

Mark Pickering suggests ways to strengthen CMF's local and regional support networks



BUILDING CMF NETWORKS

key points

Local networks are essential. Although membership of the local church is vital, doctors often need to talk and pray with others who understand the challenges of medicine.

Building closer links is not easy. Doctors are busy with family, church and work responsibilities. Churches don't always understand why medics need the support of Christian peers. Often it is difficult to identify fellow Christians in the workplace.

Networks build on relationships. Prayer triplets and topical meetings can help if there is also space to develop friendships. Events which include students, graduates, other healthcare professionals and Christian medics who are not CMF members can be mutually beneficial.

The Christian Medical Fellowship's goal is to unite and equip Christian doctors. Much can be done through conferences, literature and public policy work, but there is a real need to strengthen and support the grassroots networks and relationships between ordinary Christian doctors at a local and regional level. If we are able to do this better, then the resources and events provided by CMF staff and the national office will be more effective.

In the last 18 months I've led three seminars at CMF conferences on the subject of building local and regional support networks amongst Christian doctors. In preparing and leading these I've spoken to regional secretaries, those leading local groups and others who are keen to see networks develop in their local areas. All these conversations could be summarised in two short phrases:

1. It's really important
2. It's jolly hard

Why is it important?

CMF produces great literature and runs excellent conferences, as well as standing up for Christian values in the media and with government. But the individual Christian doctor can still feel isolated, struggling to work out the crucial 'What Would Jesus Do?' question in their daily life and work.

I find CMF conferences incredibly stimulating and encouraging, but the challenge of applying Christian principles to Monday morning is still difficult. We are much more likely to be equipped and effective if we have a local network of Christian colleagues with

whom we can pray and discuss how to be salt and light in our daily practice. Whilst our local church is vital, we also need some around us who understand the nuances and challenges of medicine.

Why is it hard?

In preparation for the seminars above I emailed all the CMF regional secretaries and asked them about the challenges they are facing in developing functioning local support networks. Four themes emerged repeatedly:

- i) **Busyness** – Christian medics are busy! Work, family, church and other outside interests can mean that any discussion of 'getting involved with another organisation' can quickly lead to the furrowed brow and hasty retreat. Unless we are offering something that is seen as 'really relevant,' efforts to build CMF locally are unlikely to draw many people in.
- ii) **Church commitments** – Many Christian medics are already committed to worthy responsibilities in their local churches. It can be difficult for non-medics to see that Christian medics have needs that are not well catered for by churches, and that these need working out in partnership with others who understand them.
- iii) **Geography** – Being spread out over a rural region, or across a city, can produce an extra challenge in getting people together for meaningful contact.
- iv) **Lack of network** – Often we simply don't know who the other Christian medics are in our area. I am often surprised to discover keen Christian

medics in unexpected places. Whilst frustrating at one level, it is a constant reminder to be on the lookout, to be praying for contacts, and to be flying the 'faith flags' that make it easy for others to identify us as a Christian at work.

What sort of things tend to work?

- **Relationships are key.** Social events that give Christian medics opportunities to get to know each other better will develop friendships that spin off in other ways.
- **Prayer is valued.** We all have things that need praying for, and many will be willing to pray for others. Some can be encouraged to meet in twos and threes for prayer. I have been greatly encouraged by meeting periodically to pray with two other young Christian GPs, and separately with a local psychiatrist. It's been a great chance to share struggles in life and at work, to pray for God's will in our priorities and career decisions, and wisdom in our witness to staff and patients.
- **Meetings** on relevant topics can be very helpful. CMF is able to provide ready-made roadshows such as Saline Solution or Who Is My Neighbour? Promoting social interaction at these events is very important.

It's important to tailor things to your local area, to scratch where people itch, and this may mean taking some time to build individual relationships to find out what people would want to commit to.

Using students

Christian doctors and medical students need each other! Students need the wisdom and experience of both junior and senior doctors to help them work out what being salt and light in their careers looks like in practice. Equally, contact with the freshness and enthusiasm of students can restore life to many a tired and disillusioned doctor.

Relevant events can be opened to both students and graduates to encourage the synergy. At a recent family Open House for local doctors and students, a number of local graduates who had had little contact with CMF commented on how much they had enjoyed chatting with the students. Conversely, one very useful way of bringing local doctors into the local CMF network is to ask them to speak at a student meeting on a topic they know well.

Partnership with the student reps and CMF medical school secretary at your local medical school is a great way of helping each other. In our local Hull York Medical School the CMF student team have developed an excellent network of monthly Open House meetings in the homes of local doctors for students on each of the five clinical placement sites (search for 'CMF HYMS' on Facebook to see what they get up to). These have been incredibly valuable in supporting the students. It's good to remember that, in order to encourage our local students, we don't need to be perfect - just available and willing to share some of the lessons we're learning as we walk the same road, just a little further ahead of them.

Non-doctor health carers

One perennial question asked by leaders of local CMF groups is, 'should we allow/invite other Christian healthcare workers?' My answer would always be yes. Even if the main focus is on doctors, other disciplines face many of the same issues as us and also need encouragement and support. The staff prayer meeting at our local hospital would never function without the commitment of a core group of administrators and nurses; we should promote partnership wherever possible. It can be a powerful demonstration of God's kingdom in action to break down some of the hierarchy and have supportive friendships between multidisciplinary team members.

CMF membership

Another thorny issue is why more Christian doctors don't join CMF. There are many keen Christian doctors who are involved in their churches and keen to use their careers for God's kingdom, but they haven't seen a reason to join CMF. There may be myths we can dispel of what CMF is or isn't about. There may be fears about what 'getting involved' might mean in terms of time commitment. CMF is a mixture of 'membership' where my involvement produces benefits to me, and 'mission', where my involvement and giving produces benefits for others. Communicating this dual purpose may sometimes help.

Certainly if we have more local support available, then the 'what does CMF do for me?' question is easier to answer. But there will always be those who don't want to join, so it is important to keep activities open to them, and to have a means of communicating with them, eg keeping an email list of local non-members to inform them of events.

What can I do?

A great question for us all to ask is, 'what do the combination of my gifts, opportunities and life circumstances particularly fit me to be doing?' The answer will be different for each of us, but I would love to see more CMF members giving time to building their local CMF support networks. After all, there are often others who can get involved in much of what is needed in the local church, but supporting Christian medics is more specialised and we are often best placed to do this.

Traditionally CMF has used a system of regional secretaries, but the regions can often be quite large and there is certainly a need for people to concentrate more on their local area, such as one town or city. If you feel God might be prompting you to give some time to this, get in touch with your existing regional secretary or graduate staffworker if there is one (visit the 'contacts in your area' pages on the doctors, juniors or students pages at www.cmf.org.uk). If not, then contact Pablo Fernandez, Head of Graduate Ministries, to chat about what you might be able to offer.

Mark Pickering is CMF North Yorkshire regional secretary



'I believe that as Christians who are doctors, it is important for us to unite with one another, sharing fellowship, education and serving God together, be that in the UK or elsewhere in the world. CMF helps me to do this through fellowship with a network of Christian doctors both locally and nationally, through petitioning and highlighting the Christian viewpoint on topical medical ethical and legal issues, and through its many invaluable educational resources and publications.'

Victoria Parsonson,
a missionary doctor
working in Madagascar

'CMF is invaluable in helping groups of junior doctors meet together to support each other in our faith and then put it into practice.'

Clare Mason,
GP Trainee, Leicester

Closer online connections

During 2012 CMF is developing the website to provide better links between members. When the changes are complete, a secure, personal log-in will give access to personalised pages and online links with other members in your locality, specialty, workplace, church or medical school.