

EurECA Conference 2009

How should Christians Teach?

John Muir recently retired from full-time employment in primary education with the Highland Council. He continues to work part-time as an Education Consultant in Scotland. A former chairman of ACT Scotland, he was co-opted earlier this year to membership of the Board of EurECA.

John Shortt is the Travelling Secretary for EurECA (European Educators' Christian Association), in which role he works with Christian teachers all over Europe. He formerly worked at The Stapleford Centre, Nottingham.

Vevey, Switzerland

The venue for the 2009 EurECA conference was the Emmaus Bible Institute set in its beautiful location on a hillside above Lake Geneva, further enhanced over the weekend by blue skies and warm sunshine.

From all over Europe and beyond we came.

106 participants from 20 countries: Austria (4), Belgium (1), Bulgaria (5), England (17), Finland (4), France (5), Germany (13), Hungary (5), Italy (1), Luxembourg (2), Netherlands (4), Norway (6), Portugal (2), Romania (6), Scotland (3), Spain (1), Switzerland (15) and Ukraine (4) and, from beyond the borders of Europe, 7 from Australia and 1 from the USA.

We came from a wide range of spheres of involvement in education: from primary and secondary schools (both state and independent); language schools; colleges and universities. Among our number were representatives from national Christian teacher associations and from other organisations who support Christians in schools and in home education.

How we teach

The focus of the conference was on classroom approaches to teaching and learning across the curriculum. We looked at how our faith can shape how we teach, rather than what we teach, as we examined our pedagogical approaches in the light of a Christian view of reality and especially of human nature and development. Far from being a dry academic study, albeit in a Christian context, we were enthralled by a lively, well illustrated and





engaging series of talks, which challenged pre-conceived ideas and encouraged us to reflect on our practice as Christians in education.

The keynote speaker was David Smith, who teaches German language and literature at Calvin College in the USA and is the founding Director of the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning. He was brought up in the UK and formerly worked at The Stapleford Centre, where he was one of the prime movers in the Charis Project.

Plenum 1

The first plenary session was entitled ***Faith in Pedagogy: Changing Visions of Learning***. David used the concrete example of the changing approaches to second language classrooms in recent history to show, in practical terms, how teaching and learning processes reflect varying underlying beliefs about learners, about growth, and about the nature of human flourishing.

This was followed by workshop groups based on either the subject or the age range we taught. With reference to the issues raised by David, our task was to consider the range of views of human nature and teaching styles that have influenced our practice through the years. The majority of the groups had to be coaxed to stop for lunch; such was the liveliness of the discussion!

Plenum 2

David's second plenary session on ***Learning and Spiritual Growth*** built on the first and on what we had been doing in our workshop groups. He looked with us at the reframing of pedagogy in such a way as to combine subject teaching with a focus on spiritual development. Given what we had seen about the faith-laden nature of successive visions

of teaching and learning, how can the Christian educator respond? How might a belief that the spiritual and moral aspects of learner identity are of basic importance, affect the ways in which we approach teaching and learning?

After the session we moved into workshop groups of five or six people; this time in mixed nationalities, languages and educational contexts. We had been asked in advance of the conference to bring along a short description of moments of teaching and learning in the classroom in which personal transformation (of any kind, not only 'spiritual' in the narrow sense of the word) took place. Each person told their story to the rest of the group. Then we worked together to write a short commentary on each account that brought out connections with a Christian view of personal and spiritual development, including, where possible, some of the issues raised in the first two sessions.

Plenum 3

David's third and final plenary session on ***Practising Christian Learning*** considered the importance of Christian practice in the classroom. He used the specific example of the reading practices that happen in schools as compared with the long tradition of Christian reflection on charitable reading and reading for spiritual growth. This was followed by the final workshop session. In our small mixed-nationality groups, we looked again at our stories to reflect on how our teaching approaches might change in a practical way in the light of what David had said.

After a feast of teaching and discussion, Saturday afternoon was a time to digest it all and to relax in the glorious sunshine. Some enjoyed walking around the lovely grounds of the college, while others took part in a choice of excursions: a sail on the lake; a visit to a local town, or a train ride and mountain walk. It was an opportunity to become more acquainted with each other in informal chat, while admiring the breathtaking scenery around Lake Geneva.

Prayer and nourishment

On Saturday evening there was a session of prayer for the nations. A representative from each country had collated items for prayer about their

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homeland or about the challenges facing their schools or associations. The prayer lists were laid out across the dining room. In groups of four we moved around the room to pray in turn for the nations represented. With interludes of music and scripture readings, many sensed a great spirit of fellowship and intercession.

Whilst it could be said that the sessions led by David Smith were the ‘meat’ of the weekend, we were also nourished by the times of worship, when we sang together in different languages and reflected for a short time each day on Scripture. In the three short sessions we were led by John Muir to consider *The Growth of the Christian*, with reference each day to Luke 2:52: ‘Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man.’

Traditionally, the teaching and meditations of each EurECA conference are gathered together in the final Sunday morning worship session, as participants celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This conference was no exception.

True love

The Revd Liviu Căprar, a teacher in the Baptist High School in Timisoara, Romania, chose the title *What Matters Most in Teaching?* Looking at Mark 10:17-22, we reflected on the sacrificial life of Christ; our supreme example of how to live and love as Christian educators. Liviu challenged us to consider the view that what matters most in teaching is how we express our love for others, by giving of our time, not tomorrow or sometime in the future, but NOW. His theme was well illustrated by a selection of stories from his own experience, chosen to highlight the conclusion of the talk that God is calling us to be living examples. He closed with the exhortation:

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‘The Lord’s Supper is a true picture of how Jesus loved us. Jesus was a model of true love. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 5:2 encourages us to: “Be full of love for others, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave Himself to God as a sacrifice to take away our sins ...” Let us follow His example! Our Saviour’s love was directed by and in submission to the will of God. It must be the same for us. Jesus knew how to teach and love. He loved people for the right reasons, and in the right way! As difficult as it may be, this is also the kind of love we should be striving to develop as we work with the young people in our charge.’

Bread and wine

The conclusion of Liviu’s sermon took us seamlessly into Communion, which was led by John Shortt, who engaged us in worship together, through prayer, readings and songs, before we shared the bread and the wine.

With pleasant memories of an enjoyable and spiritually enriching weekend of fellowship (and some good fun!) it was soon time to get into our cars or to make our way to the mountain railway station as we set off for onward connections to our homes. Whether we were there for the first time or had experienced the fellowship of a EurECA conference before, we set off on ‘the road from Emmaus’, not only well nourished by the many satisfying meals given to us by our hosts, but also with much food for thought to keep us going mentally and spiritually for a long time to come.

■ John Muir and John Shortt

Answers to Black History Month 2009 Quiz

Round one (15 x two-point questions = 30 points)

- 1 Rosa Parks
- 2 Alice Walker
- 3 Colin Jackson
- 4 Nelson Mandela
- 5 Desmond Tutu
- 6 Bob Marley
- 7 Joan Armatrading
- 8 Tupac Shakur
- 9 Shirley Bassey
- 10 Prince
- 11 (d) 1968

- 12 (c) Ralph Johnson Bunche
- 13 (a) 1965

- 14 (b) Gwendolyn Brooks
- 15 (b) 1976

Round two (10 x four-point questions = 40 points)

- 16 Mary Seacole
- 17 Elijah McCoy
- 18 Samuel Coleridge-Taylor
- 19 (c) 1789
- 20 Andrew Watson, Scotland
- 21 Alice Coachman, high jump

- 22 Louis Gossett Jr, *An Officer and a Gentleman*; Denzel Washington, *Glory*; Cuba Gooding Jr, *Jerry Maguire*; Morgan Freeman, *Million Dollar Baby*

- 23 Sidney Poitier, *Lilies of the Field*; Denzel Washington, *Training Day*; Jamie Foxx, *Ray*; Forest Whitaker, *The Last King of Scotland*

- 24 Hattie McDaniel, *Gone With The Wind*; Whoopi Goldberg, *Ghost*; Jennifer Hudson, *Dreamgirls*
- 25 *Monster’s Ball*, 2001

Round three (5 x six-point questions = 30 points)

- 26 Diane Abbott, Labour Party, Hackney North and Stoke Newington; Paul Boateng, Labour Party, Brent South; Bernie Grant, Labour Party, Tottenham

- 27 John Taylor, Baron Taylor of Warwick, Conservative Party

- 28 James Baskett for his performance as Uncle Remus in *Song of the South*

- 29 Harriet Tubman (born Araminta Ross). As a girl she worked as a house servant and field hand on a Maryland plantation, but escaped to the North in about 1849. Before the American Civil War (1861–1865), Harriet made 19 journeys back to the South to lead an estimated 300 slaves to freedom in Canada. During the American Civil War she served as cook, nurse, scout and spy in the Union Army.
- 30 Sislin Fay Allen

Note: Total = 100 points