

Christians in Psychology faculty groups

By Nick Gibson

If you're working or studying in a university Psychology Department, chances are you think you're the only Christian there. Actually, you're probably not, it's just that all the others think they're the only one too! As an ex-leader of the Christians in Psychology (CIP) group within the Psychology Department at Oxford, I thought I'd offer a few ideas on why finding the other Christians in your department and forming a group is helpful, how to go about setting one up, what to do with it once you've got one, and how NeCIP could be of use. The Oxford group has been around for at least six years now, so I'll use it as an example every so often.

Why do I need another Christian meeting?

There are lots of reasons to get involved in a CIP group in your department:

First, it's a place where you can get support from other Christians who are thinking about the same psychological problems you are. Lots of Christians at our churches are suspicious of psychology – one of the Oxford group was told by a fellow church-member: “You can't be Christian and study psychology. Psychology is from Satan!”

Second, it's a place where you can wrestle with the assumptions of the psychology you are learning or researching. The easy option is to compartmentalise our study and our faith. A CIP group affords you the opportunity to discuss and think through issues that lie on the interface between faith and the study of human thought and behaviour, and to attempt to resolve the apparent conflicts between psychology and biblical Christianity.

Third, it's a place from which you can pray for and witness to the other members of your department.

Okay, but how do I set a group up?

If you really don't know any other Christians in your department, pray! It may be that there already is a group of some form that you just don't know about. In Oxford I came across a number of 3rd year undergrads who were desperate for a group such as already existed but didn't know it was there! Fully 10% of every year of psychology undergraduates were Christian while I was in Oxford, and I'd be surprised if it were different anywhere else. One of the group thought he was one of only two Christians in his year until he (bravely!) gave a notice about the group at the end of a lecture and had ten people bounce up to him afterwards!

One way to discover other Christians is to invite somebody to come speak at a meeting at your department and see who turns up! There may be a clinical or academic psychologist at your church who would be happy to do this, or else another member of NeCIP.

Assuming you've discovered at least one other Christian in your department via these means or others (let me know if you have other ideas that work!), try meeting up one lunchtime to discuss a chapter of a book from one of Tom Smiley's exhaustive reading lists (contact me for a copy, or see the website (soon!)). Swathe your department noticeboards (and anything else around your department that doesn't move) with posters advertising when and where, and away you go.

One tip: don't make the group exclusively for undergraduates – graduates and staff members can receive and give at these meetings too.

Wahey! I've got a group! Now what do I do?

Anything you like really. When I got involved in the Oxford group five years ago it was a small discussion group of about six people, at least half of whom were graduates and staff. We tended to meet up one lunchtime each week to discuss a chapter from Myers & Jeeves' (1987) book *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* or something similar, and because we were sociable too, we had a prayer breakfast as well. We then discovered publicity, and the group grew to nearly thirty people, so we set up an email list and started sending out term cards. Our focus remained on psychology-Christianity integration (both theoretical and practical) for the lunchtime meetings and on prayer for the department and fellow psych students for the (elaborate!) breakfasts. (An aside for anyone leading prayer breakfast: you always get better numbers if you avoid toast and instead opt for tasty coffee and at least one of (a) bagels & Philadelphia (b) pancakes & maple syrup (c) a fry up. Home made granola helps too.) As we grew in size we started inviting occasional speakers to the group on all sorts of topics from artificial intelligence to values in psychotherapy, psychology in the missions field to brain injury and moral responsibility. More recently the focus of the Oxford group has become more evangelistic. We'd tend to get between four and twelve people to a lunchtime meeting (though many more if there was a speaker) and between three and five to a breakfast meeting, with the majority of the group coming to something occasionally. Whatever you choose to do, good publicity is essential – give notices, put up posters, send around email reminders to the group, get yourself advertised (and prayed for) by your university Christian Union.

How can NeCIP help me?

NeCIP can help in lots of ways. As we develop the website we'll be adding a section for students and academics, and also putting up things like reading lists and more primers. Perhaps your group could use the primers as a focus for some lunchtime meetings. We can also advertise your meetings on our website – send the details to me, even if it's just a monthly prayer meeting – that way existing students or people about to start at your department can check whether there is already a group. Many NeCIP members are also willing to speak at your events – put your request out on the NeCIP email group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NeCIP/>).