

The History of the Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 October 2018

Preacher: Dr. Olav Slaymaker

[0 : 00] Harry Robinson, a long time ago in the other church, once introduced for us, I'll never forget this, he introduced a very distinguished visiting Church of England clergyman from a big parish church in London.

And I'll always remember he was a prebendary of Westminster Abbey, this distinguished clergyman. And Harry said to us, from now on, if someone asks you, what's a prebendary?

You can always say, I haven't got a clue, but I saw one once. So there's a reason for this joke. I thought of this this morning.

This was a pre-coffee thought about introduction. Today, we are very honoured to have, likewise, a very, very honoured to have a member of his achievements are too many to list, but a member of the Order of Canada is going to speak with us today, a distinguished emeritus professor of geography at the University of British Columbia.

But he's also, I found this out this morning, a geomorphologist. So, for the rest of your life, if someone ever comes up to you and says, do you know what a geomorphologist is?

[1 : 28] Likewise, you can say, I haven't got a clue, but I saw one. That's a geomorphologist. I think we're safe in the presence of a geomorphologist.

But Dr. Slaymaker, well known to us at Learners Exchange. He's spoken to us before, always furthering our knowledge of things of the gospel directly and indirectly.

So, without more ado, isn't it, we want to welcome today our good, dear friend, Dr. Olav Slaymaker. Thank you.

It is not the history of the Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union. It is a history. It's my take on that part of the history which I know something about, and that part of the history about which I have read.

But there are large gaps in this story, so please don't expect a fulsome explanation. But I have enormous, enormous gratitude to this union, for reasons which I hope will become apparent as we discuss this topic.

[3 : 08] To give this talk occurred to me last spring, when Dan Gifford gave a lovely talk on the impact of the Billy Graham mission to Cambridge in 1955.

He gave a moving account of the impact of the Cambridge undergraduate students, and asked the question, and asked the question, why was Cambridge a particularly appropriate place for student revival?

And he discussed the fact that the presence of a revitalized Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union. That's the last time I will use this long expression.

I should say, kick you, from now on. But just so you know that that's what it is. Dan also mentioned that the roots of kick you went back to at least 1910.

And it's my argument that it goes back very much further than that. And my argument was given a bit of a setback a couple of weeks ago when I spoke to Alistair Graf.

[4 : 42] And I gave him a brief outline of my perspective. And he said, well that seems like rather a long reach, doesn't it, Olaf? So apparently he doesn't think it goes quite as far back as I do.

I'm very much taken by this old book by J.C. Pollock called A Cambridge Movement, in which his argument is that the origins of the kick you go back to Charles Simeon.

Charles Simeon you will remember, perhaps. I'm not sure whether we do remember very much about what happens here on a Sunday morning. But if you were here three or four years ago, I gave a talk about Charles Simeon, this most remarkable individual, whose influence continues to be felt today in very many ways.

So I'm going to make the case, and I hope convincingly, that it was the emphasis that Charles Simeon placed on his flock.

And his flock not only included the parishioners of the Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, where he was the vicar for 54 years, but his flock also specifically included the undergraduate students that he was living with in the fellows building at King's College in Cambridge.

[6 : 23] And he took enormous risks in so doing. And I'll try and explain why later. But the fact is, as many of you know, that the Conventual Act of 1660 continued to be on the books, not really, not repealed, repealed, I should say, until 1812.

And before 1812, he was technically disobeying the Conventual Act, which did not allow for meetings of more than five people to actually engage in prayer and Bible study.

But this would be regarded as seditious. And interestingly enough, in 1812, many other things happened, as you know, if you're musically inclined.

But in 1812, Charles Simeon moved into a large set of rooms in which he conducted meetings with undergraduate students of 50 and 60 in number.

And technically, he was okay because the Conventual Act had been repealed at this point. And if you read Carus' account of Charles Simeon's life, you'll find that this was a point at which the numbers of people and the numbers of undergraduates at his so-called parties increased greatly.

[8 : 05] Anyway, I'll come to that in due course. So it's a partial history.

It's a history that intersects with the discussion in Pollock's book, which takes one to the 1950s. I turned up at Cambridge in 1958, so there's not a big gap there, but of course there's a gap since my graduation when I have not been in continuous contact with the Union.

I'm thinking of the time when I was an undergraduate as a representative of the college in the Kikiu.

I was also a research student at Cambridge, and as a research student I was also helped by the presence of Kikiu and indeed the whole time at Cambridge, whether it was undergraduate or graduate, or as a more senior visitor, which I did in one particular year.

the presence of Kikiu has been a very important influence in my life. Now those of you who are documenting what goes on at Learners' Exchange will want to know how does this fit into the quadrilateral.

[9 : 41] As the chandeliers are no longer here, I don't suppose anyone is checking up on the quadrilateral. But the quadrilateral, for those who don't remember, includes Bible study, church tradition, biographies of saints, and the church in the world.

And Kikiu surely has to be an example of the church in the world. And so that's my justification for bringing this topic to you.

You'll notice that I haven't brought any illustrations with me today. Last time I was very gently told that they thought my speaking was a little better than my art.

So I thought, well, maybe I'll try just speaking. So going back to this historical sketch, my perspective is, and you'll see, this should start with the life and vision of Charles Simeon, who lived from 1759 to 1836.

I am personally persuaded that this is the case, primarily because of his profound concentration on the needs of undergraduates.

[11 : 13] To make a short sketch of the context, not only was this period of time a very arid time in the life of the Church of England, but there were very small numbers of undergraduate students.

For example, Charles Simeon was admitted as one of three students admitted to King's College in the year that he went to Cambridge. Now today, there are 90 or 100 people admitted every year, but at that time, undergraduates were few and far between.

They had no particular influence whilst they were in *statu cupulari*, or just regular students. And the whole idea that undergraduate students should influence, indeed to take initiative in matters of spiritual activity was really quite alien.

I don't think we realize how out of line this was because we simply don't understand the nature of the regulatory acts that were present at various stages in the life of the Church of England.

But anyway, in 1782, Charles Simeon became the vicar of Holy Trinity Church, and he remained the vicar of that church for 54 years.

[12 : 47] It's an astonishing record. he retained a suite of rooms in the college because once you became a fellow, nobody could kick you out, as it were.

He had entertained in his rooms, first of all, his bedmaker and various staff from the Porter's Lodge, and gradually worked up to concentrating on the undergraduate students.

Moved from his modest quarters up until 1812 and then moved to the luxurious set on the top floor of the same building.

Even in 1958, when I was a first-year undergraduate student, it's hard to imagine, the staircase leading to the rooms that Charles Simeon had occupied were known as the holy staircase.

The iron handrail leading to his rooms was called the saint's rest. This is 120 years after he died.

[14 : 21] So, the argument which is not made in Pollock's book, and which apparently is not impressive as far as Alistair McGrath is concerned, is that it's the focus on the undergraduates that's so distinctive in Charles Simeon's life.

Incidentally, he was enormously helpful to all the parishioners, didn't just work with the undergraduates, but it's my contention that that is the unique and revolutionary thing that he actually did.

he initiated what were called conversation parties. We would call them Bible studies, and the conversation parties ranged widely, but essentially were theologically based and always Bible centered.

his influence on individuals like Henry Martin, who was one of the first missionaries in the East Asian region, was profound.

There are many, many examples of individuals who were greatly influenced by him, and it seems to me that's what one needs to look at. There was another development that not just his conversation parties, but the so-called Jesus Lane Sunday School, which was started in 1827, and was started by five undergraduates following one of Simeon's sermons.

[16 : 17] sermons. His sermons were not the kind of thing that we are commonly given here at this church, or any other church, as far as I can tell.

They were challenges every time to do something about proving one's faith by works. Against strong opposition from the clergy, these undergraduate students, inspired by Charles Simeon's talks, succeeded in establishing a tradition of imposing themselves on any church that would receive them.

I use the words advisedly. The undergraduate students imposed themselves on local churches, and particularly well-documented for the village of Barnwell, where they simply walked in and started up this Sunday school tradition.

Again, that was quite unknown in the average Church of England church at the time. And I can speak to the way in which that tradition carried through to my undergraduate experience.

churches were imposed ourselves on local churches without so much as a letter of introduction. It must have caused considerable anxiety in local parishes, but it was an indication of the extent to which undergraduate students started to feel empowered by the time I was there.

[18 : 05] It was a tradition that the members of Kikiu would inquire. In fact, we did inquire. We didn't send letters, but we did inquire as to whether the church would be available for the following week.

And in this way, gave tremendous opportunity for people to stand up and speak about their faith and their sense of the importance of what the church and Jesus belonging to his family was all about.

But there was strong opposition at the time when the first assembly of the Jesus Lane Sunday School was set up, primarily from the clergy who felt that this was inappropriate activity for youngsters.

And of course, one might well say that it was somewhat aggressive, but on the other hand, it led to some significant growth and an increasing empowerment of the undergraduate students at the time.

time. It was Simeon's direct influence on encouraging undergraduate students to teach Sunday school classes in churches in and around Cambridge that was paramount, and between 1827 and 1836, when Charles Simeon passed away, a number of undergraduate students were greatly strengthened in their faith by this opportunity.

[19 : 55] So again, this is a second evidence contrary to Alistair McGrath's point of view. I hate to say this, but he's such an important individual that I have to be honest that he doesn't agree with what I'm saying, but there we are.

It's all in good humor and in good relationship with him, so don't feel that he's going to be surprised if you report this. After Charles Simeon died, there were other important events that focused on the legacy of undergraduate students taking initiative.

Twelve years after Simeon's death, a Cambridge Union for Private Prayer was established, again by a number of undergraduate students. And this union eventually morphed into the so-called daily prayer meeting, which continued to be present when I was an undergraduate.

Again, lasting a hundred years at that point. Exactly where that is today, I don't know. Another relevant event occurred in 1858 when the Cambridge University Church Missionary Union was started.

Again, started by a group of undergraduates from, in this case, Corpus Christi, Trinity, St. John's, and Gonville and Quays Colleges.

[21 : 27] For those who don't know Cambridge, there were at this time 17 colleges making up the University of Cambridge. So in this case there were four colleges whose undergraduates took the initiative to form this church missionary union.

By 1873, having started in 1858, they numbered over 1,000 members who were actively involved in missionary initiatives.

In many cases the undergraduates themselves became missionaries in the time when the growth of missionary work was at its highest. Now, it was not until 1877, I have to admit, everyone agrees, 1877 was the start of Kikiu.

This is why Alistair believes it's a bit of a stretch to talk about the earlier part of the 19th century. Each of the developments that we have listed, whether it's to do with Sunday school or to regular prayer meetings or it's to do with missionary activity, was work that was inspired either directly or indirectly by the specific attention that Simeon gave to the undergraduate students.

It is a revolutionary activity. It seems to me to characterize the ultimate evolution of Kikiu itself. And in its turn, Oikiu, I have to mention Oikiu for those who have some strange allegiance to another university, which actually started in 1879, and then eventually, of course, led to the formation of the IBCF in 1928.

[23 : 25] So we all have benefited, or many of us have benefited, from this initial activity. One of the ways in which I differ from Mr. Pollack's account, this book on the Cambridge movement, is his emphasis on the missions.

Now, the missions were very special events, like the one that Dan Gifford told us about in the spring, when Billy Graham came, and there was a huge response to Billy Graham, and there have been major responses to missions throughout the history of Kikiu.

It's not, at this point, I gather, a major part of their work. Whilst in no way opposed to missions, it seems to me that it's a far more significant thing to think of the daily and weekly activities that the students were engaged in.

Yes, every so often, a tremendous growth of fervor and excitement, in a sense of the Holy Spirit's blessing on the Union, was associated with these missions.

But I don't think that this work of God would have survived on the basis just of missions. The discipline that one learned in private devotions, in organizing one's friends along the corridor in a Bible study, or in attending the group prayer meetings, and in particular, something that is not emphasized in this book either, is the Saturday night Bible study.

[25 : 10] while I was a student, every Saturday evening you could see crowds of students streaming into the Cambridge Union debating hall, which is sort of central place where all the controversial issues of the day were discussed, not usually solved, but discussed, and the Kikku had permanent access on a Saturday evening to those debating chambers.

There would be every Saturday 500 or more undergraduate students meeting for Bible study in that room. I think, and again, I'm giving you my personal story here, and I could well be barking up the wrong tree, but from my perspective, I look back at that as something quite unique.

Of all the things that could be going on on a Saturday night, both legal and illegal, that was a remarkable thing. 500 students presented with solid teaching from the scriptures, and really made an opportunity for anybody who asked, what on earth were you doing on Saturday night.

We didn't see you at this, that, or the other, but clearly open conversations with people we otherwise might not have got to know. So I'm making the case not against missions, but sometimes there's a huge sense of despondency that there are not so many missions as there were in the past, and I don't know that that is necessarily as serious as whether or not the Saturday night Bible study is going, or whether indeed there are active groups of Christians meeting in the colleges at this time.

I know that the actual membership is there, exactly what they're doing, I'm not sure. There were other interesting things that happened in the course of the development of Kikyū.

[27 : 37] One particular challenge that Kikyū had to face between 1900 and 1910 was that of the issue of the unity of the Christian groups, and there was a challenge from the student Christian movement which caused considerable discussion for really a good ten-year period, and it has never properly gone away, but in 1910 there was a clear decision reached to maintain the unique evangelistic emphasis of Kikyū, and that has been maintained ever since, not as an objection to the SCM, but as a calling that someone on some group has to maintain the tradition of the evangel.

So I've mixed up some of my own experiences with what I've just said, but I don't like to turn to now my personal experience and involvement with Kikyū.

In October of 1958, I turned up trembling, mystified, wondering what was going to happen.

Knocked at the porter's lodge door, and a gentleman came out of the corner and said, will you be needing beer at six o'clock in the morning, sir?

What is this place? What is this place? I've never touched a glass of beer in my life, let alone drinking at six o'clock in the morning.

[29 : 32] So anyway, that was the first tricky question, which I managed to resolve by saying no. there were 89 other freshmen, that's what I was in those days, a freshman, no longer.

Next thing I had to do was to find my room, and my neighbor. I've told some of you this before, I know, but maybe it fits quite appropriately here.

my first meeting with my next door neighbor at the college took me by surprise. One of the Eaton scholars, who was anxious to demonstrate his superior wisdom, addressed me in Latin.

After refusing to have beer at six o'clock in the morning, I wasn't quite sure what to do. so I, by some inspiration, responded in Norwegian.

I don't know how it happened, but it was the only thing I could do in self-defense.

[30 : 50] Now, this gentleman never did come to any of our kicking meetings. Then I had to go to dinner, and I had to wear a black gown.

You know, but wearing a black gown for dinner was not a common thing in South Wales. And, making conversation, a rich conversation, in a black gown, was initially quite tricky.

I managed to survive, that one as well, but did not realize who I was conversing with for a number of days.

Several of the senior fellows actually were having breakfast together, and I just sort of plunked myself in the midst of them. I had no idea what they were talking about.

They were all far too intelligent and intellectually minded. So I was, after the first breakfast, reeling at this complicated social situation.

[32 : 08] But it became even more complicated. How to navigate the relationships between local church, in my case, Plymouth brethren church, which I had got a nice long letter for introduction and handed it in to the senior management committee, whatever they're called, the elders.

The relationship between that, the college chapel, which as some of you know was a rather large chapel, commonly empty, except at Christmas and Advent for carol services.

But on the other hand, it was, at this point, my chapel. So what do I do with it? The University Church, a liberal Church of England church, which engaged significant discussions and ethical issues of the time.

On top of this, as part of my potential membership of KQ, what to do with Holy Trinity Church, which continues to be a very active church, and the Henry Martin Hall, which was the main prayer center for KQ, at that time at least, and what to do with the Bible study group, which I was implored to join, and a small prayer group in the college.

There was all these things happening at the same time, a complete confusion, in my case, and I'm sure many others, but I'm sharing the sense of the challenge, how to keep things straight, with so many competing things, and I haven't even mentioned the reason for which I was supposed to be there, which was to become a geomorphologist.

[34 : 01] then finding a fellow Christian, requesting membership of KQ, that was not a straightforward thing.

The first response to being, asking to join was, it's a bit early, you need to have more experience, which was an interesting way of turning people off, or challenging them to work out why indeed one might be wishing to be a member of KQ.

Then there was a question of meeting college people, the senior tutor, the dean, the moral tutor, imagine the moral tutor at UBC, I don't think I've ever seen one, maybe we know what moral tutor is, but we never have seen one, Mark Rushton, who was the vicar of the round church, a lovely 12th century church, which was a strong Christian center, Mark Rushton was a warm, loving, gracious senior advisor to KQ, with a strong biblical witness, and then there was the meeting with Basil Atkinson, some of you may have heard the name, this was a giant of a man, a Victorian figure, who prowled the corridors of

Cambridge in search of any potential new KQ members, he was very well known as a seaside camp presenter, and had right through the years supported KQ very strongly, so these were sort of rites of passage to meet Basil Atkinson was one of those steps, and as I say, finding the University of Cambridge in the Department of Geography, which happened to be the chief official purpose of my being there, to find out about courses and so on, was simply way down on the list of priorities.

What I'm describing is the confusion and the importance of a union like KQ to help to navigate this huge variety of challenges.

[36 : 41] For my part, thinking back on it, I can only thank God for the presence of KQ and the way in which it helped to orient my life around all these hurdles, all of which were totally new in my experience.

So eventually I was accepted as a member of KQ. I was given a little card in which it read, in joining this union, I declare my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior, my Lord, and my God.

And this little card just stood on the mantelpiece in my room, and again it provided an assist in any person inquiring about what it is that I believe is important.

perhaps one of the reasons that I'm less convinced about the importance of missions is that the very first term in the midst of all this excitement and confusion, John Stott came and held a mission.

And it was remarkably successful. it was the follow-up, it was the next mission after Billy Graham's mission. On one evening I can recall 80 or so undergraduate students coming forward to make a commitment.

[38 : 19] You ask whether they survived? I don't know. The fact is that it's 80 people who are sufficiently challenged to be able to think about their lives and to reconsider the claims of Christ, or in some cases consider the claims of Christ for the first time.

But what I was going to point out is it doesn't really show me up very well, but I was caught up in the middle of this mission and really quite unprepared, I have to say.

And so I took it upon myself to invite John Stott to my room and invite some of my friends to the, music.

Well, the first thing was I had a record player, a gramophone I suppose in those days, on which I decided to play some traditional jazz music.

So John came into my rooms expecting a very serious minded and studious person and introduced with somewhat loud musical accompaniment.

[39 : 40] And then I really was so taken aback by the challenge and by the activity itself that I really did not give John the space that he needed.

Remember I was talking more than I should have and so on. But what I'm anxious to convey is a sense of the fact that you had an anchor in the Kikyū which allowed you to make mistakes of that kind, not be very well prepared, but at the same time be able to survive and grow very much by the lack of success in a particular event.

So the failure to do the right thing is sometimes a good way of growing. And I look back on that mission as a great growth event, personally, and for others.

Another thing that happened in the midst of, not in the first year, but in the second year, was the Bishop Robinson crisis. This, for those who don't recall, was the attempt by an academic bishop to bring the Christian faith to relevance in the twentieth century.

He imagined that the use of terms like resurrection and God and the saving work of Christ were all sort of passe.

[41 : 31] And it's never really been a discussion that's got properly resolved, except that I guess mainstream Christians have gone in the other direction of reinforcing the tradition and the understanding of those words.

But Bishop Robinson had a tremendously negative impact on lots of little cell groups of undergraduate Christians. And the immediate impact was quite negative.

Indeed, we lost several members of the Union because of the publicity associated with Bishop Robinson. Which is not to say that in the long term it may have been a good thing.

It shook people. And as long as one didn't cave in to the specious arguments that Bishop Robinson produced, it certainly meant that people had to think more carefully about the basis for their faith.

people. So, then the actual experience of the Saturday evening Bible study, which I've mentioned with this large gathering of people.

[42 : 53] people. That event was something that punctuated one's week, again helped to organize one's time, and however intensive the courses might be, very few of them were as intensive as the UBC courses today, but nevertheless one had to do them.

It meant that one's life was, again, helpfully oriented by that Saturday evening Bible study. So, my concluding thought on this is that the existence of Kikku was in order to introduce undergraduate students to Jesus Christ, quite simply.

And this, in my view, is exactly what Charles Simeon prayed for and worked to achieve in his totally dedicated leadership role in relation to his flock, and particularly the student flock that came to his rooms and in which many people were helped.

Indeed, the record is that many, many undergraduate students, were introduced to Jesus through the witness of Kikku and, of course, subsequently, Oikku, IVF, and so on.

This was also Charles Simeon's prayer, and it forced students to make up their hearts and minds about the Bible, which was also Charles Simeon's concern.

[44 : 53] So I'm emphasizing this, the role of undergraduates, partly because that's what I experienced, but partly because I think it's consistent with the record, and that even if there are not a series of papers giving definite times at which the minutes said Kikku did this, that, and the other.

The fact is that the record was continuous, and the experience was continuous, and there hasn't been a gap in the witness of that union that I'm aware of.

Difficulties, of course, have arisen over such things as attitudes to homosexuality. that's not the only place where that's happened.

Difficulties have happened in relation to the role of women. Don't be aghast at this statistic. One female president of Kikku has appeared in 140 years of Kikku's existence.

Seems an odd balance. Or, shall we say, imbalance. And these have shaken the union temporarily, and in some cases, over a long time.

[46 : 18] And another thing one has to confess, that a cold and arrogant impression has sometimes been created. So, whilst I'm expressing my sincere and deep thanks the existence of Kikku, I'm not trying to pretend that it's a perfect organization.

There are problems that still have to be resolved. But I publicly want to express that Kikku, for four years of support, at a crucial time, when I could so easily have gone astray, and could so easily have got lost in the welter of new experiences, and the challenge, and the thought that fame and fortune would come some other route, I give thanks to Kikku for its wisdom and consistency.

And I can give my more general thanks for inspiring the IBCF in 1928, to commence its worldwide ministry, and which continues today, as Sue Norman will attest.

And I'm confident that Charles Simeon would have approved. And I just thank God for this history. Please remember, it's a personal history.

You may find facts that are contrary to some of the argument, but I do believe that it's been a work of God, and it's been remarkably effective and honoring to his name.

[48 : 03] Thank you.