

CiS Northern Conference
Big Faith, Big Science, Big Issue; Communication.
Sat 10th March 2007, St Nicholas Church, Durham.

The 5th CiS Northern Conference was focussed on the issues surrounding communication of science and faith in different public arenas today. With almost 40 participants, including several members of the CiS Durham student group, we had an interesting and thought provoking day.

Paul Marston, a senior lecturer from University of Central Lancashire in Preston, and long-standing CiS member, kicked the day off with 'Wise as serpents - understanding communication of truth'. He looked at how we communicate our faith as scientists, both to Christians and non-Christians, with a useful summary of how we can communicate most effectively to different audiences. He stressed the importance of hermeneutics, a new word for some of us, interpreting scripture in relation to its context and historic setting as well as to our own situation. He looked at the way that Jesus communicated, with stories and parables to attract attention and showed how we can follow that pattern. He looked at the way that Jesus communicated, and how we can follow that pattern.

Ian Hore-Lacy then spoke on 'Presentation and misrepresentation: seeking integrity in communication', drawing on his experience as the director of the Australian Uranium Information Centre, and the World Nuclear Association in London. He used examples for this industry to show how showed how scientific facts are accepted in different ways. Focusing on the interaction of facts, context and perspective and meaning, he showed how Christians working in science can communicate their point of view in any issue without resorting to 'spin'. He emphasised the importance for Christians of taking time and trouble to be sure of facts before making pronouncements. Failure to do this is dis-honouring to God and a poor witness.

We then moved to communication in the context of the media, as Ray Mathias, a communications consultant and former plant biologist spoke on 'Truth: a still small world in a world of spin.' His first job as a science communicator was for the John Innes Centre for plant science during the GM food debate, and he spoke from this experience giving us insights into how the media work. He believes we should aim to tell the truth but needed to bear in mind the medias' need for brevity and simplicity. We as scientists should take the opportunities available to us to speak directly to the public, following Jesus' example in engaging with people at their level. However scientists from any academic level can benefit from training in presentation and wise handling of these media opportunities.

The final speaker was Andrew Griffiths, director of policy at the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, on 'Openness and democracy: management of risk'. He addressed the trend of risk aversion, as opposed to risk management, and the

communication of risk by scientists. Christians in this area need to be willing to speak the truth into an atmosphere of conflicting interests.

We then had the opportunity to talk to the speakers in smaller groups, and the discussion that followed dealt mainly with the practical application of the principles outlined in the talks. Rev Dale Hanson, the vicar of St Nicholas' Church, closed the meeting with an epilogue, on Colossians 1:15-20: 'For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.' The Lordship of Christ is a fundamental part of the structure of the universe, and all we do is connected to him. He sent us out with the encouragement us that what we do as scientists needs to be high on the priority list for the church, and that we are expanding our idea of God and the universe, by Him, through Him and for Him.

Many thanks go to everyone who helped to organise the day, including Dale Hanson, and all the DUCiS students who helped, and to John Bausor for sending the contents of the ever-popular bookstall.