**Talk Titles**

Picking talk titles is often one of the hardest and most time-consuming parts of planning a mission week. However, it is well worth the time taken, as talk titles are one of the most important aspects of a mission week.Before people come to an event they may have little idea about what will happen. One of the few ways that we can show hospitality to people before they even arrive is by picking titles that particularly engage with them. A good title will communicate ‘You are welcome! We understand you! These events are for you!’ Conversely, a bad title will communicate ‘You’re not welcome. We don’t understand you. These events are for someone else.’

**Culture has changed and so should our titles**

Here in the UK in the last couple of years there has been a shift in titles that many groups are picking for their mission week talks. For the previous 10 years many of my talks, especially the lunchtimes, used questions that many non-Christians were asking about the Christian faith. These talks sought to engage with the questions and objections often raised by the New Atheists.

However, the influence of the New Atheists like Richard Dawkins has dramatically lessened in British society in general and especially in the university in particular. Those students who still identify as being atheist often seek to distance themselves from such people. New atheism as a movement seems to have had its day. [[1]](#footnote-1) As the University Evangelist Nigel Lee often used to say ‘sooner or later ‘isms’ become ‘wasms’’! Today students are more likely to identify as agnostic rather than atheist (as a recent YouGov pole confirms[[2]](#footnote-2)).

Coupled with the decline of New Atheism is also the decline of Christianity in the UK. Very few students have had any involvement with the church or ever heard a clear presentation of the gospel. This means that few people are asking classical objections to the Christian faith as they do not know enough about it to even object to it! Many of the objections people used to have were really attempts to rationally justify their rejection of the faith that they were brought up in. (The angriest atheists always had a church upbringing!)

If we continue to use such classical objections as our talk titles then we will appeal to a smaller and smaller section of the University. We will be asking questions that few people are actually asking.

We need, therefore, to think about what questions the majority of students in our universities *are* asking. In reality these are not normally questions about God or faith. Many people feel that Christianity is irrelevant to life. Because of this I have been sometimes been asked to speak on the question ‘Is Christianity relevant?’ However, this was always the worst attended talk of the week – the reason being that if you think something is irrelevant you won’t bother coming to hear a talk about it!

Far better is to show the relevance of the Christian faith to areas of life that the average student really does care about. In reality this means looking at existential issues. This was something that I often already did in our evening talks but now have included far more in our lunch talks as well. Topics such as human rights, freedom, love, significance, identity, rationality, the environment and so on.One of the possible objections from some Christian students towards this approach is that it is not being upfront about the content of the talk. Obviously we do intend to speak about the Christian faith in relation to the topic in question. The fear is that some students maybe surprised when they come to hear the talk that we are speaking about God. There may also be a fear that we won’t be communicating the heart of the gospel. In practice I have never found this issue for at least three reasons:

* It should be obvious by the fact the event organised by the Christian Union (this is always clear on the publicity) that’s our response to the question may have something to do with the Christian faith!
* A good talk will take seriously the question and will show clearly how the Christian faith engages with the topic and answers the particular question. Because the Christian faith is true and the Gospel is the story of creation to new creation - then nothing is really outside of its realm. It is not hard to show how anything of significance connects to the gospel.
* As an evangelist my aim is not just to speak generally on a topic but to use is as bridge to the person of Jesus. Therefore every talk, while starting with the topic in question will clearly present Jesus and his death for us. This is the model of the apostolic sermons in Acts which always start where people are at but still clearly present the death and resurrection of Christ with a call to repent and believe.

One potential issue with such titles is that while they enable us to show that the Christian faith is existentially satisfying they don’t lend themselves as well to showing how it is also objectively true. However, to be most persuasive we need to show the gospel is both beautiful and true. Questions like ‘How can I trust the Bible?’ are still important – but they are rarely the first question people ask these days.

The solution to this is to pick titles for the talks towards the end of the week, especially on the final day, that enable us to make a legitimate connection with the evidence for the resurrection of Christ. It is the resurrection that is the vindication of all Jesus’ claims and the means by which we can know the Christian faith is both unique and true. It also makes more sense to *finish* the week with more evidential claims than to *begin* the week in this way. Pascal said of the Gospel - ‘Make good men wish it were true… and then show them that it is.’ Through the week the talks show people how the gospel is attractive and makes most sense of the areas of life that we really care about. By the final day people are therefore far more likely to be open to the evidence that shows that this is also true than they would have been at the start.

The experience of the last few mission weeks I have been involved with has confirmed to me that such an approach is indeed helpful. While on a recent mission week in Leeds I was struck by the reaction of non-Christian students the flyers that we were giving out. Those that took time to look down and start to read the titles were instantly intrigued by what they read. It was not uncommon for them to say something like ‘Oh wow! That one looks really interesting! Wait - and that one as well! In fact… they all look really interesting! I’m wish I could come to every single one!’

**Helpful questions**

My friend, Peter Dray suggests that it is good to ask various questions to help diagnose what topics might be best to cover in a mission week. He suggests:

**Perceptions of Christianity**

* What are the reasons why students at this university won’t even give the gospel a fair hearing?
* What are the reasons that the gospel is considered ridiculous?
* What do they fear might happen if they started following Jesus?
* What are the reasons they think that they don’t need Jesus?

**Self-perceptions**

* How would students at this university tend to fill in the blank: ‘Deep down, I fear I’m not \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ enough.”
* How would students at this university tend to fill in the blank: ‘I like to think of myself as a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ person.”
* What are the things that make students at this university feel self-righteous?
* What would students think of as their finest moment? Or their lowest moment?
* What sins will the gospel tend to expose and then heal at this university?

**Perceptions of life**

* What would need to happen for students at this university to reflect on their lives ten years after graduation and say that they’d lived life well?[[3]](#footnote-3)

And here is a positive example of a group that worked this through.

<https://peterdray.wordpress.com/2018/11/15/one-a-new-motif-for-student-evangelism/>

**Examples from recent missions**

The following are examples of series of talks that I have given over the last academic year. You’ll notice that some titles come up in several different weeks. Others are similar but worded in a slightly different way, which often means that the approach of the talk has different as well. [[4]](#footnote-4)

I particularly encouraged each planning committee to take time to think about the unique features of their own university:

* What were the disciplines that people study?
* What are the things that are particularly important to students?
* What does the average student in your university aspire to?
* Which other groups / interests are well represented on the campus and in student societies?

**Real (Sheffield)**

Real World

(Lunch) Where does our commitment to the environment come from?

(Evening) How can I play my part in changing the world for good?

Real Truth

(Lunch) How can we live in harmony in a world of competing truth claims?

(Evening) Will following my heart lead me to freedom?

Real Pain

(Lunch) Is there any meaning in my pain?

(Evening) How can I be strong enough to help in a crisis?

Real Justice

(Lunch) What is the answer to religious hypocrisy?

(Evening) What makes humans worthy of human rights?

Real Life

(Lunch) Why is death still the greatest taboo?

(Evening) What can I contribute that death won’t rob?

**Known (Leeds)**

**Lunch Times**

(2 different talks each day but both connected to a similar theme)

Who is the real me?

What makes humans worthy of human rights?

Is there more to life than just being happy?

Will following my heart set me free?

If God is so good then why is the world so bad?

Is there any meaning in my pain?

What can I contribute to life that death won’t rob?

Is happily ever after just wishful thinking?

**Evenings**

Known for being real - *Searching for authenticity in a world of filters*

Known for being somebody - *Searching for significance in a world of 7 billion*

Known for being free - *Searching for fulfilment in a world of never enough*

Known for being good - *Searching for justice in an unjust world*

Known for being loved - *Searching for lasting significance in a temporary world*

**The Journey (Newcastle)**

**Lunchtime talks**

True Happiness – why is it always around the next corner?

On the road to success – How do I know when I am enough?

Pushing through – Is there any point to my pain?

Life – Is death a dead end?

**Real (Exeter)**

**Lunchtime talks**

(2 different talks each day but both connected to a theme)

Science

Has science made Christianity irrelevant?

How could a rational person believe in miracles?

Bible

2000 years… isn’t the bible past its sell by date?

Fact or fiction - why does it matter if the Bible is true?

Church

A corrupt church - why is the church so full of hypocrites?

Why do Christians want to ruin my fun?

Suffering

How can God be loving in a world full of suffering?

Is there hope when life is hard?

Truth

Does it matter if Christianity is true?

Who is the real Jesus?

**Evening Events**

The Real Me – Who am I and why am I here? (Mark 2)

Real Happiness – What is the secret to a fulfilled life? (Mark 10)

Real Power – Does power have to corrupt? (Mark 4: 35-41/Mark 10: 42-45)

Real Justice – Is there any hope in an unjust world? (Mark 15 -The Cross)

Real Legacy – What can I contribute to life that death won’t rob? (Resurrection)

**Human (Zurich)**

**Lunch times**

(There is also a second stream connected with the overall theme each day - but the talk titles are all in German)

Rational – Why Maths Challenges Atheism (A professor of Maths will speak at this one)

Emotional - War, Famine, Disease – and a Loving God?

Spiritual - Can We Have Harmony in a World of Competing Truth Claims?

Eternal - Is There Evidence for Life After Death?

**Evenings**

Searching for Truth in a World of Fake News

Searching for Significance in a World of 7 Billion

Searching for Freedom in a World of Obligation

Searching for Love in a World of Broken Hearts

1. See <https://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2019/01/25/the-train-wreck-that-was-the-new-atheism/> for a fascinating admission of this from PZ Myers, a former New Atheist. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/culture/atheism-may-be-on-the-wane-in-britain/amp/?__twitter_impression=true#content> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://peterdray.wordpress.com/2018/11/16/diagnostic-questions-for-engaging-evangelism/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For instance ‘Has science buried God’ will lead to quite a different talk than ‘Can science explain everything?’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)