

News and Current Events :: 5 world changing ideas for the Church from across the globe

5 world changing ideas for the Church from across the globe - posted by ArthurRosh, on: 2015/7/29 21:11

When 1,200 Christian leaders from 158 countries gather in an isolated resort in Mexico for a week, the whole event becomes a massive discussion about mission in the 21st century. It's an exciting experience. There were opportunities for conversation everywhere – queuing up for breakfast could mean meeting a Ghanaian entrepreneur with a vision to transform his nation's recreation industry. Jumping into the swimming pool to escape the heat could mean a long discussion with the meteorologist who came up with the term 'nuclear winter'. Not to mention the actual program which could put you in contact with student ministry leaders from Palestine, Paraguay, Panama or Pakistan. I learned a great amount in those rich conversations and also discovered a lot about the wonders of Mexico. To name just one, Mexican mass catering is amazing! They really understand the meaning of hospitality and they are rightly proud of their diverse and vibrant culture. I kind of got used to having refried beans for breakfast; in fact I think I'm going to miss it.

This was the quadrennial gathering of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES); a family of locally led national student movements seeking to engage all universities with the love of Christ. This is a large mission field: it's estimated that by 2025 there will be 225 million students globally across around 50,000 campuses. It's also a very influential field; with so many of the world's political, business, scientific and of course academic leaders passing through the bottle neck of university life. Here are five ideas of how to we might strategically work with students and help change the world for good through the transforming power of the gospel. Too often, when we westerners go to global events, we demonstrate a colonial snobbery, believing we have sussed out our theology and methodology and we have nothing to learn from those working in other nations without the resources or history we enjoy. I tried hard not to be the ugly Brit abroad and went on a mission to find some great stories from around the world that could help us in our mission at home.

1. Encourage integral entrepreneurship

I was so impressed by the staff and students of the Sierra Leone movement. They have developed a spirit of entrepreneurship in their students – encouraging them to not only gather for prayer, Bible study and evangelism but also to look for ways they can bless the wider campus. Their student groups average about 60 members and they have few staff resources, and yet they encourage each group to develop a project that will seek to demonstrate something of the grace, justice and compassion of God. One group started an anti-corruption workshop and facilitated a conversation between the faculty, students and administration of the university. There was a sex-for-grades culture developing and it was the Sierra Leone IFES group which openly challenged it. The students modeled something of the integrated nature of the gospel – that it has never been enough to just preach at people or invite them to Bible studies; if it were, then that would have been all Jesus did. But instead, Christ went around doing good and preaching the word of God. I return home wondering how best I can encourage students to be more entrepreneurial in their efforts to love their university, and also how churches can develop this spirit too, even when our resources are limited. This entrepreneurial spirit will be especially important for the western Church to rediscover as our relationship with wider culture changes at an accelerated rate. Helping Christians to innovate is an important skill to equip the Church with for the next phase of its ministry.

2. Create a digitally connected movement

Over a breakfast burrito I managed to speak to Armand Dzadu, the leader of student ministry from Togo in West Africa. He was on his phone checking his Whatsapp social media feed. With sky rocketing uptake of mobile social media usage in Africa, this innovative leader had developed a prayer network that engaged 300 of his students on a regular basis. Students would post prayer requests on the closed group and they would immediately pop up and alert others to pray for them. In a country where transport is complicated, this is a fantastic way for the movement to be drawn together in vision and love for one another. What really impressed me was the idea of a daily Bible study that Armand would update each morning. He would paste a passage of scripture into the Whatsapp feed and then ask three questions about it. Around 150 students were participating, which meant that all through the day he would receive alerts as others commented with their reflections on the passage. That meant a rich scripture engagement not just in a short quiet time, but all through the day.

3. Develop an intelligent Christian mind

The small French speaking student movement in Switzerland has been experimenting with innovative ways not just to h

elp students be better Christians, but helping them become better Christian students. If we are not careful, student groups can sometimes end up mimicking what a local church does and this can lead to campus groups unwittingly de-churching young people as they use the groups as a substitute. Hence, church leaders can become suspicious of campus groups. The Swiss have a different strategy, however. They have set up small groups of undergraduates, postgraduates and sometimes faculty from the same academic field. They meet up three times over an eight month period to explore in depth a Christian approach to a relevant topic. For example, a group in the law faculty met to explore "The Right to Offend and the Right to be Offended" well before the Charlie Hebdo massacre took place. At the first meeting, the group agrees a reading list and then set a date to meet again having read the books to discuss them. They then agree to write a position paper that can act as a resource to inform public policy on this issue. The third time they meet to critique and commend each other's papers, which are then published online. In a culture where Christians are often being sneered at for being naïve, this kind of thoughtful training of young Christian scholars is a profoundly visionary investment as it seeks to increase Christian intellectual social capital. Some might worry that this would detract from evangelism – the small Swiss movement at the same time has been pioneering ways of doing mission weeks and outreach events on campus.

4. Generous curiosity

In a special track dedicated to academics and graduates, an idea from Stanford University gained a lot of interest. I was encouraged that Wendy Quay, an old student of mine, had come up with an exciting idea in the heart of Silicon Valley. A lot of postgraduates said that the culture in their research groups encouraged them to pretend they weren't really Christian – to leave their faith at the door of the lab, as it were. But when they went to the campus group or their church, the culture encouraged them to be Christian, but pretend they weren't academics. This led to great frustration and a sense that their God-given calling to academia was being undermined. So Wendy and her graduate group set up a special event called "The Passion Talks", where postgraduate students were encouraged to package up their academic research into a talk that would make sense to non-specialists. These talks proved very successful, and the next event will include 30 speakers giving TED-style talks on their research. This has proved interesting not just to Christian postgrads, but to a wider body who seem to like the generous curiosity the group has developed. There is a general lesson to be learned by the Church here – how often do we encourage the members of our congregations to actually talk about the passion that drives their professional or academic life? Have we created a culture that discourages people to serve God in their work or one that is marked by a generous curiosity?

5. Offer radical hospitality

The Danish student movement has had a fantastic idea. National director Robert Bladt told me that there had been a less-than-perfect relationship between student groups and local churches in the past. This year, they have developed an exciting new project where 20 churches are coming together to welcome all students, both Christians and non-Christians, to the city of Copenhagen. This will involve tours that provide the fresh crop of students tips on where to go and what to do in the city. They are also helping to promote ecological concern by running workshops to help students get their bikes to be road worthy in what is a cycle-friendly city. I love this idea – I have met many international students who have never really had the confidence to leave campus, and so something like this could be a real pastoral help to all sorts of students. I have seen churches run receptions for Christian students before. I have also seen campus groups for international students before, but never anything on this kind of scale. What a lovely witness of the churches working together showing that they love their city, love students, love each other and are willing to work together to bless the student movement. I really hope this idea catches on as I am convinced that radical hospitality is a key missional posture for our changing culture.

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