

Linking in with others

The fact that you've gone independently and are willing to work on your own might indicate that linking in with others is not high on your agenda, but we recommend that you take time to track down suitable people to befriend and build working relationships with. This will help you minimise the effects of culture shock and isolation, develop a local support base, and may contribute to the overall success of your ministry.

Being friendly with people generally is a good way to build local friendships. Just get to know your neighbours, or the local shopkeepers, and they may well become lasting friends. There may be an evangelistic impulse for this, but there is also a social one. Finding other foreigners in the country is easy – just go to the places they're likely to be, like well-known chains of coffee shops or an air-conditioned mall! Some of the specific people to look out for include:

Church leaders – it is important to link in to a local church, whether indigenous or international. It will provide you with a home and may bring alongside you people who can help in your ministry. The leader of an international church may be willing to take you under his/her wing, and will understand your cross-cultural challenges better, while a local pastor may be able to open doors for you into the community, though may have a very different understanding of your cultural preconceptions and may have different expectations of their role in your ministry. It is important to talk this through, and you to submit to the advice of the pastor, who will have a much better idea of what will work in his culture than you do.

Mission agencies – some agencies are willing to take independents under their wing as 'associates'. That means that while you're not a full team member, they will make resources available to you and invite you to their conferences and seminars. Don't turn your back on agencies – they often have decades of local experience and can be a massive support to you.

Other ex-pats – many mission workers avoid contact with ex-pats, which gives them a reputation for being snooty. Yet your fellow-nationals who are in the country for secular employment reasons may become good friends, be able to help you relax, and may have skills and resources to place at your disposal, particularly if you're doing something that they can buy into like working with street kids.

People of influence – in any society there are people who can get things done, whether they are politicians, police, businessmen or matriarchs. If you can get alongside such people they may be of great help to you. There is nothing inherently wrong with this; in many societies who you know is more important than what you know. But be careful – they may want something in return and you could find yourself unwillingly co-opted into a political or criminal network. They might also do things by the back door so take steps to ensure that everything they do for you is legal and above board.