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BRUCE STORMER | GC3 BOARD CHAIR

IBCM7 – A FORETASTE OF HEAVEN!

IN JUNE I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF ATTENDING THE SEVENTH INTERNATIONAL BRETHREN CONFERENCE ON MISSION (IBCM7) IN ROME. AS AN ACCOUNTANT, IT IS ONLY PROPER THAT I START WITH SOME FACTS AND FIGURES.

The theme was 'You shall be my witnesses' – Engaging with the world and its Needs. With 900 people and 122 countries represented, it was the biggest conference in the history of IBCM.

The organising committee did an outstanding job in arranging all aspects of the conference, so we received clear practical teaching from Dr John Lennox, a wide range of workshop topics and presenters to interact with, and reports on God's work from many regions of the world.

As a New Zealander, I often forget the privilege we have to be able to travel freely to a lot of countries, but for many nationalities a visa is needed, and getting them can be hard. One of the big behind the scenes tasks, that the chair of the committee Fares Marzone undertook, was the many letters and emails needed to allow participants to obtain entry visas to Italy. In the two months before IBCM7 Fares alone sent over 3,000 emails to assist in the issuing of visas and on the

day before the conference started, we were still praying and seeing God answer with further visas being issued.

Some of the committee members have been involved since its inception and are now stepping aside. They are owed a huge debt of gratitude for their vision and perseverance in taking IBCM to this point.

It was a delight to meet so many people from so many countries. One group were students from Emmaus Bible School in Dubuque, Iowa, USA, who had been on a mission's trip to Romania and then came to serve at the conference. ▶

I would like to share four of the many highlights from the conference with you.

The first was to be able to spend time before IBCM started with sister organisations to GC3, some new and some old. These two days of meetings raised issues and opportunities that will take prayer and wisdom to work through.

The second was Wednesday. Mark Grace, CCCNZ, had arranged NZ tee shirts for the kiwis in attendance to wear on Wednesday. After lunch, the kiwis got together and heard reports from three NZ mission partners. It was special

hearing from three younger ladies about how God is using them.

The third was the evening reports reporting what God was doing in various countries. The reports of work in countries that we would never know of was exciting – God cannot be limited by rulers and leaders.

My final highlight was not one event but the overall atmosphere. I have not really been one to think too much about what heaven will be like – the thought of continuous singing doesn't appeal (I know my singing voice will be better in heaven), but if I had to describe the

conference, I would say it was a foretaste of heaven. Why? Because of the joy of being together with people from so many (not every) countries and languages, all with the same desire to worship, serve and give glory to our great God.

To finish, I am thankful to Lichfield Lands Trust who provided the funding that allowed GC3 and CCCNZ representatives to attend. I believe they have made a hugely valuable investment. I encourage you to please pray for people to step up and form the next committee to organise IBCM8, that is, if we are not all experiencing the real joy of heaven together. ■

JOHN DE JONG

PARTNERSHIP IN MISSION

IN ISSUE 1 OF *GC3 CONNECT*, FEBRUARY THIS YEAR, I RECOUNTED THE STORY OF JAMES KIRK FOLLOWING GOD'S CALL TO MISSION IN ARGENTINA, IN 1896. AT THIS TIME MOST CHRISTIANS WERE WESTERNERS, AND "MISSIONS" WAS UNDERSTOOD AS TAKING THE GOSPEL TO THE NON-WESTERN WORLD. NO ONE COULD HAVE PREDICTED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN OVER THE FOLLOWING CENTURY.

For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Western missions leaders held little hope for the Gospel in Africa, which was expected to become a Muslim continent.¹ Now Western Christians publish articles with titles such as, "Christianity's Future Lies in Africa."² In stark contrast to James Kirk's day, now more Christians live in the non-Western world than the Western world.³

This amazing new context has changed mission in two significant ways. First, it is no longer primarily Western missionaries through whom the church is growing. Mission is now mainly done by Christians from those non-Western places, both within their own nations and beyond.⁴ We experienced this in Myanmar all the time. Our pastor had been at the forefront of a cross-cultural mission outreach which began in the late 1980s, and now over 25,000 people from this ethnic group have come to Christ. In Myanmar the dominant ethnic group is strongly Buddhist and not many have become Christians, but all of the ones we met who had come to faith

had done so through local evangelists. This kind of thing is happening throughout the church in the non-western World, and is sometimes the subject of *GC3 Connect* articles.⁵

Following on from this, the second change is how Western Christians like us now engage in overseas and/or intercultural mission. This is where it gets a bit complicated. "Partnership" is (and has been for a long time) a buzz word in mission, and it is an important concept as it recognises that the church is now established in the traditional "mission" fields. But if we do not recognise our assumptions of cultural superiority, "partnership" in mission becomes us (Western Christians) going over "there" to show them the "right" way to do things. This attitude necessarily entails not understanding their culture and the reasons why they do what they do. In his excellent book, *Lalsangkima Pachuau*, a Mizo from north-east India, writes,

An important mark of world Christianity is the multiplicity of the religion's self-expressions in



John is married to Rebecca. They both grew up in West Auckland and met at Lincoln Road Bible Chapel, which is still their home church. In 2005 they moved to Yangon, Myanmar, to work with the church there. They took Adam (two-and-a-half years old) and Grace (10 months) with them. Sarah and Charlotte were born over there. John taught Old Testament and Hebrew at the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (MEGST), along with preaching and teaching in the local church. Rebecca was involved in women's and children's ministry, as well as home schooling the children. They returned to Auckland to live in October 2017, and John has found work lecturing in Biblical and Intercultural studies at Laidlaw College, based at the Henderson campus.

different contexts, traditions, and practices. Christianity's essential nature is to be able to incarnate itself in any context to transform such contexts for the knowledge and likeness of God in Christ. What antagonises world Christianity is ▶

¹ Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900-2000* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), xvi.

² <https://sojo.net/articles/christianitys-future-lies-africa>

³ See <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

⁴ E.g., <https://www.ft.com/content/69a41f7e-6b96-11e7-bfeb-33fe0c5b7eaa>

⁵ See also, e.g., <https://theglobalchurchproject.com/video/jossy-chacko-video/>



POLLY | DAY 17, GC3 DAILY PRAYER GUIDE

CONVERSATIONS THAT COUNT

THE PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL SURROUNDING CONFERENCES OFTEN HIGHLIGHTS THE KEY SPEAKER AND WORKSHOPS AND MAYBE INCLUDES A FLASHY PHOTO OR TWO OF THE HOTEL SWIMMING POOL. PERHAPS THOUGH, IT WOULD BE BETTER TO SHOWCASE THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE REASONS YOU WILL LOVE HAVING CONVERSATIONS WITH THEM.

Because if I had to give a reason for recommending IBCM7, the participants would be it. The workshops were good, the speaker was great, the pool was hardly used but the conversations with other participants were downright excellent.

Working cross-culturally can be isolating. In our minds our ministries become so important and we are often faced with the sorts of decisions we wouldn't have to make if we had stayed in our home

countries. The enemy can use these as opportunities to convince us that there is no-one who can really understand, or maybe even that our worth is only to be found in what we achieve, not in who God made us to be.

Both were lies that I was beginning to believe in the months leading up to the conference. As I sat down time and time again with people who genuinely cared about my well being and were connected with 100s of years of experience on the



John Lennox

field, my illusions were shattered. It's great to have seasons where we put our heads down and run for God, but we need to take time to lift our heads to see that our world – and our God – are much bigger than the struggles and triumphs directly before us. The conversations I had at IBCM7 gave me a much-needed opportunity to see this.

But we weren't only having important conversations, we were being equipped for more of them. ▶

FROM PAGE 2...

not the diverse local and indigenous expressions of Christianity, but the failure to recognise these as meaningful and to impose the older Western forms on others as if it represented a universal form.⁶

Mission today involves partnership, and western Christians have a lot to bring to the table. But partnership in mission requires genuine relationship with our brothers and sisters from

different cultures. Through relationship we come to understand people different than ourselves, and as the relationship continues we become changed and enriched through them, and our capacity to contribute is enhanced. Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts applies to mission in and through the global church:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds

of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4-7 NIV)

Mission as partnership is sharing the different gifts God has given to his whole church, his global church, for the sake of the Gospel and for God's glory. There are many opportunities for this kind of involvement in this new era of mission. ■

⁶ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *World Christianity: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 3.



FROM PAGE 3...

The main speaker was John Lennox. He's a lecturer at Oxford University, known for debating famous atheists such as Richard Dawkins and writing books on the sorts of topics that come up in such debates. He sat in front of the auditorium on a chair at a desk and simply talked us through a range of apologetics topics preparing us to "always be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have" and to have a solid confidence in our own faith and position before the Lord. He encouraged us to never let anyone assume that our faith is blind and to explore how logic, reason and evidence back what the Bible tells us about God.

Apologetics is good, but it is very rare for someone to be motivated to a life in Christ by truth alone. They need to experience God's love too.

John told us that when he debates his goal is never to win. He tries to present Christianity as a viable alternative to an atheistic worldview so that those in the crowd can have confidence and/or see it as an option. This, and a healthy respect for all people as image bearers, brings a different spin to his debating style.

...never let anyone assume that our faith is blind and to explore how logic, reason and evidence back what the Bible tells us about God.

He told us a story of one debate where, for entertainment's sake, he had been pitted against someone with completely opposing views on almost everything. However, when she did say something true John made sure he stopped to agree with her. As you can expect this was meet by surprise and spoke volumes. Often, it isn't our arguments that speak to people the loudest, but our attitude and our kindness towards them – even when we are sure they are wrong.

I wonder how often we show this kindness to each other.

Near the beginning of the conference someone, not a main speaker, made a throwaway comment from the front based on his own opinions and experiences. And as I saw heads nodding around me I was thrown because it was something I ardently disagreed with. I wasn't the only one. Later that day someone confided in me; "When I hear things like that, it makes me feel like

there isn't anyone I can express [my own opinions] to because I would be labelled before they took the time to listen and understand."

In some ways, this isn't altogether surprising. As Christians and perhaps even more so in the Brethren church, we tend to take stands on divisive issues. Often this is important – we are people of the Word and understand that we have a responsibility to adhere to and present the truth even when it is unpopular. But, while the Word of God is infallible and unchanging, the same is not true of the mere mortals who read it. We need to ensure that no love of tradition or fear of the world will ever prevent us from examining our own opinions in His light or listening with genuine openness and brotherly affection to those who hold differing views.

An overpacked hotel dining room, with representatives from 122 countries, ranging from babies to the very grey ▶

is the exact place to expect a plethora of views and opinions. Flying towards such a place our excitement might be tinged with slight social anxiety. We ask ourselves "Will I be accepted there?"

At IBCM7, this fear turned out to be unfounded. Time and again, delicate issues were openly raised and presented with humility.

Far from a condemnation, a seminar on homosexuality discussed how we can support and respond to the unique needs of same-sex-attracted members of our congregation as they deal with stigma, questions of identity and core loneliness. Another speaker challenged the entire assembly on the importance of inter-generational leadership and was even willing to openly query what we truly mean when we claim a belief in the priesthood of all believers.

As we continued these dialogues over meals, in our shared rooms and even on the bus, I realised that my opinions were being listened to with openness and grace, by people who wanted to understand where I was coming from



– whether or not they agreed with me. As mentioned, John Lennox pointed out to us the importance of such grace as a witness in our conversations with non-believers. It's important in conversations with each other too. I left the conference with renewed hope that, as we continue

to find unity in diversity, Jesus' plea of, "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me," may come to fruition in us. ■





RUSSELL & SUE | DAY 1, GC3 DAILY PRAYER GUIDE

THEY SAY LIFE BEGINS AT SIXTY!

THIS HAS BECOME A REALITY FOR US AND AS WE LOOK BACK OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, WE CAN SEE HOW GOD WAS PREPARING US FOR THIS TO HAPPEN.

We were in our early sixties and planning for an easy retirement where we could spend time with our children and grandchildren, do a little travel, spend time at our holiday home, and perhaps help with different children's programmes in our home church. We had downsized our house and garden ready for the time when all this would happen.

Over the last fifteen years we had visited Suva, Fiji, many times where we "fell in love" with the children at the Gospel School for the Deaf. We first visited when Vivienne Harland was still directing the School and Hostels, and we were in awe of the amazing ministry she had established, and her desire to help the deaf in Fiji. We became aware of the great needs of these beautiful, kind and generous Fijian people, and especially those who could not hear.

Russell became a board member of The Harland Deaf Ministry Trust in 2014, and we continued our annual visits to attend the AGM and stay in touch with staff and children.

It was while attending one of these meetings that the first seeds were sown by the then Director, Jim Cooney and his wife Marilyn. They had been travelling back and forth to Fiji from the United States for 15 years and felt it was time for them to hand over to someone younger (Jim was in his early eighties), giving them more time with their family. We dismissed this crazy idea, as neither of us had had any teaching or deaf experience. We certainly didn't know sign language, and we were looking forward to retirement in NZ.

Family needed us, our grandchildren were too young to leave for long periods

of time and there were many other valid excuses. However, God saw things differently, and slowly but surely, he had answers for all those excuses and started to reveal his plans for us.

Through our daily Bible readings, prayer, and a bit of gentle persuasion from other board members we began to realise that the work that God had for us to do in Fiji was doable. Marilyn Cooney had told us that if we said we would go, God would work out the details, and this has proved to be true. We have been reminded that He has promised that His plans for us are to prosper us and not to harm us.

There were challenges and doubts along the way, as we prepared for the big changes that lay ahead of us. Russell had been in the same IT job for forty years and the thought of that coming to an end seemed a little daunting. Sue had been in accounts for many years and neither of those jobs seemed to be suitable training for "missions" work. ▶

After the routine and security of going to the same place of work for forty years, attending the same church for nearly as many years, and having a small garden that we liked to keep manicured, it was a huge leap of faith to pack up our suitcases, hire a boy to mow our lawns, lock the doors and board a plane to Fiji where we had no idea where we were going to live. All of these actions were quite outside the square for us, but we had peace about it all, and looking back we can see that God had everything under control. There were many who have been, and still are on the journey with us, and pray for us regularly. We have family, a home church, friends, neighbours, and workmates who have shown amazing support and encouragement.

People talk about the sacrifices we have made, and yes, we do miss our family. We are not able to pick our grandchildren up from school, we do miss the comforts of home, we do miss our home church, we do miss meeting friends for coffee, but God has met those needs in various ways and we do not think about those things as sacrifices.

We can talk with our family with the help of technology, and although they will be never be our grandchildren, we have many young children who need a hug. We have a very comfortable home to live in (along with the cockroaches, lizards, and ants), we have a church where we are needed, and amazing Fijian Christian friends who have taught us so much about loving and trusting God. We feel so blessed by their care for us, and to hear them pray for us brings tears to our eyes.

There are many cultural traditions which we still have to learn about, we are not completely converted to doing things in "Fiji time" yet, and it will be many months before we can converse in sign language. The weather will get unbearably hot again in summer, we will have to say "goodbye" to NZ again and again, but we know that we are where God wants us to be, and He has promised to be with us every step of the way.

We knew that life would be hard in Fiji, but perhaps not quite as hard as it has turned out to be, and there have been many challenges to face, in areas where neither of us has ever had any experience, but we came with the assurance of Deuteronomy 31:8 – The Lord Himself goes before you and will

be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged.

We are still new at this game and there will be hard times ahead of us, but there is joy in knowing that we can be part of this ministry, where we pray that our beautiful children and young adults will learn about, and come to know the Lord. They may not pass their exams when they finish school, but they have heard the greatest message of all time. We feel so blessed that God has brought us here.

Have you got something on your heart that you would like to do? Then listen to God's call and step out in faith. It will have its challenges and might be hard work, but if you can make an eternal difference in one person's life, isn't it worth it? You may be at retiring age, but you will have a wealth of experience that God can use to be a blessing to others. It doesn't have to be all 'spiritual' work but follow the footsteps of our Lord who met the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of so many. Just remember Matthew 19:26: Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible". ■



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