

3 x 3 x 3 - Three week three faith study groups

Nottingham, previous experiments in organised inter-faith dialogue have usually taken the form of meetings where invited speakers from each faith state their case from the front, while the audience spectates, each person rooting for their own champion. However, this year we wanted to find a format for dialogue that would not be a spectator sport, that could be run on our different campuses, and could be repeated annually.

With the Muslim and Jewish Chaplains in the University, we tried to set up a number of study groups, each to comprise, ideally, three Christians, three Jews and three Muslims; and each to gather for three evening meetings in November.

Why these faiths? Only these faith communities have provided Chaplains recognised by the University.

Why this size of group? Small enough for everyone to have a chance to talk, large enough so that not everyone has to; and three representatives from each faith might reflect some of the diversity within faith communities.

Why three times in November? Only three times because we are not wanting to ask too big a commitment, or reduce loyal attendance to the individual faith societies in the university. November; so that new students have found their feet, and so that Jewish and Muslim holidays and fasts would be over.

We advertised the venture from the start of term, using various channels, and offering the possibility of signing up for a group on any evening, Mon — Thursday, on any of our 3 main campuses. We had 26 Christians, 13 Muslims, and 6 Jews wanting to participate. This imbalance meant that some Christians had to be turned away but we ended up with three groups on different nights, all on main campus.

The themes for the evening studies were Creation, Forgiveness and Hospitality. We used materials from the Scriptural Reasoning Society (www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk) and the Three Faiths Forums (www.3ff.org.uk) - essentially one or two texts on the theme from each faith. Each group was expected to manage its own discussion, according to guidelines provided, with a Chaplain from one faith or other visiting each group for only part of its meeting.

Most participants managed to attend all three sessions of their group, and were positive about the opportunity for sharing, and for getting to know members of the other faiths. A joint meeting for members of all groups was held at the end of the autumn term, and it was resolved to run the programme again, with three different themes, in the spring term.

I would be happy to share more details of what we did with anyone interested.

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