

Handout

IFI – Hosting Internationals for Holiday Dinner
Presented by Gene Greene

Thanksgiving & Christmas 2012

First of all, when you accept this opportunity to host students, commit to praying that God will use this time in a meaningful way to draw these students to Himself. This usually starts with establishing a relationship with them that can extend well beyond this holiday.

Something to keep in mind: Your home may be the very first American home these international students have ever entered.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Matt. 25:40 (NIV)

Types of Meal Settings

- **Immediate Family Setting** – Your spouse, children and a couple of students or some variation of this theme.
- **Extended Family Setting** – Where you may have a couple of students join your traditional family dinner. Often includes the grandparents, aunts & uncles, brothers & sisters, and your children
- **Dinner Planned Primarily for Students** – This is great for individuals or couples who have no local family or just want to get more involved with internationals.

DETAILS COMMON IN ALL THESE SETTINGS

Pre-Dinner Contact

If you have been assigned students (hopefully minimum of 2), we suggest you contact them as soon as possible either by phone or e-mail to:

- Introduce yourself to them,
- Let them know the schedule for Thanksgiving Day
- Arrange for their transportation.
- Find out if the students have any special dietary restrictions.
- Inquire if they need to be back to the campus by a certain time.
- Let them know you are looking forward to meeting them.

Put the students at ease –

- Name tags are always a good idea...for the students and the Americans. You may even want to write the name phonetically for hard-to-pronounce names. Don't be afraid to ask them to repeat it until you have it down.
- If you can, try to learn the student's names prior to the day of the dinner.
- Give them a tour of your home.
- Students will often ask if they can help in the kitchen. They will feel like they have contributed. Try to reserve some tasks that they can easily handle.
- Children are also great at putting students at ease.
- Pets can go either way. Some internationals have strong fears of dogs or cats. IFI recommends you isolate your pets.

Cultural Differences

- **Shoes** – Many Asian cultures remove their shoes upon entering a home. You may want to let the students know that Americans tend to leave their shoes on in the house. Let them know that they are welcome to leave theirs on or remove them. We keep several sizes of slippers near the door, but this is not necessary.
- **Eating habits** – Most Americans grew up in a culture of "Don't chew with your mouth open. Don't make noise. Never let food hang out of your mouth." This is not true in many countries. Be prepared to accept this difference.
- **Gifts** – Often the student will bring a "thank you" gift, usually something from their country. Just a note, if they bring you a bottle of wine (and you don't drink wine), avoid saying something like "we are Christians and don't drink." Accept it graciously and put it aside.

Handout

IFI – Hosting Internationals for Holiday Dinner (Continued)

The Meal

- Pray before your meal in your normal manner. Before we pray, we take time to explain what we are doing (thanking God for the food He has provided and for His blessings). Keep this simple. We have never had a situation where we felt like we had offended the students or made them feel uncomfortable. They know we are Christians.
- **Serve the foods that are traditional for you.** The students want to experience our culture. Don't try to figure out what they would want to eat.
- **The mechanics of the meal.** In most American homes, all the food is put on the table and then the food dishes are passed around. Many foreign cultures pass the plates to someone who puts the food on the plates. You may need to explain this (although I can never remember if the food is passed left or right.)
- **Portions** –Most international students are not used to our portions. Don't be surprised if they take very small portions initially. Also, we tend to put our condiments on the meat. Many internationals use it as a dipping sauce.
- **Place Cards on the table are a nice touch.** This allows you to control where everyone will be setting. My wife sometimes has holiday materials available and if the students come early, she has them make the place cards for everyone. This gives them something to do while waiting for the meal to be served. Often, they take them home as souvenirs of the occasion.
- **Stretch yourself** – Since many of the students are from Asia, you might try putting some chopsticks on the table (if you have some), especially if you are not too good at using them. Let the students show you how to use them. They will get a 'kick' out of it, and you might even learn a new skill.

Conversation at the Table

In many cultures, the table is not a place for talking. You may want to ask the student about family meals in their country, explaining that this is generally a time for American families to 'catch-up' on what is going on in each other's lives. Is this similar to how it is in their families? Ask the student if they have a similar holiday in their country. If they say 'No', ask about the biggest family-oriented holiday at their home.

As the meal starts to wind down:

- **Take some time to explain the origin of Thanksgiving in America.** Most of you have a general understanding of this, but look at the materials IFI provides.
- As a follow-up and as the host, you might start things off by telling everyone why you are thankful. Keep this simple, but heart felt.
- **Go around the table and ask each person to give one thing for which they are thankful.** This can give you a little insight into what the student is thinking. Use the timing that is right for you.

Other points of conversation can include:

- **Ask where they live** (specifically). Try to have a world map or Atlas so they can show you where they live (usually before or after the meal). Show more interest than just "China". You probably knew that anyway. Have some follow-up questions like ... What kind of dwelling do they live in? Is that in the city or a rural area?
- **What do your parents do?** If they are from China, remember they have a single child policy there, although some do have siblings.
- **What are you studying** and **what do you plan to do with your education when you graduate?**
- **How long have you been in the US and at OSU?** Many have gone to an under-graduate college elsewhere in the US or even high school.
- If you have a pet, ask them if they have a pet back home.
- **Do you or your family have any religious background?**

General Comments

- **Politics** – I personally do not discuss this.
- **Avoid** anything that implies their country is anything less than the U.S.
- **Conversational English** is something most students want to practice. Allow equal exchange. Also, complement them on their English skills as appropriate.
- **Do Not** – try to evangelize these students during this initial contact. Many are involved in weekly Bible studies. Don't scare them off. If they are involved in a study, you might ask what they are studying and their thoughts on it.
- **Do Not** – Discuss persecution of Christians in their country. Most students would not know anything about this, so don't educate them on the subject.

Handout

IFI – Hosting Internationals for Holiday Dinner (Continued)

THE IMMEDIATE FAMILY SETTING & THE EXTENDED FAMILY SETTING

The Immediate Family Setting is primarily inviting internationals to join your family for a special holiday dinner. It is fairly easy to control and you have probably had practice at this with other Americans. The Extended Family Setting is about the same, only bigger. If you normally go to another family member's home for Thanksgiving, why not take along a couple of international students ... with host's permission, of course? Many of these students are from countries that have strong family bonds. They enjoy seeing how multiple generations and multiple sibling families interact.

THE DINNER PLANNED PRIMARILY FOR STUDENTS

This is the approach we have used the most where we invite only international students. We have met a number of students via airport pickups and look for a way to stay involved in their lives. Since we usually have our family dinner on Thanksgiving Day, we usually schedule this dinner for Friday or Saturday.

- **Invitations** – Make up a list of students you want to invite and send out the invitations via e-mail. Tell them that they can invite some of their friends too. We usually end up with about 20 students that accept the invitation. This would be too much work for just one couple, so recruit some other Americans to help. Work out transportation needs. Many of these students have cars and are willing to provide rides for others as well. Internationals tend to NOT be 'clock' oriented. 2:00 often means "around" 2:00, like 2:30 or 3:00. So you need to be clear.
- **The menu** – I leave the menu up to my wife and her "staff". If you can, take the opportunity to get students involved in the preparation, even a few days in advance. **Invite them to come over the evening before (Friday night) and bake pies.** This gives some extra quality time with them.
- **Communicate the schedule for the day.** Tell the students the time you will eat and how early they can arrive. The times are strictly up to you.
- **Crowd control** is sometimes an issue. There is only so much room in the kitchen, but everyone wants to talk and be with you and where the action is. Try to have some games that can be played individually or in small groups. We also keep some photo albums on the coffee table. More on this later.
- **Cleanup** – The students will want to help with cleaning off the table and doing the dishes. Let them. You may have to show them how to use the disposal or load the dishwasher.
- **Leftovers** – What is Thanksgiving without leftovers? Try to have some "throw-away" containers you can send home with them.
- **Problems** – First, we have never had a problem with the students themselves. But we did once have a problem when one "helper" tried to put all the potato peels down the disposal at once. It clogged big time right before dinner was served. If something like this happens, you do what you have to do. We took all the dishes to the backyard and rinsed them with a hose. I unclogged the sink the next morning.

Games or Other Entertainment

We try to have something for the students to do before dinner and afterward as well.

Before Dinner

We usually have some games for individuals or small teams like:

- **Tangoes** – A puzzle game for up to two teams of two people each.
- **Skill games** – Catch the ball on the end of the peg.

Note: Try to stick to games that encourage interaction of the students and family members or other American guests. A side benefit of these 'before dinner' games is that it keeps people out of the kitchen.

After Dinner

We usually have some group games. Some of our favorites include:

- **PIT** – You can play with up to 8 people and the rules are fairly simple. Strong English skills are not required. **The Lying Game** – Each player is to tell three things about themselves, two of which are true and the other is a lie. The rest of the group tries to guess which answer is the lie.
- **Farkle** – A dice game that can be played with any number of players.

Note: Any game you play should have fairly simple rules and not depend on one's knowledge of American culture. Just for fun, sometimes we establish a rule that each player must wear a hat to participate. We have quite a collection of hats including: cowboy hats, baseball caps with various logos, military hats, Santa hats, Dr. Seuss hat to name a few. The students really get into this.

Handout

IFI – Hosting Internationals for Holiday Dinner (Continued)

Pictures

Take lots of pictures. You should already have the students' e-mail addresses. Send pictures out to them and/or put them on your Facebook page, if you have one. Send them to IFI too. They always need pictures for different occasions they are promoting.

Follow-up

- **Look for ways to maintain contact with these students.** You have made a connection that can lead to a long-term relationship. If you have enjoyed this experience, say something like “We really enjoyed ourselves. Do you think we could do it again sometime?” Ask something like: “Would you like to learn how to make pumpkin pie? How about getting together next (whatever date) for a cooking lesson.
- **Be sure to follow-up with your students a day or two after the dinner.** Let them know how much you enjoyed having them in you home.
- **Sometimes the student will initiate a follow-up.** They may invite you to their apartment for some of their home-cooked food.
- **Tell your friends about your experience.** IFI can always use more volunteers in the future.

Excuses (fears) for not getting involved:

- **I have small children.** I need to wait until they get a little older.
- **I have no experience with international students.** I would be embarrassed if I couldn't understand them. They are used to this and will be very patient with you.
- **I don't know what they might like to eat.** They like FOOD! I can't think of anything we serve for Thanksgiving that an international wouldn't like.
- **I'm a little intimidated to try this on my own.** (How about joining in with someone who is already planning on having internationals for dinner? They would probably appreciate the help.)