



On International Students

Over 8,000 international students ages 12-24 study in Kentucky each year. The majority of these students are coming from China, India, and Saudi Arabia. Most people in these countries have not only never heard the gospel, but rarely even met a Christian. When students from these countries and others, come to the USA for college, this is a prime opportunity to share the gospel.

The **Twelve24 Initiative** of the Kentucky Baptist Convention is a movement to help churches reach students from the ages of 12 to 24 on every campus. This includes international students. On our campuses today, it is estimated that 95% of the students (American and international) would say they are not a practicing Christian.



Thus, churches are needed to see campuses as their mission field. For the Twelve24 Initiative, this includes middle and high school as well as college campuses. In regard to the international element of this initiative, the goal is not only to lead international students to Christ, but also to equip them as missionaries before they return home.

Brett Martin leads the KBC international student ministry. His desire is to help churches grasp that through ministry with international students, Kentucky Baptists have the potential to be a catalyst in the sharing of the gospel with unreached people in other nations. He explains, "If a student from a country with little access to the gospel comes to Kentucky, is welcomed by a Kentucky Baptist church, comes to faith in Christ, is equipped as a missionary, then returns home to share the gospel and start a church, Kentucky Baptists have had a part in taking the gospel to that place and people. Our desire is for every Kentucky Baptist to catch the vision of international missions through ministry to international students."

Sandi McDowell, First Baptist Church of Richmond, works with international student ministry at Eastern Kentucky University. Thanksgiving is a good time to introduce students to a special American holiday. It is also an opportunity to share the Christian perspective on both Thanksgiving and Christmas. At EKV, students are invited to a traditional dinner of turkey and dressing with all the side dishes. Tates Creek Association churches decorate and help provide the meal.

At the Thanksgiving gathering, McDowell invited students to sign up if they were interested in being in an American home during Thanksgiving and/or Christmas. Last year about 20 students wanted to do this. Families

from several churches wanted to connect with students and there were enough homes for everyone. Outings for the students were as different as the families that hosted. Each had a wonderful experience with their students.

After the holidays, additional outings with students included sledding with hot chocolate, shopping trips, site seeing, etc. Families that connected with students planned movie nights and other family gatherings. As relationships have grown, gospel conversations flow naturally.

McDowell is working to engage more churches from Tates Creek Association in the ministry with international students. Welcoming events held when the students first arrive in August include meeting students at the airport, showing them the community, taking them to the university, and providing linens for those who arrive without them. Some students arrive without a coat and may not have the funds to purchase one.

WMU groups have made hospitality baskets to give to students. These include anything that might make their stay a little more comfortable. International students generally arrive with only what will fit in a couple of suitcases. The majority will not have transportation and are dependent on others for an opportunity to get off campus.

Sandi speaks at churches to make them aware of the ministry to international students. She offers several ways of getting involved: helping to host the Thanksgiving dinner, collecting linens, making hospitality baskets, providing rides from the airport, having students in homes for meals, and hosting students for holidays and times when dorms are closed.

Brett Martin tells of a family in Kentucky who hosted an international student and had questions such as "Who is Jesus?" and "Why did He have to die?" This student even told the family, "I want to treat my future wife and children the way you treat yours, not the way my culture treats theirs."

Martin says, "The KBC consists of 2,400 churches who cooperate together to reach Kentucky and the world for Christ. One would think Kentucky and the world would be two different ministry locations, but with God



Sandi McDowell poses with international students at the International Student Conference

bringing the nations to us, we see that one can reach the world by simply walking out the front door. You can impact the world by stepping onto a campus. Now you can impact the world by simply inviting students into your home.”

Prior experience interacting with cultures is not required to participate in the Twelve24 Initiative with international students. To get started, Martin urges Kentucky Baptists to pray for international students and for more people to serve in this ministry. He encourages churches who want to get started to connect with a regional campus missionary to learn more about the needs and opportunities.

Churches who are engaging in International Student Ministry testify to the impact of this work. Todd Martin (no relation to Brett Martin) got his start in international student ministry with the North American Mission Board (NAMB) as a US/C-2 missionary. He assisted local churches in the Lexington area and from that beginning, Ashland Avenue Baptist Church approached him about continuing his work on their staff as a missionary to international students. Todd’s wife, Anca, is an integral part of Connexion International, Ashland Avenue’s international student ministry. She is from Romania and now leads Bible study for international women.

Each week Ashland Avenue has church members who invite students to Sunday morning activities, provide rides, and have lunch with the students afterwards. After morning worship, there is a small group that is designed to help international students explore the truths of the Bible in a discussion format. No background knowledge of the Bible is required to participate and facilitators seek to explain the gospel in language that is comfortable for those who speak English as a Second Language.

Each Wednesday night, Anca Martin leads the international women’s Bible student, and a men’s Bible study was started this past January. In collaboration with other churches in Lexington and with the help of Baptist Campus Ministry (BCM), there is a dinner and conversation night for students every Monday. The ministry also helps with airport pickups, shopping trips, baby showers, out-of-town trips, and other types of ministry. Each Thanksgiving, they host an international student Thanksgiving dinner that usually includes about 400 people from about 30 different nationalities. Each

table is hosted by believers who share Christian hospitality and are able to share their thankfulness for what God has done for them through Christ.

Todd Martin says that Connexion International is often able to stay in touch with students and scholars when they return to their home countries. One professor who came to faith was the head of the English literature department at her university. Upon returning to her school, she was able to share biblical truth with her classes whenever there were biblical illustrations in the literature.

Anca Martin recently received a message from a student who had returned home saying that she had just become a believer. This student was not at all interested in Christianity when she came to Kentucky, but the kindness of believers and the message of God’s word over time had changed her heart and mind. “She is a very thoughtful lady,” said Anca, “and considered carefully the cost of following Christ. Though she is no longer here, God has brought her into contact with a wonderful Chinese Christian couple who are continuing to invest in her life.”

Two Kentucky students were recently able to visit a Japanese student who had become a believer before returning home. Her mother threatened suicide if she did not discontinue her involvement with Christianity. But this student’s faith has held strong and she committed to follow through with baptism.

Another student from China came to faith and then, about a year later, her husband also became a believer. This couple decided to stay in the USA. After having a baby, her mother came to visit and was able to see the Christian way of life and hear the teachings. She became a believer. Later the husband’s mother started reading the Bible and listening to sermons online after seeing the difference in her son. She has also become a believer.

Brett Martin encourages churches to reach out to international students. “In so doing, your church could reach, teach, and send an international student to plant churches where there are none, all around the world.” Pray for international students as they adjust to life in the United States. Pray that they will hear and understand the gospel while they are here. Pray for laborers to be sent out into the harvest, coming from your local church.

For more information on ministry to international students, contact Brett Martin at 502-489-3351 or email: Brett.Martin@kybaptist.org.

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