

CHRISTIAN STANDARD

+ THE LOOKOUT



missions:

PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

+ INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES
to the pandemic

Sharing the Bread of Life with a Used Table



**HOW OUR CHURCH IS MAKING
A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

BY TOM ELLSWORTH

The bursts rang out on that sultry, July 4 Sunday morning in 1999. They weren't firecrackers, but gunshots . . . fired at attendees gathered in front of the Korean United Methodist Church in Bloomington, Indiana. Won-Joon Yoon, a Korean student at Indiana University, was gunned down on his way into worship. The cowardly white supremacist had fired randomly into the crowd and taken an innocent life. The city was stunned.

At the time, my dear friend Carthell Everett—part of the Sherwood Oaks Christian Church family—worked with international students in his role at IU. Carthell, the Yoon family's main university contact, truly ministered to them. Sadly, it took a tragedy to wake me to the needs of international students in our own backyard. After Won-Joon's funeral, Carthell and I began discussing what we could do to minister to these students who are so far from home.

COFFEE AND BUTTERBALLS

At that time, South Koreans comprised the largest group of international students at Indiana University. That has changed as the international population has increased. Today, students from China and India dominate the international student population, but it also includes scholars from scores of other countries. And most, I have discovered, are gracious and grateful toward their southern Indiana home away from home.

In due time, we started an International Coffee Hour that provided guests a casual class setting where lessons and faith discussions were openly shared. As our international friends became more acquainted with the congregation, many

of them started volunteering in the life of the church. Whether participating on worship teams or working behind the scenes, these students have made a lasting impression on our congregation. Families at Sherwood Oaks “adopt” many of these students annually and regularly host them in their homes.

For several years at Thanksgiving, the church hosted hundreds of international students for a traditional holiday meal. As a truly American holiday, it exposed our guests to this nation's heritage as well as the importance of expressing thanks to God. By the way, baking all those Butterballs was no small achievement!

FURNITURE GIVE-AWAY

However, for the last 16 years, the crown jewel of this ministry has been the International Furniture Give-Away. Elan Rajamani, director of the Bloomington branch of International Friendship Ministries and currently a Sherwood Oaks elder, has been the inspiration and organizer from the beginning. That said, Elan would quickly admit that such a job requires 400 to 500 volunteers per year. Why this ministry? Many, if not most, international students arrive in Bloomington with only their suitcases. They move into empty apartments that are likely to remain that way. Providing furniture was a need the church could help fill and doing so was a profound way of welcoming our guests to the community.

Here's how the Furniture Give-Away—FGA for short—works. Throughout the year, folks from the congregation and community donate used furniture and household items that are in good condition. The FGA team works tirelessly to collect, clean, and organize the donations for the August event.

In the past, students were transported to the church facilities where they were treated to refreshments,

an orientation on the church, the city of Bloomington, and the FGA program, followed by the opportunity to select furniture and household goods which were then delivered to their apartments. This year, with the COVID-19 restrictions, much of the event was accomplished virtually, but the furniture was still delivered in a safe and socially distanced manner. I've learned you can still see evidence of smiles and grateful hearts from behind masks!

In visiting with these students while they waited to select furniture, I have picked up a common response—*mystified gratitude*. Each person was very grateful for the help, but they were mystified at why a church would do something like this. Such perplexity has opened the door for many spiritual conversations, some of them life changing.

Over the years I've watched students from 90 different countries finish their degrees and head back home. Before leaving, however, many have returned the furniture they received from us so that new incoming internationals could be blessed. To date, more than 15,000 pieces of furniture have been given away and the household items are too numerous to count. That's recycling at its finest!

FGA INSIGHTS

Testimonies and stories from volunteers and students offer real insight into the power and significance of the FGA.

“My first impression of the FGA was one of amazement,” said Shaun, an attorney from London. “The effort and logistics . . . were impressive, [but] what really blew me away was the impact it had on the people receiving [help]. As someone who has moved more times than I can count, I know the impact it has when you create your new home. I firmly believe the furniture giveaway is one of the most effective and impactful ways I've ever seen of the church showing God's love in a practical way.”

“I've had the opportunity to visit with students from very restrictive cultures,” said staff member Tim Thompson. “There is no other setting quite like the FGA, where a Caucasian male could have a conversation with three burka-clad, college coeds about the church and Christianity. They saw the church in a new light through a dresser, a couple desks, and a box full of home furnishings.”

Rhonda Raad, a minister's daughter, grew up with visions of serving on the mission field. That didn't happen, but she never gave up the dream of working with internationals—and for many years now she has done so in her “backyard.” She quickly realized

international students would not be hampered by cultural or language barriers in their own homeland, so if they returned with a newfound faith in Christ, they would make the best missionaries possible. And many of these students return to their homelands as leaders and influencers. For over 17 years, Rhonda has worked tirelessly and sacrificially to influence these influencers for Jesus Christ.

Amal (not his real name) journeyed from his Muslim homeland in the Middle East to study at IU. He arrived alone; his family would follow at a later date. His loneliness those first couple of weeks nearly drove him to return home, but then he saw an FGA poster. He came. The event was more than he could grasp. *Who would do such a thing?* He started asking questions, and he eventually began studying privately with Elan. Amal ultimately gave his life to Christ and was baptized. He serves today as a physician in his home nation and is sharing the gospel with his people.

A Tanzanian said one of his biggest worries upon moving to the United States was “how was I going to get furniture and some basic house stuff. . . . FGA helped me unconditionally. . . . That made my transition to the U.S. smooth and easy. God bless you for your giving heart!”

“Sherwood Oaks and their volunteers have been very helpful from the start,” a female undergraduate student from Malaysia wrote. “The first year I was here, they were the ones picking me up from the airport. [They] gave us furniture and brought us to the mall to buy some winter wear. I’m so thankful. . . .”

“I came for the sole purpose of getting free furniture,” a young man from Ghana wrote, “but then I realized that . . . I can benefit by joining the church. They have helped me to stay closer to God and involved in spiritual activities that guided me to not stray from my faith.”

OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES

International students have changed our congregation, and we are better people because of them. They have broadened our horizons on what constitutes a mission outreach. They have lifted our hearts with their stories, inspired us with their service, and humbled us with their gratitude. I’ve had the privilege of baptizing several of these students; I know they will return home—some to hostile environments—as ambassadors for Jesus Christ.

You may not live in a university community where the world comes to your doorstep, but I suspect your community is much more “international” than it was in the past. I grew up in a small southern Indiana community where I never saw anyone who didn’t look like me. Today, that area has benefitted from a large influx of Latino immigrants. What a great opportunity for a new kind of outreach! Look around you. Who needs you to be the image of Christ to them?

Ryosuke Koyama of Japan arrived in Bloomington with nothing but a suitcase. When FGA team members visited his apartment, there was nothing but a mattress on his floor. When we delivered a few pieces of free furniture to Ryosuke, who was not a Christian, he was overwhelmed. His curiosity brought him to church on Sunday. He started attending regularly, got involved with the International Coffee Hour, asked tons of questions, and in time surrendered his life to Jesus.

Upon returning to Japan, Ryosuke immediately started sharing his faith. Sadly, in his early thirties, Ryosuke was diagnosed with an incurable brain disease, which only intensified his evangelism efforts until his death. God alone knows the influence of Ryosuke’s faith in the “Land of the Rising Sun.” I look forward to seeing Ryosuke again someday in the “Land of the Risen Son.” Just think, Ryosuke is now at home with the Lord because someone gave him some used furniture in the name of Jesus! ■

Tom Ellsworth has served as pastor of Sherwood Oaks Christian Church in Bloomington, Indiana, for nearly 40 years. He has seen the church grow from an attendance of about 80 people to more than 3,000 on two campuses. His retirement, originally slated for April, was postponed until the church resumes in-person services.