

CHRISTMAS INTERNATIONAL HOUSE

PURPOSE AND HISTORY - Christmas International House is a program providing hospitality to international students during the Christmas holidays. For many students, Christmas is a lonely time when the student has no place to go when dormitories close and they are unable to return home for Christmas. Any international student or scholar (non-immigrants, over 18 years of age) who is currently enrolled in a US College or University is invited to participate.

Christmas International House began in 1965 when the Reverend Harry Petersen, former missionary to Taiwan and Nigeria, invited international students to spend the Christmas holidays at the First Presbyterian Church in Huntington, West Virginia. 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. Since its beginning with one church and some one hundred and eighty (180) students in 1965, Christmas International House has mushroomed. There have been programs in twenty-four (24) states with as many as sixty (60) host communities participating. About 400 to 700 students participate in the program each year, and approximately 40,000 have been hosted in the 47 years of Christmas International House. 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 single students pay a \$125.00 registration fee. Families and married couples pay a \$150.00 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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