

Ideas for introducing Christian content from the front at International Cafes

Some International Cafes feature a short bible talk each week (see "Mini Bible Talks at Cafés" for more ideas), but this does not always seem possible or appropriate. Below are ideas for some other ways of introducing Christian content from the front that can help spark off deeper conversations at tables for students who are interested.

1. Testimonies

For example, a Café in Exeter has a 5 minute "Meet the Team" slot each week. The team member introduces themselves briefly and shares something about their life (eg hobby/work/family/or travel) and something of what God/Jesus means to them. They often put a Bible verse up on the screen to give guests something to look at and hopefully take away from the talk. They also put up a follow up question to promote discussion after the team member has finished their talk.

Other Cafes use testimonies more occasionally, when these match the theme of the evening or when something significant/current happens. For example, when Cumbria and York were much in the news because of widespread flooding, one Café team member in York shared (aided by dramatic photos) how his home was flooded but also how his church friends rallied round in the big clean up and how God was his peace.

2. Announcements

Even for Cafes wanting to keep from-the-front talking to a minimum, there will be a place for welcome and announcements, and you can bring up a different thing about Jesus/God/Christians each week, for example:

"Welcome to Globe Café! We know it can be lonely when you first come to a new country, and we hope this will be a place you'll always feel valued and included. Globe Café is run by Christians in X city because we hope to express something of God's love for people here."

"Welcome to Globe Cafe! For those who are new - Globe Cafe is specially for international students and it runs every Thu evening from 7-9pm. It's run by volunteers from X church. This building is a church, and on Sundays, at 11am, we meet together for a church service and visitors are always welcome. If you've never been to a church service in England before, why not try it? Come meet some more friendly people."

"Here's an important announcement – this is the last Globe Café until April 25th because next week, the Easter holidays start. Did you know that Easter is possibly even more significant to Christians than Christmas? If you don't know why, ask one of the team members."

If there's a literature table or a seeker bible study that you're drawing people's attention to, take some time to think about how you will create interest in these each week. For example, for the bible study, you could highlight the specific topic, "This Wed's bible discussion is about hope. If you're curious what the Bible might say about hope, why not come." or "The story we're going to read and discuss this Wed is called "The parable of the Good Samaritan". Do you know the English expression the "good Samaritan"? Well, this very famous story in the Bible is where that expression came from originally. If you want to read it for yourself, come..." Or you could take a more general approach, "If you're never read the Bible before and want to try it in a comfortable environment where you can ask any question with no pressure, then come..." etc etc.

3. Thought for the Day

Different team members could give a 3-5min (500-700 word) "thought" each week. These can be about life in the UK – e.g., "British humour", "British weather", "British food", "British politeness", etc. They can be seasonal – "Christmas", "Easter", "Chinese New Year", "Guy Fawkes", "exams", etc, or express someone's personal response to current news, e.g., "flooding", "refugees" etc. Or they can be on the big themes of life.

Although these talks aren't primarily about Christian/Biblical truths, they are still opportunities to share a little of the speakers' Christian values and perspectives on various issues, and might open the way for fruitful discussions at tables or link naturally to an invitation to a bible study or other event.

Top tips

- Speak slowly and clearly. Pauses are good.
- Avoid idioms and jargon.
- Keep it simple with one main idea.
- Use humour and personal stories.
- Avoid criticizing other people's religion and politics.
- Encourage audience participation in creative ways.
- If you use the Bible keep the reading short.
- Leave the students with questions that they can discuss on their tables if they wish.
- Try to leave them wanting more. Resist trying to cover your topic comprehensively.

4. Drama

This is a staple for summer team Cafes, where a simple skit is used to highlight the theme of each evening's seeker bible study and to encourage students to join the study. Even if students don't go to the bible study group, the skit can be a helpful springboard for conversations at the tables. After the drama is performed, the "host" picks up an idea from the drama and links it to the bible study.

If you happen to have a slick church drama team or drama students involved in your Café, then that's fantastic – do use them. However, it's no impediment at all if you just have team members who protest that they've never done drama before. In a cosy "among-friends" type setting such as an international café, team members up for participating in a silly skit has a charm of its own and can be very effective.

Ideas can be simple. For example, to publicise a bible study on Jesus laying down his life for us, you could have a skit portraying a boyfriend taking a girl out on a romantic date and giving her a teddy bear. And the host can round up by saying something like "Aw. Sweet. Is this what true love is? Is this the best that love can offer? Well, tonight's bible study looks at what the Bible says the highest love is..."

Apart from introducing a bible study, dramas can also introduce a topical discussion at tables.

5. Other creative ideas

Much like the drama idea, you can also present a song with an explanation, leading to a discussion. Or you could show a video clip (followed by an explanation and discussion). Or you could show a famous piece of Art and explain the story, symbolism, themes, etc – e.g., Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper painting or Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son.

Not every conversation we have with students needs to be about spiritual things and we need to be careful not to come across as Churchill's definition of a fanatic – someone who can't change his mind and won't change the subject. On the other hand, many students are genuinely interested in understanding our faith and hearing about Jesus and we should make it easy for them to ask any questions they have, express their thoughts, and read the Bible for themselves.