



Building Relationships with African Students



Imagine that you grew up in a rural town, or maybe even a big city, being known and loved by a large extended family and chosen community. Your aunts and uncles live up and down your street, and you went to school with all your cousins. You didn't have to think twice about your needs because God always provided what you needed at the right moment. All that changed the moment you decided to travel abroad. You still talk to your family every day, but they don't understand what life is like in this new country, and they are unable to comprehend how to help you with the problems you have. No one is around to hold you accountable for your decisions: whether you still go to church on Sunday, or try something new that was forbidden at home. This is the reality for many international students, and African students, for whom every neighbor is no longer 'aunty and uncle'.

1. Understanding Their World

The continent of Africa comprises 54 countries and in terms of land size is larger than China, India, the Continental USA, and most of Europe. Its 3,715 people groups speak over 3,000 languages. Many experts are predicting that the next wave of international students coming to the United States may come from Sub-Saharan Africa. International student workers who are good listeners, humble, and curious are the most likely to be appreciated by African students and best suited to learn from them.

The rate of urbanization in Africa has grown steadily over the last few decades. Some students have 'home villages' where grandparents and other family members might still be living, but the student or their immediate family may have immigrated to a big city for opportunities in career, education, etc. Village or small town life is slow-paced, with

limited internet access, where every aspect of life takes place in the context of community. City life is fast-paced, filled with temptations unknown in the village context, and African cities easily compare to American cities of similar population sizes. Cairo, Egypt and Lagos, Nigeria are each about the size of New York City, and Washington, D.C. combined. Students feel unmoored from their tight-knit families and church communities when they come to the US, and this is especially substantial for students from smaller communities.

“Wherever there is an African there is religion.”

John Mbiti
Kenyan philosopher

African students treasure community and family values. Because of this, displacement from their native communities to seize opportunities in America can be overwhelming. Barriers of language, skin tone, and loneliness can make it hard to thrive in their studies, let alone to thrive in their spiritual lives.

Like many international students, African students often carry financial responsibility for friends and family back home; students may receive weekly requests for funds on top of regularly sched-

uled financial support. Be mindful of the financial burden your friends feel, especially when it comes to ministry activities with cost associated. Giving gifts that are practical like blankets and groceries could be a good addition to sentimental gifts.

2. Christianity and Spiritual Heritage

Spirituality is very important to most individuals from the African continent. African traditional beliefs have spread that the existence of God is a fact, so it is rare to meet a student from this side of the world who does not believe in God. According to [cia.gov](https://www.cia.gov), most students will have African traditional beliefs, Roman Catholicism, prosperity or word of blessing beliefs, Pentecostal faith, or Protestant faith. There are quite a few cults like Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Islam is quickly growing in many countries in Africa. Generally, the farther North in Africa someone’s country is, the more probable it is that the person is Muslim.

African traditional beliefs vary tribe to tribe, but generally contain ancestor worship, charms or amulets, and traditional healers (witch doctors). Some so-called Christians practice syncretism, where they value these beliefs to some degree while still practicing Christianity. As a note, tribes, chiefs, bride price and other traditional practices are cultural and actively practiced among Christians, but this is separate from African traditional religion. If a student you engage with brings up such practices, please take time to ask in more detail what they look like as they differ from nation to nation.

Africa has played a vibrant role in church history and is the home of several ancient kingdoms. African theologians¹ such as Tertullian of Tunisia



¹ Hinson, T. (2021, April 21). Fathers of The Reformation: Africans in The Early Church.

grappled with apologetics, and Polemics and Athanasius of Alexandria played a vital role in the early church's Trinitarian theology. In 1910, 1.4% of the world's Christians were in Sub-Saharan Africa.² In 2010, that number had increased to 23.6%, showing that engaging international students from Africa can be strategic. Additionally, Africans lead some of the largest churches in non-African countries. Once Africans hear the Gospel, catch a vision for how God can use them in His kingdom, and receive coaching, they can become powerful leaders both here in America and in their home countries for God's kingdom. Around the world. Not only are African students intellectually brilliant, but many often carry an emotional intelligence which is remarkably developed. This allows them to craft great ideas and utilize relationships to make these dreams possible.

Strong traditional values tend to leave Africans resistant to secularization, and it is unlikely to meet an African student who is atheist or agnostic. For many African students, spiritual habits like evangelism, fasting, and all-night prayer gatherings were a regular rhythm on a monthly or weekly basis. Due to these values and desires for Christian community, have we considered these students and scholars already coming to the States primed to live missionally as an answer to our prayers?

Because of the vast diversity of spirituality and beliefs, it is very important to ask someone whether they identify with a particular denomination and understand what they consider important about their faith. Some may not have a strong answer as to why they're part of a certain denomination unlike most Europeans and Americans. Even if someone identifies as a Protestant, you may find that they have never truly heard the Gospel to the point of making a decision or been given a personal opportunity to accept Jesus or be discipled in their faith.

3. Growing Together as Disciples

Though Africans can be indirect about preferences and conflict, that is not often the case when it comes to matters relating to faith and God. Don't be afraid to talk about God, the Bible and other things about Christianity. Whether an African student is a person of faith or not, they usually deeply respect people who are clear about their faith. African students are grateful for chances to further their learning about Jesus, but often need to be sought out and given the opportunity. Discipleship is one of the biggest needs within the African church, and many students don't realize their need for it at first. Be patient, kind and direct as you build your discipleship friendships.

Communicating your desire to disciple is as easy as clearly stating it and allowing them to think about it. Inviting them into different aspects of your life can further develop the bond of them trusting you to join them in their spiritual journey. Some Africans

"The problem with stereotypes is not that they aren't true, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Nigerian writer



² Pew Research Center. (2011, December). Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>



4. Building Trust

Due to a history of colonialism and racism, topics of worthiness and belonging are important to African students. Take special care to listen to their experiences and family histories around these topics, extend hospitality to these students, and work hard to build their trust. Building trust with African students may take more time. The following paragraphs discuss ideas on how to establish trust with African students.

Food is an important entryway into African cultures, and sharing a meal and cooking together can help to improve trust within relationships. Meat especially speaks love to the hearts of African men and women, just be aware if they have any dietary restrictions due to Islam. Invite them over for meals and include food (and meat!) in student meetings. You could also have a cook-off among the students. Just be aware that there's always a rivalry about which country has the best rice so be prepared for a loud, fun, and long night.

Africans like to tease each other, and there are many rivalries that they will loudly debate, often related to country pride. Loud and boisterous debate, teasing, or dancing is a good indicator that you are deepening trust with an African student. Rivalries can be found in sports: whose soccer or rugby team is the best; food: whether Nigerians or Ghanaians make the best jollof rice.

Finally, a wonderful way to build trust and relationships is to invite African students to do life with you. Find out what a student's interests are and invite them to join you for grocery shopping, fixing your car, a sewing or craft project, and whatever else is on your to-do list. The more you build your relationships through things like attending class presentations or performances, cooking together, and more; the more directly you will see spiritual fruit and results in your African friends' lives.

prefer to do everything together, so large, formal discipleship groups could also work out well if students' schedules overlap.

A unique way to begin to contextualize the Gospel with them is to find connection points between the Christian narrative and proverbs and parables that they are already familiar with. The value of storytelling with a lingering lesson is a way often used to further connection and increase the desire for growth and trust.

The spiritual journey of Africans from rural contexts or those following syncretistic practices are deeply impacted by the fear and darkness of their beliefs. As for believers, they courageously hold fast to the power that Jesus extends to his followers such as the use of spiritual gifts. They are also more finely aware of spiritual warfare and the spiritual powers around them than the average American. Have conversations around fear & power, as well as honor & shame and guilt & innocence.

“We have eaten theology with you, will you now eat theology with us?”

Kwame Bediako
Ghanaian theologian

5. *Etiquette Reminders*

In addition to the tips dispersed through the document, here are some dos and don'ts that will help with relationships and evangelism among your African students:

DO ask questions to see if there is something your friend needs help with practically.

DO search for street views on Google of hometowns on your own or even with them to create conversation.

DO walk people halfway to where they need to go: across campus, out of your door toward their car, etc.

DO send students a message to check on them without any ministry or business agenda.

DO try using 'sir' in place of 'bro' with your guy friends to imply respect. As the relationship gains more trust or context, 'sir' may not be needed.

DO pay for your friends' expenses if you invite them for a first coffee or a meal together.

DO go and support them in other clubs they are in. You might see students leaving early or coming late to your events. Being involved in other things doesn't mean they don't consider your time precious.

DO ask for clarification about anything they have said.

DO be humble: Be quick to say you are sorry when offense is caused without adding excuses.

DO keep your friends' personal information private until they share it with other students/staff.

DO prioritize African celebrations and events as much as you would any other nation's.

DO follow up on your word while offering help or services.

DO recognize the importance of music to Africans whether in song or dance.

DON'T assume every African will feel comfortable dancing and singing in front of you.

DON'T assume African students have the same emotional baggage that African Americans have to slavery and racism. Each person's lived experience is different.

DON'T be offended if your African friend interrupts in conversation or uses sarcasm — they could finally be getting comfortable.

DON'T be offended if they don't like your pets.

