

Australia looks towards Edinburgh 2010

Next year will mark 100 years since the World Mission Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, and an event of celebration will be held in Edinburgh in June. On October 2-3 last, Christian missionaries and theologians in Melbourne, Australia, organised an ecumenical celebration and seminar which has set the ball rolling in anticipation of next year's Edinburgh gathering.

A key goal of the Melbourne event was to gather a wide range of church groups to reflect the various ways that the spirit of Edinburgh 1910 has been implemented. Institutional sponsorship and support came from diverse groups: the Catholic Mission Office of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, the Divine Word Missionaries, the Columban Missionaries, the Victorian Council of Churches, the Australian Association of Mission Studies, Yarra Theological Union, the Melbourne College of Divinity and the Bible College of Victoria.

The Friday evening programme at the Salvation Army Centre in Box Hill featured rousing singing, led by a choir from the Pacific island of Tonga, where Christianity was established in the 19th century and consolidated during the 20th century by various mission groups. First came *Praise My Soul the King of Heaven*, followed by a Tongan cultural hymn and prayers. Then retired Professor Ian Breward of the United Faculty of Theology summarised some of the major issues discussed at the 1910 Conference and considered their relevance for today.

Saturday's programme was held at excellent facilities provided without charge by Yarra Theological Union in Box Hill. The morning centred around two plenary talks and two responses to each talk. The first plenary considered "Christian Mission Among Other Faiths" and was given by Rev. Dr. David Claydon, past General Secretary of the Church Mission Society of Australia, who argued that "the Christian concept of salvation in God's eternal kingdom is unique; if it were not then there would be nothing worth suffering or even dying for." He stressed the importance of contextualization in mission, the need for identifying limits to that contextualization, and that dialogue "is not a means, and should not be used as a means, for Christians to announce the gospel."

Responses to Dr Claydon's paper were delivered by Rev. Merrill Kitchen, Principal of the Churches of Christ Theological College, and Dr. Stewart Sharlow of the Catholic Interfaith Committee of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne. Together Dr Claydon's address and the two responses prompted a stimulating discussion, reflecting the diverse viewpoints of those in attendance.

The second lecture addressed the topic "Christian Communities In Contemporary Contexts" and was given by Dr. Ross Langmead, Professor of Missiology and Director of the School of World Mission at Whitley College in Melbourne. He pointed out that "at Edinburgh 1910 it was assumed that world mission would be from the West to the rest; if there was thought of contexts, they were regions as big as Africa or Asia." He reflected on the last hundred years of mission since Edinburgh, arguing that "a central concern of today's missiology is to allow the gospel to take shape differently in different contexts."

Responses to his paper came from Mr Graeme Mundine, Executive Secretary of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and Rev. Jason Kioa, Uniting Church of Australia Moderator. Both developed the issue of contextualisation raised by the plenary presentations, and offered a personal testimony about the challenges the churches face in reaching out to Aboriginal and immigrant communities in Australia.

Saturday afternoon provided the opportunity to digest the discussions from the morning. Three workshops were held, two focusing on the plenary lectures and the third focusing on

issues for the Church and Aboriginal people in Australia. The day concluded with a short prayer session.

Around 65 people were in attendance for the Friday evening and Saturday morning programmes, with 35 staying on for the workshops. The quality of the lectures was very high, enabling active and creative discussion to take place. The modest attendance raises issues about the level of awareness among lay Christians concerning the Edinburgh 1910 conference and the world mission that followed it. The churches face a significant challenge in raising awareness in this regard, and hopefully the Edinburgh 2010 gathering next June will have a positive impact on stimulating interest in mission in the future.

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