

# The Cultural Calendar: Introduction

## Introduction

Every society has its customs and traditions that provide a focus for celebration and holiday. Life, death, the seasons, important national anniversaries and religious festivals all play their part in creating a rhythm for the year which is embedded in a given culture. Britain is no exception.

What's more, centuries of Christian influence and tradition in Great Britain mean that much of our cultural calendar has a natural link with church festivals. Some are more obviously gospel related than others but the connections are there nonetheless. Bound up with the Christian heritage you often find early pagan practice, which is helpful for us to identify. Modern consumerism plays a big part too. A cynical view of modern secular Britain might attest that many of our old customs are kept alive by commercial pressures - any excuse, it seems, to keep the economy going by buying chocolates, gifts or cards for children, mother or lover. What ever the reasons for celebrating, and there are many, the fact remains that many customs are universally marked. We find them in the home, schools, community, media and the high street and (this is the important bit) *they are visible to international visitors.*

What a wonderful resource for us all to use in our ministry to international students!

Of course many of you are already using folk customs when you organise a pancake party on Shrove Tuesday, a trip to a fireworks display in November or a Christmas party in December. But have you ever been asked

- Why do mince pies not contain mince (ie meat)?
- Why do you have Mother's Day in March, not May?
- Why do you burn an effigy of a Catholic?
- Who is Santa Claus?
- What do I do when children in scary masks come to my door demanding sweets?

This guide is designed to give you easy access to the history behind Britain's traditional folk customs (what I have called our 'Cultural Calendar') and to help you make use of them effectively in your social events for international students.

This document includes these parts:

- Why organise social events
- The parable principle – using our social events for the gospel
- Giving a presentation

Accompanying documents have details about different cultural events.

## Why organise social events for international students?

Wherever our meeting takes place – home, common room or church hall – the same basic aims apply.

### **Aim 1: to provide a service for international students.**

We are commanded in the Bible to care for the stranger. We love because Jesus first loved us. We show our love in genuine service.

This comes first as it is the presenting need of international students. It is maybe what attracts them to our meetings when they first arrive in this country.

What kinds of service? International students need *information* of all kinds when they arrive and as they continue to settle in. Some practical services will be provided by good international welfare officers in institutions near you, but there may be many gaps. It's worth doing some research to find out where your church/CU can help. This is also the aspect which will have clear appeal to secular authorities who may, as a result, be prepared to advertise your activities to their students. Even when the official orientation provided to students is good it is very difficult for the newcomer to absorb all the relevant information on arrival. Ongoing sessions provided by your group can make a difference. They also usually need *English practice*. Even EFL students who are lodged with British families are keen to have further opportunities to improve their English with native speakers. Help *coping with cultural adjustment* is seldom provided in student orientation. As a result sessions on 'coping with culture shock' are well received.

Of course the best service we can provide has a category all of its own – friendship.

### **Aim 2: to foster friendship**

The heart of effective, Biblical, international student ministry is one-to-one friendship. So much of the above can be provided tailor made when an international student has a Christian friend. This should be the acid test of our social events – are they fostering genuine friendship between individuals? We need to regularly ask ourselves as we review our events. Did every newcomer get personally greeted? Was there enough time for relaxed conversation? Did people mix well or were Christians only talking to other Christians and international students to each other? Are we genuinely concerned for them as people with needs, joys and worries just like ours? Do we love them with no strings attached? Remember there is no proviso in scripture that says 'only love them if they want to attend the Bible study'!

### **Aim 3: to create community**

Many British Christians would like to meet and care for international students but have no natural contact with them. Regular social events provide the opportunity for them to meet and befriend them.

Many international students come from cultures which rate community very highly. Consequently they are lost and lonely in our very individualistic culture, far from their normal support systems. One of the real benefits of holding regular meetings (weekly works best) is the opportunity it gives to build up a regular core of attenders. As people get to know one another often a sense of group identity emerges. Students themselves - even those who are not believers - begin to own the group and take an active part. The tone, of course, has been set by the Christians who are bathing the project in prayer. If the group identity does take on a life of its own the benefits all round are tangible. A warm and welcoming community attracts more people and everyone (hosts included) can grow and learn in their understanding of one another's cultures. Cultural events of the kind we'll explore in this guide provide great opportunities to learn and share with one another.

### **Aim 4: to point to Jesus**

If the first three aims are being met then already it's likely that individuals have been asking 'why do you do this?' How natural then, to give the answer 'it's because we Christians have experienced God's love and we want to share that with others'. If we're used to the normal response of British secular friends when God's name is mentioned we are often delighted and surprised at how ready an international friend will listen to an explanation like this. Most non-Westerners assume Brits are Christian anyway and for them religion is not a taboo subject.

A Warning: Having said that, it may be quite a while before our new friend is ready to hear a straight gospel presentation in a way that is meaningful to him/her. Beware of using a social event as a hook solely in order to present a gospel outline to those who may not be ready to hear. Giving answers to questions people aren't asking yet is not effective communication, especially if no thought has been given to the varied cultural and religious backgrounds of our guests/friends. It can even cause resentment in your 'captive audience' and get you a bad name among university authorities if it happens too often. This is a danger of one off, occasional social events where a sense of community and trusting relationships has not yet been built. Preaching the gospel on such occasions can be appropriate if it arises out of the context (eg a Christmas party) but if it doesn't I want to argue for a better model.

## The Parable Principle

In Jesus' public ministry he taught to the crowds using stories and parables, but privately to his disciples he explained everything.

It seems to me that this is a good principle to use in our evangelism both generally and especially in our case with international students. In an open, social group people come, just like the crowds following Jesus around, from all kinds of backgrounds. You might have a Chinese university student brought up on atheism and a nominal Catholic from Mexico. That Japanese girl has some knowledge of the Bible from her protestant school but her friend has never heard of Jesus and comes from a home where offerings are presented regularly to the ancestors.

What did Jesus do when faced with a diverse crowd, many of whom just came for what they could get? He told stories. Stories that related to where they were, that informed, teased, intrigued and no doubt entertained. But there was always something there to take on further. So it is that as we explain an aspect of our culture we can inform, interact, entertain in an inclusive and non threatening manner in our social groups, but always looking for opportunities to raise a question in our hearers' minds about spiritual or moral issues.

Consider the following:

"Of course, although [example] has its basis in Christian belief most British people today ignore that aspect. Less than 10% of the population are practising Christians."

*Impact:* a lot of your audience may assume Britain is a Christian country and equate modern Western morals with Christian teaching. It's good to put the record straight early on!

"Shrove Tuesday is the day for using up certain ingredients in the kitchen before a time of fasting, but now most Brits are more concerned to diet for their body shape than fast for their spiritual wellbeing. Is any kind of fasting practised in your country?"

*Impact:* could lead to discussions about outward ritual and change of heart; a time of listening to a Muslim friend about Ramadan.

### **Getting discussion going**

In a mixed social setting this depends so much on the composition and size of your group. Educational experience, differing cultural values and English competence may hinder many from speaking out in a group, particularly if there are articulate Westerners voicing their opinions. Some women may only speak up within a women only group. Larger group discussions can be enormously helpful when they do work but follow up to a presentation that has raised spiritual issues may be best handled one to one or in small groups.

As these questions and discussions are provoked and as your team is praying for gospel opportunities with individuals, then it becomes natural to make the following kind of announcements:

"If you're interested in finding out more about the meaning of Easter we're going to show a film about the life of Jesus ..."

“If you want to consider this further we’re holding a small study group to find out what Jesus said about the true nature of religion”

“A British Christmas is not complete without a celebration in music and words which we call a Carol Service. Come as a group with us to church this Sunday evening and we’ll explain what the readings and songs refer to.”

### ***Using the parable principle for the gospel: a summary***

As you plan your social events, keep in mind your aims

- Provide a service
- Foster friendship
- Create community
- Point to Jesus

Pray regularly over those aims! Ask God that he will draw international students who are hungry to know Him. Ask for opportunities individually and publicly to explain our faith. Aim to organise more specifically evangelistic events for those who are seeking (e.g. Jesus video, weekend away with gospel talks, international guest service etc) Aim to expose international students to the Word of God through regular Evangelistic Bible studies or a Visa Course.

There may be those who come regularly to our events who never show any interest in anything spiritual before they go home. Have we failed? Remember that if we have cared for the stranger we have obeyed our Master’s call. (Matt 25) God uses our faithful service for his glory and the growth of the worldwide church in ways we cannot always see.

*Insert Stories.*

## **Giving a presentation**

You’re organising a social event. Perhaps the bulk of your time this week is taken serving drinks and snacks and chatting. But you have a theme this week which needs to be introduced. How are you going to present it? As you plan (and it’s a good idea to do some preparation!) here are some questions to ask yourself.

### **1 What is my aim?**

Another way of putting this is ‘What do I want my audience to do/feel/think as a result of what I have to say?’ Answers might include:

- To explain why there are so many fireworks being let off on cold wet dark November evenings.
- To know that the conflict in Northern Ireland was more to do with politics and culture than religion.
- To encourage conversations about fasting and celebration and/or attendance at an optional Bible study on the subject
- To entertain and delight with stories about my childhood Christmas
- To communicate enthusiasm for something I enjoy that I want them to try because they’re my friends.

You can of course combine several aims. Many more than mentioned above are possible and good. When you have answered this question it will help you decide what to include and what to leave out for another day or private conversation.

### **2 What is the English level of my audience?**

There is a world of difference between the competence of students doing a lecture based university course and language students struggling towards intermediate level. Some wives of students arrive speaking little English at all. Even postgraduate students who can handle reading and writing English well may struggle with rapid colloquial speech.

The poorer your audience's English is, the shorter your talk needs to be. University students with competent English may enjoy a 20 minute lecture, but it's probably best to stick to 5-10 minutes and leave plenty of time for questions and interaction. If you have a wide range of English competence it's probably best to aim somewhere in the middle and make sure those who struggle to follow have someone sitting near to explain or translate.

For those with limited English make sure you

- Speak clearly and slowly (without sounding patronising - they are not children!)
- Stop and ask questions to check understanding and readjust if necessary. There's nothing worse than completing a talk and discovering everyone missed the whole point because they didn't understand a crucial word in your first sentence.
- Prune your language of idioms as far as possible.
- Avoid references that are too British culture specific, unless explained.
- Use plenty of visual aids and write key words or facts to display.
- Tell stories

Be aware that some students will be more familiar with American English than British English (and not just the Americans!) Get to know some of the common causes of confusion by talking to friends from the US. Otherwise most students will have learned Standard (British) English and will find a BBC type accent the easiest to follow. If your vowels deviate a lot from Standard English you need to allow your audience time to tune in to your speech patterns. You might find it helpful to point out the differences at the beginning.

### **3 Will my talk be helped by visual aids?**

Almost certainly yes, especially if the English level of your audience is very basic. Consider producing an attractive A4 information sheet for everyone to take away. Display pictures, posters, books, artefacts or maps. For example:

- Bring a leek on St David's day and ask everyone to search their £1 coins to find the leek or Welsh dragon.
- Bring a picture of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators and one of King James or a KJV Bible with the original frontispiece.
- Bring Eyewitness travel guides for the different countries of the UK
- Bring a sprig of hawthorn blossom and a picture of Maypole dancing.

Having things to look at/touch/taste/handle with a whispered explanation from a British friend can help the one whose English is poor keep up with everyone else.

### **4 What does my audience already know?**

Our guests are usually intelligent and thoughtful people who probably know a great deal more about Britain than we know about their countries. Having said that, with most subjects we're dealing with in this guide it is best to assume no prior knowledge. Best to whet their appetites with basics and have further information or books for those who want to take it further. Ask yourself - if I went to hear a talk about Chinese medicine, Japanese girl's day or the Mexican Day of the Dead what questions would I have? What level should it be pitched at for me to relate to what's being said? Much the same will apply to your talk.

## **Preparing a presentation: check list**

What is my aim?

What is the English level of my audience?

What visual aids could I include?

What does my audience already know about the subject?