

Making Disciples of International Students as an Empty Nester

I came to Christ as a sophomore at a small college in Illinois. God got ahold of my life in a number of ways, and I came to Him through a group called Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. The following fall, I transferred to Iowa State University to become part of a church family which I had become familiar with and which was committed to living out the New Testament. That was 39 years ago. I have been in Ames ever since. I am now 59 years old and married, with three grown, married children, and five grandchildren and counting.

My bride and I were actively involved in youth ministry for 25 years until our youngest graduated from high school. Then I followed him and his older sister into our campus ministry (the Rock) on the ISU campus. I was involved there for a year before we started meeting international students on the ISU campus the summer of 2009. That summer changed my life. I found a place where my gifts and experiences have perfectly positioned me to make a significant impact for the kingdom of God. I would like to tell you about it.

First of all, if you are an empty-nester like me, and you have been walking with the Lord for decades, and grown mature in Him – you already have some of the most important qualifications. (1) You are an American who has lived here a long time and know how to get things done, so you can help them understand, figure out, and work through situations and problems that they face, (2) You walk with God and you know His word, so you can help another person learn to walk with Him, (3) You are a parent who knows how to love grown children and how to raise up children in the Lord, so you can be a parent to international students (who are grown children far from home) and raise them up in the Lord, (4) you know how to love with a deep family love (something which most of them have never experienced and are starved for), and (5) you are more available than most other people – either still working but with nights and evenings free, or a homemaker, or retired. In other words, you have maturity, experience, love, and time to invest in the Lord's work.

Stonebrook Community Church in Ames has been focusing on reaching college students at ISU since its inception in the early 70s. There were times when that involved international students, but most of the efforts have focused on American students. We had some families in our church reaching out to young international couples and families in 2009, but there was no focused effort to pursue international students and lead them to Christ. In 2008, the U.S. and China reached an agreement which enabled Chinese undergraduate students to freely attend U.S. universities for the first time. Iowa State averaged over 400 new students per semester for the next several years after that. They flooded into the school. When we were reaching out on campus the summer of 2009, we met many. They were everywhere. We started reaching out to them. At first, it was somewhat awkward because most of the traditional outreach methods were irrelevant to them. But then we found the key – relationships. They had many needs that we could help them with, and through that, we could form love relationships (which many of them were hungry for), and in those, we could share Christ.

Since that summer, we have been blessed by God with helping about 50 international students come to know Him, and we've helped dozens of others who already knew Him when they arrived in the U.S. grow as disciples. A growing number of them are getting married and remaining in Ames after they graduate to become part of the team. The work is multiplying.

If you ask me to provide a title for my role in our international ministry, I am a father. The students see me that way. I am called Father by some, Daddy by many, and even Grandpa by one. I treat them that way. They love it, and it earns their trust. We have several empty-nesters and older single adults involved in our international ministry. All of us have embraced that role. We are mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Technically, they are our younger brothers and sisters, but for all practical purposes, we relate to them as our grown children (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

All of us are involved in different ways, and with different amounts of time. Some host things in their homes. Others go out and meet with students on campus and around town. We help by teaching English, giving driving lessons, shopping, providing rides, helping obtain and move furniture, and many other things. I myself spend a lot of time meeting with students alone or in small groups. I meet with believers to help them learn to become family and grow, and I meet with nonbelievers to love, serve, and share Christ with them. In a normal week, we have our "Little Family" (our Acts 2:42 time for the believing international students) on Friday nights, our iFam home groups (which are focused on outreach) on Saturday nights, and life groups (made up of believing students) which meet during the week. I am involved Friday and Saturday, and then I meet with students many other nights of the week. I am a full-time, self-employed, I.T. person who is engaged in work activities 40-50 hours/week. On an average week, I spend 30ish hours with students.

It is soooooo good. I wish I could provide you with a way to experience what it is like to not only be able to watch, but also be an active part of, God radically changing a young person's life and bring His own beautiful fruits into it. I am giving more than I've ever given, and yet I feel fuller than I've ever felt. I've never felt so alive, so useful, so joyful, so motivated. I've never before had such a clear sense of who I am and why I am here. God is saving International students all over the world. He has brought them right here to our communities for us to love, serve, and lead to Him. As older men and women, we have more capability and availability to bear fruit than ever before. All we have to do is say, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!" And to God be the glory.

Your brother in Christ,

Craig McClanahan
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