

agapé uk[†]

Third Spaces

Picture two castles standing on opposite hills. One of these castles belongs to the Christians. The other one belongs to everyone else. Throughout history, Christians have tried to get others to leave their own castle and come and join the Christians in theirs. This is fantastic for those who make the journey, but what about those who don't? After all, it's uncomfortable leaving your own castle and even more uncomfortable stepping inside someone else's. At other times, Christians have tried venturing inside the other castle. This can be great, or it can feel to others a bit like a vegetarian coming to a barbeque and lecturing everybody on why they shouldn't eat meat.

However, there is a third way, a third space. The middle ground between both castles, where people can meet to share what they think, listen to other ideas, and build deep connections.

Sociologist Ray Oldenberg highlights the eight characteristics of a 'third space:'

- Neutral;
- Levelling (no prerequisites or requirements);
- Focus on conversation;
- Accessible and accommodating;
- Regular attendees to set the mood and welcome new people;
- Accepting of others;
- Playful in tone;
- Conveys the warmth and sense of belonging, a 'home away from home.'

Whether you agree with all these characteristics or not, it gives you a sense of what a third space feels like. This is the kind of space people are searching for, separate from home and work, where they can relax, connect, know and be known.

A Third Space can be found everywhere. A dorm, a student home, a pub, the beach, a park, literally anywhere. We have had one of these spaces in Newcastle, known at times as the Hub and, more recently, Food for Thought, for many years. It is a place where Christians and non-Christians meet to eat, listen to new ideas, share their beliefs and engage with other points of view.

We usually start with a meal, before a member of the group gets up and shares a five-minute thought on a topic of their choice (we have had everything, from relationships to ancient runes to empathy to maps), and then sharing some reflection questions amongst tables, where people will chat and discuss for the rest of the evening. We have found it to be a great way of building community and regularly sharing our faith in a context where it would be weirder to conceal what we think than to express it. At times, non-Christians have also helped run the event. This can make it an easy invite for anyone worried they might secretly get 'evangelised' when they hear that not all the people on the planning committee are even Christians.

It's worth saying, however, that this can come with its own complications: where is the line for where the event, if it is still seen as something we are essentially responsible for, can go under the leadership of people who don't share our faith? This is something for all of us to consider in our own consciences and in conversation with God.

For a student looking to create this kind of space, you should consider location. Where do you have access to? We use a church hall, which is great for seating lots of people and cooking in a big kitchen, but a church is less effective for creating a space that feels neutral than other venues. You could use a common room in your halls of residence, a pub (you may need to pre-book a table to ensure seating) or even your own living room.

You can replicate the 'five minute talk' formula or, if that feels like too much work, simply get someone to think up some good, open questions on a particular topic beforehand. Make sure to have fun, too. If you can't share food together, you could still bring some games along to play after the discussion has finished.

Proverbs 20:5 says,

'The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.'

Ultimately, third space evangelism is about being the kind of person who can draw others out, to recognise where God is already at work in their lives and to meet them on their spiritual journey. It is about listening before we speak; seeking to understand instead of to be understood; asking a question before we provide an answer.

Ten ideas for a Third Space meeting

Dinner talk and discussion

Enjoy some food together and then invite someone up to give a short talk during dessert. Follow up this time with discussion. If the group is too big, split up into smaller groups. Remember the discussion should be the emphasis, not the talk itself.

Do a shared activity together.

It could be a games night, cinema trip, or even a hike in the countryside. Get creative! Prioritise building relationships, creating community, and sharing life with one another.

A Wish Map

Needed: large sheets of paper, magazines, markers, colored pencils, pens

Number of participants: 6-20

Give all participants a piece of white paper on which they will be able to draw up a wish map. A wish map can contain images taken from magazines or drawings and is about what they would like to achieve in the coming year.

After spending 10 minutes to create the wish map people can share what's on their wish map. Encourage people to ask more questions in a personal conversation after the presentations.

Unflitr'd questions

Need: Unfilter'd

Number of participants: 4-10 in a large group or several small groups

Use your usual Unfilter'd to ask new interesting questions! Distribute the cards on the table and ask the first question, have everyone choose the card that most accurately reflects their opinion on this issue, and then explain their choice.

You can come up with questions in advance or let everyone take turns asking a question. There already are suggested questions on the introduction cards of Unfilter'd.

Encourage participants to ask questions about others' answers, creating conversation.

Draw yourself

Needed: paper, pens, pencils, markers.

Number of participants: 5-10

Everyone gets a piece of paper (A4) and draws themselves. It is necessary to show in the drawing what qualities, abilities and interests you have.

The drawings are then collected and distributed randomly among the participants, and everyone tries to guess who is in their drawing. Share why you connect the drawing to a person. After that the one who drew the picture, regardless of whether they guessed him or not, explains his/her drawing. Continue until everyone has shared.

Money

Ask the group the question: "What would you do with £10 million?" Have everyone draw a pie chart and divide it into what they would spend the money on. Then everyone explains their choice.

You could also invite the group to discuss the following questions and statements:

- If you had an unlimited amount of money, what would your life look like?
- It is better to give than to receive - is this true?
- Is it important to think about your budget? Why?
- Is it important that someone teaches you how to use money well? Why?
- Do you think that money has become too important in our world? Why? Can this change?

Re-tell the story

Task: Divide all the people into 2 groups. Give each group a Bible story to read (Luke 7:36-50 and Matt 18:23-35). Each group then has to make a play, film or write a modern interpretation of these Bible stories. You have 30 minutes to prepare. Then you will show it to everyone and explain why they drew/filmed the story that way.

Ask any Question

Needed: pen, paper, container

Number of people: 5-10

Everyone receives 2 pieces of paper and writes questions that interest them about life or faith. Then the sheets are folded and mixed in one container. Next, everyone in a circle takes one sheet of paper, reads out the question and answers it. Encourage participants to ask questions about others' answers, creating conversation.

Watch and discuss a short video

A good opportunity to start a spiritual conversation can be watching short videos. The website www.globalshortfilmnetwork.com has many examples of such videos and questions that can be discussed after viewing.

Discover Jesus The Quiz

Needed: Discover Jesus The Quiz card game

Divide in groups of 4 or 5.

Ask 1 person to do The Quiz and discuss the questions that the person picks.