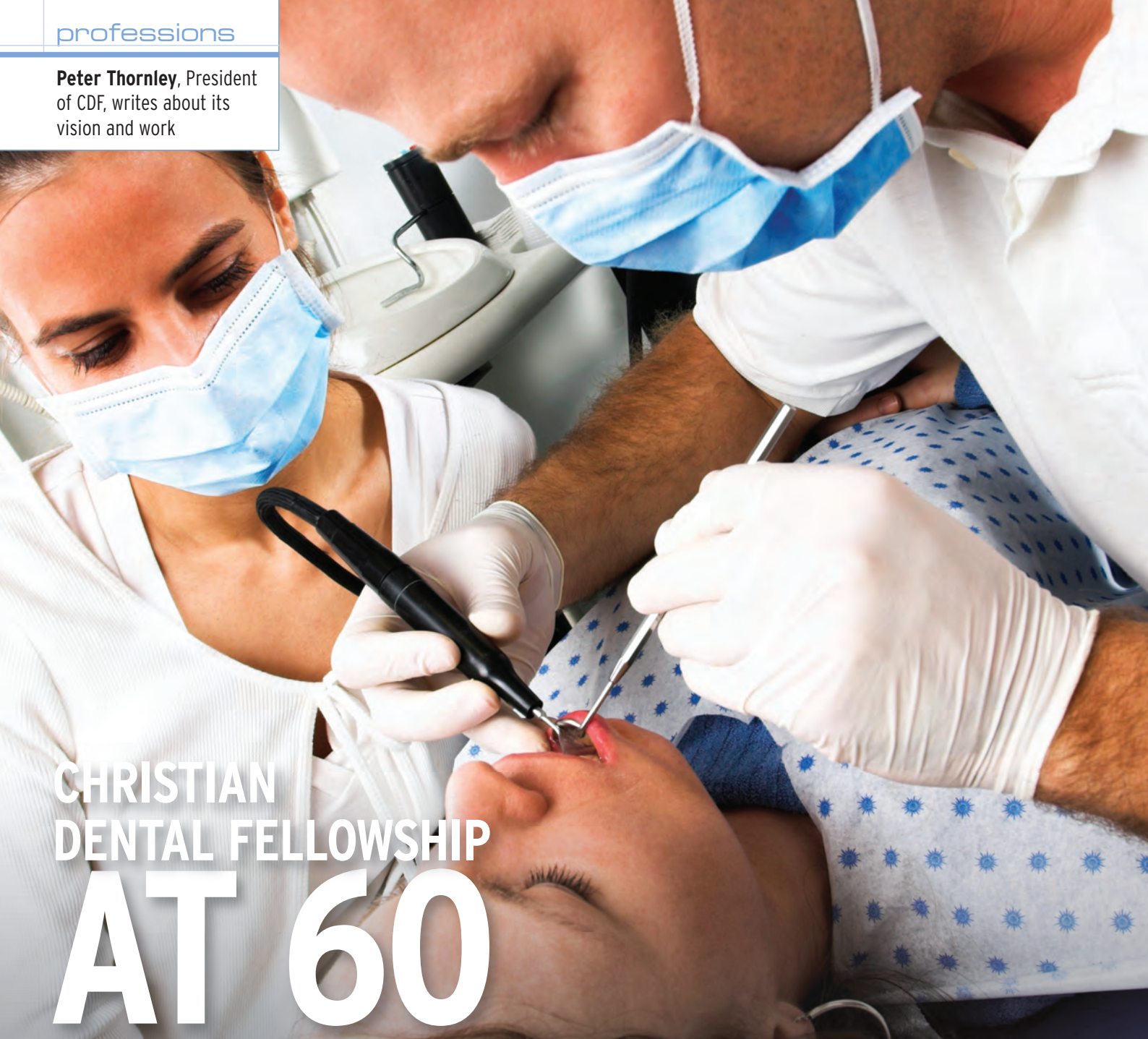


Peter Thornley, President of CDF, writes about its vision and work



CHRISTIAN DENTAL FELLOWSHIP AT 60

key points

The Christian Dental Fellowship has always had close links with Christian medics and nurses.

Dentists face many day-to-day issues which can lead to ethical dilemmas.

High suicide and divorce rates among dentists are well known.

The year: 1952. The scene: a dentist's waiting room in Wimbledon, south west London. Present: eight Christian dentists, members of the Inter Varsity Fellowship (later to become the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship). The outcome: the Christian Dental Fellowship (CDF) was founded.

Right from those early days the aims of CDF have remained constant:

- To unite all those who try to follow high standards in their Christian professional life;
- To support students and those who have recently qualified;
- To give practical support to members who are overseas partners and to help them meet specific needs;
- To help all members of the dental team share their faith in Christ and his ethical teaching within the profession.

From its inception CDF has had close links with Christian medics and nurses. Douglas Munns, the first secretary, arranged day courses on emergency dentistry for doctors and nurses. They were held at missionary training colleges and participants received a manual to take with them overseas.

The CDF and CMF partnership

These links continue today. CDF and CMF partners work together on projects such as Mercy Ships, providing oral surgery and dentistry for people with no access to basic health care. CDF has trained many health workers overseas in safe extraction techniques and preventative dentistry, with partners such as Dentaaid and Bridge to Aid.

Although CDF is not a sending agency, it encourages its members to support international dental work as well as making members aware of opportunities to work overseas, both on a short-term and long-term basis. CDF is affiliated to the

International Christian Medical and Dental Association (ICMDA) and continues its links with CMF and the Professional Groups section of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship.

At home CDF has many regional groups which hold informal meetings to build friendship and support members in their Christian and professional lives. Dentists are privileged to see large numbers of generally healthy people at approximately six monthly intervals; the average 35 to 55-year-old man sees his dentist much more frequently than his doctor.

Relationships matter

This long term care allows relationships with patients to grow and provides insight into their lives. (Dentists can discuss holidays and much more with patients, despite filling their mouths with various instruments and making their lips numb.) As with many GMP practices, dental practices often become a source of social and pastoral support for patients in areas where there are few other professionals.

Some regional CDF members have been working with CMF colleagues and other Christian healthcare workers to run Saline Solution courses. These provide information and training on bearing witness to Christ in the healthcare setting, whilst following the guidance of the GMC and GDC to use sensitivity, gain permission and to respect patients when discussing spiritual issues. Saline courses are an opportunity to network with colleagues from a variety of healthcare disciplines, providing mutual support and allowing the exchange of ideas.

A great feature of CDF has always been the annual conference, usually alternately south and north of the country. The conference is family-friendly and the format usually consists of excellent Bible exposition by a well-known preacher, a clinical session, reports from our mission partners and a relaxing Saturday evening get-together. This year it was Salsa dancing.

Active in Scotland

Scottish CDF is very active and holds an annual conference. The fellowship has been involved with the British Dental Association conference. This year it hosted a seminar, 'Faith Matters in Dentistry'. The Care Quality Commission is the regulatory body responsible for Quality Assurance and patient safety for healthcare providers. One of its requirements is that health professionals should take into account patients' beliefs and views when providing treatment. The Faith Matters seminar invited other faith groups to inform the profession about patients' beliefs and provided an opportunity to present the gospel.

Although dentists do not usually face the life and death ethical issues that doctors have to deal with, there are many day-to-day issues which can lead to ethical dilemmas. Dentistry is not free at the point of delivery for many patients in the health service.

Dental practices are, in effect, small businesses and dentists have to deal with costs directly and charge patients for their services.

Dentists have been subject to several reformations of their NHS contracts in recent years. They have to deal with the tension between providing universal care affordable to all and the desire to produce high quality care with the best techniques and materials available; this may be very difficult within the health service budget.

Living with stress

These tensions inevitably produce stresses and strains, together with the high intensity and invasive nature of dentistry. There are similarities with medicine in the effects this has on the work force. High suicide and divorce rates among dentists are well known. CDF has developed a pastoral support network to assist members facing difficulties. This can include the challenges of working ethically in the NHS, dealing with complaints, returning from overseas, coping with retirement and facing mental health and alcohol dependency problems.

Students are seen as the life-blood of CDF and although we are a small organisation we have two student representatives. Regional groups invite students to their meetings and offer the opportunity to meet with practising dentists and share a meal.

Facing the future

Dentistry faces many challenges in the future. Many things have changed since the fellowship was founded in 1952. The gender balance and ethnicity of the work-force has changed. There is a much greater skill mix in dental practices. Inter and intra-disciplinary team-working has become the norm and the role of the dentist continues to change. CDF hopes to equip and help colleagues with the spiritual resources and support to meet these challenges and face changes. If you would like to know more about CDF, have involvement with dentistry or a friend who may be interested, contact details and more information are available on the website: www.cdf-uk.org.

Peter Thornley is the President of the Christian Dental Fellowship



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