

dialogue dinners - the Gospel on the menu

Mark Pickering outlines a recipe for effective evangelism

Imagine the scene. A room filled with your med school friends. Good food, good company, and an evening spent talking about the gospel - whether it's true and what it means in practice. Does that sound like merely a fantasy? Well, it's just what happens at a dialogue dinner.

Dialogue dinners have happened sporadically for years in CMF groups around the country, occasionally in more organised bursts. They're one of the evangelistic ideas promoted in CMF's *Confident Christianity* training days.

so what's the big idea?

A dialogue dinner is a really effective way to get talking about gospel issues with your friends. It basically consists of a small number of Christians inviting a larger number of non-Christian friends around for dinner, with the explicit understanding that along with good food there will be discussion about what Christianity is all about, with the opportunity to ask any questions they like.

There is an external speaker who is confident taking any

questions that may come and leading the discussion. After dinner they will kick things off with a brief outline of the gospel (for instance, using the 'God-man-God' outline promoted in *Confident Christianity*). This gets people thinking and then the floor is thrown open to questions.

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In the right circumstances, this can lead on to a couple of hours or more of great discussion where people really get to air their objections, be challenged and hear the gospel explained clearly, perhaps for the first time.

here are some we made earlier...

In March this year, CMF students at Hull York Medical School organised a Grill-a-Christian event in York. This was a panel discussion in a campus bar where non-Christian students were invited to come and ask any questions they wanted to a

panel of Christians, both doctors and students. This was very popular and so the group organised three dialogue dinners in April and May as follow-up events with their friends, some of whom had attended the Grill-a-Christian event and wanted the opportunity to talk further.

I led two of the events and local CMF psychiatrist, Jeff Clarke, led the other. Each was organised and hosted by different CMF students, inviting their own friends to come. This meant that each event had its own character. One was made up mostly of all the housemates from one house; one had almost all Muslims.

The questions discussed tend to depend somewhat on the background of the group. The first event I led leant quite heavily towards questions like, 'how could God send nice people to hell?', 'what's so wrong with homosexuality?' and 'aren't all religions the same anyway?'

The second event was much more Muslim-focused and so the questions centred on the reliability of the Bible, how God



Feel free to ask as many searching, difficult and controversial questions as you like

could exist in multiple persons, whether Jesus was more than a human prophet, and why God couldn't just forgive without having to let Jesus die.

In both evenings there was a real buzz and some great discussion. I came away feeling like I'd done a few rounds with a heavyweight boxer, but exhilarated to think of all the big issues we'd aired. With the Muslim students especially, there was a real engagement with the issues, and an agreement that the issues we were talking about were of crucial importance.

In the third event, Amy Watson and Melanie Mack (both first years at the time) invited their friends and Dr Jeff Clarke spoke. Amy recalls:

Our dialogue dinner in my kitchen in halls last term was a real encouragement. It was scary

inviting close friends but I know they really appreciated our willingness to talk about what are very personal and relevant issues. Also having a Christian doctor gave an insight into a Christian viewpoint from another stage within medicine. I would really recommend having a dialogue dinner amongst a group of your friends at medical school.

Melanie also adds:
I really enjoyed the dialogue dinner. Having a Christian doctor there was really comforting for those moments when you're tongue-tied and don't know what to say! It also brought up some questions I'd never considered before, but would now feel confident talking about to my non-Christian friends in the future. So it was really beneficial for me spiritually, as well as for the friends we'd invited, which I hadn't expected.

Having one of the medical school psychiatry lecturers speaking gave an added dimension as some of the students quizzed Jeff on psychiatry over pudding!

I could do that!

Running a dialogue dinner really is a great way to get your friends talking about the gospel. It's not expensive, it's not (very) scary and it can make a real difference to your friends' understanding of the gospel. Why not think about organising one or more dialogue dinners in your CMF group this year? You could run them as follow-ups to a larger evangelistic event, or stand-alone events at any time. The second year HYMS students who hosted the events I led knew that this was their last chance to get all these friends together before they got split up for clinical placements, so they took the opportunity and went for it.

If you want to organise a dialogue dinner, why not talk to your relevant CMF staff member, or local medical school secretary, to get some more advice and find a good speaker for your event?

But it's also good now to be aware of some of the things that make a dialogue dinner likely to go well...or badly.

secrets for success

- i) Be clear from the outset what you are inviting friends to. They need to be fully aware that along with the food is a discussion about Christianity - otherwise they will feel they've been conned!
- ii) The better your existing friendships, the better the conversation. If you have a good number of non-Christian friends you can talk freely with, the more likely it is that the group will gel and the discussion will flow.
- iii) Choose your leader carefully - you need someone who will be able to lead the discussion clearly, calmly and put guests at their ease, respecting them but being able to handle hard questions and explain the gospel and its implications

clearly, bringing things back to focus when they inevitably go off at a tangent.

- iv) Prepare well - in prayer, in cooking or buying good food, in having some resources available (eg Gospels or evangelistic booklets) for people who want to go further at the end.

recipes for disaster

- i) Don't have too many Christians there, or the non-Christians may feel like a lion in a den of Daniels! In order to get 6-10 non-Christian friends you may have to invite twice that number.
- ii) Don't let dinner run on too late or get sidetracked on washing up - be slick and be prepared to move into discussion once people have had a chance to eat.
- iii) Don't collect together too disparate a group - people who don't know each other or are from very different backgrounds, eg different religions. This may stunt the conversation or risk taking it off in too many different directions.

now it's your turn

Dialogue dinners are a brilliant

CMF staff members are keen to lead dialogue dinners - please contact us in the office. Medical school secretaries are local doctors who provide a link between graduates and students - if you need to know who yours is please contact the CMF office - even if they can't help themselves they may well know someone who can. Others who might be able to help you are local church student workers or UCCF staff and relay workers. Of course every great speaker starts somewhere ... and more senior medical students might want to try out and enhance their skills at a dinner for younger students, perhaps with some guidance from someone more experienced.

way to get the gospel on the agenda with your friends. And it doesn't stop when the evening ends. A good discussion can lead to many more personal conversations afterwards once things have been stirred up.

Why not think about organising one in your group?

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