

10 things I discovered in Norway. (part 1)

- 1) Bringing 90 people together from 20 different nations is no easy thing but has a significant impact.

The European Educator's Christian Association (EurECA) has been around for very nearly 25 years. During that time many hundreds of Christian educators have been encouraged, supported and developed through its work. Each year they (or more correctly now, we) organise a conference. This is no straightforward exercise at the best of times but doing it with volunteers in different nations for people from across the continent? There has to be an easier way to make something happen but despite the obvious potential pitfalls this was a really well organised and successful venture and so I pay tribute to all those involved. Well done!

- 2) Going to bed at 11.30pm when it is still light makes you very grateful for eyelids!

If I had been advising God in the process of creation and He had asked my opinion, I would have agreed wholeheartedly with the concept of eyelids. I might have needed more persuasion about eyebrows but that is another story for another day. For now I'll confine myself to eyelids and what a splendid idea they are. You see, the problem is sunset, or rather the lack of it. There just wasn't one in Norway when I was there, at least not that you'd have noticed. There might have been one at around 1.00 am but I didn't stay up that long to find out. The first evening we were there we were having a chat after dinner, thinking it was around 8.00 in the evening, at least that was the time that the brightness indicated, when in reality it was 11.30. How was anyone supposed to sleep when it was bright enough for another 20 overs of cricket to be played? The answer; eyelids. So I dutifully closed mine and slept soundly through until morning. I was told that the dawn chorus had started at around 03.00 in the morning but thankfully I was blissfully unaware of it. So, eyelids - good idea Lord, thanks.

- 3) My tendency to cry during worship isn't changed by singing in Norwegian, even though I only understood three words.

I cry much more readily these days and with no self-consciousness at all. This is especially true in worship and never more so than when singing about the resurrection. What surprised me is that when we were singing a new song in Norwegian, *Graven er tom (The grave is empty)* I found the same thing happening. Now, to a non-linguist like me the Norwegian language is, let me use the word *interesting*. Here is an example, '*over verden høyt i akt skal være*' which means '*highest praise over all the Earth and Heaven*'; pretty obvious really, yes? So imagine how I mangled the pronunciation through whole songs.

To be honest, most of the time I gave up. After a while I asked the Holy Spirit to help me because I reckoned that He had a better idea about what was going on than I did, which of course was true. When I did this I discovered again that He loves to lead us in the journey of worship. This is what I think happens, when we allow Him to do this our language changes from being the language of Earth to the language of Heaven, which is the Word of God, which is Jesus.

- 4) Some Norwegian coins have holes in them.

This produced unexpected joy. Upon seeing my first one I was tempted to hand it back and ask for a real one. There has to be a good reason for the holes. I've no idea what it is but it opens up all kinds of questions. How many can you get on a toothpick? Would one without a hole be

worth more or less than one with a hole? Could you have a game throwing them onto a cocktail stick from around a table in a bar? Could they be worn on a piece of string around your neck instead of putting them in your pocket? Could you make a tunnel for small insects to play in and if you could, why would you want to?

Disappointingly I tried none of these things. I stuck to the rather well-worn track of trading them in exchange for items in cafes and shops, though to be honest you need quite a lot of them to buy anything in Norway, which is not exactly the cheapest place I have been to. Prices ranged from very expensive to eye-wateringly expensive. Despite this, the Norwegian people are almost universally happy and pleasant which cannot be unrelated to the all fun they must have with their loose change.

5) God delights to work in unexpected places.

I met a lady from the Faroe Islands. I knew where they were, roughly, somewhere northish of Scotland and westish of Norway but probably not as far as Iceland. She was the Headteacher in a Christian school there, in fact *the* Christian school there. Her school has about 100 pupils but she was influencing her nation, which only has about 50,000 inhabitants. The island's TV station had been there several times to report on what they were doing and why and they were really making an impact on the community there.

It also transpired that my good friend Phill Moon, the Headteacher of Bradford Christian School (more of him in part 2) had met her before when she had visited Bradford. Phill was with me at the conference and was as surprised to see her there as I was to find out that she knew him. We had the privilege of praying for her and her nation and the sense we had as we did so was of the Lord's delight in working in unexpected ways in unexpected places. I am firmly convinced that what will happen in the Faroe Islands has the capacity to influence and to bring hope to a much broader community.

We should be encouraged. In the soul of God is a burning desire to bring change to lives, communities and nations. Education and schools have a great role to play in that because a vast majority of people, certainly in Europe, spend a great deal of their early lives in schools getting educated; about 14,000 hours in fact. The real question for those of us responsible is this, into what are we educating them? When God finds teachers whose own souls resonate with His desire, children and young people begin to discover the glory that they were created for. This is happening all over Europe in all sorts of schools but there is nothing to prevent that growing, if God's church so desires. A small school in the north Atlantic is discovering that and so are teachers across this continent. Our goal can be to be a part of that and to see every nation in Europe touched by God because its children are being introduced to Jesus and disciplined by teachers who love Him.

I'll tell you the other 5 things that I discovered in Norway in the next missive. Until then, may God bless you greatly.

Ten things I discovered in Norway (part 2).



6) God's love can make us feel quite uncomfortable at times.

Think for a moment, if you will, of the Samaritan woman that Jesus met at a well. If you are not familiar with the story, it's told in chapter 4 of John's gospel. When Jesus gets to the point of telling her that He knows that she has had five husbands and is not married to her current 'plus one', the teacher in me wants to say something to her like, 'see, I told you what would happen but you wouldn't listen and now you have to sort this mess out yourself'. Now, if anyone had the moral high ground to tell her that, Jesus did. But (and there is often a 'but' with Jesus), but, Jesus responds to her in a totally different way. Far from condemning her for her lifestyle choices He ever so lovingly helps her out of her shame and despair. Five men had already communicated to her through the divorce rules at the time that she was way below their standard and even her current 'partner' would not commit himself to her as she hoped for.

Jesus tells her that there is a way of helping the rejected of the world find total acceptance and a fulfilling life that is not dependent on human relationships or achievement but on the love of a good and perfect Father.

People are not the sum of their successes and failures. That is not how God sees anyone. We teachers need to be careful that our view of individuals, especially our pupils, is not based on criteria established by our curricula, our school rules, or our culture.

Understanding the values of the culture that we and others are shaped by is essential as we can easily miss important signals and indicators. For instance, a western child, when first given a toy drum or some moulding clay may be taught how to play with it through its function; this is what you do with it. A child from an eastern culture may be shown that at first when something is given to you it should first be offered back to the giver so as to reflect the principle of reciprocity rather than that of mastery. Both very different but which one is right, are they equally valid or are both wrong?

These are the sort of questions we were invited to grapple with at the EurECA conference in Hurdal and jolly important questions they are too.

Of course another question is this; how is God revealed through the culture of a school? Now that is a big question and I don't have room to explore it here. You could, of course, invite me to your school to lead your staff into finding some answers...but that is entirely up to you.

7) KLM love to serve cheese as an on-flight snack.



Strictly speaking this was not a discovery *in* Norway but one made *to and from* Norway.

For those who know me well you'll realise the life-threatening hazards I face in travelling on an airline based in a nation where one of their great contributions to world culture is eating cheese. Lots and lots of cheese. I don't have a happy relationship with cheese. Suffice to say that if there was a requirement for cheese-eating as a proof of *British* citizenship I'd have been deported long ago. Perhaps shipped off to some far flung corner of the Commonwealth, or simply cast adrift in an open boat in the North Atlantic.

So, somehow I had to survive several cheese-based assaults. My strategy was to try as hard as possible to extract the cheese from whichever nutritious, complimentary snack I'd been supplied with and tuck it underneath the serviette, so that on returning it to the cabin crew, presumably for disposal or re-cycling I didn't have to face the question 'what's wrong with the cheese, Englishman?'

Whether or not this will lead to being blacklisted by KLM remains to be seen but I don't hold out any hope of them suddenly changing their menu just for me.

8) Sometimes the sincere questions are the toughest.



At the conference I was asked to chair one of the discussion groups which followed each talk and between those 9 or 10 people from 6 or 7 nations there was a very high level of openness as well as challenge in the way that they dealt with the issues at hand.

There is a proverb (Proverbs 27:17) that states 'as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another' (just as true for women too by the way) and there was quite a lot of sharpening going on in the group. So much so that at times the challenge of the gospel in education brought us all up short.

I hope that you have been sharpened recently. We all benefit from it and if it is done in the right context it leads to a more loving, hopeful and faithful expression of God through our lives.

9) Norway is very, very hot.



To my way of thinking this is counter-intuitive. Norway is associated with snow, long nights, more snow, reindeer, yet more snow, the winter Olympics and, you guessed it, tons more snow. But no! On a sunny Saturday afternoon, my good Norwegian friend Arnstein (genuinely authentic Nordic name there) reliably informed me that the mercury hit 30C (86F). That's not Norway, that's Nigeria! Let me tell you it played havoc with the snow.

10) We can never be more ambitious than God.

I'm strongly convinced that God's desire is to see Europe radically transformed by the power of the gospel carried by the people of His church. For me, education can play a significant role in this and an organisation like EurECA has a part to play as well. When we organise a conference in a nation I hope that we leave more than a good feeling among a relatively small group of teachers. I hope that we make a significant impact for God's Kingdom in education.

Our conference next year is to be in Sofia, Bulgaria. We have never been there before so it is a great new opportunity to advance what God is already doing in that nation. Many of you will know that I really like Bulgaria. I have been there several times and have sought to invest a lot into the nation. Having our conference there is a real bonus for me and an opportunity to sow into that whole region in south-west Europe. Over the years, we have not had many EurECA delegates from any of those nations. I suspect one significant factor is the basic cost of the conference itself.

EurECA generates a fund, through its members, to help supplement as many pedagogues as possible but I have felt the invitation from the Lord to add to it. So, in a conversation that I was having with Him I offered to raise £1000, which would pay for 5 or so more places for teachers. However, somehow He convinced me that £2000 was a much better figure to aim for, so that at least 10 more teachers from the region could get there.



So far I'm about £500 into my target for May next year and it occurred to me that some of you might like to join with me in seeing this total reached, or even exceeded. If you are and would like to make a one-off gift or establish a small monthly gift over a short period please email me at graham@riverschool.co.uk and I'll tell you how easy it will be to help.

(The reality is that I'd really like to provide 50 extra places but I didn't want to scare you too much but if you have around £10,000 available let me know.)

Bye for now, Graham.