



Draft OR Thinking Truth Together

Interview with Lewis Jones 21 August 2018

Terry

Lewis, in another interview you said that a key activity of the Simeon Network is to equip academics to reach wider publics – the university, the church, and society. How do you do that in practice?

Lewis

We had an initiative we called Thinking Truth Together. Later, we borrowed the label they used at the Australian National University – Draft – so Thinking Truth Together became Draft.

It is a long story. In a sense it came out of the recognition that the Simeon vision deals with a different segment of the university, a different kind of person. And we coupled that with the theological realization that each person is different. Every single post-grad and faculty Christian under our care has different gifts, opportunities, expertise, competencies, even different potential.

It dawned on me that God had given me these people not to be churned through a system [created for other types of people in the university] but to be loved as individuals and pushed on to serve Christ in the way that they have been gifted. So I had to take a step back from my own settled thinking which was putting everyone through the same course and equipping everyone simultaneously in the same way for Christian service in the university.

I realized that these people have a specific role in the university and in the church. They are a hand, or a foot, or an eye, and not a knee or an elbow, but something else. We need to make them the best hand they can be, rather than thinking we need more feet. Our job is to make them the best hand they can be to serve Christ.

That was the light bulb that freed me up to think about different kinds of programs, different sorts of structures, to help postgrads and faculty develop.

So Draft was coupled with a further realization about academics. Academics see themselves as trainers, input-givers, rather than as trainees or receivers of input. Their self-perception is “we are experts, we do research”. I’d been trying to get people to see how in principle they could integrate their faith and discipline by inviting them to come listen to me tell them how to do it. I had little success. People didn’t want to come, didn’t want to listen. For years, Professor Ross

McKenzie (at the University of Queensland) was trying to tell me that his circles of senior academics needed to be listened to rather than lectured at. For years he told me this. It finally dawned on me, the theological recognition broke through, that our programs could not be one size fits all, but that if I set them a task they found interesting enough, they would each take the initiative to train themselves to do it in their own way and at their own pace, so Draft followed that insight.

Draft is an opportunity for the academics to get together and share what they have been thinking about – how theology relates to their research – how these two sides of their lives interact – how they link to assumptions of disciplines or solving a need in the world, e.g. the assumption of orderliness in Science or better methods for purification of water. Let academics talk about their own reflections on their research, on their discipline as a whole, and so on.

My sneaky agenda is that along the way they ended up training themselves to do this. They are self-learners. If you set them a task, they know how to muster the resources to accomplish the task.

I said, ok, let's get together on a Saturday and we will share some theological reflections on your discipline or research. They might be terrified at the outset. Still, we invited everyone to come, everyone to present something, and along the way they learned something about the process of integration. At the meeting they get the feedback of people on the same journey – getting tips, asking good questions.

It has been a really exciting thing for us to see people [develop in this way].

Terry

I see that the [Melbourne Draft 2018](#) calls for people to give 10-20 minutes presentations with 5-10 minute general discussion. Did Draft start that way?

Lewis

At the beginning we decided deliberately to make it short and easy. The historical order is that Write (LINK TO WRITE INTERVIEW) developed first, and from Write came Draft. Write is our polished version of Draft. Draft is a one day local event in a particular city. Write is a national gathering over a weekend. The papers at Write are invited papers.

What happened was that we had Write but after a couple of years we saw there were two separate needs—a very low bar point of entry versus a higher level degree of sophistication. So, we decided to create two different kinds of events. Draft, which is local and low-entry in its expectations, and Write, which is national and has higher expectations. In a way, Write is a bit like the “premier league” in soccer and Draft like “farm teams” in baseball. In Draft we build up capacity and confidence. So from the beginning Draft days were like “come as you are,” “give us what you’ve got,” and hopefully you’ll learn something and maybe next year you will present at Write. So always come as you are.

Terry

So Draft has a very low barrier for entry?

Lewis

As low as possible, really. For example, we tried something called Lightning Talks – in 5 minutes tell us what you've been thinking about or working on and give us two dot points on a Christian response and let us give some feedback. We try to have theological scholars and senior academics in the room who can think in a bigger picture way about what people are saying to try and improve the quality of feedback with questions and suggestions.

Terry

Did this all develop in stages?

Lewis

Not exactly but in any given city there may have been a progression. People have to understand what they are doing. Sydney people and Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne people, they had already been coming to Write or similar events that were in the same genre but were more ad hoc. So they had been exposed to [some trial and error efforts].

So when we switched on the idea of going national, those guys already had something like a finished product in the first year. Sandy and I could provide more guidance.

But in other cities, [it was necessary to go step by step]. I went to Adelaide or Perth and met with people. In the first couple of years we mostly got testimonies about life in academia. It was very encouraging but it wasn't the mould or product we were aiming for, so it took a while.

Also, to set the scene, you need to give examples of what you are expecting. So one thing, which worked well, we played a recording of your talk [INSERT AUDIO HERE?], Terry, at the Simeon annual dinner about different modes of Christian engagement – pietistic, evangelistic, apologetic, and dialogic. We played that talk as a way of saying, hey, we are thinking about different modes of engagement and here's one we are wanting you to think through. That helped focus their thinking for the next year. And then we had a discussion about the talk. It got their juices flowing.

Also we played online talks from earlier Write conferences at the beginning of a Draft day, e.g., from [Nick Aroney](#), a law professor at the University of Queensland, to set the stage.

So, ultimately, after the first year or two I got to know people so I would invite people who could do what I wanted to prepare something for the day so I knew I would have 3-4 talks of what I had in mind. I would spread them through the day and set the tone for next year. That's been effective.

Terry

Who are the participants? What sorts of turnout have you had?

Lewis

Quite a range of people, post-grads through senior academics. It depends on the year what the mix or balance is. The day caters for everyone. It doesn't need to be streamlined for a particular audience.

Terry

Does it work to have senior academics and grad students together? Mightn't the grad students be intimidated?

Lewis

They could be in theory but it has never been the case. I have never had a post-grad feel self-conscious about this. The fact that this is a Christian event just cuts through everything.

Terry

Do you lay out norms for participation, e.g., gentleness, kindness, encouragement?

Lewis

In Australia people are less pretentious than in some other places. I think as well, probably, the reality is that the more gentle and constructive academics are the ones who come along. They make themselves available to be of service to the next generation. And they are humble enough to say they themselves need to think about things better. So it is a self-selecting process as well.

Terry

Do you try and focus people in what to talk about. For example, do you say we prefer to have something specific you are working on rather than some very generic topic like sociology and the human faith?

Lewis

No. We invite any kind of angle. You may address something in your wider discipline. Or some part of your specialization or research. We list a bunch of different styles of kinds of papers we'd like to hear. The reason we cast the net broadly is that we're trying to equip the wider church and wider society with our Christian thinking on these areas of specialization. So we want people – if they have a passion on an apologetic angle – we want them to develop it. We are trying to use our guys to equip the wider church. If they have developed it sufficiently we will put them on the circuit – to speak at churches, write an article for the church newsletters, and so on.

Terry

What has worked well? What difficulties have you confronted? What didn't work?

Lewis

It has depended entirely on the city. In Sydney and Melbourne we have Simeon staff on the ground. There have been strong local campus ministries there for 100 years. Those Draft events virtually came fully formed from on high. We had also run Write a couple of times so we had a core of people in major cities who knew what we were trying to do. So no problem there.

In other places it is a quite slow process. You don't know people in those cities. Networks are small. If you are going to do anything you have to start with people you know, but they might not be interested, or are not the ones to push forward. But they might provide names of others, so you have to follow the connections to find people who are interested. If there are no local

staff, then it is not easy. So, I can only go to Perth once a year. I cannot travel that much. So that means 12 months between events. It will be slow. Creating networks is a challenge.

Terry

Are interested faculty key to Draft?

Lewis

No, post-grads can be fine by themselves.

Terry

And what about attendance?

Lewis

Something that never works to my satisfaction is attendance. We have had 30 people in Sydney and Melbourne but sometimes only 15. You think, wow, what we are doing wrong? I still don't know. Everyone who comes has a great time, loves it, wants to come back, but it is difficult to grow beyond those numbers. There should be 100 people. In Sydney there are 100s of people in our networks, let alone the 1000s they know. There should be 100s. There should be a Draft event every academic quarter and 100s of post-grads and academics there each time.

Terry

Do you have any sense about why there is not a breakout from the smaller numbers into the wider circles of 100s and 1000s?

Lewis

In the state capitals people are tired. They are over-entertained. So much is going on in Sydney and Melbourne. There are so many things you could go to. Bible colleges in Sydney may have lecture series several times a year. There are individual universities running their events. Churches are putting on special events. If you look at your Facebook event feed there are 2-3 events every day that might interest you. I think people are exhausted. And, it's on a Sat, so what is the value added? People ask, is this more important than the 16 things I could be doing today? For sure, strong relationships are crucial to the pull.

Terry

What do the Draft events cost? Is expense part of the problem?

Lewis

No. They are free. They cost nothing. Let me qualify that. I can book a room at the university for free in Australia. It is probably free if you book in your church hall. We like doing it in the university because it feels like the right context. We have also done them at theological colleges. That is a great context too. That kind of tertiary institution context I like.

Beyond that you have to put on morning tea – but can be done easily – a couple of packets of biscuits and a kitchen down the hall.

There are variations now. In Melbourne we used to say 9-1pm Saturday and whoever is around we'll go for lunch somewhere. But now we are often doing for a full day because more people are presenting. So it is helpful to plan for lunch to stick together and keep conversations going. So in some cities they might book a pub backroom and everyone buys their own lunch. Occasionally someone in a local church may volunteer to cater for 20 – and then charge everyone \$10 for the day to cover costs. No one bothers about a minimal cost like that. It can be as cheap as you want.

Terry

What advice would you give if someone wanted to start up something like this in their own setting?

Lewis

I would find a handful of people who want to work with you. You need words to explain what you are trying to accomplish. Most Christian academics haven't explicitly done this kind of thinking any time in their lives. It is the reality. So you really need to learn how to articulate what you are doing so people know what they are signing up for.

The lovely thing about Christian work is someone else has done it before so you can borrow. Go for it! Shamelessly borrow other experiences!

Also, decide beforehand that you are going to be thrilled with whatever the outcome is the first or second time you do it. You just have to say – if these 3-4 people have got together with me, great. We have spent a morning encouraging each other and improving our skills and equipping ourselves to be ambassadors. You haven't lost anything but you've gained something.

Plan to be excited. That is extremely important.

Maybe it is me looking back and worrying about low numbers at events. Yet I am genuinely encouraged. Everyone comes away thinking they wouldn't have wanted to spend their Saturday mornings any other way. Just enjoy what God does.

Terry

Thanks a lot, Lewis. I am thrilled to hear what it is happening in Australia. I really appreciate your practical advice, too, and how this developed over time through experiments, trial and error, as one thing led to another and another and you just followed your heart, the talents of scholars and the leading of the Holy Spirit!

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 and colleagues

Event organizer: Simeon Network, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students

Event topic: Draft

Location: Brisbane

Country: Australia

Participants: Faculty, Graduate Students

Language: English