



Write

Interview with Lewis Jones 21 August 2018

Terry

Lewis, welcome back to our conversations! You mentioned in your description of Simeon Network activities

http://engage.universityresources.org/sites/default/files/practice_files/Interview%20Lewis%20Jones%20DRAFT%208_30_2018%20%283%29_1.pdf that one of your main programs is Write.

What is its purpose?

Lewis

That has evolved over the years. Write started as a national gathering for faith and research presentations and networking.

The historical context is that we had been running the “Cite” conference, held in December each year, which is part of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) national training event. It is the big annual national conference for AFES. At that training week we had been running a sub-conference for a few years. It focused on theology and mission. Because it was part of the larger university movement conference the focus was more campus ministry than anything else. We ran our own theological stream to have a theologian come and talk, mostly to post-grads, with some academics.

That national conference for Simeon Network people was already running. What it wasn't, though, was a faith and research exploration event. So, when we realized that we sought to develop each person's gifts and to have that person provide the input, we then created Write. Cite is theology and mission. Write is giving our people a chance at the integration of faith and research.

It started out a bit like Draft days. Come as you are. It was a closed shop. Only Christian researchers and staff were invited. You can say anything you want. It's safe. We won't measure your expertise or theology. We just want people to get started. You'll get feedback—and that is the point. We'll help push you down the track. Come as you are.

We wanted to fill a weekend so we primed some people to have some reasonable talks ready to go. In the end we ended up with a program where some people wanted to give more polished 20 minute presentations, but we also made time for everyone to present.

So, we mixed maybe twelve 20 minute presentation with a sort of “Young Talent Time” where anyone else could stand up and speak for 5 minutes.

Terry

Were these presentations purely oral? Did you ask or expect papers or abstracts?

Lewis

We got abstracts once people started lining up to talk. We asked them once we got going after the first one. It also depended on the discipline. In the social sciences and humanities people came with written papers. Scientists brought graphs and charts.

Terry

Did it become more formal over time?

Lewis

This was the structure for the first two years. We were so impressed with what people were producing, and we were inundated with people from the capital cities saying why we can't do this back home. So we thought, maybe people will come, so we switched to saying that the national weekend, Write, will now be the polished, version, the premium example. And the Draft Days will be for Young Talent Time.

So this is how it has been. We call for papers and vet abstracts before people are invited to present.

Terry

Do you try for a spread across faculties?

Lewis

Yes, we try for a spread. Let me be clear. The fact is that we don't get many abstracts. So we have rejected abstracts but we reject them on quality grounds, not on questions of spread across disciplines. We want to do Write well. We find ourselves having to actively go out and seek papers that cross disciplines to be sure we have a spread.

Terry

Do you want a spread?

Lewis

Yes, we do. That is one of the most exciting, encouraging, enduring legacies of having this kind of national gathering that is based around peoples' academic work. It is the networking and the excitement of learning from other disciplines and expanding your Christian thinking outside your own theological orientations – learning about conversations going on in entirely different disciplines, e .g., what a Christian ethnology might look like. You realize there are worlds and worlds of thought and interest beyond your own little world.

Terry

It sounds as if people get intellectually excited.

Lewis

It is phenomenally intellectually exciting. You think so many new thoughts. The numbers aren't large – fifty max, but you are in a room with the most fascinating people. It is fantastic. You are locked away with them for a weekend. It is a great time of intellectual stimulation.

There is one way it evolved. It began as a closed shop, a safe place where you were invited to fly a kite and only those people presenting would attend. But now it has gone to a format of demonstrating how to do this, so we invite anyone in our network who wants to come.

Terry

So, maybe 15 presenting, but 35 others joining the discussion?

Lewis

Yes, that's right. That's a change. The wider network is invited as participants.

Terry

Did other developments occur as Write unfolded?

Lewis

Yes. Another evolution has taken place. Part of this integration work is not just influencing the university but going beyond the university. So we need to develop platforms for our people to climb onto to ply their wares. We need a forum for them to say their bit. If the church is to be edified, it needs to hear it. Likewise with society. So we needed to develop channels onto other people's platforms. So now we also invite people from those platforms to come, so they can then grab the person who has just presented and ask them to write something for an apologetics magazine or some such.

There are 4 platforms that we can easily name:

[1] CASE, [The Centre for Christian Apologetics, Scholarship & Education](#). They've said we will publish anything presented at a Write conference

[2] [The Centre for Public Christianity](#). They want and need material. They can come along and check out the talent.

[3] A blog and podcast called [Bigger Questions](#), which is based in Melbourne. It has to produce a weekly radio show so he loves our people. He comes to recruit talent to be interviewed on the podcast. Rob, the podcast guy, is going to be at each of our three annual dinners in 2018, and he will record an episode with the dinner speaker.

It teaches our people that their content is sought after and that we have pathways to get content to public audiences.

Terry

How longstanding is this “pathway “approach

Lewis

2018 is the second year for explicitly thinking along these lines. In 2019 it should be in full bloom. We’re not quite clear what shape it will take. We’re experimenting.

[4] Actually, one other platform is Christian schools – we have friends who are chaplains in Christian schools and some of them have come to Write. The light dawned that our people are great people to integrate into the chaplaincy program at schools, partly to encourage the Christians, but there are also piles of non-Christians at the schools. So to get Christian experts in to talk about research and to give a Christian reflection on their lives and research for a school chaplaincy program is just phenomenal.

Terry

Do you tend to get the same people attending year after year?

Lewis

Yes, there is a core, but virtually no one comes every year. We ran these things in July, which is the university winter break in Australia. We’ve now shifted to a different time of year. July is conference season in the northern hemisphere, but at least no one is teaching. We thought we’d try it. But we found the number who said I am at a conference somewhere else was overwhelming. They’d say I’d love to be there but I’m away.

So we decided to switch to the beginning of the academic year, e.g., March or early April. We had one year trying that – everything was working against us, for instance, it was only 9 months after the last one. The only time was just before Easter and that’s not so good for academics. We struggled for numbers (about 30 people for the weekend) but we are going to try this timing again for several years and try to build on it.

Terry

Does Write require significant administrative and financial resources?

Lewis

It is fairly expensive. The fixed costs are still very inexpensive. But for an individual, they have to buy a plane ticket and pay for accommodation. The conference registration fee can be virtually nothing.

We have a good venue – a boutique Christian conference center – an incredible place – and they have accommodation. So if we fill the accommodation they don’t charge us for the meeting rooms.

Actual costs are something like \$A100-\$A150 for accommodations (\$A50 per night for sharing a room, \$A75 without sharing a room) so about \$A400, including \$A250 for a plane ticket. If you come to the conference dinner, another \$50. So it might cost someone from Adelaide about \$A500. But for someone from Sydney it can cost \$A100 or less.

Terry

Do you subsidize grad students?

Lewis

We ask for donations on our registration page. It's not very predictable, but we always get enough to help a few people. Also, because I am settled in Sydney for now I know people and we can even billet people for the weekend, i.e., stay with Christian friends. That has been no trouble at all. The beauty of our common bond in the Spirit goes a long way.

Terry

What about the administrative demands for staff?

Lewis

As a guesstimate I'd say about 2 weeks full-time work.

Terry

What guidance would you give a leader wanting to begin Write in their contexts?

Lewis

Some things are common to academic life. One is that the academic life is highly mobile – you can spend 6 months every 3 years in some other part of the world. For most people's lives that is incredible mobility. Academics go to conferences. People move, travel to different universities, and they are making connections with people. And those can be Christian connections.

Couple that with the fact that Australians are very isolated. Perth is the most isolated capital city on the planet. It is farther away from other capital. Each Australian city is isolated from others. And the academic communities themselves are also isolated. There are 40 universities in all of Australia. The academic community is tiny, even compared to developing nations.

Putting those together, we've always thought about an academic network as national. We cannot think of it in any other way. The distances are large but the community needs each other for a critical mass. So, for us, the Write conference had to be a national event. That was one factor we needed to consider as we got started.

Terry

So in countries where there is higher population density you could have local Write conferences?

Lewis

Yes. Wherever there is a critical mass. It could be helpfully multiplied. We enjoy putting on national things. There is such joy in meeting people from around the country when they get together. The joy is palpable.

Terry

Any other advice you would offer?

Lewis

All the Draft comments apply [LINK].

One other thing – pick a format, pick a time of the year, and give it a go. Give it a good run, for instance, commit yourself for 5 years. When I see the same event recur year after year there is something about regularity and consistency of an event being on each year at the same time that makes me start paying attention after a few years. That allows you to build a following over the years. Commit yourself. If you keep changing it every year – format, time, and city – that creates problems.

You have to trust yourself, decide what you're doing, and set a horizon, and don't look back until you reach the horizon. Re-evaluate in 5 years, say.

Terry

Thanks, again, Lewis. There's lots to learn from your experiences over the past few years. They offer a great vision and much practical wisdom.

If other academics or staff leaders would like to chat with you, are you open to that? How can they best reach you?

Lewis

I would love to hear from anyone out there in the IFES world. If we can be of service or encouragement in any way, please get in touch. Also, if you've read this and have had some ideas about things we might try or ways we could improve, we want your ideas! We are not proud! My email address is lewis.jones@simeonnetwork.org. I'm on Facebook, as well, but I tend to get quite a few spam friend requests, so friend me, but also send a message to say you're with IFES.

Author: Lewis Jones

Date: 21 August 2018

Event topic: Interview about Write Conferences

Location: Sydney

Country: Australia

Language: English