LESSONS FROM THE ARCHIVE EPISODE 6

DOUGLAS JOHNSON AND THE BIRTH OF CMF

Mark Pickering traces the birth of CMF from the evangelical student movement of the early twentieth century and the part played by our first General Secretary, Douglas Johnson.

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From the very first days of the Christian medical movement in the UK, students played key roles, as seen in the earlier articles in this series. In the 1840s, the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society began by spreading the message of medical mission to a new generation of students.[1] In the 1850s, the Guy's Hospital Bible Class led to the formation of the Christian Medical Association.[2] In this instalment, we will see how, once again, students were vital to the eventual formation of the Christian Medical Fellowship in 1949.

the first evangelical student movement

Various awakenings amongst evangelical students began in the mid-1800s, and these gained

key points

- Christian student groups in medical schools around the UK were central to the birth of CMF and remain vital to it to this day.
- Douglas Johnson (DJ) was an important leader in these movements, and it was under his capable administration that the different strands of Christian ministry among British medics began to coalesce in the 1930s and 40s.
- The support and guidance of wiser older leaders, a strong emphasis on biblical truth, and a 'long obedience in the same direction' were united under DJ's leadership to create CMF.

SCAN FOR MORE

momentum in the 1880s. The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM) came into being at a summer camp in the USA in 1886, organised by the veteran evangelist DL Moody. The leader of the SVM was a Princeton College student, Robert Wilder, whose parents had been pioneer missionaries in India and who had already formed a student missionary society at Princeton.[3] Over the next few decades, many thousands of SVM students sailed from the USA as missionaries to a whole range of countries.[4]

In the UK, as well as the stirrings amongst medical students in Edinburgh and London, Christian student gatherings were gaining momentum in Cambridge and Oxford, leading to the establishment of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) in 1877 and its Oxford equivalent (OICCU) in 1879.[5] Links between the US and British movements were strong from these early days, as DL Moody led the memorable first full-scale CICCU mission in 1882, and Robert Wilder came over on a speaking tour from 1891-2 that resulted in the formation of a national Student Volunteer Missionary Union (SVMU) for Great Britain and Ireland in 1892.[6]

DJ['s]... skills and strategic vision were huge...[but] he actively shunned the limelight

growth, dilution and divergence

Along with the specific missionary emphasis of the SVMU, a more general movement of Christian Unions grew throughout the 1890s. Known initially as the British College Christian Union (BCCU), it merged with the SVMU in 1898 and eventually came to be known as the Student Christian Movement (SCM). This comprehensive, national, Christian student movement rapidly grew to be a highly influential force within the UK church and a significant contributor to its global umbrella organisation, the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), formed in 1895.[7]

However, with such rapid growth, the SCM also broadened its theological outlook, keen to embrace all forms of Protestant Christianity in an ecumenical spirit. Whilst its original evangelical and missionary emphases were still present in different ways, there were increasing moves to embrace liberal theology and more rationalist approaches to the Bible. Evangelicals in Cambridge and London (including some medical schools) began to raise concerns with the SCM leadership about the direction the movement was taking.

Things came to a head in 1910, as a new, more theologically liberal group had arisen at Cambridge as an alternative to CICCU. As SCM rules only allowed one member group at each university, the CICCU eventually disaffiliated from the SCM and continued alone.[8] It was a brave step at the time to break away from a large, established, and well-funded national movement over evangelical theological convictions that seemed strange and petty to many senior people within the SCM and the wider church. However, with the benefit of hindsight it seems very clear that the evangelical students of the CICCU were entirely right to stand their ground. Whilst the evangelical student movement gained momentum over the following decades, the SCM eventually withered, and today is a shadow of its former self, focussed on various social causes, such as LGBT+ activism and climate change, whilst having lost its original focus on mission and evangelism.[9]

Whilst the CICCU were taking their own stand in Cambridge, the London medical school Christian Unions were also forming their own identity, separate to that of the SCM. Medical students studied longer, and so had an extra couple of years to develop and maintain their leadership and evangelical convictions. A good number were preparing to be medical missionaries, which helped to focus their minds on what mattered. In addition, there was a steady stream of CICCU students who completed their preclinical studies and moved to London for the clinical years. All these factors led to the formation of the London Inter-Hospital Christian Union (LIHCU) in 1912.[10] This later broadened out to form the London Inter-Faculty Christian Union (LIFCU) in the early 1920s.

disruptions of war and the evangelical rebirth

As UK Christian student groups faced their own challenges and disruptions, much greater disturbances were going on in the wider world. The tragedy of World War One during 1914-18 meant that the universities emptied, and much Christian student activity ground to a halt.

However, once the war was over and university life began to return, it was not long before evangelical student groups saw a resurgence. CICCU and LIHCU had maintained some continuity, and as the universities swelled again with students, many of these were hardened soldiers who had lost much of the pre-war tendency to view human nature as essentially good, progressing naturally along an upward moral and social trajectory. The inherently sinful and selfish nature of humanity made perfect sense to them![11]

These new beginnings merged together in the first Inter-Varsity Convention,[12] held in London in December 1919, which brought together evangelical students from Cambridge, Oxford, London, and Durham. These conferences were held annually in London, becoming residential and moving to High Leigh Conference Centre in 1926.[13]

1877 Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) formed

1898 formation of a national Student Volunteer Missionary Union (SVMU)

1910 CICCU and SVMU (now called the Student Christian Movement – SCM) split

1928 Intervarsity Fellowship (IVF) formed

1939 IVF Graduates Fellowship (GF) formed

1943 GF Medical Section holds first conference

1949 Medical Prayer Union and GF Medical Section agree to merge

1949 The Christian Medical Fellowship is formed

CMF was founded in 1949, and 2024 sees its seventy-fifth anniversary. However, its roots go back much further, and there is plenty to learn from the people and organisations that came before it. This is the sixth of a series of articles featuring some of the main highlights.

Douglas Johnson enters the scene

Into these exciting times stepped Douglas Johnson (widely known as DJ) – first as a combined English and History student at University College London (UCL) in autumn 1921. Due to the overwhelming numbers of returning ex-servicemen with priority on university places, he had been unable to study medicine to begin with. Coming to the SCM Christian Union there, he was disappointed there was little interest in Bible study. In fact, only he and one other student were interested in joining the Bible study group, which, as a result, did not run! However, DJ and his fellow student resolved to do something, and joining forces with a few of the female students who were similarly keen to engage in Bible study and evangelism, they eventually formed a new Christian Union in 1922, linked to the emerging LIFCU.[14] DJ further demonstrated his organisational talents by being made secretary of LIFCU in 1922. Then, in 1924, the year he finished his first degree and moved to study medicine at King's College, he became secretary to the Intervarsity Conferences.[15]

the InterVarsity Fellowship develops

With strong support from the CUs in Cambridge, London, and Oxford, and a growing number of others, the InterVarsity Conferences were gradually becoming a national movement, which eventually became the InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF) in 1928 – the name changed in 1977 to become the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), which continues to this day.[16]

Throughout these growing years of IVF, DJ continued as their secretary, beavering away behind the scenes. His administrative skills and strategic vision were huge – writing innumerable letters, encouraging people one-to-one, and organising committees. He actively shunned the limelight, avoiding photographs wherever possible and avoiding speaking in public wherever he could find someone he thought better qualified to speak. Yet despite his 'backroom' preferences, he became, over the years, an immensely influential figure in the evangelical world. He also played a large part in the launch of the London Bible College, the Intervarsity Press (IVP), the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), and the International Christian Medical and Dental Association (ICMDA).

However, the challenges of balancing medical studies with running a national movement periodically took their toll. DJ struggled to pass his final medical exams due to the many distractions of his IVF work. However, Dr Arthur Rendle Short came to the rescue. He was a Professor of Surgery at Bristol, a great friend of the IVF,[17] and a mentor to DJ. Rendle Short facilitated DJ's transfer to Bristol, where he could complete his medical studies in 1931 without the constant distractions of IVF administration.[18]

pioneer medical missionary ...to Bermondsey

Since at least his early medical school days, DJ had planned to be a medical missionary;[19] his particular goal was Southern Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe). However, as IVF was growing rapidly, this gave him a real moral dilemma. He saw how vital this new organisation was, and he was clearly gifted as an administrator, but he had vowed to be a medical missionary!

Thankfully his problems were solved once again by Arthur Rendle Short, who was by then the President of IVF. Eventually, they were both encouraged that perhaps the Lord might want DJ to stay in the UK and to send others abroad, a wonderful conversation is recorded between them as the time for a final decision approached.

'Johnson, do you really think you ought to go to Southern Rhodesia?'

'Well, sir... Just the other day I was wondering what I would do if one day I got to the gates of heaven and Peter said in a gruff voice: 'Johnson, why didn't you go to Rhodesia?''

'Then you just tell him to call me!'[20]

However, he was still able to be a pioneer medical missionary! Living as a student in the Medical Missionary Association (MMA) hostel in Highbury, London, he was well aware of the Islington Medical Mission, which had been specifically set up to give home medical mission experience to those MMA students who were preparing for future overseas service. He was also a member of the MMA Board and Executive Committee during most of the 1930s and 40s.[21]

In Bermondsey, then a dilapidated slum area of southeast London, and just a short walk from today's CMF office, was a well-established project run by the Shaftesbury Society – the Lansdowne Place Mission. DJ knew the President of the Mission, and eventually this culminated in the launch of a new project in 1932, the Lansdowne Place Medical Mission, set up on the model of Islington. DJ was its first doctor, setting up the medical work there immediately after his medical 'house jobs'.

Although he only stayed there for just over a year before handing it on to others due to the pressure of work in the developing IVF, he had in that time helped to bring transformative medical mission work to a deprived inner-city area.

The medical mission continued over many years with its mixture of evangelism, social support, and compassionate medical care, becoming an NHS general practice in due course. It still survives today, although now as a secular practice in a slightly different location.[22]

Graduates Fellowship and the Medical Section

Through the 1930s and 40s, IVF continued to grow and develop, with DJ as its secretary. Many students graduating from IVF Christian Unions wanted to stay in touch, support the CUs, and continue to develop evangelical Christian witness in their various professions. This concept formed into the Graduates Fellowship (GF) of the IVF in 1939, which evolved and grew through the 1940s.[23]

A few of the professions represented in the GF formed distinct 'sections'. Some have gone on to become separate organisations that survive today, such as Christians in Science, the Christian Dental Fellowship, and the Association of Christian Teachers.

The GF Medical Section became particularly prominent, and although the Second World War again disrupted IVF ministry nationwide, the GF held its first conference for medical students and junior doctors in 1943. By 1946, things were picking up pace, and Major William Melville Capper returned from army medical service to be a surgeon at Bristol – as Chair of the GF Medical Section, he led its development, along with DJ and a few others, in that period.[24]

Plans were already being developed to form the Medical Section into a distinct organisation that retained strong links to the existing GF, when things took an unexpected turn.

unexpected allies, and a merger

In April 1948, a letter appeared in *The Lancet* from Neville Bradley, the secretary of the Medical Prayer Union (MPU).[25] Although depleted by the War and the recent death of their Chair, Dr William McAdam Eccles, they were keen to revive the fortunes of the MPU. The Lord's timing was perfect. A letter survives to DJ from Ellison Nash (an IVF colleague and later Dean of the Medical School at Bart's Hospital, London), suggesting they discuss this urgently and remarking that the MPU were 'quite a good thing before the War'.

The Lancet letter led to discussions between leaders of the MPU and IVF during 1948 and 1949. The remaining MPU leadership held that 'the future seemed to lie with this new movement, and the MPU's aims were much the same'. So, they all agreed that the two societies should combine under a new name. At the time, there were around 200 MPU members and 600 in the GF Medical Section.[26]

The final decision came on 22 October 1949 at a meeting of the GF Medical Section, where the minutes record their decision to merge with the MPU to form the Christian Medical Fellowship. Hence, although it is now 75 years since the birth of CMF, we are very much the continuation of the MPU as well, reflecting an unbroken continuity going back 150 years to 1874!

what can we learn from Douglas Johson and the birth of CMF?

We have now completed the journey I set out to chart through this series of six articles. We have only scratched the surface of the colourful and inspiring characters involved and the twists and turns of the Christian medical movement that led up to CMF's birth. God has remained faithful through all these years, and I am incredibly grateful to him that CMF remains strong in 2024, looking ahead to the next chapter of our service together for him.

> we must never assume that God cannot use us for his purposes just because we don't appear to be 'classic leader' material

Looking back over this article, here are some lessons that stand out to me:

- Once again, students were critical in the birth of this movement, and CMF was born out of campus ministry amongst students. In fact, DJ has often been reported to have said, 'if you take care of the students and the literature, the rest of the organisation will run itself'.
- DJ and his contemporaries had to fight for evangelical doctrines, such as the centrality of the cross, the authority of the Bible, and the need for evangelism. Many scorned them for this, but they have been proved absolutely right. We must always hold on to sound biblical teaching, even if changing times may require us to nuance or express it differently than previous generations.
- Douglas Johnson was by no means a classic, charismatic leader. Always in the background, he was so self-effacing that his successor at IVF, Oliver Barclay, dubbed him 'The Invisible Man'![27] Yet despite this unassuming personality, he had an incredible influence on the twentieth-century evangelical movement. In the view of John Stott, he was the most influential evangelical of the twentieth century![28] We must never assume that God cannot use us for his purposes just because we don't appear to be 'classic leader' material. Faithfulness is the key!
- No one foresaw the eventual merger of the IVF Medical Section with the MPU, even though, in many ways, it was a reunification of the previous student and graduate work that had separated in 1906.[29] The Lord can often surprise us with unexpected allies and unanticipated reconciliations – let's continually trust him and expect to be surprised! ○

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This series has sketched out the history of the modern Christian medical and nursing movements in the UK, as we enter CMF's 75th anniversary this year. If any readers have an interest in this area, or relevant material to contribute, please contact Mark on *admin@cmf.org.uk*