

Case Study

Truro International Programs & Services



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Truro International Programs & Services (TIPS) has been Truro Anglican Church’s “Bridge to the International Community” for nearly thirty years. TIPS seeks to meet and serve the practical, cultural/educational, social and spiritual needs of international students, visiting scholars, immigrants, international professional workers and diplomats, refugees and other international guests to the Northern Virginia and DC area.

How did you feel that God was awakening you to this ministry?

I personally felt called to missionary work from my childhood, but always thought that mission work was far away. It wasn’t until after I graduated from college and was part of a summer mission team at Virginia Tech that my eyes were opened to the number of international students that were on the campus. I thought, “God knows that I struggle with learning languages but I can teach English” so it became a win/win. Internationals were willing to come and let me share the love of Christ with them in my language and I would try to learn something about their culture in their language.

Then we moved up to the north Virginia area and it was magnified all the more: not just with the international student population but also with the immigrant influx of refugees, the working professionals, and the diplomatic community that were all around us. As I clearly saw them, I also realized that many of the churches did not see them or, if they did, there was almost a resentment of their presence. The immigrants were changing the community, changing the local schools, changing many things. The church did not see the opportunity for the mission that I was so excited about. One of my hopes and dreams is to challenge the church to be a reflection on the inside of what God is doing on the outside.

You mentioned international students. What is the scope of opportunity that you have?

All our participants in the current program have been here for several years. Besides students, there are also those from the diplomatic community—usually spouses of those who are here with their embassy. Currently our academic population gleans from visiting scholars who are older, which is relatively new phenomenon over the last 10 or 15 years. The economic growth of the Asian Pacific countries has especially enabled them to bring their families. A husband comes as a scholar to the university, leaving the wife lonely at home, which gives an opportunity for her to attend language and culture classes. One noticeable exception is a scholar who may bring a child and not a spouse.



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CHURCH-BASED IMMIGRANT MINISTRY COALITION





Fairfax City is 15 miles west of Washington DC, and nearly 100 languages are spoken by children in the local schools. Most of the elementary to high schools in Fairfax County have reached the minority majority threshold. The population of Fairfax City is at 30,000 in 5 square miles and is home to people from 70 countries. George Mason University is on the doorstep of our church campus with over 120 nationalities making up the student body. GMU has 30,000 students—a full one-third of whom do not speak English

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when they go home at the end of the day. This is a reflection of the immigrant influx we have experienced in the past 20 years. GMU and the nearby community college (NVCC-Northern VA Community College) have each seen a dramatic increase in students from Saudi Arabia over the past 4 to 5 years. Most come as English students preparing to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) entrance exam so they can pursue an academic degree. For most of these students, this is the first time in their life they have been in the vicinity of a Christian and able to hear the Gospel. Currently over 70 percent of GMUs ELI (English Language Institute) are from Saudi Arabia with approximately 350 to 400 Saudi students at GMU.

Did you have to come up with any particular strategy or methodology or how did you envision this opportunity?

Our ministry offers ESL and American Culture classes as well as Bible discussion groups—designed to welcome not only students, but also immigrants and refugees who need to improve their listening/ speaking skills. We encourage home hospitality by our volunteers and church members as this gives a wonderful opportunity for international guests to see how Christian marriage and family gets expressed in its natural everyday setting.

The widest entry point is by offering international new comers an opportunity to practice the English language. For some it is a survival tool in order for job promotion or communication with their child's teacher in school. Because it's a necessary aspect of living here, especially for those who choose to come as immigrants, the best point of connecting is through language and culture classes and we offer both. Many churches or church-based programs offer only conversational English classes, which we have done for 30 years.

Then about 15 years ago we began to offer American culture, customs and values classes and because language is tied to culture and it helps people feel comfortable, we also include everything about the holidays. They see decorations in the local mall and we give them the spiritual and religious context to secular TV advertising or displays in stores. We also teach them the highs and lows of what it is to come and live in a culture where prejudice is still real and where racism still exists. It may not exist necessarily based on color of skin, but it may be manifested in other ways because of limited language. Something as simple as knowing how to develop friendships and relationships with neighbors can be very difficult in an unknown culture.

The expression that we have heard a number of times from the international community is that they feel invisible. That is a terrible way to describe oneself. You are connected with people who walk by you but ignore you—even neighbors.

What are the obstacles that you have faced and how have you addressed them?

One of the biggest obstacles is that the international neighbors we seek to reach are sometimes invisible to the larger church family. My desire is to see the local church become a more accurate reflection of the local population and not just by attending, but by serving and finding places of leadership within the staff and lay leadership structures. In order for this to happen, it requires both the invitation and encouragement of the leadership and the willing participation of the internationals who seek to find their place in a majority church. There is a need for the western church to grow in its understanding of how we can offer genuine hospitality (as well as receive it) as we develop cross-cultural relationships.

When seeking connection with the local school, university or college international student some encounter gatekeepers who limit access to any list of names or countries. Since a number of Christian groups in churches have given the appearance of conditional friendship with international students and it's been interpreted that their singular goal is for proselytizing, there is cause for resistance on many local campuses.

We must earn the right to be trusted; to be seen that we offer unconditional friendship and assistance. We must become as a servant both to the international student office staff as well as the students. The nice thing about student ministry is if you meet and befriend one, it doesn't stop there. The one has classmates or lab-mates or housemates, and if you extend friendship to one, they usually will come to an invitation with 2 or 3 or more.

Our best advertisement has been folks who have been involved in our programs who return to their country and tell colleagues who are coming here to look up this program – that they will welcome you, meet you, serve you. That's something we have been very grateful for. Yes, the official channels

100 languages

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may be resistant to a church and their ministry trying to establish relationships or connections with international students, but the internal challenge, I think, is in some ways even more difficult.

The desperate need for our churches is to be hospitable and to create a culture of hospitality that is beyond our comfort zone. It is really easy for us to be generous and hospitable at a level that is convenient and comfortable for us.

Our perspective is that ministry is messy and it is not convenient. If we are going to invest in peoples' lives, we need to know that crises will not occur between 9 and 5 and that sometimes the needs are overwhelming. You do not understand how to respond



to someone who is nearly homeless or whose family is under terrible stress. It's difficult to help someone who has not just overwhelming needs, but language and culture challenges also.

The great need for our churches is to learn to be a culture of hospitality. We need to welcome people just as they are and commit ourselves to long-term, genuine, authentic friendship. We tell our volunteers that most of the internationals come our way if and when problems surface. We may be able to help them find a doctor or a dentist or a dining room table or something that's immediate or short term. But if it's relational, or job related, or something beyond our capability, we probably are not going to be able to solve the problem.

We cannot put it on ourselves to be their rescuer. But the one thing we can do is not let them suffer alone. We just need to walk with them, to pray with them and to pray for them and then over time some of those needs will be met. It's helpful to the degree that we can connect with and learn what public services are available for families that are in crisis. Ultimately, however, we must realize that the Lord has brought this person to us to love and to befriend, not to make them rich or successful, not to make them something that they might hope and dream for. We are brought to them to offer something that is of greater value – and that is companionship.

What are the most transferable principles that you have identified?

Everyone has a story to tell—few are given the time and space to share who they really are. One of the greatest gifts we can offer our international guests is the gift of restored dignity—where we are willing to take the time to get to know them, and offer authentic friendship—not just another invitation to another class or church program.

Big is not necessarily better. It's important to work to see people move from the total stranger that they are the first time they walk in the door to becoming an acquaintance where their name is known. Over time and shared experiences they become a friend to the point, where we even see them and they see us as extended family members.

In that sense I don't think size is the best matrix to measure a ministries success program. I have had a number of conversations with local pastors. They see that our program has been established for

a number of years with a facility and staff, which has been dedicated for this ministry, and I must remind them that you don't have to be like us to be effective. If you have

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half a dozen people in your church that are intentional and crossing cultures for Christ with their neighbours and co workers and those people choose to come and be a part of fellowship/dinner or an event that will transform your church.

Consistently pray for your volunteers that, first the Lord would bring people with hungry hearts. There are more internationals in the local community than we could ever service so our prayer is that the Lord will bring us those that we can help, but who also are in some ways preconditioned and prepared by the Lord to hear the gospel. To encounter a Christian and to respond, we just pray the Lord brings us people with hungry hearts and He does that. He loves to answer that prayer. The second prayer is that the Lord will raise up our co laborers and ministry partners either from within our church or from other local churches that share our faith and our values. The absolute best people in terms of offering authentic Christian friendship are those who have either lived or studied abroad and have been a beneficiary of hospitality in their host country.

Another principle is that of extending an invitation for someone to come to a Christmas or Easter or Thanksgiving event. It might be within our comfort zone but for the increasing number of Muslim students and professionals (attending an event at

church) may be beyond their comfort zone. We can say just as much, and perhaps more ministry can take place around the dining room as around the Lord's Table. Let's do that. Let's invite them where they are comfortable even if it is a bit of a stretch for us at times to open our heart and our home and the awkwardness that might come when we are entertaining folks from different cultures. Home-based ministry and hospitality can accomplish so much more... sometimes more than an event at a church.

If you were starting all over again is there something that you might do differently?

Our ministry has always been people driven, not program driven; however, that is a different approach from the church that sometimes measures success in terms of numbers, baptisms, and money contributed rather than growing relationships, transformed lives over time (years if need be), and the sharing of self and talents of service, helps, and witness. My goal—if I had the opportunity—would be to aim to be an international church, not to be a church with an international ministry. Across the board there would be the desire that on every level we would aim to be a multinational multi-ethnic church in our staffing, in our lay leadership, in our greeters, in our choir members.

The goal should not be just to get internationals to come and worship, but for those who are believers to find where they can serve and where they can contribute

1/3 of students do not speak English at home

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their gifts. For those who are new believers to find that they are not only welcome in the family but also needed in the family. In order to help the family be effective to the community, and to see that with our encouragement or support or resources or backup, these (Iranian) believers are going to be much more effective reaching (Iranians)



than we may be able to do. Whatever the ethnicity or the language of the group, we need to say that we need your help to reach others. You can build bridges and you can help us build bridges with your partnership.

How can a church learn about immigrant communities around them?

I think the best way to envision both the need and opportunity for the future transformation of the local church in a culturally changing community is to “go back to school”—have parents of school age children report who is represented in their child’s classroom, go to local school plays, musical performances, graduations and see who attends, go to local soccer fields on Saturdays and see who is populating the youth league soccer teams, take a prayer walk on a local college campus and see the nations that are there. Also, drive around and see what local international grocery stores are popping up in strip malls, walk through the local mall or DMV and see who is shopping or seeking to get a driver’s license.

What have you learned about the immigrant communities around you?

Some of them are easier to access than others. Some of them sense a greater need for integration into American mainstream than others. I think two of the most difficult groups to figure out how to penetrate are the South Asian Indians because they already speak English though they might not be easily understood because of the strong accent. They might not think that they would benefit from the language class so that’s not necessarily what they are looking

100 thousand

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for. And for South Asians who have been here for so long that there is already a well-established subculture. So it is a difficult group to find an entry point.

Another group would be the Saudis. This is where the church needs a wakeup call. Missionaries have never been able to go to

Saudi Arabia and likely will never be able to go. God in His providence has allowed nearly 100,000 Saudi students to study in majority Christian countries. This is the first time in their life to meet a Christian and hear the gospel. They may or may not come to a church and they may not be comfortable with the matters of faith within a group of other Saudis. But they have questions and we all know the stories of the Lord using dreams and visions to quicken an awareness of many Muslims, as we have seen in this ministry as well. Christians could see this opportunity to become an authentic friend of the Saudi person of the same gender. (That would be another principle point as well in terms of ministry: that most effective ministry is done man-to-man, woman-to-woman.) Whether they embrace Christ during the time here or not, they can certainly return to their country with a much more open heart and mind to who Jesus is and who his followers are. The Kings Scholarship has been extended to 2020 so we have a window in which to work and certainly the numbers will continue to go up. One of my prayers is that a Christian will embrace these Saudi students and professionals who are coming here.

What is your most compelling success story?

Dr. X. Several years ago we met a Chinese doctor who came to the US to present a professional paper at a medical conference. While in the US he visited his sister who was involved in our ESL program. We invited him to join us for English and Bible classes – and he eagerly accepted. In the months he visited his sister we learned that he had plans to defect and seek asylum in the US. Once he gained his green card, he would send for his wife and son so they could also come and enjoy the taste of freedom and opportunity he was experiencing. However, 2 weeks before the end of his visa and decision to apply for asylum, he came and shared with us that he had decided to go back to his family and country.

When asked “why”—he shared he came to the US looking for “freedom”, but he found something better—“forgiveness.” He couldn’t take freedom back to his family, but he could take the message of God’s forgiveness back to his loved ones and he did. He lives in a part of China that is known for much political/social instability due to a large Muslim population and on his days off from the hospital he goes to the very poor villages around the city, offers them free medical care, shares the love of Christ with

these Muslim neighbors and has seen God do miracles of healing. When the government offered him a very prestigious job promotion to another city, he turned down the offer—he knew he was needed where he was. In many ways, this medical doctor has become an apostle to some of the least reached and neglected people in his own country.

It’s a great experience to be able to think about him and the time he had with us. It was only six months – a relatively short period of time compared to the opportunities that we have for students who are in a multiyear graduate program or something of that sort. But God had plans for him and he continues to work through his heart and his life. It is very exciting, and there are a

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number of other stories that I could share. On our 20th anniversary 10 years ago, we put together a testimony booklet of some of these stories.

How has the Lord used this outreach to change you, your church?

I have learned that I can be part of cross-cultural missions that has a global impact by engaging my local international neighbors. I think our local churches are slowly beginning to see that change is happening around them, but have not yet seen change happen to them. I think the most effective change a local church can have in terms of cross-cultural ministry is twofold:

- 1) Love and welcome the language challenged by offering ESL classes and perhaps providing a first language service/ Bible study group for the adults.



2) Work hard to help the Sunday School teachers/youth directors and teens to become a reflection of their local schools – where bi-lingual/bi-cultural classmates can be genuinely welcomed into the life of the church. As they grow up in the US, they will

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embrace the majority culture, very possibly marry outside their heritage, and will want a church that will welcome their racially/culturally mixed family.

Some churches simply want to welcome the international to come and be a part of them as long as they become like the majority

and that they leave their cultural distinctive at the door. I don't believe that represents heaven very well. Instead of assimilation the goal of the church should be that people are welcome to come as believers and to bring their flavor—bring their spiritual and cultural spices—and to let that be reflected in the worship and ministries of the church, so that the church is going to change. If it doesn't change it will become increasingly irrelevant within the next generation.

I think those that are the backbone of the church family right now, that are paying to keep the lights on and staff paid, are late 50s on up. We are an aged congregation, and not many younger families are coming to our churches. We are not attracting international younger families to the degree we should. There is always a place for a first language ethnic church whether its Spanish, Chinese or whatever might be. It's a place for the language and the social support that is provided by a first language immigrant church. But an immigrant church is really only effective for 3 generations. By the time the grandchildren come along they have adapted so completely to an American worldview and outlook, that they no longer speak the language or eat the food of the grandparents. They are forward looking and not heritage backward looking. When they are looking for romance it's not always what their parents or grandparents would want for them.

We will have an increasing number of biracial families that won't fit in a first language church. The majority church must change to welcome biracial families because

that is the future of our population. We must think about how to extend a welcome, not just as a biracial family, but also to the blend of foods and music and culture and anything else that they might want to bring with them. I think that will only enrich our church, and other local churches.

For many in the majority, that's going to be a real, uncomfortable change. There again, as a people we are generous as long as it is convenient and comfortable for us. I know that is stereotyping, but I think as a church we don't understand what sacrificial service is and that is an area that we need to grow in.

I would love to see churches with international believers who have the gifts of leadership and vision, to not only welcome them to share their gifts, but encourage them to share. Many of the internationals that we have met over the years are more hesitant to find their place in the church. They need to be encouraged; they need to know that we don't just want them here we need them. We need the perspective of internationals: We need their contribution not financially, as much as their talents, their gifts, their visions, their ability to contribute ideas, to help us be a more relevant church.

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