CONFERENCE PEOPLE

Posted on May 21, 2014 by Eddie

Reflections on the WEA Missions Commission Conference: I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to some remarkable church leaders and to hear some great stories about what God is doing around the world; it's just a shame that the majority of the conference did not live up to the promise of the two short sessions given over to these stories.
Category: Observations

Over the last two days, I've blogged about some of my experiences at the WEA Missions Commission Conference. I heard some great stories about churches and met some great people. Sadly, however, the overall experience of the conference was pretty negative. Â So, this last post will share some observations based partly on my experiences last week and partly on my experience of attending and helping to organise other international gatherings.

It's Easier to Talk About Community Than to Create It. Big conferences generally have a mixture of people who have been attending these things for years and who know lots of people and first timers who stand around at coffee breaks and look lost. If the organisers are serious about creating a community feel, they need to put a good deal of effort into integrating the new people as quickly and smoothly as possible. For reasons I don't understand, the WEA MC conference organisers decided only to introduce those who were chairing the sessions and many of the speakers by their first name. I had no idea who they were, nor why they were up on stage speaking. It was fine for the old timers who knew everyone, but for me it felt as though I'd been invited to watch, but not participate in, someone else's party.

Conference organisers need to consciously take steps to build community and to allow adequate time outside of the formal sessions for people to meet and interact with new people.

Conferences Need to Flow. Ideally, there should be a flow and a coherence to a conference programme.Â Perhaps the organisers of last week's conference had built in some sort of structure, but it was not apparent to me. The plenary sessions seemed to be pulled together at random and it wasn't always clear why we were listening to a particular talk. On at least one occasion, a plenary presentation was in more or less direct contradiction of the one it followed. Â In addition, table groups need a lot of preparation and the table group leaders need to be well briefed on what it is they are expected to achieve.

Ideally, conference organisers need to involve someone in their planning process who has a background and experience of facilitating presentations and discussion groups. These can be really powerful tools, but they have to be used well.

We Really Should Be Past Only Using English. A conference which purports to be Global or World should make provision for people to speak in more than one language. It is no longer acceptable to make people deliver plenary talks in a language other than their mother tongue. I wrote the followingÂ after the Lausanne conference in 2010 and it's sad to see that it is still true in some parts of the mission world.

> *I haveÂ already highlightedÂ the way in which all of the conference presentations had to be given in English.Â The conference chairman explained that this was done to facilitate the interpretation into other languages. While this was an issue, it was not an insurmountable one. Having everyone speak in English marginalised all other languageÂ communities and*

> *reduced them to a lower status, which was unfortunate. It was desperately sad to see people struggle to read statements in English and coming across as dull and boring, when they would undoubtedly have been exciting and interesting in their own language. On the last morning we were reminded that we have to listen to the voices from the margins of the Church â€“ sadly, the message of the conference was that we would only listen to the margins if they speak English.*

The arguments that it would cost too much or take too much time to organise translation are fallacious. Â There was enough expertise in the room last week to, at least, have allowed people to present in their mother tongues and have interpretation from the front of the room into English. That would have taken a little time, true, but the programme was too packed anyway and needed to be slowed down! The conference would have been none the worse for dropping some of the sessions.

Don't be Impressed by Titles.Â I must admit that I was (naively, perhaps) expecting great things of a WORLD Evangelical Alliance Conference. I thought we would be exposed to cutting edge thinking and reflection. I was very disappointed. Apart from one thought provoking presentation on the Church, most of the plenary sessions delivered nothing particularly new or ground breaking while at least one session was actually rather poor. More worryingly, the engagement with the Bible, either during the formal Bible readings or in the other sessions was rather shallow. Though we focussed on the letters to the seven churches from Revelation, there was little serious exposition of the text during the conference.

There are people who are not in major positions in global organisations who would have more to say about cutting edge mission and who would be better equipped to open up the Scriptures. It is noticeable that the most heartwarming and challenging interventions in the conference came from pastors and evangelists who were given brief opportunities to share, not from the 'big names'.

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