

God has no other plan!

New Wineskins for Global Mission 2003 Episcopal Church Missions Community (ECMC) Conference Ridgecrest, North Carolina 23-27 April 2003

Once again, it has been our amazing privilege in Wellspring to provide the music and worship for the 2003 New Wineskins conference that we last took part in 3 years ago, in April 2000. The conference was the fourth in a series of meetings organised by the ECMC to encourage the growth of mission within the North American Episcopal Church, and the second we have attended.

It was a remarkable conference in all sorts of ways. The prayer backing and the support from the organising team from ECMC was unmatched. Rarely do we see the kind of backing from a group of people that we experienced this time. The faithfulness in prayer and constancy in encouragement were the two most obvious hallmarks of the love and maturity that this group of Christians possess. Along with this was a superb range of teaching, from different angles and with different emphases, all seeking to portray the world of mission as God sees it, and encouraging everyone there to walk with God to achieve it – as Gary Haugen from International Justice Mission said – God has no other plan!

The team that went this time was almost the same as in 2000 – Chris Swain, Sally Thornton, Huw Humphreys, Helen Pitstow, Alan Tokeley, Corinne Frost, Richard Williamson and Jon and Sarah Blamire were all returning to a familiar scene. We were joined by Marcus Pagnam, Graham Roberts and Roland Faux, the latter having never set foot in an aeroplane before. He has now!! Roland was asked to come to run the PowerPoint and multimedia side of the services. This was a really significant addition to the worship, and released a lot of Richard's time.



The Wellspring team

From left to right: Jonathan & Sarah Blamire, Marcus Pagnam, Graham Roberts, Corinne Frost, Sally Thornton, Huw Humphreys, Richard Williamson, Helen Pitstow, Alan Tokeley, Chris Swain and Roland Faux



Ridgecrest Conference Centre

Ridgecrest is a Baptist Convention Centre started in the 1920s, and lies about 15 miles due east of Asheville, in the Appalachian Blue Ridge of western North Carolina. The whole area is at altitude – we were living at about 2700', and the surrounding mountains rising to 4500' and more. The entire area is densely forested – Ridgecrest lies adjacent to the Pisgah National Forest reserve. It meant that any spare time could – and was – used in walking in the surrounding upland. For all of us, the sense of being within such gentle and beautiful scenery really helped to make the conference a place of peace.



Some of the surrounding countryside – note the sign on the right!

Not that the pace wasn't hectic. Breakfast was followed by a long morning meeting followed by an hour's break before lunch, followed by a rehearsal followed by a briefer break than the previous one, followed by another plenary meeting followed by supper (early!) followed by a prayer meeting followed by a third (long) meeting followed by a search for pecan pie or cheesecake (the early suppers seeming to conflict with our biorhythms!). We were accommodated in a very nice stand-alone conference complex – more like a hotel really, that had been built since we were last there, and which gave lovely views of the surrounding hills and woods. It was an ideal place of rest for us. As before, the openness of American Christians and their willingness to talk and share their lives, was wonderful.

The main conference themes involved us learning to see the church through God's eyes. Paul Gordon Chandler opened the proceedings, teaching us that the church is no longer – and maybe has never really been, a western organisation – God needed us to know this to gain a global vision of where the church was and what it did. He stressed in particular the massive contribution of the Coptic and Russian Orthodox churches in enlarging our understanding of the size of God. Baroness Caroline Cox spoke very movingly of the pain of Christian communities in the midst of persecution, which had many of us shell-shocked into prayer afterwards. We had our hearts lifted by the amazing story of how God has enabled Youth With A Mission to receive accreditation as an NGO in the United Nations, and were amazed by God's passion for justice as Gary Haugen told us of how the Lord had raised up Christian lawyers, investigators and prosecutors to bring justice to those trapped in forced prostitution and bonded child labour. Tito Zavala, the Bishop of Chile, urged us not to back away from cities, where most of the world's poor are. He has a passion for bringing the gospel to families and to marriages, to build a strong society through the gospel. He has a principle – you're not really a church until you have planted another church! All the time, it was clear that the mission of God was forever outward, working together on building relationships and active warm church fellowships so that the world might be blessed and nations redeemed.



Leading the worship at New Wineskins 2003

As before, we were incredibly well received, with many people clearly refreshed by both music and song. Although there were some who were fairly unused to the style of worship we played, (quite a lot at the front, actually!) there were a large number who were aching to sing their love and praise to the King! The song that expressed their longings most deeply was without a doubt "In Christ Alone". For mission-minded people to sing heartfelt worship to their God whilst describing his amazing mission to mankind had a beauty about it beyond words. I have sung the song many times, but rarely have I been moved as much as here. We were encouraged by the inimitable Slater Armstrong from Knoxville to help him with a powerful and heart-tugging song of devotion that he had written while in the Sudan – "Follow Him", with the chorus in Zande "*Yesu nga gi gbia mina ida ka peko*" – *Jesus is my Lord I want to follow Him* (Slater's website is at www.joiningourvoices.com which is worth a visit!)

And, of course, amongst the teaching, were the questions to think about....

Good questions from Gary Haugen (IMJ): **Are Jesus and I interested in the same things? 25,000 children died today – what is God's plan for letting their families know that He is good?**

Good questions from Zac Niringiye (Church Mission Society): **Do we behave as though God has come down in Jesus? Do we behave as though He wants to introduce Himself to others through us?** And on another note...**Is it time now for the Western church simply to stand and listen?**

Good questions from Nancy Hogan (YWAM): **What gets you out of bed in the morning? What's worth sleeping on the floor for?**

Good questions from Paul Gordon Chandler (Rector Designate of St John's Cairo): **Seeing Jesus' name on a bumper sticker is tremendously disrespectful from a North African viewpoint. How can we learn from other nations' experience of Christianity? Whose world view do we reflect?**

A good question from Caroline Cox (Christian Solidarity Worldwide): **When one suffers, all suffer. Do we?**

At the final communion, John Senyonyi, the chaplain of the Ugandan Christian University, told us **"YOU brought the gospel to us, and gave us no reason to be quiet about it!"** and later reminded us that **"All you need for a joyless Christian life is to shut up about Jesus!"** It was the inability of those gathered to shut up that made it such a spiritually refreshing place to be! May we not ever shut up!

There was much to give God great praise for in what we saw and in what we were called to offer. I had the impression that there was a greater expectation and deeper passion in this group of believers than 3 years ago, and to build on and strengthen the relationships we had had in 2000 was a great privilege. Naturally, there were a few lighter/more dodgy/genuinely pleasure-seeking moments as well. A sample – Alan playing a 'horn' longer than he was on the steps of the conference centre, Wellspring being bundled into a stretch limo on the last night courtesy of the Airport Taxi firm, Marcus using a bass amp in which he could most likely have slept, Graham needing a drill and hacksaw to assemble his drum kit....(don't ask), Huw and Jon making off with the last of the Pecan Pie from the "Clouds" café – pursued by the indignant (but VERY Christian) protests of those behind us in the queue...and a pleasant, uninterrupted, Air France-free zone over the Atlantic, ensuring a pleasant trip home for everyone.



Alan and his 'horn'!