



iinsight

A Journal for International Student Ministry in the UK

Reaching European Students

European Students:

What are they like and how can we reach them?

Jim Memory et al.

Reaching Europeans:

Practical ideas on reaching secular and postmodern students

Lindsey Capper

The 25th Hour:

Reaching Generation Y through story and song

Ovidiu Spartacian-Tarnu

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insight@friendsinternational.org.uk

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a word from the editor



If you are a citizen in the EU you can study in Scotland for free! Who would pass up such an offer?

Scotland has always had good numbers coming to study from Europe, but the last year or two has seen a huge rise in interest. As a university admissions officer at St Andrews University, my friend scrutinises hundreds of applications from bright European students. Applications come from Lithuanians, Swedes, French, Bulgarians, Romanians, Germans and many more. Entry requirements are tough and competitive; only the smartest receive an offer of a place. Quite a few have attended international schools where teaching has been in English. They mix very easily. They are confident and pro-active, vocal in tutorials and prominent in leadership of student societies.

Looking at the statistics for new students in the ESOL service (English for Speakers of Other Languages) where I teach, the Spanish overwhelmingly top the list. One student told me, "The economic situation is so bad in my country, I have come here to improve my English and look for work." (Interestingly, he was also the one who commented that he wanted to work in charity shops to practise his language skills, but drew the line at the Salvation Army store, because it is "very religious".)

How can we seize the opportunities that these social and economic winds are sending us? How can we be better prepared to reach the 132,550¹ students from Europe who flock to the UK to study in higher education?

It is dangerous to generalise. Every student we meet is an individual, whether they come from a post-communist or post-Christian country, from the Mediterranean south or the Scandinavian north. However, in this issue of *Insight* the writers help us to consider some of the trends, and challenge us to respond creatively.

Gathering the opinions and priorities of students from a variety of countries, Jim Memory from Redcliffe College, along with Charlie Hadjiev and Edith Vilamajó from IFES Europe present their research and propose a number of missiological consequences from their findings. Lindsey Capper, a former Friends International Staff Worker, continues by offering practical suggestions in reaching European students and invites us to reflect on our own practice. Ovi Spatacian-Tarnu, originally from Romania, provides a case study of how one project, *The 25th Hour*, is being used to reach Generation Y through story and song.

Two resources, the *Glad You Asked* course and *Soularium* are reviewed as tools to initiate conversation and provoke deeper discussion with European students.

So whether you are inundated with European students at your events or wondering how to locate them, we trust that these articles will provoke interest and challenge, as well as sparking imaginative possibilities and a better informed prayerfulness.

Fiona Barnard-Smith
Guest Editor

1. Statistic from academic year 2010/11. UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).



European Students: What are they like and how can we reach them?

By Jim Memory (Redcliffe College), Charlie Hadjiev and Edith Vilamajó (IFES Europe)

Introduction

The values and beliefs of European students are often assumed rather than known. As a result the gospel of Jesus Christ is sometimes expressed in terms which make little sense to today's European students. A research project conducted by IFES Europe in association with Redcliffe College has provoked some deep questions about the best way to evangelise this generation of students.

The three-year project sought to engage in contextual mapping of students from a number of European countries. The IFES student movements in Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Italy, Romania, and Portugal chose to participate. The objective was to better understand the values of students and thus help orient the movements' work in regard to evangelistic initiatives.

Methodology

The use of questionnaires to evaluate the opinion of students on religious matters is relatively common. However, questionnaire design is an exacting science and, rather than attempt to design our own questionnaire, the decision was taken to take advantage of the questions from the well-trusted European Values Study (EVS).

The European Values Study is a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values. It provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of citizens all over Europe. It is a unique research project on how Europeans think about life, family, work, religion, politics and society.¹

The European Values Study is a standardized tool used by many of Europe's leading sociologists. The same questionnaire has been used in each of the four surveys (1980, 1989, 2000 and 2008) meaning that it is possible to compare results between countries.² Questions from the full EVS were carefully selected, focusing on those relating to religion, belief and spirituality.

Results

What follows is a selection of the most important findings presented thematically and not in the order in which they appeared in the questionnaire.

Sample and demographics

A total of 1048 questionnaires were completed, approximately 200 per country which was our objective. It proved more difficult to balance the number of male and female participants. In some ways this reflects the greater proportion of females among university students but it should be noted when we come to interpret the results.

Figure 1:
Number of Respondents by Country and Sex

	Male	Female	Total
Albania	51	131	182
Belgium	93	122	215
Croatia	68	147	215
Portugal	91	149	240
Romania	95	101	196
Totals	398	650	1048

The vast majority of the respondents (88% to be more precise) were born between 1987 and 1993. At the time of the research they were aged between 18 and 25 years of age, with a median of 21.

The important things in life

The first question asked respondents to indicate how important in their life is: work, family, friends and acquaintances, leisure time, politics and religion. Possible responses for each were: *very important*, *quite important*, *not important*, *not at all important*. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of respondents who said the item in question was very important to them.

Figure 2: Percentage saying the following are very important, ranked by importance and country

Albania		Belgium		Croatia		Portugal		Romania	
Family	91.8	Friends	75.3	Family	85.6	Family	89.6	Family	89.3
Work	68.1	Family	61.4	Friends	62.8	Friends	54.2	Religion	41.8
Friends	19.8	Leisure	45.6	Leisure	42.8	Work	36.7	Friends	36.7
Religion	16.5	Work	41.4	Work	30.7	Leisure	27.9	Work	31.6
Leisure	15.9	Religion	6.5	Religion	18.6	Religion	12.1	Leisure	29.6
Politics	5.5	Politics	4.2	Politics	1.4	Politics	4.6	Politics	1.5

1. <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/evs/about-evs/>

2. <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/evs/surveys/survey-2008.html>

Figure 2 makes it immediately apparent that across all the countries the family is considered to be the most important thing for students. In every country except Belgium, over 85% of students say that family is very important to them. Friends are the second most important thing to students with this item appearing in the top three of every country but in most cases at a significantly lower level than the family. Only in Belgium did friends replace family as the most important thing in their lives.

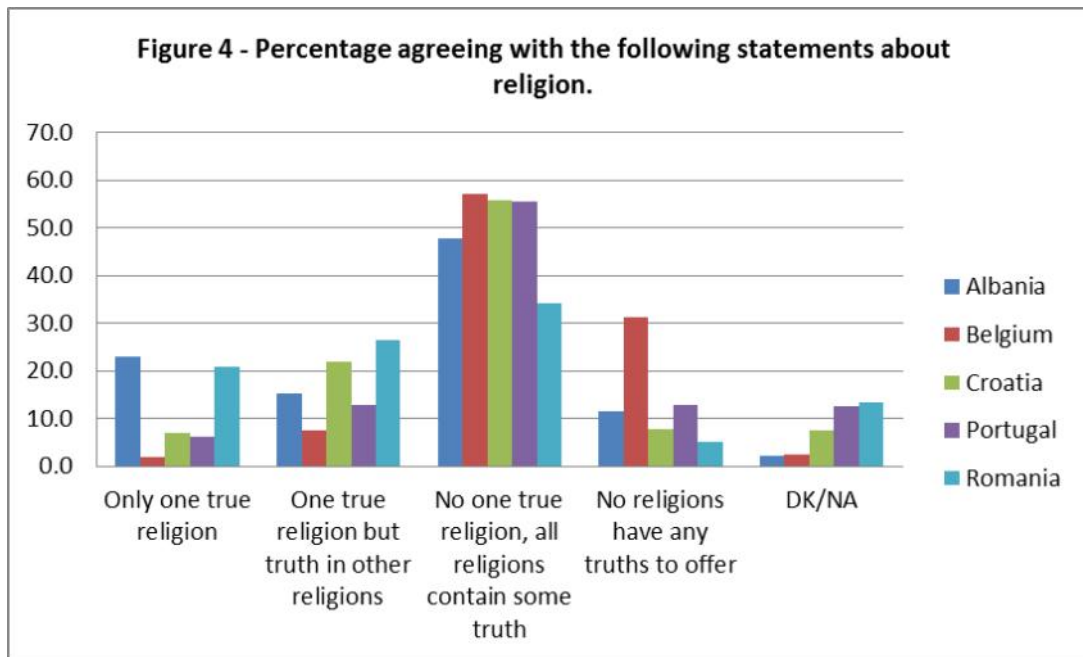
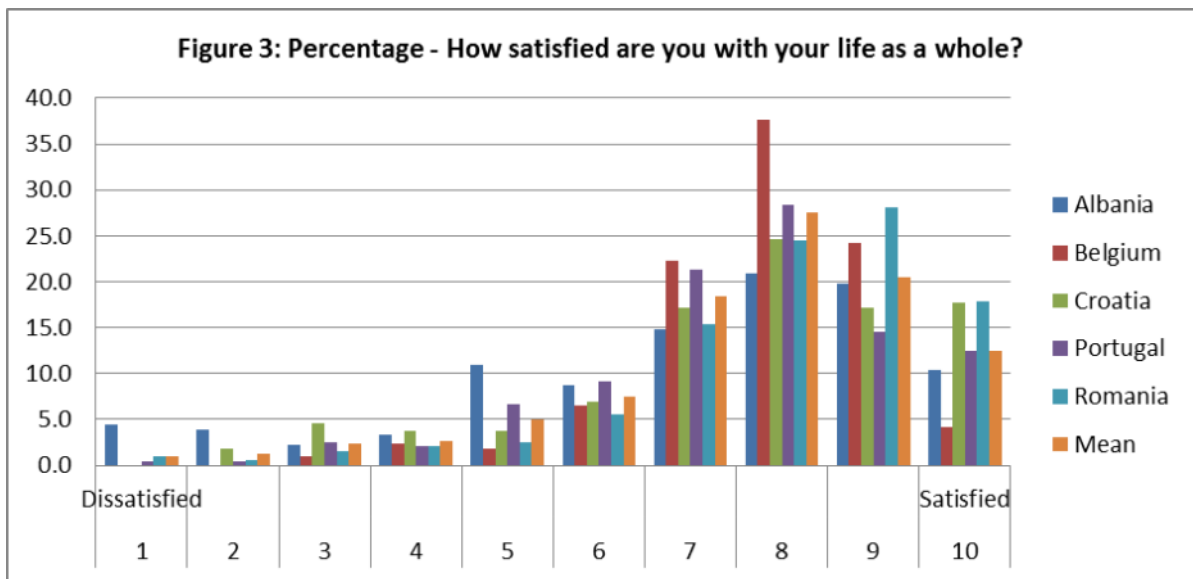
Student happiness

Perhaps the most striking finding of all came from the question which asked about life satisfaction. Students were asked to rate on a ten-point scale the question: ‘All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?’ As can be clearly seen from **Figure 3** European students are on the whole very

satisfied with their lives. The median score across the whole dataset is an 8 with 86% of students scoring between a 6 and a 10.

Is there one true religion?

Another question asked: ‘These are statements one sometimes hears. Please choose the statement that best describes your view: There is only one true religion; There is only one true religion, but other religions do contain some basic truths as well; There is not one true religion, but all great world religions contain some basic truths; None of the great religions have any truths to offer.’ The results are displayed in **Figure 4**. It is evident that even in countries with a long Roman Catholic tradition, like Croatia and Portugal, only a tiny minority of students hold that there is only one true religion.



Believing without belonging

The sociologist Grace Davie has summed up the spiritual state of Europe as “believing without belonging”³. To some degree the results of this research support that conclusion. Two questions asked the students if they belonged to a religious denomination and if so which one. 75% of Albanians, 32% of Belgians, 73% of Croats, 65% of Portuguese and 95% of Romanians said they belonged to a religious denomination.

Clearly religious affiliation only tells part of the story so we were interested in public and private participation, namely attendance at a religious service and private devotion. One question asked: *Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend a religious service these days?* The possible responses ranged from *more than once a week* to *never or practically never* (Figure 5).

A further question asked: *How often do you pray outside of religious services?* With possible responses ranging from *every day* to *never*. It is clear that whilst weekly attendance at religious services is low in some countries, students continue to pray. Even in secularized Belgium one in seven Belgian students say they pray once a week or more (Figure 6).

Students were also asked about their belief in God: *Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs:*

there is a personal God; there is some sort of spirit or life force; I don't really know what to think; I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force. (Figure 7).

Whilst belief in the divine is widespread, belief in a personal God is considerably lower. Nearly four times as many Belgian students believe in some sort of spirit or life force than in a personal God.

Religious or spiritual?

A further question asked: *Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are: a religious person; not a religious person; a convinced atheist?* As Figure 8 makes clear an extraordinarily high percentage of the students describe themselves as religious. Most strikingly over a third of Belgian students describe themselves as religious even though only 4% attend church weekly (Figure 5). The very low level of convinced atheists among students is also noteworthy.

A final question delved deeper into the issue of spirituality (Figure 9). European students are interested in spirituality. Only a tiny minority have no interest, and most are somewhat or very interested. Even in Belgium half of the students surveyed said they were somewhat or very interested in the sacred or supernatural.

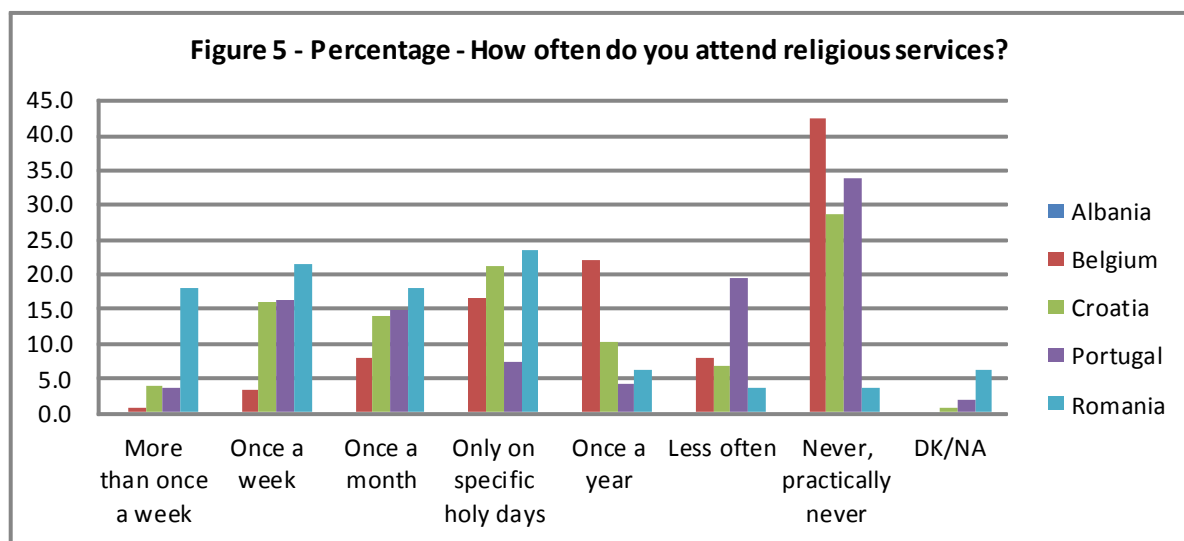
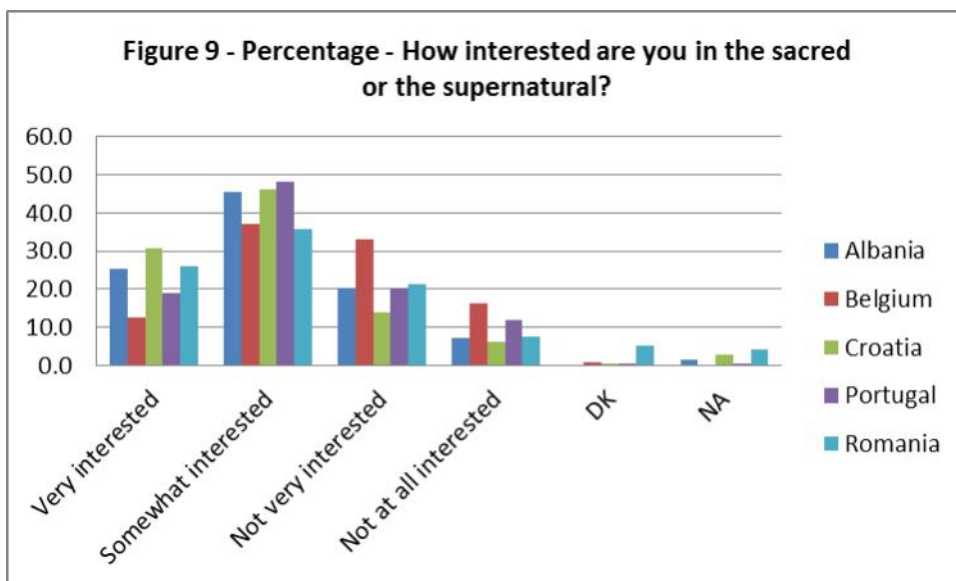
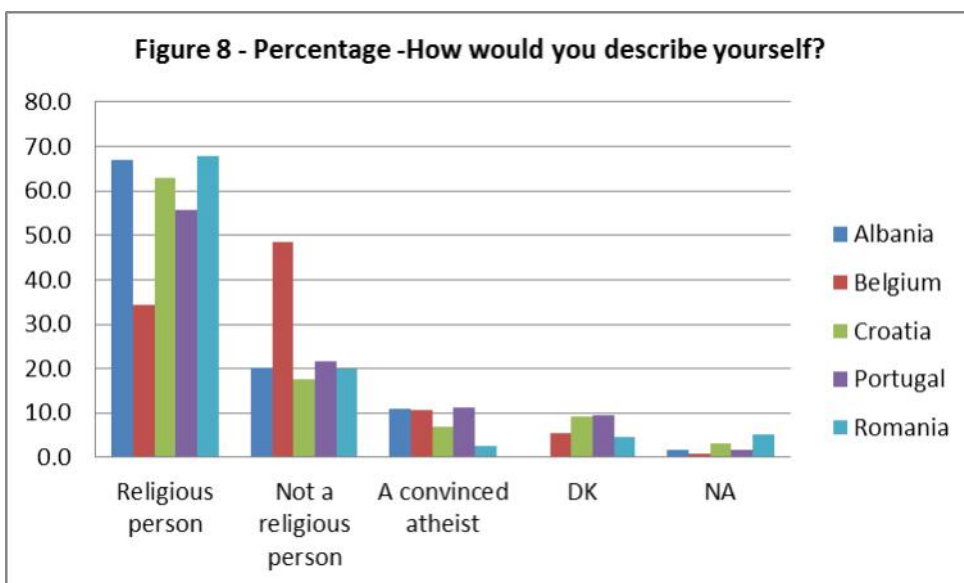
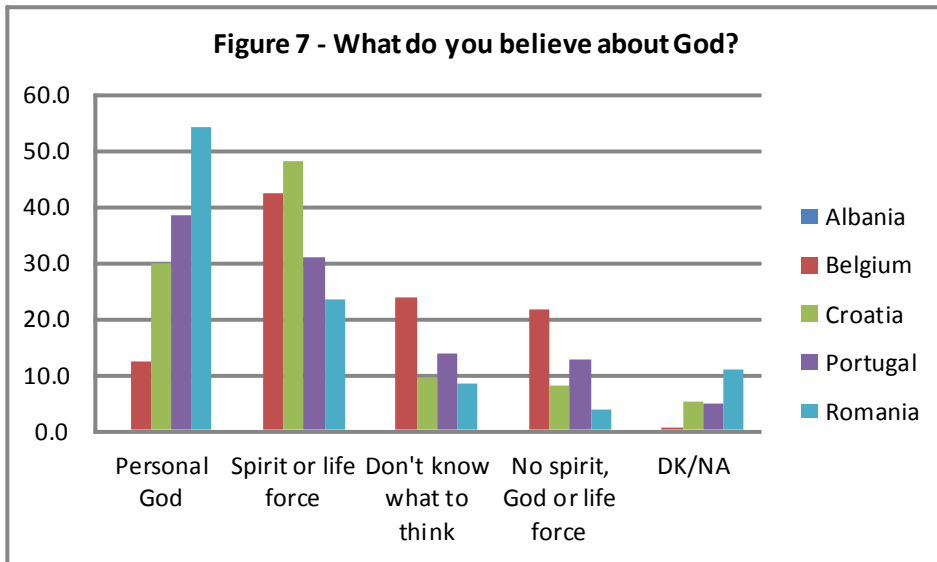


Figure 6 - Percentage - Frequency of Prayer by country

	Every day	More than once a week	Once a week	At least once a month	Several times a year	Less often	Never	DK/NA
Albania	52.7	17.6	4.4	5.5	7.1	7.7	3.3	1.6
Belgium	6.0	2.8	4.7	7.0	11.6	14.4	50.2	3.3
Croatia	28.8	14.4	8.4	9.3	8.8	8.4	17.2	4.7
Portugal	15.1	9.2	6.3	6.3	9.2	16.3	32.6	5.0
Romania	54.6	13.3	4.1	4.6	1.0	11.7	5.1	5.6

3. Davie, G, *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda* (2nd ed.), Sage Publications, London, 2013.



Conclusion

Whilst differences were apparent between the countries some common patterns emerged. This led us to make three significant observations that were true for all:

1. The students in this study were largely satisfied with their lives.
2. The students in this study consider family and friends to be most important in their lives.
3. The students in this study were not always interested in religion but were interested in spirituality and the supernatural.

What follows is an attempt to reflect missiologically and theologically on the observations of this research. Inevitably it involves some degree of speculation but takes the observations of this study as a starting point and follows the logic through. If these propositions or “theses” were true more generally for European students what would it mean for how we engage in mission amongst them?

Proposition 1:

European students are largely satisfied with life.

This study found that European students are for the most part satisfied with their lives. This corroborates other studies such as that by Savage et al⁴ who found that British young people live by what they call a “*happy midi-narrative*”: their lives revolve around their friends and family with the aim of being happy together in the here and now.

We might ask what the students who responded to our survey understand by “satisfied” but it seems to be very much focussed on enjoying life in the present. Clearly this observation has huge missiological consequences:

- If students are basically satisfied with their lives then many forms of evangelism which presuppose dissatisfaction with life will make little sense. This goes much further than a rethink of evangelistic materials or even of evangelism training but points to a need for a new theology of evangelism. This would involve effectively a change of missiological paradigm for many churches.
- Whilst today’s young people are just as much in need of redemption as those of every other generation, our “missiological starting points” must posit answers to their spiritual questions not ours.
- Their spiritual questions focus on the here and now. Films might continue to present fantasy eschatologies for entertainment purposes, but generally European young people look for a “realized” spirituality rather than one that focuses on the future.
- Life must be celebrated and affirmed by churches and Christian organizations and seen to be so. So often young people see Christians as life-denying. Celebration should be rediscovered and

reaffirmed as a core value of the Christian life.

- Work, leisure and relationships must become the primary locus of spirituality, not only because it is here that most of life’s real questions are posed but also because these are the areas that are most in need of genuine redemption. It is here that the gospel may be seen to be “really” good news.

In sum, there is a need for a realized “whole life” spirituality that understands redemption as the transformation of all that is, by all that we have and are, so that Christ may be all in all (Col. 1:20; Rev. 21:1, 1 Cor. 15:24-28; 2 Peter 3:13).

Proposition 2:

European students consider family and friends to be most important in life.

This study found that relationships with family and friends are the most important thing in the lives of European students, whatever their country of origin.

- Evangelism and discipleship are so often focused on the individual. We must learn to think once again in terms of the “*oikos*” or household, the primary community (or communities) to which we all belong and whose relationships are the most important thing for European young people. Zacchaeus’ repentance led not only to his “personal salvation” but also that of his whole family — “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). In European society where families are increasingly dysfunctional this message of “family salvation” is sorely needed.
- The family is to be valued and honoured; a person’s relationships with parents, siblings and extended family are an inextricable part of who they are. The gospel must be communicated not only as good news for the individual, but “really” good news for the family. Further reflection is necessary on how practically the family might be honoured in our evangelism.
- Our evangelism should be less propositional and more relational, telling the story of how we came to be part of family of Christ, and include practical teaching on how to live well as daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, friends and co-workers, etc.
- As above, there is a need for fresh theological reflection in this case on the place of friendship in the ministry of Christ. Jesus chose to redefine his relationship with his disciples not as one of service to a master but in terms of friendship — “I have called you friends” (John 15:15).
- Friendship is not friendliness. All too often “friendship evangelism” involves being friendly so as to gain the opportunity to share the Christian gospel. Not only is this increasingly seen to be

4. Savage, Collins-Mayo, Mayo and Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y*, Church House Publishing, London, 2006

false by marketing-savvy European youth, but it also does injury to the biblical understanding of friendship which is a relationship of trust where truth is spoken even when it is unpalatable: "Wounds from a friend can be trusted but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Proverbs 27:6).

Proposition 3:

European students are not always interested in religion but are interested in spirituality and the supernatural.

Once again this observation suggests a need for further missiological reflection:

- The secular worldview permeates the media, education and the public sphere to such a degree that we often assume people have no interest in spirituality. Nevertheless, a very significant proportion of European young people continue to believe in God and value spirituality even if they have no time for organized religion.
- The presupposition that all European students are going to be secular humanists can lead to wrongheaded evangelistic approaches, self-censorship and the abandonment of the public sphere to the secular voices. Christian students must understand the secular worldview and be able to point out its weaknesses and be actively involved in student politics.
- There is a need for further reflection on why "spirituality" is seen as positive whilst "religion" is less so. Is this merely the spiritual aspect of the postmodern rejection of authoritative institutions or is there something more to it than that?
- How can we speak the language of "spirituality" rather than "religion"? Perhaps this is merely another aspect of the theological paradigm shift we have already argued for, that our language, our way of talking about life and God, and even our "theological starting points" must respect the "starting points" of our audience, much in the way Jesus did with the woman at the well in John 4.
- Prayer in whatever form continues to be a common practice amongst Europeans and even European young people. Perhaps further research is necessary to establish exactly what is meant by this but surely this is a potential bridge for dialogue.



Reaching Europeans: Practical ideas on reaching secular and postmodern students.

By Lindsey Capper

Tomas, a German student loved to talk and was openly 'spiritual'. He enjoyed coming to our European spiritual discussion group and also came to various Bible studies. His main spiritual interest was in seeking personal happiness and harmony. He hasn't come to believe that Jesus provides the only answer to his spiritual needs but he has been impacted by the behaviour of Christians around him over the last five years and because of that recently has been to church. It can be a long road to travel with some European students.

Meeting European students

Some may find it easy to meet European students with regular numbers attending events. Many, however, struggle to connect and attract them to international student cafes, Bible studies and other activities. They seem to be hidden from view; perhaps it is just more difficult to distinguish them physically as international students and so they are often overlooked in our ministry.

Hard work and intentional seeking out is needed to meet and build relationships with European students. Reaching and journeying with them in friendship does not happen quickly, but requires commitment and perseverance. Often witnessing is through lifestyle initially before we earn the right to speak God's word into their lives. They need to be pursued by prayerful and patient Christians. Everts and Schaupp write about the journey to faith for postmodernists and have identified five thresholds (stages) in the journey. It is important to recognise the stages and adjust to where the 'postmodern' person is in their growth in order to witness appropriately for their stage. The five thresholds are:

1. From distrust to trust (of Christians)
2. From complacent to curious
3. From being closed to change to being open to change in their life (the hardest threshold to cross)
4. From meandering to seeking
5. Crossing the threshold of the kingdom itself

Trust needs to be built and curiosity aroused before they may begin to show interest, however small, in knowing more about Christianity.



Ideas and thoughts for Evangelism and Discipleship

The *Alpha* course has been one of the best evangelistic gifts to Europe as well as the rest of the world. Dr Dietrich Schindler, executive director of church planting for the German Evangelical Free Church, identifies the *Alpha* course's sociology as the success-defining factor; *Alpha* helps people experience community and journey together in a faith-seeking process. He talks of a different emphasis today in the Holy Spirit's method of bringing people to Christ. It is less like a Damascus-type conversion experience (common up to the 1980s) and more like the road to Emmaus: the disciples with one another, having doubts; Jesus comes alongside them and as they dialogue together and journey together, they find the way.

Community emphasis

The community emphasis of *Alpha* is highly attractive for Europeans. When experimenting with a weekly spiritual discussion group for European students in Edinburgh, whilst I found the broad-ranging and tangential natures of our discussions were often frustrating and difficult to guide, those participating really enjoyed the community aspect. We succeeded in creating close community together as a group and Christian hospitality was modelled each week through this.

Dr Schindler, church-planting expert, calls for many more courses such as *Alpha* in order to reach Europeans with the gospel and is currently developing a course for secular Europeans called '*My life*'. It aims to help an individual get a better grasp of who he or she is as a person. The course is currently being tested, but Dr Schindler hopes to train facilitators in the UK in the near future. Its rough outline is provided below (with permission) as an aid sparking ideas and creativity. Although it is aimed at those older than student age, I think it could be adapted. The principles appeal to Europeans and scratches where they are itching in their need to make meaning of their life.

Participants are asked to write down:

- Most significant people in their lives and events that have influenced them today.
- The most painful people and events.
- Course facilitators help them discern how they've been shaped by people and events, and see how their values have developed over time based on these people and experiences.
- From there, they consider their lives: if writing an autobiography, what title would they give their book if giving it one now? What would the chapter titles be? What about the future? What do they want to do with the rest of life and how will they get there?
- C. S. Lewis likens the presence of God in our lives to symphony music; sometimes it is loud, sometimes barely audible. Participants are asked to write down musical notes next to the milestones of who they have become, and where they have heard the music from the presence of God in their lives.
- Facilitators then talk about the composer of the music coming into the world.
- From there they go to the gospel and help participants make sense of their story through the biblical worldview.

A key aspect of this course is the listening and self-reflecting process, preparing the hearts of participants before bringing the gospel into the mix. The course is focused on identity making. Helping secular Europeans to think about who they are becoming and who they want to become, is a helpful way in to start sharing faith and the idea that God is an actual reality in life.

Life experiences

The 'postmodern' secular European students of today derive more of their identity and meaning from life experiences than from knowledge they gain. They are experience-shaped and driven. This influences their attitudes to the spiritual and thereby impacts our evangelism, discipleship and all aspects of encountering God and expressing faith.

Stop and think:

How is your evangelism and discipleship geared toward facilitating a person's experiential encounter with God?

This can happen through the Holy Spirit, through Christian community, through generous Christ-like hospitality, through inviting students to participate in Christian / church social action projects where they are serving the community, the poor or disadvantaged and

can see Christian love in action. It may be a much more natural starting point to invite them to get involved in some practical way of serving before talking about the gospel.

Stop and think:

What community serving projects or justice/ environmental campaigns could you invite European students to join with you or with a local church?

Weekends away can also play a vital part in helping Europeans experience what it is like to live in a Christian community for a few days. The task in all of this is to work hard to make transparent our Christ-motivated living, community and service. Too often it is not visible for unbelievers to observe because we are not open and honest enough to show all of ourselves with faults and sinful parts also on display.

This preference for experience-oriented learning is why mediums such as film, story telling, and images are so helpful in communicating the gospel and other biblical truths with postmodern and secular Europeans. They help students make meaningful connections to experiences in their own lives, therefore having a greater impact.

Stop and think:

How can you complement evangelistic and discipleship Bible study with an experience-oriented learning approach?

Images and symbolism

Hipps notes that as images become major elements of Western culture and the dominant symbol system by which we make meaning, critical reasoning gives way to a preference for the experiential and intuitive³. In *'Making sense of Generation Y'* Savage et al emphasise the use of images and symbolism in engaging with Generation Y. I would broaden this category to include secular and postmodern Europeans also. They connect today's need to use images and symbolism to how they were used by the biblical prophets (other visible props also) to 'image' the message rather than verbalize it. For example, Jeremiah used a belt (13:1-14), pottery (18:1-19:5), goblets of wine (25:15-36) etc. Such symbols were intended to provoke a response and stimulate interest rather than clarify a situation. Research undertaken by Savage et al suggests the use of ambiguous images is a good way to make Generation Y inquisitive and provoke a response. As with images in Scripture, these then provide a bridging opportunity for further explanation.

Stop and think:

What images do you use in your communication? (Perhaps try Soularium, the picture-based questionnaire —Page 14)



Dialogue

Another key element in reaching postmodern students is the ability to dialogue with them and ask provocative questions. Asking experience-focused questions is a great way to hear where they are coming from and provide an opportunity to give our own answer and tell the story of God's work in our lives. Richardson gives an example of such a question: *'Where do you seek perspective and help with your inner questions, doubts and struggles?'* He also advocates learning to tell good transformation stories for each stage of our lives, so that we can talk naturally about the real experiences and encounters we have had with the presence and authority of God or as Richards puts it "learning to talk about Jesus in surprising and 'rock my world' ways."

Doubt

Doubt is a big issue for secular Europeans. To be so certain that Christianity is the only way to God in the world is not only arrogant for them, but also unfathomable! Certainty is no longer common. There is so much spiritual choice on the market that nothing is certain, everything is relative and absolutes are rejected. Doubt becomes an all-pervading atmosphere and a barrier to absolute faith.

Addressing this issue could provide some interesting opportunities with European students open to discussion and dialogue. We all know how doubt feels; it is part of the human condition. Certainly it would be useful to help European Christian students think through doubt and how to deal with it as part of their discipleship. The consumer mentality (which helps lead to relativism) is so strong, even in Christians. I was shocked at myself a few years ago, during an evangelistic conversation with an atheist to discover these words coming out of my mouth: "That's ok if that's what you believe." It certainly wasn't what I knew and thought I believed in my head. Yet it somehow came out of my mouth revealing the influence of relativism on my subconscious! It was a real wake up call from the Holy Spirit for me. I think it is helpful to create spaces for European students, both Christian and non-Christian, to be able to talk about the topic of doubt openly and honestly though it would need to be done thoughtfully and carefully. George Hunter III states that helping people with doubts find faith, is a longer process than helping people find forgiveness. He quotes Donald Soper who observed that "guilt is like tinder that blazes when the spark of emotion is applied to it, whereas doubt is like a rust which can only be removed by careful polishing."

Stop and think:

What sort of questions and stories open up conversations with students used to relativism and who may be cynical and disillusioned?

Conclusion

I hope some of these thoughts and ideas have been helpful in stimulating your thinking. There is a great need

to be creative, to be bold in experimenting and trying new ways of doing things and of communicating Jesus to secular Europeans. They desperately need us to engage with them on their turf, using language they understand and we need to be patient travellers with them, persevering down the often long and difficult road towards faith in Jesus.

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The 25th Hour: Reaching Generation Y through story and song

By Ovidiu Spartacian-Tarnu

Two years ago I set off on an exciting spiritual journey. No, I did not go on a pilgrimage to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostella, nor did I go on a mission trip to Africa, nor did I plant a mega-church. Instead, I started an interactive and creative Bible study group called *The 25th Hour*.

The meaning behind *The 25th Hour*

When I searched for a name for the group, I was hoping I could find not only something memorable, but also something that would have a profound spiritual meaning. It was not an easy task, but the need for redeeming time kept coming to my mind.

I said from the beginning that I did not want the Bible study group to be simply a source of information. Instead, the goal I set was to find out if and how God was involved in our lives, giving us opportunities to do something positive. The Old Testament seems to revolve around this principle and so does Christian wisdom. The Jews had a proverb which said, "Do not withhold good from those who need it, when you have the ability to help" (Proverbs 3:27, NET). Jesus Himself was very careful not to miss any opportunity that His Father presented to Him. He did not allow anything to distract Him, not even a nice meal after a long and exhausting day (John 4:27-31). It was challenging, but He considered it very gratifying. The apostle Paul wrote along these lines as well: "*Be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days*" (Ephesians 5:15-16, NLT).

When *The 25th hour* came to my mind, I thought it was interesting enough and it appeared to me that it was conveying the meaning I had intended. However, I did not want to be too definite about it until I had put it to the test. So I made an announcement in church about the Bible study group. After the service ended, an African man with broken English came to me. He was quite intrigued with the name and said, "*I know what this is about. There are 24 hours in a day. If a 25th hour were to be given to us, it would be by God's grace. It is about second chances, isn't it?*" If he could grasp the meaning behind *The 25th Hour* instantly, I told myself, then certainly others would.

Currently, the group meets in a restaurant in the centre of Glasgow every Tuesday evening. The more treasures we discover in God's Word, the more relevant our initial question becomes: "If you received one extra hour at the

end of the day, what would you use it for? Would you spend more time with your kids? Would you try and help your friend who is in need? Would you stop by to speak to a homeless person in the street? Would you do more work towards the dream that God has placed on your heart?"

Engaging with stories from our culture

Looking at today's culture, it is very noticeable that we are living in a story-driven generation. The time of set ideologies seems to have passed and what most people wish to hear are stories to which they can relate, that inspire and give them hope. They want to be presented with a wide range of perspectives and then to pick the one that suits them. Ultimately, they hope that at the end of a story, they will feel spiritually enriched.

The majority of the stories we come across are what literary critics call "redemptive stories." They are about the mistakes that heroes make and then learn how to fix. These kind of stories appear to be the most popular at the moment. Despite all the relativism brewed by postmodernism, one common certainty seems to be that there is something wrong with this life; things just are not supposed to be the way they are. Stories are meant to show a way out, a redemptive path, the possibility for salvation. Anaïs Nin referred to this imaginative power to propose a better world when she wrote that "*stories are the only enchantment possible, for when we begin to see our suffering as a story, we are saved.*"

Stories are an important part of our Bible studies at *The 25th Hour*. They are to be found everywhere: in cinemas, on TV, on the Internet, on commercial billboards in the street, in newspapers and magazines. We can never run out of sources of inspiration. All these stories make an attempt at fixing problems. The solutions they offer vary enormously, from how to make your laundry pure white to ways of seeking reconciliation after a break-up in marriage.

The Bible is not much different. It explores the consequences of some of the most serious mistakes people make in life: murdering a brother, committing adultery with a neighbour's wife, envying a friend for succeeding in life, stealing from a dangerous enemy, lying to a business partner or rebelling against parents. Biblical writers have not shied away from the reality of sin. They help us look it straight in the eye. It takes a



lot of courage to do so, and noticeably secular writers often fail to display the reality of life. However, the authors of the various books in the Bible have dared to face sin for what it is, not because they are braver, but because they know that God has the wisdom and the ability to fix the biggest mess anyone can make.

The structure of *The 25th Hour*

We often start a session by watching selected scenes from films like *Forrest Gump*, *Batman Begins*, and *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Sometimes, when the group has a little more time to read a few chapters from a book, we try a biographical novel like *Have a Little Faith* by Mitch Albom. This enables us to engage more carefully with the material over a period of time. Since we meet in a restaurant, we all sit around a table (or a few joined tables), so it is quite easy to interact with one another. Usually, whoever leads the session will have a few questions prepared for group discussion. These are meant to help people make a connection between the story and their personal life experience.

Once a connection has been created, the evening's facilitator introduces a biblical passage where a similar experience is described. This is the climax of our meeting. Everything that has come before is meant to prepare the group for this moment. The text is read aloud and then some general remarks are made. Every member of the group has the opportunity to air their own observations of the text. They are encouraged to share personal stories or voice what they feel God is saying to them.

The beauty of story is that each reader can engage with the text at their own level. For instance, one person will understand the narrative of Joseph as a tale of family conflict and reconciliation, another as a coming-of-age account, and a third as a lesson on wise leadership. It is amazing how God can use one story in the Bible to speak personally to so many individuals.

Some have asked me for tips on finding a link between the Bible and the numerous stories in our culture. I think the key is to identify the main idea of a biblical passage. Once this is done, it is quite easy to find a related theme on the Internet or on other media channels.

At the end of every *25th Hour* session we create space for reflection and prayer. This is everybody's favourite moment. While listening to a song, the people in the group are invited to respond to the Bible study. In moments like these some have given their life to God, others have made a decision to pursue a dream they have felt God put on their heart, and others have been healed emotionally and physically.

It is amazing how God engineers this particular stage of our Bible study. As we meet in a restaurant, there is often music in the background already, but we fail to notice it. This is a general phenomenon in our culture because music seems to have become like wallpaper: it affects our mood and emotions even though we are unaware of it. Yet when we pray at *The 25th Hour*, we become receptive.

The tracks that are played in public spaces nowadays although 'secular', can have a deep spiritual meaning. On many occasions the songs have matched the theme of the evening. It is as if God is saying, "I'm listening and I'm going to answer your prayers."

What's next?

Since I started *The 25th Hour* two years ago, I have prepared a number of Bible studies. I have tried to explore themes that are relevant to the events in our lives and our society. Now is the time to organise those notes in an easy to read format so that others may benefit from them. I have started working on an online library system that will make these resources available to a wider audience. Pastors, house group leaders, youth and student workers will soon be able to access a rich source of inspiration for their Bible studies, sermons and talks.

If you visit Glasgow on a Tuesday and would like to join us for a Bible study, please don't hesitate to do so. The group would love you to be a part of our time together. Our event website is at www.25h.so. There you will find a list of upcoming themes and discussions.

Ovi is happy to answer questions and provide more information about The 25th Hour. He can be contacted by email at contact@25h.so

Engaging with the questions: *Glad You Asked* – a DVD course

Reviewed by Lizi Ross

'If you could ask God any question and knew you would get a straight answer, what would you ask?'

This was the question asked to a group of European students as they concluded an investigating Christianity course. The group still had many unanswered concerns and wanted to keep discussing, so the group leaders asked the above. A list of key questions was formed. The group continued to meet, working their way through them. Several weeks later, four out of the five seekers had become Christians.

This experience made the group leaders wonder—*is there potential for life change if people are given an opportunity to ask and discuss their questions in a safe place?*

Soon after, *Glad You Asked* was formed.

Glad You Asked is a DVD- based course which seeks to be a tool to 'spark conversations about faith', particularly for those with a European mind-set. It encourages people to think through key and popular apologetic questions whilst giving them also an opportunity to engage with the Christian worldview.

Glad You Asked doesn't tell people what to believe. It asks them to consider the evidence for themselves.

Each week a different question is discussed, for example: "How do we make sense of the world?", "Does God exist?" and "What about suffering?" The questions were selected following research.



Krish Kandiah is one of the gifted communicators featured on *Glad You Asked*.



Each session is divided up into questions, discussion and short 2-3 minute soundbite video clips along with some testimonies. The video clips ask some thinkers/experts and good communicators for their input. These are then followed by the questions to help you engage together. An average DVD session is about 20 minutes, so there is plenty of time for conversation. The short clips build up a body of evidence to allow people to make an informed decision, whilst the questions allow them to discuss any further thoughts and any other related questions. It is a learn-together rather than teacher/pupil style. There are lots of movement and visuals appealing to a postmodern learning style.

There are many strengths of this course. The main ones from my experience are:

- It starts where people are. The postmodern generation on the whole are not 'churched'. They are biblically illiterate. *Glad You Asked* does not presuppose any knowledge, but starts much further back answering questions before hopefully moving onto the truths of the gospel.
- It takes us to Jesus, having knocked down some barriers. It enables a good discussion on the cross and resurrection using scripture.
- It promotes dialogue – a recognised learning style for a postmodern generation.
- It understands the value of relationships and the need for relational evangelism to Europeans.
- The format and style are attractive, relevant and appeal to postmodernists.
- Many of the testimonies are moving, speaking to both heart and mind – ensuring both our brains and feelings are engaged.

There is no doubt that *Glad You Asked* is a fantastic resource but there are several things that are important to be noted:



- Some of the questions just give the beginnings of answers as the sound bites are short. Some responses are not comprehensive. The leader, whilst not giving the answer, does need to have a good grasp of apologetics to guide the discussion gently and answer questions which the DVD does not. This is a great opportunity for a leader to scrub up on their apologetics!
- The style and language works for those who are willing to challenge authority and popular assumptions. This will not work for all cultures.
- On their own, the testimonies are not always that clear, but viewed with all the evidence they build a good picture.

The Glad You Asked DVD is available to buy for £33 directly from the Glad You Asked website: www.gladyouasked.org

Soularium: A Picture-Based Questionnaire

Reviewed by Kirsten Wynn

*"Just as sunlight illuminates a solarium,
Soularium opens a window to the soul."*

It's summer in a university city in France. A small group of Christians are doing questionnaires around campus, but this year instead of just a clipboard and list of questions they've set up a board with pictures attached.

Curious students pause to look, and the conversation begins: *"Which three images best describe your life right now & why?"*

Welcome to Soularium!

Soularium is a picture-based questionnaire created to help start up spiritual conversations with those who are not yet Christians.

It consists of 50 high quality full-colour photographic images and five simple exploring questions which gently invite the non-Christian to explore where they are in their spiritual journey.

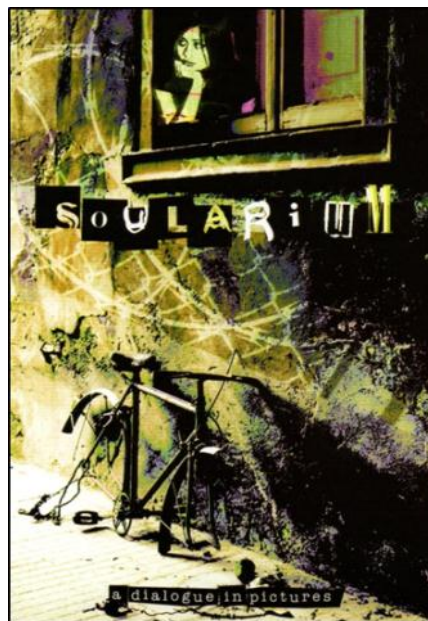
It was originally designed for the post-modern generation who think more visually but I think it appeals across the spectrum and it can be especially helpful to use with international students. Sometimes it's hard to put our thoughts and feelings into words especially in second language. Soularium provide the visual prompts to help people express what they think and feel.

You may want to tweak the questions, and you may need to supplement some of the photos to make them more culturally appropriate to your group of students, but I'd recommend it as a fun, unthreatening, great value and very flexible tool to have in your resources box.

A few ideas on how it can be used:

- Stick the pictures on a board and use as a conversation starter at Freshers' Fair or in your Globe Café or during a Mission week.
- Put the photos in a flip album and use it to chat with students 1-1.

- As an activity in an English Conversation class or with a Wives group- maybe doing just one question each session.
- If you're not sure the photos are quite right for your group then you could pose a question and then use a couple of the pictures to give your own answer as a model and then ask the students to bring in their own photo answers for the following week.



Even if you decide not to buy Soularium I'd recommend you check out www.mysoularium.com. The "See What Others Are Saying" section gives an interesting insight into what students today are thinking and feeling about life's big questions. Also, the "Go Deeper in Your Journey" section has some great follow-up resources, including a link to the website everystudent.com, which has resources in 36 languages!

One Soularium pack consists of:
50 photographs (15x10cm)
5 Questions
Guidelines on how to use
Follow-up booklet "Backstory"
Website cards.

Available from www.agape.org.uk

Cost: £4.68.

For more information and ideas on follow-up go to:
www.mysoularium.com

"The soul never thinks without a mental picture." — Aristotle



the contributors



Jim Memory is the course leader of the MA in *European Mission and Intercultural Christianity* at Redcliffe College, Gloucester. He is the editor of *Vista*, Redcliffe's quarterly bulletin of research-based information on mission in Europe, and has a particular research interest in secularization and the values of Europe. Jim combines his role at Redcliffe with a role within European Christian Mission International in training, supporting and developing the field ministries of ECM across Europe. Previously Jim was a church planter in Spain for 14 years and he continues to be involved in Spain by supporting a collaborative church-planting initiative. He and his wife, Christine, have three teenage children.

Lindsey Capper was a Friends International Staff Worker in Edinburgh for four years. She is currently studying for a diploma in Applied Theology in Intercultural Contexts at Redcliffe College, a centre for cross-cultural mission training in Gloucester. At the end of her course she hopes to be involved in mission abroad.



Ovidiu Spatacian-Tarnu, originally from Romania, came to study Theology at International Christian College in Glasgow, five years ago. He is now running a creative ministry that engages with current trends in the culture. Making use of films, music, graphic and web design he brings the all-time relevant message of the gospel to a post-modern audience.

the insight team

Sue Burt
Head of Returnee Ministry

Peter Teagle
Area Team Leader

Lizi Ross
HR & Communications
Manager

Patty McCulloch
Head of Training

Fiona Barnard-Smith
Staff Worker

Jack Bentley
Communications & Media
Coordinator

Lynette Teagle
Staff Worker

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friends
INTERNATIONAL

The Rowan Centre
All Nations Christian College
Easney
Ware, Herts
SG12 8LX

01920 460006
info@friendsinternational.org.uk
www.friendsinternational.org.uk