

Starting a local *Christians in Science* group

Christians in Science operates mainly at a national UK level by holding annual conferences, by distributing the journal *Science and Christian Belief* and the newsletter *PréCiS* to all members, and by providing a mail-order literature service for books, reprints of articles etc.

However, there have always been local CiS groups meeting in various parts of the country who have organised local activities for other CiS members and friends. These are largely self-supporting groups, who decide on their own aims and activities, and raise their own funding for any larger events. They are supported by the CiS development officer who is available to give advice on starting a group, and provide some resources.

At the time of writing there are 7 active groups, and about the same number planning to start this year. The growth in the number of local groups, from one in autumn 2004 to the present level is exciting, and CiS aims to do all it can to support these initiatives.

Ethos of CiS local groups

The overall aim of supporting local groups is to encourage people to engage with current issues, help working scientists, science teachers and others to feel more supported in what they do, and reach out in the local area.

Local groups are free to set their own agenda, and don't need to have a formal constitution or committee. Most CiS events are open to non-members – this is an important part of our outreach to the church and the general public – although we'd encourage people to think about joining. Most of the larger groups have good links with local churches and Christian university/college staff, and student Christian groups, as a source of interested people to come along, long term support, and advertising for larger events. CiS doesn't have huge financial resources, so although we can provide a bit of financial support to begin with, we rely on local groups being able to support their own activities in the long term, perhaps by collecting donations or applying for funding for larger projects (see below).

Examples of local activities

Local activities are as varied as the imagination and vision of the local organisers! A small informal gathering every few months may work best for you, or at the other extreme, you may have plenty of time to organise a big lecture series! Here are some examples of activities that have worked well in various contexts:

* *Coffee or meal with a few friends.* Sometimes Christians working in big science departments or large companies where there are few Christians can feel quite isolated and need regular fellowship with people of like mind. Simply getting together for a chat can be a great way of encouraging each other in challenging environments.

* *Informal Discussion Evenings.* Normally held in a private home or other suitable venue such as a college or university room e.g. once per term. Refreshments and/or a takeaway help to warm up the atmosphere. Leader prepared to kick off discussion on any science-faith topic, perhaps based on a book or film, a paper from *Science and Christian Belief*, an article from the CiS website, or on some practical issue, like 'How to maintain Christian integrity in the scientific community' or 'Contemporary bioethical challenges'. A local outside speaker can be brought in for variety.

* *Organise a group to travel together to the annual CiS Conference.* This provides a good opportunity to get to know other people from your area as you travel.

* *Staff-student events*. For example, a Sunday lunch for all the Christians in a University department has worked extremely well as a way for the Christian staff to get to know each other, and meet the Christian students. This can be incredibly valuable, and develop into other more outward looking events.

* *Open lectures*. A CiS open lecture once per term is not that difficult to organise and suggestions for good speakers can always be obtained from the development officer. This is a great way to make contact with those interested in science-faith issues who happen to see a poster etc. For the more ambitious, the John Templeton Foundation give grants for such activities, making it possible to hire more expensive venues, increase the advertising budget, bring in speakers from further away etc. A variant is to have a yearly CiS Lecture - less work than termly - and this enables more effort to be put into one 'big event' in the year.

* *Organising a science evening/day in a local church*. The public understanding of science is a major challenge and the pace of scientific advance tends to leave the public way behind in terms of understanding what is really going on and what key ethical issues are involved. Churches are often eager to host open days for science-faith topics and this can be a great way of helping local Christian communities to think through the issues in a Biblical way.

* *Focused Study Group*. This type of discussion group is probably easiest to organise within a university setting and its aim is to meet regularly (e.g. monthly) with the goal of producing a paper for the CiS Annual Conference held in late September/early October. Some of these groups have been highly effective in producing excellent papers that were later published in *Science and Christian Belief* (e.g. see the article by J. Doye et al. 'Contemporary perspectives on chance, providence and free will' *S & CB* 7: 117-140, 1995). The topic for the CiS Annual Conference is normally decided at least a year ahead, so the theme can be found out from the CiS Secretary.

How to get started

Contact the development officer Ruth Bancewicz (ruthb@cis.org.uk, Tel: 0781 687 3515) and let her know that you'd like to start a local group. She is in regular email or phone contact with all the local group leaders, can help you in many ways:

- Getting you up to speed with what's happening in other local groups, how they have gone about setting up local activities, and what works well.
- Providing the names and contact details for all CiS members in your area, and any other contacts that may be useful.
- Giving details about speakers.
- Putting details of your activities or plans in *Precis* and on the CiS website.
- Providing you with a good supply of CiS brochures and other free or cheap literature.
- Visiting the group or attending a planning meeting
- Providing poster templates, CiS logo and other graphics, a CiS introductory PowerPoint presentation etc.
- You can apply to CiS for a small grant start-up grant

On your behalf, all we ask is that you:

- Join CiS as a full member, if you haven't already!
- Keep in touch with Ruth – she'll email to collect news for *PréCiS* every few months

Bookstalls

A small selection of books on science and faith, back-issues of *Science & Christian Belief*, and a wide range of reprints and lectures can be obtained from John Bausor the CiS publications secretary (16 Walter Road, Wokingham, Berkshire RG41 3JA, Tel: 0118 978 2902, or go to the website for more details). For a larger bookstall, your Christian bookshop should be able to provide books on sale or return. A list of recommended books is available on the CiS website, or by request, from the publications secretary.