... I am also well. How is your family?” and so on.

“Do You Live Around Here?”

You will need a tactful way to find out if they are a newcomer, where they are from, and if they have been here for many years. They will at first be hesitant to share this information with a stranger, and don’t like to be viewed as foreigners. Find a way to ask it politely with a question like: “Do you live around here?” Then be quick to give a positive response to their hesitant answers.

Address & Phone Number

It may not always be possible, but try to get their address and phone number to keep in touch with them later. Don’t be rude if they hesitate. If they’re looking at you suspiciously, then keep being friendly and try to build more common ground. Or drop it with a pleasant goodbye, and pray to meet them in the future. One thing that often works for me is first volunteering to give them mine. I carry small “business cards” with my phone number and address, and graciously encourage them that I’d love to hear from them. Even if I lose track of them, they still have a way to contact me and can be reminded by looking at the card. When they do call I always thank them and reassure them that I don’t mind at all, but in fact am thrilled that they did so.

Within an Hour’s Drive From Home

The facts of who may be living not far away can be surprising. Recently I’ve become more aware of the size and presence of internationals nearby. And not only the people, but also the religious groups they influence. Within only 70-80 miles of here, in the greater Philadelphia area, there are 200,000 Muslims. Not all these are immigrants, but definitely the foreign mission field near at hand. Philadelphia has over 35 mosques and Islamic centers. Recently I was down in a small African grocery. In the back of the store I noticed some men bowing down in ritual prayer on their mats facing east. No longer is it necessary to go to another country to see a common thing like this. One fellow I talked to was Mohammed from Benin, He had only been here 3 months. His English ability was almost nonexistent, so we made small talk in French as I was able. I think he appreciated that an American took an interest in his life, and I wonder if I’m the only one that has ever done so.

The town of Coatesville, PA sits beside a couple of hills. By standing in a development up on a hill to the north, it’s possible to look down and see almost the entire town -- even notice cars driving up and down it’s streets. This little town has at least 3 mosques/Islamic centers, and also an Islamic school. Doesn’t this put a burden on your heart? We simply cannot ignore these things thinking they are way out there somewhere, and we’ll send one or two to face the challenge of meeting these needs while the rest of us just go about our lives ignorant of them. The numbers are mushrooming and there is an opportunity for all Christians to step into the battle.

At times I’ve stopped by Green Dragon, a local flea market here in Ephrata. There it’s possible to see people from a wide variety of cultures, including many West Africans bargaining off shoes or miscellaneous wares. I got to know a man from Senegal, and have visited him a couple times down in Philadelphia.

Our family has gotten to know a man from Nepal and invited him over several times. He lives with his brother and his brother’s wife. After meeting him at the local Getty Mart, we tried to stop in and see him sometimes when we would go past. Although a Hindu, he’s open to spiritual discussion. We gave him some tracts in his own language, Nepalese, and then bought him a Bible. These materials can be picked up at Multi Language Media in downtown Ephrata. They carry Scriptures and other materials from most languages and ship all over the country, and even the world. You may notice that many gas stations and motels across the country are owned or operated by Punjabi Indians and Pakistanis.

T - I - M - E

This may be one of the more important points. Their different perspectives on time make it difficult to ever have meaningful contact with Americans or integrate into society. They are used to Americans being too busy to pay them any attention. Friendship is not an American trait, and something we need to re-learn. You will need to lay aside your American views of time and efficiency. They may call you at strange hours, or want to have you over at odd times like for supper at 8 p.m.! You will not be able to build good relationships with ethnic people if you try to tightly squeeze it into your schedule before running on to the next thing. When you go shopping at Wal-mart, plan an extra fifteen minutes just in case you meet someone.

Help Them In Practical Ways

You need to get to know them well enough to find out the issues with which they are grappling, and help shape their response. Remember, the whole culture here is bombarding them with new thoughts and ways. Maybe their landlord is upset with them, and they can't figure out why. It's not unusual for them to be struggling to understand the culture, immigrant paperwork, bills, and language. They may simply be nervous about how to go about getting mail service at the post office. Is snow coming? Show them how to deal with it, and help them buy a shovel. Be warm and helpful. Offer to take them somewhere or introduce them to someone. Where they come from, connections

are everything. If they are having a hard time with these practical things, they would love it if you would show them how to do it and help them deal with situations they face. They need to sense that you genuinely love them and that they are not a project. If you ignore their felt needs, it will be very hard for them to focus on what you want to share into their hearts.

Teach English

Offer to let your friend come over to your house once a week and help him with his English language. Have him write down all the words and phrases during the week that he doesn't understand, and then go over them together. Teaching English could open the door for regular contact and meaningful friendships. It will also help them with one of their greatest needs. Effective ministries have started through small ways like that. Opportunities are there if we look for them. For example, consider those who work in the local Chinese take-away.



Learn Another Language

If you are a single young person, I really encourage you to put some time and effort into this if at all possible. Maybe you could start with either Spanish or French. There are millions of Spanish speakers here in the USA, so you would use it quite often. French will also open many doors. I've found that a basic knowledge goes a long way with many West Africans. Since many immigrants tend to stick to their own cultural groups, it's not uncommon to meet people that have been here for four years but still can't speak much English at all. Put the effort into it and you will not regret it. Also, you could learn several words of greeting in various languages. Say "hello" to the Chinese man in Chinese. This can quickly crack the ice and go a long way.

Shop At International Food Stores

The best place to meet these people has got to be an ethnic grocery store. These little stores are pungently aromatic, crowded, and filled with loads of food that you have no idea what it is. They are also good places to learn about that country. By looking at the foods on the shelf you may be able to get an idea of what ethnic minorities are in your area. Buy some of the foods, go home, and learn how to cook them. Ask them how to do it and take advantage of the pride they have in their own culture's food. Ethnic peoples feel at home in these stores, and you are now the odd one in their environment. That is good.

RESOURCES - Find Statistics on Internationals in Your area and Other Information

<http://factfinder.census.gov>

Look under the "people" section, categories: "origins & languages," and "race & ethnicity."

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign.html>

US Census Bureau Foreign Born site.

<http://www.cis.org/articles/2003/back1203.html>

Where Immigrants Live — An examination of state residency by country of origin in 1990 and 2000.

<http://www.migrationinformation.org>

Go to the "US in focus" section, or "Data Tools."

<http://www.ethnicarvest.com>

Inspirational and informative

<http://www.peoplegroups.info>

Very good site--Search for the total amount of international people in your city, county, or zip code by nationality, ancestry, or language spoken at home. Accuracy not 100% guaranteed – I've noticed that some of the least common groups aren't always listed

http://www.valpo.edu/geomet/geo/courses/geo200/usa_maps.html

A cultural geography of the US and Canada — Maps showing percentage of ancestry by region.

<http://www.adherents.com>

This web site has world and USA stats on religions. It allows you to see the top ten religions in US and many other avenues.

<http://www.islamicfinder.org>

Find mosques and Muslim businesses (like a halal meat store).

<http://www.switchboard.com> and <http://local.google.com>

These are phone directories, handy in searching for ethnic grocery stores, religious meeting places, Like mosques and Hindu temples, and other places of interest.

Also just be aware that Indian food stores usually have a rack of filthy movies filling up the whole wall(s) and may not be a good place to go, especially with the whole family.

A good way to find these stores is by looking in the yellow pages. Look under the grocery section and notice the names that sound foreign. An internet yellow pages search will also help you locate them. Ask at one store where others might be. Also, you could search stores by the cultural group, e.g., "African," "Oriental," "Halal meat," and "Middle Eastern." If it is a Muslim business, you can probably find it on Islamicfinder. (See the "Resources" box on the right)

As you go to these food stores, one thing I want to emphasize is: be in prayer beforehand. And don't be in a hurry. Ask the Lord to lead you to people. Incredible things can happen if you go to a store prayed up. A couple months ago I decided to take a day off and go down to Philadelphia. Before going, I looked through the yellow pages and found several ethnic grocery stores to stop in. Having just returned from a month in Southeast Asia, naturally my attention was attracted that direction. I told the Lord: "I don't know where I'm going, or what I'm doing, but I put my hand into Yours. You lead me."

Surprised to find a store specializing in goods from the particular country I had just returned from, I stepped inside out of the cold. It was as though I had just stepped right into that country as the language flew back and forth. The store owner was friendly, and as we made small talk, he informed me that there were hundreds of his countrymen living within a few blocks in that area of the city. I was impressed, but mentioned to him that I would really like to meet a man from the particular tribe and area I had visited--if he knew anyone. After thinking for a minute he said he might know a few.

Hardly a minute later a fellow from that group walked in! The owner quickly called him over and we had a nice little chat for over an hour. Then he also invited me to follow him over to his house to meet his wife and three small children. They are a sweet little family, and we had a pleasant visit. I learned that they only know of maybe six other

families from their people group in the city. There are a few more in other places, and they invited me to join them for their once-a-year get-together. Is that an open door?! I returned home amazed at the Lord's leading, knowing that I had met just the right person, and that he had stopped by to pick up his bag of rice at just the right moment!

This particular people group of three million souls has fewer than fifty Christians, most of whom don't live in their home province. Think about it: Here is a people group with almost no true believers, yet within not much more than an hour's drive from here, there are several dozen of this group. Beloved, who will care enough to shine a Light into their lives? If we're concerned for them enough to go halfway around the world, do we also have a fraction of that concern to go drive an hour to meet them? What are our motives as we travel to other countries? Let us not overlook these things, as in the drawing of the man with the binoculars.

Some brothers and I did accept the invitation to that meeting and felt a very open door for continued contact. Since then a brother has been going over there once a week on Saturdays to teach English classes. I am excited as I see how they did much of the organizing for the classes and even from the beginning took upon themselves the responsibility of paying for expenses. What will the Lord do in the future? We pray that they will see the Gospel clearly.

Now, what will you do about the internationals around you? May the Lord open your eyes to notice them, guide your steps to meet them, and teach you to connect with them. And may you see it as the mission field that it is. —

If you want, you can write to us and tell what the Lord has been showing you and the opportunities you have stepped into. We would love to hear from you!

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