

“The whole world in his hands”

The Younger Leaders’ Gathering (YLG), held in Port Dickson, Malaysia in September 2006, brought together over 500 younger leaders (aged 25-35) from over 100 countries, in addition to a number of elder mentors.¹ Organised by the Lausanne Movement, it drew upon a significant history. The Lausanne Movement was established in 1974 at the International Congress for World Evangelisation, held in Lausanne, Switzerland. This congress brought together the most influential evangelical leaders (2,300 of them to be precise) from 150 countries.

Subsequent congresses have been held in Pattaya (1980 and 2004) and Manila (1989). Emerging from the 1974 Congress was the Lausanne Covenant, arguably the best expression of evangelical faith to ever be written.²

A gathering like the YLG could be easily remembered for the great networks, strong friendships, and moving experiences. It could easily be a travelogue, where people could look at the hundreds of photos, nod and smile, say how nice it was that I had a lovely time, and move on. But my experience was less to do with what life-changing impact it might have on my own life and more to do with an insight into God’s work in God’s world. I came away with six significant reflections, which I found helpful to frame using Revelation 7:9-17, alongside Revelation 21. Here, John the Revelator expressed what I had seen in a week in Malaysia: unity, worship, witness, suffering, sacrifice, and hope. In many respects, this is the story of the church writ large, past, present, and future: the whole Gospel, the whole

church, the whole world in God’s hands, “making all things new”.

Unity

At first glance, there was much between us that divided us. We looked, spoke, and experienced faith differently from each other. But what united us was much stronger than

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Of course, this picture of a unity is not something we readily associate with the church. The Anglican Communion is facing one of its greatest challenges to unity as it struggles with important social and theological issues. Within congregational churches, we hear of splits and divisions. Any reading of church history will throw up those on one side versus those on another side. Against this, Ephesians 4:1-6 throws down a challenge:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as

you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Here, we are not invited to create unity. Instead, we are invited to maintain the unity that is already there: a unity that comes with our

calling to follow Christ. At the YLG, we put our differences in perspective as in unity and with humility we came, as followers of Christ, to the foot of the cross.

Worship

There are three images that I won’t

easily forget.

The first image is singing the first verse of “Great is thy faithfulness” in Portuguese. Up to that point I’d never spoken a word of Portuguese in my life. Now, the memory is not evocative because I’d suddenly found I could speak a new language! The memory is evocative because I looked at the faces of the native Portuguese speakers and their smiles and joy were unparalleled.

This experience was foreign for the English speakers there. For most of the week we English speakers had it easy, virtually all the songs we sang were both familiar to us and in English. But the Portuguese speakers – not to mention the speakers of the many other languages at the conference – had had to worship in a foreign tongue, in a foreign place. I couldn’t help but think of another nation, in another place, trying to worship God. We read about it in Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon –
There we sat and there we wept
When we remembered Zion...
How could we sing the Lord’s song*

*In a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let me right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my
mouth,
If I do not remember you
If I do not set Jerusalem
Above my highest joy.*

It's not that the leaders at this conference were dispossessed from their land as the Jewish nation is in this passage, but for these younger leaders to be able to sing in *their* language, to let familiar vowels roll from their tongue, to praise in words they've known since birth: that is worship. I'm glad God doesn't just speak English. He speaks Portuguese too. What a wonderful image as in their own tongue people worshipped God.

The second image I recall is five hundred of us moving, jumping, dancing, clapping, yelling, singing to the African beats as our African brothers and sisters shared with us their indigenous worship songs. Unlike "Great is thy Faithfulness", these tunes weren't familiar to most of us, but it didn't matter. I'm glad God doesn't just speak English. He speaks African too. What a wonderful sense of joy and worship as we sang and we danced to God.

I came away from this conference more convinced than ever that our God is more attractive when he is not wrapped in an English-speaking cloak or constrained within Western ways of expressing our faith. I'm glad that God is bigger than all that and I confess for all the times I've tried to keep God in a Western-shaped box when the God of the Scriptures transcends whatever cultural baggage we might try to load him with and instead comes down to us to become one of us, to speak our language – whatever that might be, in our context. Praise God for the incarnation! May we use it as the model for empowering indigenous worship!

The third image I recall is of our last session together as we broke bread together and celebrated the Lord's Supper. On this occasion, we had been encouraged to dress in our national costumes if we had them and to wear or to wave our national

flags. The colour and the diversity were vibrant and catching. But more than that, before we walked up to take the bread and the wine we prayed together the Lord's Prayer. We said those familiar words: "Our Father, who art in heaven". I learned those words, in the King James Versio, growing up in the Baptist church. My Lord's Prayer is full of thous and thees! The Lord's Prayer we said on that occasion we said in our own languages. On my left, I heard said it in Tamil. On my right, I heard it said in German. Behind me, in Mandarin. In front of me, in Urdu.

I'm glad God doesn't just speak English. He speaks Tamil and German and Mandarin and Urdu too. We worship a God who transcends all cultures, but comes to us speaking our language, in our context, so that we may worship him in Spirit and in truth.

Witness

There were two types of witnesses at the YLG demonstrated through two types of conversations. There would be those who would tell me how great their ministry was, how capable their staff were, how many people they had in their congregation, how many different ministries their churches ran, and how popular they were.

Then there would be those people who would tell me their stories. They'd tell me about their families and show me photographs of their children. They'd tell me about how God had called them into a particular ministry and how they were trusting that God would provide the money for them, because they didn't have any. They'd tell me how they'd grappled and struggled with the call of God on their lives and how, oftentimes, that call was marked by personal trials and difficulties. They'd tell me how full of joy they were with the work that God was doing in their country or their region.

The difference between these two types of conversations was clear: for one, the emphasis was on them; for the other, the emphasis was on God. I quickly came to see a sales pitch for what it was. I much preferred the

conversations about people's lives and God's work. However, I thought how easy it was for any of us to fall into the trap of heaping the blessing and honour upon ourselves, particularly when things are going well. We are earthen vessels bearing the precious treasure of the gospel. May we always acknowledge that treasure and its giver.

The conference organisers frequently invoked what they called "the spirit of Lausanne". A lot of this "spirit of Lausanne" was bound up in nostalgia, as the leaders of the 1974 Congress-generation looked backed fondly to the heady days of John Stott and Billy Graham. Many of us commented during the YLG that there is no one uniting evangelical leader in the world today: there is no equivalent to Graham or Stott.

But as God used those men for their generation, so God will raise up men and women for this generation. Maybe there will be one or two readily identifiable figures; maybe there will be several hundred leaders working around the world?

We can look back at the great evangelical work of the twentieth century and celebrate its achievements and honour its leaders. And we can look forward at the evangelical work to be done in the twenty-first century and consider the possibilities and pray for its leaders, wherever in the world they may come from, that all of us may be witnesses to the blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honour, power, and might of our God.

Suffering

Many of the people I met will die for their faith. Read that sentence again.

I met some wonderful people from some of the most difficult parts of the world. Some of these people openly said that they expected their bags to be searched when they returned to their countries after the YLG. Some went further and said that every day they live their faith is another day closer to their execution.

These people could have moved to a safer country. They could have upped sticks, packed their bags, and moved to a place where their faith

was tolerated amongst many other faiths, where it didn't matter what they believed because it didn't matter what anybody believed. But these people didn't. They stayed in the countries they'd grown up in. They kept working in the areas God had called them to work in. They were prepared to die for their faith.

I looked at these people and I heard their stories and I wondered, "Am I prepared to die for my faith?" I asked myself, "What is the most difficult thing I will experience as a Christian in New Zealand?" Possibly embarrassment or ridicule. Neither of those things threatens my life or my livelihood. Am I prepared to die for my faith? Am I prepared to live for my faith? Am I prepared to say that nothing – not even my very life – is more important than my faith? And I recall some teaching of Christ, recorded here in Matthew 16:21-26:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him saying, "Lord! This must never happen to you". But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

I met these men and women who were prepared to die for their faith and I had to confess that my mind

was set on human things: my career, where I will live, how I'll make a name for myself. The notion of dying for my faith had never entered my thoughts. But to meet those for whom dying for faith is part of their every thought was a great challenge to me to remove the stumbling blocks that might not only get in the way of me dying for my faith, but living for it as well.

Sacrifice

A suffering church is a sacrificial church. There were people who attended that conference at great personal cost. My room-mate, three weeks out from the conference, had no idea how he would be able to afford to go to the conference. His story was not unique.

"I talked to my friends from Africa and asked them what the big issues are that they are facing. Their answer: poverty and AIDS. People in their congregations and communities are regularly dying of both. How does a church respond pastorally and theologically to that?!"

I talked to my friends from Africa and asked them what the big issues are that they are facing. Their answer: poverty and AIDS. People in their congregations and communities are regularly dying of both. How does a church respond pastorally and theologically to that?!

The conference organisers went into the two-thirds world to draw their leaders because that's where the centre of Christianity is, amongst a suffering people called to sacrifice.

It's not that these people sacrifice because they have to, because – if you have no possessions – it's easy to sacrifice. I can also tell you stories of those from wealthy developed countries whom God has called to minister amongst language groups in Kenya, or amongst people groups in Afghanistan, or amongst the prostitutes and drug addicts on the streets of Brazil. These people had

obeyed the call of God on their lives even when it came at great sacrifice.

I returned to New Zealand and read through the mail that had piled up in my absence. In that pile of mail was a *Time* magazine, with an article about whether Christians should be rich. As I read that article, I couldn't help but think of the conversations I'd had with my new friends from around the world, most of who come from places where there is no guarantee that the next meal will be on the table, and where thanking God for the food on their table is a literal prayer.

I have to say in response to that *Time* article that God may well call Christians to be rich, but that our riches in heaven are significantly more important than whatever we

may gather and store for ourselves here. May God forgive us for hoarding treasures here and using the gospel to legitimate a lifestyle we like and want to keep!

Hope

Is the church hopeful? In a world where there is much despair – in the

West, pluralism and tolerance are threatening whatever unique claims Christianity might offer, and, in the East, war and poverty and terrorism and AIDS are tearing apart families, societies and entire countries. Is the church hopeful?

I say unequivocally, yes. God is working in this world in ways that don't make it on to CNN. God is liberating the hearts and minds of people in places where liberation doesn't come through enforced democracy but through the life-changing good news of Jesus Christ, who came to give sight to the blind, make the lame to walk, and set the prisoner free.

There is hope. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being lived and preached even amidst the pluralism and the tolerance, the war, poverty, terrorism, and AIDS.

In late 2005, I had cause to

prepare a talk on the last chapter of Acts. When I realised how the book of Acts ended I was filled with excitement!

[Paul] lived there [in Rome] two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness and unhindered. (Acts 28:30-31)

And unhindered. That's what the Greek word that ends this book actually means: unhindered. Paul had arrived in Rome via shipwreck and torture, imprisonment and persecution, and here he was preaching the gospel of Christ unhindered. As Tom Wright speaks of this passage:

We might imagine Paul arriving in Rome: Oh, Paul, we heard you'd been shipwrecked. Fancy having to go through such a thing. In fact, that's exactly what they said on Malta: he's obviously done something wrong, so blind justice is determined to kill him, whether by sea or snakebite. Foolish ones, Paul would reply, and slow of heart to believe: was it not necessary that the gospel and its carriers should follow their Master, should pass through the dark waters, in order to come to Caesar's city, Caesar who kills but cannot make alive, Caesar in whose empire Mammon, Aphrodite and Mars reign unchecked and unchallenged? Did you expect that the gospel would stroll in to Rome of all places with its hands in its pockets and whistling a cheerful tune? Was it not necessary that it should arrive having gone through fire and water, embodying the truth it comes to tell, the truth that you only live first if you die, that you only celebrate if first you suffer, that you only preach if first you drown. God forgive us for our pseudo-gospels of cheap grace, of cossetting self-fulfilment, of a Christ without a cross and a church which never got its feet wet.³

God forgive us indeed!

I think of my friends from these difficult and dangerous places; the word I would use to describe each of them is "joy". Each of these people had good reason to be anxious. But

their faces were alive with something that was much bigger than their temporal worries. They had the good news of Jesus Christ and they knew that it would be preached and lived and proclaimed and witnessed to, unhindered.

At the gathering, we had members of a house church in China. I looked at those four Chinese and thought of my grandparents, ten years serving in China until they, with all the other missionaries, were kicked out by the Communists. Did the proclamation of the gospel cease? Did the good news become yesterday's news? I looked at these four Chinese and I thanked God that he continued – and continues still – to work in China. This is a hopeful church.

I heard stories about God working in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Serbia, in Liberia, in Afghanistan and I thanked God that his gospel spreads unhindered, even in places where there are all manner of things that could hinder it. God's messengers may be imprisoned, tortured, and killed, but the message of God goes on. These messengers, these younger leaders I met, could despair; they could lose hope. But they don't. Their hope is not in things of this world, but in rumours of another world. I recall Hebrews 11:13-16:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land they had left behind, they would have opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

What gave these people hope? God has prepared a city for them.

Our hope, to use the words of Shirley Murray, is often in the mystery of suffering.⁴ In the darkest day of all history, we see a cruciform hope. We put God to death, but his

good news is unhindered and God proclaimed it and proclaims it still. I looked at the people at the YLG and I heard their stories; then I read Revelation: I saw a church united, worshipping, witnessing, suffering, sacrificing, and hoping.

This is the whole gospel – at once incarnational and cruciform, changing lives and challenging allegiances, under persecution but persistently proclaimed, expressed here in English and there in Mandarin or Urdu or Portuguese. And it is lived and preached through the whole church, whether that is an underground church in China or a magnificent Cathedral in Europe or the worldwide community of faith gathered at the Younger Leaders' Gathering in Malaysia. And this is God's world, in lands of plenty and with people in need, in peaceful streets and in cities ravaged by war. And, most importantly of all, this is God's work. And again I return to the witness and the hope told in my friends' stories and also set out by John the Revelator and I come to the same conclusion: God has the whole world in his hands.

Endnotes

1. The New Zealanders who attended the YLG 06 were Chris Grantham and Jim Chew as mentors and Matthew Newton, Andrew Tipping, Clay McGregor, James Rees-Thomas, Xiaou Tan, and Andrew Butcher as participants.
2. You can read the covenant at <http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12891> [Accessed 10 January, 2007].
3. http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Shipwreck_Kingdom.htm [Accessed 6 October 2006].
4. Shirley Murray "Christ is Alive", as recorded on *Transmission: Songs of Titahi Bay Gospel Chapel* (1998).



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