

Reflections on the Third Lausanne International Researchers' Conference

4 - 8 September 2001, Chiang Mai,
Thailand

Early September 2001, about 45 people gathered from around the world to discuss serving the church through research. The lead in organising was taken by the CRA (UK), an independent research organisation established by Peter Brierley to serve the churches in the UK. He was assisted with on-the-ground organisation by Rev Herb Swanson, the head of the Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand and occasional advice from myself.

The first night of the conference, Herb Swanson and his staff had organised a gala dinner. The participants were taken by bus to a village church, 25 kms out of the city of Chiang Mai, where they were entertained by northern Thai Christian music and dancing and singing from a Karen group which had driven in an open utility for 5 hours down the mountains especially for this event. The evening involved a traditional northern Thai 'Kantoke dinner' and concluded with fireworks.

In many ways, that night subtly undermined many of the presuppositions and dogmas with which we came. The very setting of this church, in a little village, outside the city of Chiang Mai, suggested to us that the issues of strengthening church life may be very different from those we face in the various countries from which we came. The singing and dancing reminded us that there

were many expressions of the Christian faith: in terms of language and art, but also in terms issues and challenges. We were told about the work that Christian Karen leaders are doing in order, not only to strengthen their churches, but also to hold onto the traditional Karen culture, at a time when global forces are close to wiping it off the planet.

There were two groups of people who attended the conference. One group was working with missionary organisations cross-culturally. The second group was working with churches within their own culture. Each group had its separate concerns and interests, although there was some overlap.

1. Missionary Researchers

The missionary researchers were mainly concerned about counting

and contacting the various people groups around the world. Walt Jarrett of Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF) spoke of MAF research in people groups, language groups and in assessing the exposure that various groups have to Christian proclamation. However, the MAF has been using its mapping not only to plan how missionaries can be served, but also in assisting global disasters. It was active in relation to fires in Kalimantan and floods in Mozambique and Venezuela, for example.

In another hotel nearby, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Wycliffe Bible Translators) were meeting to discuss the relationship between various language groups and which languages were of greatest strategic importance for Biblical translation. Some interchange took place between the two conferences.

However, other concerns about the ways that the Christian Gospel might be proclaimed were also discussed. Dr Ho Wai-Yip from Hong Kong University talked about the possibility of working through students studying overseas to evangelise Muslims. Don Persons, working with the Lamp of Thailand, which produces Thai



Sharon Bond (CRA), Junram Chaisri and Prasit Pongudom (Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand), and Warunee Swanson at the Kantoke Dinner, Chiang Mai

Bible studies primarily for people who are not involved in churches, spoke of the problems in developing educational programs which were relevant to those who studied them.

John Easterling, professor of cross-cultural ministries at Northwestern College in the USA took up quite a different theme. He spoke about the Urbana Conference which is held regularly in the United States to challenge young Americans to global evangelism. The Urbana Conference feeds many young people into missionary agencies and colleges. He argued that, while it had changed style over recent years, and the old divisions between evangelism and social justice were no longer as evident, the Urbana Conference had lost none of its impact.

Dr David Greenlee of Operation Mobilization, based in Cyprus, spoke of the need to be rigorous in research. He noted how some mission groups have gone to specific places and claimed to have made many converts, but on further checking, it has been found that almost no one had continued in the Christian faith. He noted how many statistical reports are based on very poor survey instruments which do not reveal the true state of affairs.

2. Building Healthy Churches

The major orientation of the conference, however, was building healthy churches - the major concern of those working in their own cultures. Almost all the researchers reported decline, not only in numbers but in vitality, in the churches with which they were working.

Michael Jeffarian was a member of the team of researchers who

had been working with Rev Dr Barrett to revise the World Christian Encyclopedia. He explained the processes whereby the research team had gathered information from every country around the world, putting it together in a comprehensive and systematic way to provide an overall global picture of Christianity. He argued that while there was still growth in actual numbers of Christians at a global level, there was a decline in Europe and an expected decline in North America. There had been a slight overall decline in the percentage of Christians in the world population.

In the discussion, it became evident that there were many similar themes around the world in terms of interest in spirituality, but rejection of the institutional church. However, the responses to the situation were quite various.

1. Try harder at church growth

Gary McIntosh, from California, USA, argued that the Church Growth methodologies were still the best in growing faithful churches. He suggested that the way forward involved a renewed commitment to the authority of the Bible, to prayer, and to growing the church both numerically and in terms of discipleship. He noted that, in a post-modern world, it may be necessary to allow people to bond first before they come to belief and growth in faith.

He spoke too of the importance of cultural relevance in the ways the Gospel is 'packaged', noting the increased 'tribalisation' of culture along with the global 'uni-culture'. He suggested the churches should focus on target groups of people who are receptive.

Within this context, he suggested that it was important to develop simple church structures which make possible quick decisions, changing targets and speedy communication. At the same time, ministry should be a matter of team work, and church growth would involve discovering ways of moving people from pew to ministry.

2. Renewed efforts and new strategies at points of weakness

Peter Brierley, head of the CRA (UK), spoke of church decline in England. He noted the widespread trends of:

- fewer people attending in most denominations and sectors of the church, including the evangelical and charismatic;
- those who do attend, attending less frequently;
- and a particular decline among the numbers of children attending, dropping at the rate of about 1000 per week.

Peter Brierley argued that people were not giving up on their faith, but that the nature of the church was changing.

One denomination which had taken the challenges seriously was the Salvation Army. It was developing new patterns of activities including children's activities after school (instead of Sunday School) and at supermarkets (while their parents did their shopping). It had put much effort into counselling services and into lunch-time services in city centres. It was seeing some response to these efforts.

3. Encouraging variety

Several papers noted that the future of the church would lie in

greater variety of forms and methods. Peter Kaldor spoke on this theme, arguing that the future did not lie in a single form or single solution to the nature of church life. There would be a place in the future for large regional churches and small, focused churches. There would be traditional forms of church congregation and many experimental forms.

Part of the challenge for church organisations is to recognise the variety that is already emerging, to own that variety and seek ways of appropriately supporting the various forms.

Sharon Bond presented a paper based on the survey of Christian Education in congregations of the Uniting Church in Australia. She argued that there was a real need for variety in Christian education to cater for the interests and concerns of various people and to cater for the various ways in which people learn. (See pages 8-11 of this edition of *Pointers*.)

4. Building relationships

Heather Wraight of the CRA (UK) presented a paper based on focus groups among women in churches and drawing attention to some of their particular needs and concerns. She reported that, for most women, the key to involvement in church life was relationships. They saw the church as providing 'a safe place where people are accepted and appreciated for who they are'.

Heather Wraight noted that there was a strong sense of loyalty among the women. Most felt that their faith grew through the relationships they had with each other. If those relationships were not working, often there was a felt strain in their relationships with God.

Some of the women had left the church for a period of time - mostly because of broken relationships. They had returned because of the care of people who kept in touch and because of their desire to belong.

Heather Wraight reported that the women felt that the church structures were 'masculine', run for the benefit of men rather than women. Many women felt marginalised by the structures. It was the relationships which, for them, turned a 'group of disparate people into a body'.

5. Creating community

One emphasis in my own presentation was the need for churches to create community rather than merely serve it. I also argued that the structures of new church communities may be of greater variety of forms than we currently recognise. For example, some churches may occur in small networks of people which were oriented to a specific task or interest. At the other end of the scale, churches might begin a process of engaging with people through large festivals organised by many churches across a whole city.

The theme of community was also taken up by Darrell Jackson, a researcher with the Baptist Union of Great Britain. He noted that there had been a small up-swing in the numbers of baptisms and in attendance at services in the 1990s and suggested this had occurred because the church was offering a sense of community.

Building on the social capital literature, Darrell Jackson argued that the idea of 'bridging capital' suggests a

'dispersed model of church engagement', exploring a great variety of ways in which the church would exist.

... [T]he point of entry into the churches of the UK is no longer a large, panelled oak door. Points of entry into the body of Christ will increasingly be those places in which his body is present and dispersed. The life of Jesus will be reflected in lives lived beyond and outside of the self.

6. Working with churches

Another theme, addressed most thoroughly by Herbert Swanson in a paper about working among the Thai churches, was the importance of researchers working with churches and not 'over' them. Herb Swanson spoke of the ways the Office of History of the Church of Christ in Thailand had conducted historical research with churches in order to help them work through questions of the future.

Researchers from the Office of History had been going into churches, interviewing members of the church about the past,

Pointers, the bulletin of the Christian Research Association, is published by the Christian Research Association, Locked Bag 23, Kew, 3101, four times a year: March, June, October and December. Office phone: 03-9816-9468; fax: 03-9816-9617. Email: admin@cra.org.au. Each edition is reviewed by a committee appointed by the CRA board prior to publication.

Personal Associate Members pay \$110 and Institutional Members pay \$137.50 per annum or more. They receive *Pointers* and all other Christian Research Association publications. Subscription to *Pointers* alone is \$26.40 per annum (within Australia).

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reading the documents of the church, and then processing the information. The researchers would then seek to bring this material back to the churches so that they could use it in developing future strategies. However, the process had not been very effective. The churches really did not know what to do with the information they had been given.

It was noted that this problem is also faced by researchers using sociological methodologies. Materials from surveys often had little impact on the churches.

Somehow, methodologies needed to be developed which would involve the churches right at the beginning of the process. As they were involved in developing the very goals and objectives which the survey would measure, perhaps they would take ownership of the process.

Herbert Swanson gave an example of an elder who had the idea of noting which families came to church each Sunday. He then took his notes to the Elders Council which began systematic visiting of people on the fringe of the church. Through this simple 'gathering of data', a new vitality had come to

that church. The key to that process, however, was ownership.

3. Professionalism and prophecy

Having been the plenary speaker at the first session of the conference and opening up some of the issues about the changing nature of society from traditional to post-traditional, and the challenges posed for the churches, I also had the responsibility of closing the conference by leading a service of Holy Communion.

We gathered in the chapel of the theological seminary of the Church of Christ in Thailand. As we did so, we were reminded of the importance of relating to our context. We sat, Thai style, on the floor. We shared not bread and wine, but the staples of northern Thailand, sticky rice and coconut juice.

We reflected on the prophetic function which researchers inevitably have. Such a function, within our contemporary context, demands not only great care from us but a high degree of professionalism in the processes of listening, analysing and encouraging.

One of the outcomes of the conference was the desire to strengthen networks through which research issues and findings could be shared, and professionalism in research be enhanced. Some sort of world association of church-related researchers was mooted, and will be explored in the near future.

Philip Hughes



Some of the participants at the conference in the Chiang Inn, Chiang Mai.