

Bournemouth international student coffee bar ministry: Notes for team members

A different kind of ministry

Welcome to the world of cross-cultural ministry! One of the exciting aspects of this ministry is that you never know in which country you will end up once you walk through the doors of the Coffee Bar on an International Student Evening. It's not that you get taken to an exotic destination, but rather the exotic destination comes to you – and you can speak in English!

Working with international students can be very different from working with people from your own country and because of that we thought it would be helpful, both for you and the students, to put together some notes to act as guidelines.

Initial contact with students

Be welcoming

A smile and a warm handshake go a long way. Remember – the student arriving for the first time will be more nervous than you are!

Be sensitive

Some things that we take for granted in the UK can't be assumed when working with internationals. For example, in Britain, there would be no problem for a male to get into discussion with a female. However, in a strongly Muslim country this would be totally unacceptable.

- For this and other reasons, it is always best, where possible, for team members to form friendships with members of the same sex. (A special note to female team members – always be careful about giving your address / telephone number to a male student; this could be misinterpreted).
- Also, for similar reasons, team members need to wear appropriate dress. For example, very short or tight clothing on a woman, or shorts for either sex, would be offensive to some cultures and could send wrong signals. You may feel that this is a bit of an infringement on your liberties, but you must keep in mind that we are here to win people for Christ and to cause as few barriers as possible for those to whom we witness.
- Politics can be a sensitive subject. Never attack or criticise the politics of another country.

Be aware of embarrassments

You may find that some students feel embarrassed when trying out their English on you, especially if they have only recently come to the UK. Do your best to put them at their ease. Having a pen and paper handy to aid understanding is often helpful. Drawings help, as does a sense of humour (best used against yourself!).

Be aware of who you're talking to

You will find that quite a number of students attending the Coffee Bar are Christians. Some of these may have come from countries where they have little opportunity for teaching or fellowship and may feel discouraged and lonely. If you end up talking to a Christian all evening, please don't think of it as a wasted evening.

Building relationships

The work is essentially about building relationships with the students. They may be very lonely and disorientated – coming to a foreign land can be quite traumatic! The ministry is an excellent opportunity to show the love of Christ in a very practical way. (See Leviticus 19:34

& Hebrews 13:2)

Show genuine interest in your new student contact – ask him or her to show you how to write their name and practise saying it correctly. Use a map to locate where they're from and learn a bit about their country by reading or asking questions (All these things are really just common sense, but mean a lot to someone who is feeling homesick and friendless). You may find that that you talk to the same student(s) for several weeks. They may even come in looking especially for you!

You should soon find that your ministry among international students will go beyond Coffee Bar evenings. An invitation to your home for a meal or to meet up for a coffee, a trip to the cinema, a sporting event etc can mean a great deal. Eating together is very significant in many cultures. You may find that your friendship with certain students will continue once they have gone home through letters etc (See under 'Miscellaneous – Follow-Up'). Some friendships may last years.

It is perhaps worth saying here: Don't become discouraged if these things don't happen. Sometimes a relationship just 'gels' and sometimes it doesn't. You can be welcoming to everyone but you can't be a friend to everyone. Sometimes, too, a student may assure you they'll see you next week and you never see them again. Don't take it personally!

Two other things worth saying:

1. *Lifestyle communicates more than message* – another reason for getting to know your student friend socially.
2. *Listening is the key to building relationships*. It has been wisely said that we have been given two ears and one mouth and we should use them in that ratio!

You will soon discover that the more you put into this important ministry, the more you will receive from it.

Culture

What is culture? Basically, it's a complex mixture of customs, language, religion and value systems that shapes a lot of our behaviour and lifestyle.

It is very easy to think that we need to tell the person coming from another part of the world how we do things in Britain. That is of some value but one of the important things for us is to learn something of the student's culture. Not only does this generate conversation, but it also says to the student that we are interested in them and where they have come from, making us better equipped in communicating the truth of the Gospel in a way that will be meaningful to them.

Which culture is right? We can easily assume that the way we do things in the UK is the correct way, but that's a wrong assumption! There are things that are worth affirming in every culture, as well as things that are not – and that includes the British one! It's a good exercise to ask ourselves how much of our customs and value system stems from Biblical truth and how much from culture. Humility is useful! Culture is not just about language and customs but also about the way we think!

As you get to know students you will discover that their ways of thinking can be very similar to your own in many ways, yet at other points their thinking and understanding of things will be poles apart from yours.

Some examples:

Western

Individualistic

Business / task oriented

Dualistic world-view (sacred & secular are separate)

Yes = Yes

Non-Western

Communal / the family is all-important (This has repercussions for e.g. conversion)

People / relationship oriented

Holistic world-view (sacred & secular can't be separated)

Yes = 'Thank you for asking me. It would be very impolite of me to say 'No' so I will think about it'.

It may be helpful in looking at people's different perceptions of things, to use accents as an illustration. Often we don't realise we have an accent until we move to another part of the country where it becomes obvious. So it is with the different ways that people view things – it's only when confronted with a different way of thinking that we realise our way is not the only way.

Once we come to understand that we are products of our own environment, we will more easily be able to see and appreciate another's way of thinking and looking at the world. This can be very enriching and can help us to help students understand differences between their culture and ours. Many will experience culture shock and will need a sympathetic and understanding friend.

Beliefs other than my own – help!

Another major aspect of the student work is learning to understand other people's belief systems. Students will come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. Some may practise their religion, others may be more passive, and still others will have rejected the beliefs of their parents or no longer find them of relevance to them.

Respect their beliefs

Whatever a person's position may be, the team members must respect their beliefs rather than rubbish them. Always bear in mind that the only reason we are Christians is because God has lifted the veil from our eyes (2 Cor 4:4). It is God alone who brings about someone's salvation; we are only His instruments. In His time, God is able to reveal Himself to those whom we view as the most unlikely candidates for conversion(!)

Read about their beliefs

It is important for team members to gain an understanding of other faiths. The majority of students studying in Bournemouth will come from one of three religious backgrounds – Buddhism (South East Asia), Islam (Middle East and Turkey) and Roman Catholicism (much of Europe and South America). That is not to say that these are the only religions you will encounter or that these religions are without other connection. For example, in Taiwan, Buddhism is closely connected with Taoism (a mystical kind of occult / spiritism practice) and in Japan it is often combined with Shintoism.

As time goes on and as you get to know particular students, you may want to delve further. Periodic training events are laid on to help you and there is a recommended reading list at the end. If you would like particular help and don't know where to ask, don't be afraid to ask.

Religious Terms and Understanding

It is at this point that we, as team members, can least afford to assume that the students will understand some of the Christian truths that we are trying to communicate. We must constantly remember that although the student may speak relatively good English, his or her thought processes will still, to a large extent, be Japanese, Turkish, Brazilian etc.

An example: what is God like?

When we mention God, we think about the Creator of all things, all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, and that there is but one God.

The Buddhist view

When you talk to a person from a Buddhist background about God, he may say 'Which one?' or if he doesn't say it, he may think it. Buddhism, as already mentioned, is often linked with practices such as Taoism (Taiwan) and Shintoism (Japan) that have in their belief systems a large array of demi-gods and spirits. Buddhists deny the concept of a knowable God.

The Muslim view

The Muslim at this point may appear closer to the Christian in that he will accept the concept of an only, all-powerful and Creator God (Allah). He will not, however, have the concept of a knowable God and if you describe God as 'Father' to him, it will evoke such thoughts as strict, unemotional and never expressing love.

With Islam the conflicts come at different points such as the person of Jesus. The Muslim acknowledges Jesus as a prophet from God, but to call Jesus 'God's Son' would imply such things as 'God having sexual relations with Mary'. This obviously is blasphemy as, to a Muslim, is the doctrine of the Trinity. We need to tread carefully.

Communicating trust and common difficulties

Although wrong understandings of God, who He is and what He is like, must be challenged, we must do this both sensitively and intelligently. If we are to communicate the Biblical view of God, we must do our homework and find out good ways of communicating truth.

We cannot hope to cover everything in notes such as these. As you get into the work, you may find yourself drawn to students from a particular country or religious background. This should encourage you to find out more about their beliefs. Below is a list of common difficulties. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather a selection to act as thought-starters.

Sin	Rebellion against God; a whole direction of life. (Not just the bad things we do) NB In Japanese the word for 'sin' is the same as the word for 'crime'
Guilt	Our position before God because of our sin. Different from shame – a very strong Eastern concept.
Being born again	A whole new life which starts now / not a reincarnation experience
Eternal life	A quality of life which begins now and continues forever / a relationship (See John 17:3) – not a never-ending cycle of reincarnation. NB In Thai, the words for reincarnation and eternal life are the same.

Buddhists are trying to escape 'being born again' and having 'eternal life' (!). A discussion about 'merit' and transference of merit may be much more helpful initially.

God loves	A characteristic of God that is part of His perfect nature and that motivates Him to make possible our salvation. (For a Buddhist, love is a feeling or desire i.e. a weakness and therefore something to be escaped from).
Suffering and pain	The effects of sin and a fallen world
The Holy Spirit	One with the Father; not another god or some kind of separate spirit.

Heaven and hell	Destinations at the end of time; not reincarnation experiences
Jesus as God's son	Eternally co-existent with the Father; not the result of sexual relations between God and Mary, as Muslims understand; more than a prophet or a holy man.

Hopefully you will see that when we use terminology that may be second nature to us, we may be communicating something totally different. NB This is also true of the average British person – how many have a Biblical understanding of the above terms?! How much more with our international friends?

The key is never to make assumptions – check and explain! English language teachers use the phrase 'Concept Checking Questions' i.e. asking questions to check that students have understood new words or concepts. We would do well to adapt the same strategy. Good communication is not about how well you present the message, rather, it is about how well the message can be received and understood.

A question: Why would John 3:16, a favourite verse in evangelism, be a confusing one for a Buddhist?

Sharing your faith

By now you may be thinking, 'this is not for me. I think I'll volunteer to be a church steward or for the crèche rota(!)'. Please don't be put off! In many ways, befriending and witnessing to international students can be easier than with British people. Internationals are eager to talk and often much more open to spiritual things than the British. That may be because they're happy to practise their English on any subject, because they (mistakenly!) believe the UK to be a Christian country and so want to understand our culture or because spirituality is much more a part of their everyday life than it is here.

Remember, 2 things communicate across all cultures: friendship and genuineness.

If asked a question you don't know the answer to, don't be afraid to say 'I don't know, but I'll try and find out'. That's much better than trying to 'bluff your way through'.

Some pointers to sharing our faith:

Get to know the person you're talking to.

Find out 'where they are coming from'

This doesn't just mean geographically! Don't assume that because a person is from e.g. Taiwan, that they are a Buddhist or from Brazil, that they are a Roman Catholic. Nor if they tell you that they are a Buddhist or a Roman Catholic, that they hold to a certain set of beliefs. Their religion may just be a family tradition or may be mixed in with all sorts of local superstitions and folklore. It's a bit like a British person who says his religion is 'Christian' or 'Church of England'. That doesn't necessarily tell you anything about his beliefs or how they affect his life. You need to ask questions. That too shows respect for your student friend as a person.

Build bridges

Start with common ground and areas of understanding.

Allow the Holy Spirit to work naturally

Don't try to force the issue. Students may raise religious issues with you or you may feel it appropriate to ask them about their religion. The epilogue often provides a springboard for further discussion (You might like to ask, 'Did you understand that?' 'What did you think of

that?' Do you believe that...?). But if none of these things happen, don't get discouraged. Remember what is often shared in epilogues:

"We are Christians and love to share our faith with you. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you what has been said, but if you don't want to, that's fine. We're happy to talk about anything you would like to talk about."

Sometimes it takes a long time for students to come to trust us and sometimes they may never want to discuss religious issues. That is their prerogative and our responsibility is still to show friendship and care. Relax and let the Holy Spirit take control.

If a student shows interest:

Consider the simplest way of sharing the gospel

It may help you to prepare some short answers in advance to questions we anticipate being asked. For example:

- When and why did you become a Christian?
- Why did Jesus die?
- How do you know the Bible is true?
- How do you know God is alive today?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?

In this way, we can better be equipped to fulfill the Bible's command: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15)

Share your personal experience

This includes present ways God is real to you. It's very difficult to argue against personal experience. This also speaks to those for whom religion is an external keeping of rules etc. For example, assurance of faith is largely unknown to Roman Catholics. How and on what basis do you know you are going to heaven?

Get to root issues

A student may raise many theological objections to Christianity that take up so much of our time in addressing that we can neglect more central things. Sometimes these can be 'red herrings', sometimes a mask to cover their main concerns of loneliness, disappointment, concern about the future etc. Sometimes students have genuine intellectual questions that we need to respect. Overall, we need to pray for discernment and God's leading in conversations.

Consider taking your student friend to a church service

Such a visit can expose them to a cross-section of Christians and give them an opportunity to witness worship and (hopefully!) real Christianity that makes a difference in people's lives. The following 'types' of service can be particularly helpful:

- Open Airs
- Family Services: these are often shorter in length, and more visual and simple in presentation.
- Baptismal Services: especially if another student is being baptised.

(See later notes on the inter-church nature of the work)

Bringing a student to Christ

Obviously, our greatest joy is in seeing international students come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, our desire for this can make us run ahead of God. In many cultures it is considered very important to please your host. As our guests, students may sometimes

say or do what they think we want to hear or see, rather than responding to a genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

Helpful analogies sometimes used are the dangers of trying to help a chicken break out of an egg or a butterfly out of a chrysalis. Both need the strength gained in the struggle to survive as healthy chickens and butterflies. Our intervention could in fact weaken them.

It is a sobering thought that by trying to bring a student (or anyone else) to a point of conversion before they are ready for it, we could be responsible for weak and sickly Christians. Our role is rather to be wise midwives knowing when to bring to birth. That said, we should be praying earnestly that our student contacts will indeed become Christians. The battle is very much in prayer, not in our manipulating situations.

Practical issues and what it means to be part of the Bournemouth coffee bar team

1. If at all possible, aim to arrive at 7.30pm to help set out and especially by 7.45pm to pray. This brief time together is important for us 'to touch base', give any team notices or things to be aware of that evening and the evening depends on prayer. There are always some team members who can't arrive early so there is a temptation for others to arrive later too.
2. At the beginning of the evening, be ready to welcome and join students who come in, particularly looking out for any on their own. Sometimes you may find yourself waiting for (a) particular student(s) you are expecting. This is fine but please avoid the temptation to stand and chat to fellow team members while ignoring students who are coming in. Students pick up on this and also it is often much more difficult to join them once they are settled in groups at tables.
3. Please wear your badge (and remember to leave it behind at the end of the evening!). This not only helps students remember your name, it also clearly identifies team members as 'bona fide' i.e. authorised personnel.
4. Please be aware of any English people who come into the coffee bar whom you don't know. They may be entirely innocent but we also have periodic problems with unwelcome intruders. We must do our best to protect students from those with beliefs or motives other than our own (a very important reason for wearing your badge!). Please encourage any English visitors to introduce themselves to a leader or you make a leader aware of them. The basic rule is that the coffee bar is for international students and team members.
5. As team members you need to be aware of your responsibility for all aspects of the evening, including setting up, serving drinks, washing up and clearing away. There are 2 ways we could organise this, e.g. we could allocate a, b & c to clear up on a particular evening. The problem with that is that a & b could still be involved in deep and productive conversations while d & e are free. It is therefore preferable to operate on common sense and a shared responsibility, being sensitive to what is happening around us. This works if everybody has a sense of team and joint responsibility.
6. Remember to call on other team members if you are in difficulty. It may be that you are out of your depth in a conversation or that you are trying to talk to or answer questions from 2 or 3 students at your table who are coming from totally different angles and would benefit from one-to-one conversation. If this happens, please enlist help from another team member who may be free (perhaps someone who knows more about a particular religion than you) or attract the attention of a leader or someone serving behind the bar to indicate that you need assistance. Obviously, this is an ideal scenario because

sometimes we can be very short of team members on a particular evening. However, we should aim to work as a team.

Miscellaneous

The implications of an inter-church work

One of the rich things about being involved in this work is that you will be working with people from several different churches and church backgrounds. In practice that means we can represent quite a spectrum of belief on secondary matters. We should always aim to keep primary matters primary and secondary matters secondary. There is a simple rule of thumb for distinguishing between the two: if a doctrine forms part of our basis of faith, it is primary, if not, it is secondary.

So neither in conversation with students or with other team members is it helpful to major on secondary matters. Obviously issues come up in conversation and there is nothing wrong with healthy discussion and exchange of views. However, we need to emphasise that there is no 'team line' on secondary issues and we must show respect for beliefs we don't agree with. The cross may be an offence to some (Gal 5 v 11), but we should not cause offence unnecessarily.

An additional point: if a student shows interest in attending church, it is worth stopping to ask, 'Which church would it be helpful for him or her to attend?' Often it's natural for the student to come to your church with you. However, their own church background (if it's a Christian student) or where they live in Bournemouth might indicate that another church attended by another team member might be more suitable. Or it might be right for you to accompany your student friend to a church in another part of town to introduce them to the people there. Always bear in mind - you should be involved in the work not to grow your own church but rather to extend the Kingdom of God.

Literature

It is our aim to have available in the Coffee Bar a selection of literature (both Bibles or New Testaments and tracts) in different languages. It has to be said that the quantity and quality of literature available varies enormously from language to language. However, do encourage an interested student to read something either in their own language or in English. If you can't find something suitable, do ask one of the leaders. If we can't find anything, it is possible to order from various sources. On a point of policy, it is usually best to charge a small amount for Bibles or New Testaments, as then they are valued more. Or you might like to buy one for a student as a gift. We would suggest that you don't give away literature 'willy-nilly' as it is costly.

Follow-up

There are 2 sorts of 'follow-up'.

- You do yourself i.e. when a student with whom you have built up a relationship goes home, you can keep in touch with them. Realistically, you may find that a student keeps in touch for only a short time (although others may do so for many years). Also, from your point of view, the longer you are in the work, the longer your list of contacts will grow. All of us find it difficult to set time aside to write long letters, but remember the value of a postcard or a Christmas card. Plus email is a great way of keeping in touch with returned students.
- If your student contact has shown spiritual interest during their stay in England or especially if he or she has become a Christian while here, it is very important to try and arrange some follow-up contact for their return. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a comprehensive list of Christian contacts for every country in the world. Of course, this also applies if a student is moving to another part of the UK and here it's often easier to arrange follow-up. So do ask and we'll do our best!

Requests for help from students

Be wary of pleas from students to help with legal matters, visas etc. Even accommodation needs should be approached carefully. For language students, this latter area is the responsibility of the schools and they often don't thank us for interfering. Such things can be very time-consuming and possibly fruitless. It is best to seek help or advice from a leader.

A window of opportunity

In conclusion, it is a tremendous opportunity and privilege to be involved in cross-cultural work, and it is our responsibility to live up to this. Whatever ministry God calls us to He demands our very best, and international student work is no exception. We hope that these notes have not put you off in any way, but rather that they have given you a brief glance into some of the things the work entails. You will discover that the Lord will equip you for the challenges that this work presents – and that you will find it both rewarding and fulfilling.

Recommended reading list

General

Operation World (Patrick Johnstone, Paternoster): for background information on every country in the world from a Christian perspective.

The World's Religions (A Lion Handbook)

Concise Guide to today's religions (Josh McDowell & Don Stewart, Scripture Press)

Ministering cross-culturally (S G Lingenfelter & M K Mayers, Baker Books)

Eastern Mindset

One World Two Minds (Denis Lane, OMF)

The Path to Enlightenment (John Davis, Hodder & Stoughton): introduces Buddhism

Making friends with students from China (Peter Morrison, OMF/Friends International)

Making friends with Japanese (John Taylor & Hugh Trevor, OMF/Friends International)

Islam

Islam in the modern world: a Christian perspective (Norman Anderson, Apollos)

Roman Catholicism

The Faith of the Vatican (Herbert Carson, Evangelical Press)

Catechism of the Catholic Church & other Catholic booklets to give an insight into current Catholic thinking (Catholic Truth Society)

Some modern beliefs

Blind Alley Beliefs (David Cook, IVP): on Postmodernism, Humanism, Existentialism, Marxism, Scientific Materialism etc.

Miscellaneous

Answering difficult questions (John McDowell & Don Steward, Alpha)

How to study the Bible with your International Friend (ISI)

This list is by no means exhaustive, nor are all the books necessarily the best ones available. The intention is simply to give you a taste of what is on offer. Some are quite short and generally helpful for all of us; others are more detailed and may be of use to you if you are particularly drawn to certain students or cultural backgrounds. None of us can hope to have an in-depth knowledge of all the above subjects! However, the Bible exhorts us to 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15)

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