

Theology Network Events Précis

1. Freshers' Garden Party

Attracting newcomers to Theology Network each university year is a bit of an art and what works on one institution is not necessarily going to work in another. The Freshers' Garden party in Oxford is an illustration, however, of one possible strategy that might provide inspiration for others.

In the early years of Theology Network Oxford (2014-2016) we hired a table at the main University Freshers' Fair and ran a stall just like every other society. That yielded a huge number of signups but very little actual engagement with the group. A brief conversation on a freshers' fair stall is hardly enough to communicate the nuances of Theology Network and inevitably those who came along inspired by the stall often found it wasn't what they were looking for.



In subsequent years, we have tried to be more targeted, working through local churches (if church student workers notice theology students among their new cohorts, they encourage them to come and hand them appropriate publicity), through college and university CU meetings (we place our announcements strategically in the early part of the term, we encourage members of the group to attend pre-term freshers' get-away events etc.), through the college parenting system (second year student members of the group placed as 'parents' to first years

studying the same subject can encourage their 'children' to come along) and through points of contact at the theology faculty (putting up posters etc.)

Bypassing the melee of Freshers' week, the focal point for all of this effort in the last few years has been a Garden Party in the first full week of term, aimed at bringing newcomers together with the existing group of undergraduate and graduate students in an informal setting with free food and drinks, and giving everyone a chance to hang out and chat. In Oxford we have hosted this event in a private garden in the centre of the city with a marquee. Keeping everything close to the centre makes it easy for students to drop in and drop out.



The downside of the garden party is that it doesn't give guests the chance to experience a 'normal' Theology Network meeting so, in 2022, we're going to try something different, running an event with food provided but indoors in our normal room with a discussion focussed on preparing for theological study.

2. Theology Network Champagne Bakeoff

Theology Network in Oxford meets in a private home in the centre of the city which has made it possible to really go to town on hospitality (we have tea and freshly baked cakes, and a dog for those who like a bit of animal-therapy!)

Over the years we have established a tradition of eating 'Rock Buns' which have become so strongly associated with the group that they often appear in our publicity materials, and we provide 'to go' bags for students to take surplus rock buns with them to lectures.



For several years we have kept the recipe a closely guarded secret which is handed over to graduating students in the last week of their time in Oxford at a special event we call the Theology Network champagne bakeoff. For this special meeting in our calendar, the finalists arrive one hour early, divide into teams, and cook the rock buns themselves in our family kitchen. When the rest of the group arrive they act as judges, and only the students who pass the taste test among

their peers are allowed to 'graduate.' We joke that the results of the actual exams are only peripherally important compared to their performance in the rock bun baking challenge!



Theology Network in style and I occasionally get emails from students who graduated years ago relating where they are now and how they are still baking the rock bun recipe!

This seemingly silly idea has become a valued tradition in our group. Everyone very much wants to mark their passage out of

