

KALEIDOSCOPE OF CULTURES

In 1963, the first International Congress of Christian Physicians (the forerunner of ICMDA) was held in Amsterdam with 80 delegates from a dozen countries. In July 2014 the jubilee congress was held in the Netherlands again – this time in Rotterdam – a year late for the jubilee for logistical reasons.

In 1963 the participants were predominantly senior, male and white. In 2014, the young (students and junior doctors) outnumbered the seniors, and there were probably more ladies than men, coming from every ethnic group under the sun. There were more than 800 delegates from 80 different countries around the world.

One Spanish doctor, who had been in Amsterdam as a young man, was able to attend the congress at Rotterdam. 200 delegates from financially difficult backgrounds received bursary help towards conference costs and/or travel. CMF members contributed almost £25,000 to this fund; the impact of this investment will be felt for many years to come.

Dutch organisation and hospitality were superb and the organising committee arranged for those who wished to be accommodated in Dutch homes. As well as reducing costs this was an excellent way of integrating delegates from around the world into Dutch life.

The first half of the week, as usual, was for students and junior doctors. They were joined by the seniors for the main congress in the second half of the week. I attended only the main congress, so my reflections are limited to that time. Here are a few highlights.

Morning Bible readings in Titus were taken by Andrzej Turkanik. Andrzej, originating in Poland but now living in Austria, has wide international experience and his straightforward exposition of the text unfolded its relevance for Christian doctors in the contemporary world. A recurring theme was summed up in the apostle Paul's closing words, 'Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful' (Titus 3:14). It was apparent that there were many in the conference coming from situations of 'urgent need', instability and intense pressures. The word of God was nourishment and strength to many such.

Each of the three plenary lectures carried its own poignant message. Wednesday was a day of national mourning in Holland for those lost on flight MH17. Gisela Schneider, a specialist in HIV/AIDS care, spoke of the colleagues she had lost on the flight – colleagues en route to an HIV/AIDS conference in Melbourne. We stood for a silent minute of remembrance and respect.

On Thursday John Wyatt, speaking in part on the current attempts to change UK law over assisted suicide, showed pictures of two archbishops who had decided to support a change in the UK law – George Carey on the basis of a misplaced compassion and Desmond Tutu on the grounds of unbalanced autonomy. Compassion and autonomy, said John, are the two key areas of debate.

On Friday Issam Raad spoke movingly from his own Lebanese background and current involvement across the Middle East of the plight of Christians throughout that region, notably in Syria and Mosul, Iraq. I attended a seminar led by an Egyptian doctor. She spoke of the huge impact that Christians had made in the turmoil of Egypt through their loving care of the injured and through peace-making – something that we hear very little of in our Western media.

The other seminar that I attended was given by a doctor from a large country represented for the first time at an ICMDA World Congress. It was moving to hear his account of 200 years of Protestant Christianity and missions in his country and of their determination to disciple the young generation of Christian doctors and to take the gospel to the as-yet-unreached parts of the world.

Friday night saw the traditional three hour marathon of an international night; such a kaleidoscope of cultures, each with something to contribute, each with something to be proud of; yet, realistically, each still tainted with sin. One day they will stand before the throne 'from every tribe and people and language and nation' (Revelation 5:9) without sin. Until then 'Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works ... and not be unfruitful'.

Peter Pattison is a retired GP and former ICMDA Eurasia Regional Secretary.