

# Cross-Cultural Education Journal



Discussions of Interest to Immigrants

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 4

OCTOBER 2004

## Faith Lutheran Church

### Who is My Intimate Friend?

*“Welcome one  
another as  
Christ welcomed  
you, for the  
Glory of God.”*

Romans 15:7

**NEGLECTING THE  
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#### Introduction

Do you have intimate friends? Such friends are those people who enrich our lives and with whom we meet to celebrate life. With how many friends can we genuinely share ourselves with total trust and confidence? Deep friendships require serious commitments of energy and usually take a long time to develop. Partly because of this and partly because of the difficulty of finding compatible friends most people have few, perhaps only three to five, truly intimate friends during their lives. Also, because people evolve and change throughout their lives, friends may grow apart and new friendships may develop.

#### Why do we Need Friends?

Human beings are social creatures. No matter how much we pride ourselves as individuals who are independent and self-sufficient, we still need to be close to someone, to meet often with him or her and to share our lives in activities and conversation. We need to feel a friend cares for us, loves us, and values our relationship. In its absence, we all long for intimate friendship. Neglecting the need for intimacy is as foolish as to pretend we can live without food.

For most people in healthy marriages, their closest friend is their spouse. Yet, it is important to have close friends of the same

sex also. A natural reluctance to reveal vulnerabilities to others may make it more difficult for men than for women to form same-sex bonds. But discussing male/female relationships with members of the same sex can help each of the marriage partners to gain perspective and enhance the partnership. Also, sometimes people need to spend time with others away from their spouses so they can maintain autonomy.

#### Definition of an Intimate Friend

What is a friend? Relationships with the people we call friends in our lives are generally at several levels and may be culture-dependent. For example, Americans might refer to acquaintances at any level as “friends.” With this definition, they might refer to those few with whom they share a deeper relationship as “good friends” or “best friends.” Acquaintances are people we see occasionally. We say “hello” to them, we discuss shallow topics with them, but we do not reveal our most intimate secrets to them. Some of our “friends” who are really acquaintances are people we work with and see every day. We may spend more of our waking time with our fellow workers than we do with our spouses and family. We may socialize with them during employee-centered activities. Because we spend so much time with them we may reveal some of our most intimate

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secrets, and we may learn of some of theirs. Yet, often our relationships with them intentionally remain mostly superficial.

We might ask ourselves what the qualities are that we desire and look for in a friend. For most people friends are trustworthy, respectful, reliable, understanding, helpful, sympathetic, tolerant of our shortcomings, and have

similar values, feelings and opinions. Friends might also be willing to make significant sacrifices for one another.

Each person might have their own list of what is important in relationships. The list could include some or all of the above attributes, and may have others. Each attribute may have varying importance to us, and the lack of one or two may actually draw us closer to our friends. For example, we may not necessarily value a friend because he or she has similar opinions. In fact, we may value a friend because he or she has opinions opposite to our own on some topics, but we are willing to discuss our differences respectfully with each other and learn from one another.

The primary attribute of our friends is that we generally enjoy being with them and we have good times with them. We feel comfortable sharing ourselves with them and we benefit from them sharing themselves with us. One of the greatest benefits of having friends is that each person brings his or her own individual background of experiences into relationships and we are given opportunities to expand our knowledge and potential sources for finding satisfaction in our lives.

### **Problems in Developing New Friendships**

Immigrants coming to America may find obstacles in developing friendships. Foremost among these may be a lack in the ability to communicate in English if the immigrant does not have a command of that language. On the other hand, immigrants may still be capable of developing friendships within their own ethnic community, but find it difficult to expand their relationships to Americans and people from other cultures. Cultural differences and a lack of mutual understanding may inter-

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fere. Individual personalities of immigrants and others may play a role. Some people are naturally more outgoing than others. People who are not naturally outgoing may have to force themselves to feel somewhat uncomfortable for a while as they meet new people.

Some of the difficulties in forming friendships may come from the attitudes of the immigrant. Some may come from the attitudes of the potential friend.

An informal survey of immigrants has revealed that many are so involved in their work and family that they do not have time or energy to go beyond those relationships. This may be especially common for people who are running a business such as a restaurant or a store. Because it would take so much effort to become involved with others, they do not feel it is worthwhile and they try to find satisfaction within their existing group of people. Sometimes they are successful at finding satisfaction, but this limits their opportunities to broaden their knowledge and interests.

People working in an office, laboratory, manufacturing facility or other place of business may find that they and their co-workers are too busy to have meaningful interchanges with one another during the day and at quitting time they are tired and just want to go home. Developing close friendships with co-workers can create problems later. Two co-workers may develop an intimate friendship but if one is promoted, envy and bitterness can occur in the other person. The one who becomes the subordinate employee of the other may feel that the friend in the superior position receives more credit for jobs successfully completed. Continuing the friendship may become difficult. In addition, in the case of a boss/worker relationship, at some point a boss may be forced to lay-off or fire his or her friend. The boss feels badly; the employee feels angry; the relationship suffers.

Sometimes, the ability to make friends is directly related to the cultural influences and attitudes of people in the area from which the immigrant came. An informal survey of Chinese immigrants in the Seattle, Washington area has revealed this to be so. The following discussions are specific to Chinese, but the general comments can apply to other immigrants also.

Immigrants from Hong Kong and other areas in

**IMMIGRANTS COMING TO AMERICA MAY FIND OBSTACLES IN DEVELOPING FRIENDSHIPS**

Southeast China may have come here through family ties with previous immigrants. They might be less educated than some of their fellows from other parts of China, and they live mostly in the Chinatown area of the city. They form close relationships with one another and others in that community; however, that limits opportunities for them to extend their friendships outside the community.

Many immigrants from Northern China have achieved a high level of education. They have come to the USA totally from their own efforts and hard academic work. Most of their family back home may be living in poverty and demand financial support from them. These people may avoid forming any kind of community; their relationships are “like sand”; they care only for themselves and the relatives they left in China. Often these people feel that it was not easy to immigrate to the USA and they have paid a big price to achieve what they have here today (house, car, job, etc.). Friendship is not important to them.

One factor that can interfere in developing friendships is that a person may be struggling to maintain their immigration status. They are so involved with this that they do not have time to seek friends.

Some have no desire to stay here. These people are ambitious and believe that after gaining work experience or otherwise furthering their education and professional development in America, they will have more opportunities to build their careers in China. They do not feel any need to make friends here. They may be driven by the desire to make money to demonstrate prestige, dignity and success.

People coming to America from Taiwan may have a tendency to form ties only with other Taiwanese. The difference in political background between those from mainland China and those from Taiwan probably influences the two groups.

Some people may be emotionally unstable and have a hostile attitude to those around them. They fear relationships because they may be revealed, what they consider, to be inferior to others. In North America, personality disorders are becoming a severe problem for some Chinese immigrants and an outstanding characteristic within their communities. This may be caused by a lack of understanding of American culture, social welfare and political systems and manners of communication. To preserve feelings of value and dignity, some people try to maintain their native culture; this only accentuates their alienation from the

people around them.

For those who immigrated from the oppressive political and cultural environment of China, a certain amount of paranoia may have been beneficial to survive. But in the freer society of America, paranoia is considered to be a mental distortion and predisposes the Chinese immigrants to personality disorders that further interfere with their relationships. Many try to hide their true feelings and pretend to be happy, vital and strong. But they suffer turmoil within.

The inability to make friends may have more to do with whom the immigrant is trying to meet than with himself or herself. Language problems may contribute because some people from other cultures do not understand the immigrant and do not want to try.

An immigrant may approach someone who has lived in America for a long time and be rebuffed. The immigrant may feel discouraged. However, the other person may already have so many people in his or her life that it is difficult to make time for more. As with immigrants, people who have been here for a long time may also be engrossed in their work and families.

In some cases, the other person may suffer from prejudices and does not want to get involved with the immigrant for that reason. This is usually rare. But even if it is true, the immigrant should not take the rejection as a personal affront. There are many people in the world. We cannot make them all accept us for what we are.

**MAKING FRIENDS IS NOT ALWAYS EASY. BUT WE WILL BE REWARDED IF WE TAKE CARE IN SELECTING THOSE WE CALL OUR FRIENDS.**

### **Solutions to Developing New Friendships**

Sometimes the immigrant will just have to make overtures to others to develop friendships. This might be as simple as inviting a neighbor to one’s home for tea or coffee, or for dinner. Usually, if the other person accepts the invitation, they will probably ask: “What can I bring?” A gracious host might suggest something simple.

If language is a difficulty, the immigrant can look for opportunities to enroll in English Language Learner or ELL classes (also called English as a Second Language or ESL classes). Often immigrants can find “Talk Time” classes such as those conducted at Faith Lutheran Church in Redmond, Washington, local libraries or other community centers, where they can

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### *Faithful people, raising up people of Faith*

If you wish opportunities to further explore what has been discussed here or additional topics of interest to immigrants and others, you might like to contact Rainbow Zeng at the address above.

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#### About Faith Lutheran Church:

Faith Lutheran Church is a caring people, who support one another's spiritual growth and who reach out to the community with Christ's love.

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practice and further develop their English language skills. In addition to helping increase their knowledge of English, such classes can provide opportunities to meet other immigrants and Americans who are open to developing friendships.

Many times friendships develop when people with common interests gather together on a regular basis. Local colleges, senior centers and community centers conduct classes that help immigrants to increase their knowledge of a subject and meet people regularly.

In addition to providing places of worship and religious education, churches quite often provide opportunities to meet people and develop friendships. The type of people immigrants meet in a church will generally have moral and ethical values that are desirable in friends. Furthermore, most people involved in churches have an openness and desire to share their faith with other people and develop friendships. Regular church attendance allows us to spend time together with potential friends and provide opportunities for relationships to develop.

Bible references in following sentences are from the New International Version. A major precept of Christian faith is that we serve God by serving others in the community. For example, Jesus proclaims this in Matthew 25:40, "...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Thus, in

addition to finding opportunities for themselves, immigrants becoming involved in a church also help members of the church to serve God through serving them. Most important of all, in the Christian faith, we all have a friend in Jesus, and He will always be there for us as he promises in Matthew 28:40, "...I am with you always..."

#### Conclusions

Making friends is not always easy. But we will be rewarded if we take care in selecting those we call our friends. Proverbs 12:26 reminds us that "A righteous man is cautious in friendship." Opportunities for finding friends can be found if we are willing to open ourselves to others. Developing friendships requires making time and taking risks to bring other people into our lives. As we extend ourselves to meet others, we do not need to feel badly if our overtures are rejected. Everybody has his or her own agenda and a rejection should not necessarily be taken personally. If we are married, we might ask ourselves what we were looking for in choosing our spouse. Often many of the qualities we look for in a spouse are also what we desire in friends. We can look for friends in places where we find people who share a common interest. The people we meet in a church are likely to be the type we want as friends.