

SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY CU MISSION WRITE-UP – MARCH 2011

(written by Peter Drey)

Some background

Sheffield Hallam University is a large ex-polytechnic. It has more than 33000 students; of these nearly 18000 are full-time undergraduates. There are more than 600 undergraduate courses available. Whilst the university population is inevitably extremely diverse, Hallam prides itself in drawing a large number of its undergraduates from locals from South Yorkshire who are from working class backgrounds. Hallam has the lowest percentage of publically schooled students across any university in Yorkshire or the North East.

These demographic factors inevitably impinge on the CU and its outreach at Hallam. The church scene in South Yorkshire is not strong outside of Sheffield itself. Many CU students have had little or no discipleship. CU numbers rarely climb beyond 30-35 all in all. Active Muslim students would outnumber the number of active Christian students. Hallam has also consistently struggled to produce students with much leadership potential.

Hallam CU had struggled in their evangelism in recent years. The CU had run a number of different events fairly regularly, including apologetic type talks at a coffee shop, an art competition and acoustic nights. Numbers in attendance had been quite low and in practice only a few people invited friends. The CU had run what they would call a 'mission week', but in practice this constituted three events that just happened to take place in the same week. It was also very hard to have anything but quite short talks which at best could intrigue people about Jesus.

About a year ago, Tim Dennis (then staff worker) and I started to think about what might work evangelistically at Hallam and what might help the CU best engage the campus with the gospel. We decided then that some evenings based around food might be most helpful. The idea of using Hallam's favourite films followed later. The 2010-11 committee, whom we recognised to have slightly more leadership ability and commitment to the CU than some others, were keen for our involvement in trying something new. The final mission structure was influenced by teaching from Krish Kandiah, Tim Chester and Ellis Potter, and worked out in combination with the student leaders.

Contact with the CU before mission

All 5 Hallam CU leaders were at Forum, and this is when serious discussions about the mission began. I had already agreed at this point to speak at the CU weekend away in late November, and this was an invaluable opportunity to begin to pitch the idea of the mission to the broader CU as I taught from Acts 1-8. I also led a session on using questions in evangelism.

"OOOH..."
ENGAGE
 15th - 18th March



I then had regular contact with the CU from that point, and went to 2 main CU meetings in the run-up. Simon (the staff worker) also acted as a liaison with the CU. We have also been blessed to have Clare Daubney working as an associate staff worker with Hallam. Between the three of us, we managed good communication with the leaders about the mission. We sorted out the content of the evenings (including the titles of the talks), put together special questionnaires (see below), and put together the CU Guest team; the students were responsible for sorting everything else. The CU conducted a survey of the university's top 4 films in January and February (a combination of using 'Survey Monkey' online and through questionnaires). The CU decided the week's title 'Engage' – and arranged all the advertising.

The CU really caught the vision of the mission. I was particularly encouraged the week before the mission. I attended the CU meeting, and the CU wrote on a board friends that they had already invited to the mission, or those they were planning to invite. There were 22 at CU that night, and they wrote up 93 different names between them.

The mission itself

Following a morning prayer meeting at 10am (which included a teaching from me on 2 Corinthians 4:1-7 each day), we had three hours of first contact evangelism each day (from 11am-2pm). CU Guests and students alike were involved. At first student numbers were quite low, but these grew as the week went on.

The CU had an excellent stall (see photos below). It was located just off of the busiest part of the campus. The CU had managed to procure some giant film posters from a local cinema which made the stall visually very effective.

In order to engage people, we used three methods:

SHEFFIELD HALLAM CHRISTIAN UNION 'LION KING' QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____

Year: _____

Course: _____

1. Have you seen the film *The Lion King*?

Yes No

2. If yes, what do you like most about the film? Is there one particular scene that stands out in your mind?

3. *The Lion King* speaks about several big themes. For each of these themes, to what extent do you often reflect on them? (1 being not at all, 10 being very regularly)

- Hope for life after death _____
- Strong family relationships _____
- Peace and harmony in the natural world _____
- Taking responsibility as you move into adulthood _____
- _____
- Forgiving yourself for the past _____
- Evil rulers ultimately being held accountable for their actions _____

4. Some people would say *The Lion King* has wise things to say on these themes. As members of the Christian Union, we're interested to what extent you think the Bible speaks truth about these issues.

5. Tonight the Christian Union here is looking at how we can engage with *The Lion King's* themes over a free dinner, using clips from the movie. All are welcome. Would you be interested in being invited?

Yes No



- At the busiest points of the day, we flyered those walking past;
- We used specially designed questionnaires to engage people in conversation. The *Lion King* questionnaire is reproduced here. The questionnaire was designed to be usable regardless of whether or not the person being interviewed had seen the film. In practice, they worked best with those who had seen the film.
- We asked people to write down their favourite thing about the film of the day on a large piece of paper at the stall.

It was encouraging to see how many conversations opened up through first contacts, especially through the questionnaires. Many people asked questions off of the back of questions 3 and 4. It was especially encouraging that several people came along in the evenings off of the back of these conversations. (I plan to write up the results of the questionnaires during my forthcoming sabbatical).



We'd also talked about running something called 'Pop a Question' – where students got a free bag of popcorn (in keeping with the theme of the week!) for coming to the stall and asking a question about Jesus or Christianity. In practice we didn't get round to it this time, but I'd be keen to see this tried.

Evenings

Evening events were held at a church about 15 minutes walk from the main campus. (We couldn't find anywhere nearer or more neutral unfortunately with the right facilities). But we definitely benefited from having all of the evenings in the same venue for the whole week, and several people came back for more than one evening.

We set up in the afternoon, with the idea of freeing students up to meet and bring friends in the evening. The CU arranged for a different church to cook each night which was also helpful to this end.

Attendance was, relative to other Hallam evangelistic events of the past, very good. There were 48 on the first night, building to 76 on the Thursday night – we reckoned about half were not Christians most nights. For a CU that has 25-30 regulars, this was very encouraging. Especially encouraging to me was that nearly everyone in the CU brought friends at some point in the week.

I had encouraged the CU to try and make a real experience of the evenings. I wanted the evenings to clearly demonstrate something of the generosity of the gospel, and that regardless of whether or not students agreed with what I was saying from the front, that they would experience something of the light and life the gospel brings. To this end, I encouraged the students to work hard on little details that would add to the overall effect of the evening. With some help, the students excelled here – we themed the decor and menus each night, complete with children's toys everywhere for *Toy Story 3* and spinning tops on the tables for *Inception*. CU Guests acted as waiters and served food to the tables, dressed with white shirts and black trousers or skirts. In practice, I think all this meant that students relaxed and gave the gospel more of a hearing than they might have done otherwise.

APPROXIMATE EVENING TIMINGS

- 7pm:** Advertised start of the evening; we welcomed people into the foyer with a drinks reception.
- 7.20pm:** We welcomed people into the main room and served the starter.
- 7.35pm:** Starter plates were collected. I was then introduced by a member of the CU; we showed the film trailer or a clip, and set people a couple of questions to discuss around tables as they ate their main course. (The idea here was to get people talking and start arousing thoughts and questions that I'd touch during the main talk).
- 7.40pm:** Main course was served.
- 8.15pm:** Main course plates were collected. I then gave my talk. Each time this included another clip. At the end of the talk, we put up a mobile phone number where students could text their thoughts, comments or questions.
- 8.40pm:** Dessert was served.
- 8.55pm:** I responded to the different texts we had received. On Thursday and Friday I offered a prayer. Students were encouraged to stay around and ask further questions over hot drinks, and to take books. Students could also indicate interest for a follow-up course by texting in.
- 9.00pm:** Formal close of the evening. In practice, many stayed around afterwards. We kicked them out at about 9.45pm, although many then went to the pub.



We had a constant flow of input from the front throughout the evening (after each course – see the box on the previous page). For the talks (after the main course), after explaining what I loved about each film (fortunately the Hallam students voted for 4 genuinely good films!) I tried to focus on a main theme from the film and the seemingly innate desires these represented. Ultimately we believe every good desire is fulfilled in Jesus and this was the thrust of my messages:

- On *The Lion King*, looking at the relationship between Simba and Mufasa, I spoke of how we love strong father-child relationships and – whether or not we had one – know what a relationship with a father should be like. Using Galatians 4:4-7, I explained that this was because we are made for a father-child relationship with God, which God offers us through Christ.
- On *Inception*, I looked at the theme of Cobb's search for catharsis over the death of his wife Mal. I used Psalm 32, posing the question 'how can I know true freedom from guilt?' and looking to the cross.

- On *Toy Story 3*, we looked at the theme of leadership, comparing and contrasting Woody and Lotso. I then used this to do a Hallam-style response to the challenges of new atheism (that says God is like Lotso), using 1 John 4.
- Finally, on the *Shawshank Redemption*, I asked what true freedom is. It's not just freedom to do what I want – Brooks had that and committed suicide – but freedom for a relationship and a purpose (pictured in the way that Andy 'redeems' Red). I used Philippians 1 to show how our innate desire for freedom is met in Jesus, so that we can genuinely say 'to live is Christ, to die is gain'.

Because the evenings were well-run and thoughtful and felt coherent, it never felt like we stopped the 'fun bit' and moved onto the 'Christian bit'. I think this lack of 'gear crunch' added integrity to the evening and held people's interest for longer. Including clips, I spoke for 25-30 minutes and this didn't feel too long. I also got students to text questions, thoughts and comments off of the back of what I said and we had some thoughtful and deep questions asked.

Hallam mission and afterwards

It's been so encouraging to see how the week has affected the Christians at Hallam. I had the pleasure of meeting with the new committee, all of whom were pretty involved in the week and (I think) all of whom brought friends at some point in the week. The week had so obviously been key for their own discipleship. I got them each to share the one thing above all that they had personally learned from the week (these quotes are paraphrased but fair representations!):

Sarah: "I know I'm placed at Hallam for a reason and that God wants to use me whilst I'm here."

Cat: "I now know I really can walk up to someone and talk to them about Jesus."

Alice: "I have a real desire to be able to tell people about Jesus, not just during mission week but for the rest of the year too."

Tom R: "I've had a taste of how much God is in control in our evangelism."

Tom M: "I've realised that I mustn't show prejudice to whom I tell about Jesus."

Sam: "I've discovered that I can have real confidence in Jesus and in the gospel – we really can be involved in the work of evangelism during our time at Hallam."

We're not yet aware of anyone who started professing as a Christian during Hallam mission. However, I think it is fair to say that there hasn't been so intensive a period of sowing the gospel in recent years. We pray on for fruit, and that the contacts that were made go on to engage further with the person of Jesus. Several students indicated interest for follow-up. These people will be invited to a course, and we need to go on working with the CU to make sure that CU members go on sharing the gospel with their friends as they can. We still need to increase Hallam students' belief that they really can engage their friends in conversation without having 'experts' around – this is something I hope we'll invest in the CU over the coming year.