CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: LAUSANNE 3

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Category: Observations

Running cross-cultural, Christian meetings is difficult: really difficult. Trying to run a meeting involving 4,500 people from i have no idea how many countries and languages must be next to impossible. There are two basic challenges: how do you ensure that the richness of the multinational Church is brought into the meetings and secondly, how do you make sure that the people who do not speak the majority language are able to follow everything that is going on.

Here at Lausanne 3, the conference sessions are all interprated into nine different languages, which is a great help for people who don't have English as a first language. Mind you, it is also somewhat islolating to have to wear headphones during the sessions - but there doesn't seem to be an easy way around that. I've done some conference inteprating, and I am full of admiration for those who do the job full time.

There is an amazing international band leading the worship sessions. Sadly, most of the songs we are singing English ones. Some of the songs are translated into a number of different languages, which is fun; but they remain English songs. Thankfully, the band sometimes slip into some great South African music, with blistering guitar playing: great stuff, and this morning we had a wonderful Arabic song as part of our worship song. I hope we will have more truly cross-cultural worship in the rest of the time.

Though translation is available in nine languages, there are still lots of people who are not native-English speakers who have to follow the presentations in English. Some of the speakers talk far too quickly. I have trouble following some of them, so I dread to think what it is like for those for whom English is already a struggle.

In terms of cross-cultural communication, the strangest thing about the conference is the Bible version which has been chosen for the table group studies: The English Standard Version. The ESV is not the worst English translation (though it is not the best either) but it is totally unsuitable for use in a mixed language context. I would have expected that the organisers of the congress would have gone out of their way to choose a version that was easy for non-native speakers to understand, but they seem to have gone in exactly the opposite direction. I realise that there are some English speakers who have a strong preference for the ESV, but surely in this context we should lay aside our personal preferences in order to help others.

As I say, organising cross-cultural Christian meetings is hard. The people behind Lausanne 3 have made huge efforts in some areas, but there is still a lot of progress that could be made.