

WHAT IS CIH?

What student doesn't look forward to Christmas break? For many it's their first chance to go home after a long semester at school. It's a chance for them to relax and catch up on sleep! It's a chance to be with family and friends, eat home cooked meals, and share in the celebrations and traditions of Christmas.

For most international students, Christmas is a very lonely time. Many can't afford to return to their home countries, they have been separated from their families for a long time, the dormitories are empty and sometimes closed, and there is no one around to explain the meaning of Christmas.

Christmas International House (CIH) is a nation-wide ecumenical-based program which provides friendship and hospitality to international students during two weeks of the Christmas holidays. International students finally have the opportunity to visit a home, experience American family culture and Christmas traditions!

More and more churches and communities which see the value of cross-cultural interaction are getting involved with CIH. Congregations are finding joy in sharing the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and in sharing God's love with people from all around the world. Through the generous hospitality and financial support of these churches, civic groups, American hosts, and volunteers, international students have an incredible opportunity to:

- See a different part of the country than where they are going to school

- Discover the business of a big city, or enjoy a quiet rural area

- Participate in an American family life for two weeks

- Amend false impressions of Americans and our way of life

- Eat home cooked meals!

- Learn about and experience Christianity and the Christmas celebration

- Share their own culture and foods with their host and other international students

- Meet students from around the world, some of whose nations may even be hostile towards one another.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS?

765,000 students from around the world – their country's best and brightest – come to the US to study each year. Many of these students obtained government grants and visas, others had to compete for a scholarship, still others are trying to pay their own way. They are determined to improve themselves and their country by coming to America to study. These international students have aspirations to become Prime Ministers, Cabinet Members, lawyers, educators, scientists, politicians, and religious leaders.

Many feel tremendous pressure to succeed and when their studies do not go well at first, they become anxious and depressed. Most are not fully prepared for American collegiate life and suffer culture shock. Language may be a barrier to making friends and participating in school events. So many new and perplexing sights, sounds, customs, and mannerisms may make them homesick and feel lonely.

Their experiences in our schools and communities will shape their minds and hone their skills, which could change the course of history. Their experiences with American people and Christian homes will shape their hearts and challenge their values.

Just as these students believe that one person CAN impact the world, so does CIH and we invite you to be part of a life that could impact the world.

MISSION OF CIH:

CIH believes that despite diverse manners of dress, accent, religion, age, skin color, level of education or political ideologies, everyone stands together as one human family. While sponsored and predominantly funded by churches, it is important to note that CIH is a friendship and hospitality program, not an evangelizing program. We believe our faith is modeled through our actions, friendship, hospitality, and love for strangers.

HISTORY OF CIH

Christmas International House began in 1965 when Harry F. "Pete" Petersen, Assistant Minister at First Presbyterian Church in Huntington, West Virginia suggested to his congregation that there was a need for housing international students over the Christmas holiday. He and his wife sent letters to colleges and universities east of the Mississippi River to invite international students to come to West Virginia for the holidays. That first year, they hosted 180 students in their church! With such an overwhelming response by the students, Reverend Petersen was convinced that the program was desired by the students and was a mission opportunity to show 'hospitality to the foreigner among us' (Deut. 10:18)

Seeing the enthusiastic response of both the students and the hosts, the Board of World Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States – then located in Nashville – decided to expand and coordinate the program to other interested communities and students. In 1966, seven churches in other states joined the program and in 1967, a total of 14 churches participated. Eventually, the program spread nationwide and now consists of over 30 participating cities with the headquarters located in the AMIS Office in Atlanta, Georgia. At its peak, 1,500 students were hosted across the nation. More than 40,000 International students have participated in the program since 1965 with 20,000 turned away due to lack of space. A number of the students are "repeats" as they realize the joy of lasting, other-than-academic friendships made through this contact.

PROGRAM – For the duration of the Christmas holidays, each host community plans a program of activities for its group of students. Accommodations are provided in private homes or in group housing. Opportunities are made for the students to know the local families in their homes and businesses through shared meals and parties, joint sightseeing and daily excursions. Students in a Florida Christmas International House may spend the holidays swimming, those in Pennsylvania skiing.

Many of the host communities are local churches and through Christmas International House, the congregations gain the chance to know personally, people from other parts of the world and to express their "love for the sojourner." Some of the students are Christian; many are not. Christmas International House is a program of hospitality and friendship rather than an evangelizing program. Dialogue and exchange of ideas characterizes the program rather than efforts to change views and beliefs.

One long-time observer of this program has said, "In these days of 'global village' and internationalization of the Christian mission, the Christmas International House program provides one of the most effective and important channels for grass roots experience in education for mission. The extent of the program is indeed amazing when one considers all the people in the local churches and communities who are personally involved and continue to maintain these

personal ties long after the actual event. It provides a real handle where our church members can actually take hold and give of themselves in personal relationships which involved the whole world.” Many church members begin to experience Christmas in a new meaningful way.

FINANCES – When a community agrees to sponsor a Christmas International House, it agrees also to cover the local expenses of its group, including room, board and some entertainment. The participating students pay a modest fee to the NCIH Headquarters in Atlanta, GA. Students are also responsible for their transportation to and from the local community and some local sightseeing costs.

ADMINISTRATION – Christmas International House has its Coordinating Office within the Atlanta ministry with International Students, Inc. (AMIS). AMIS is a Christian Organization of friendship and hospitality with International Students that has served the Atlanta, GA Community since 1978. Since 1973, CIH was operated from Atlanta and moved under the umbrella of AMIS in 2001. The Coordinating Office is responsible for the notification of over 500 foreign student advisors and chaplains on college and university campuses about available hosting communities. It promotes the enlistment of new host programs and advises interested communities. The host programs gain suggestions and ideas through a program manual and other materials developed in the thirty-eight year experience of Christmas International House.

An International student may indicate three choices on the application form, and is then assigned by the Registration Office to a particular program. Then the assigned hosts forward, through the Registration Office, information about arrangements as well as words of welcome to the students coming to their community.

The National Christmas International House Committee (accountable to the AMIS Board of Directors) meets periodically throughout the years. An Advisory Council representing local host programs and several participating groups meets in February or March of each year to review student and community evaluations to the previous year’s program and to make plans for the coming year’s Christmas International House.

AMIS carries the bulk of the program administration. At least seven denominations have cooperated in planning and participation in programs throughout the country. One of our hopes is that there will be more sponsorship as each year many students are turned away because there are not enough spaces in the programs.

INVITATION – Mission Committees, Peacemaking Committees, and Outreach Committees in your local congregations and community organizations are invited to consider this program as a mission ministry and a peacemaking event in the life of your local congregation and community. In the 21st century and after

9/11/01, we are called upon as the people of God to be peacemakers as Christians and citizens of the USA. We must lead the world in global understanding of cultures, religions, languages and human relationships based on dignity and respect of all people. Friendship and hospitality through Christmas International House during the Christmas holiday will help our people to experience our small global village on a 1-1 basis through love, acceptance, justice and peace.

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