



Interview with Samuel Vaiphei, 21 August 2018

Terry

It's a pleasure to talk to you, Samuel. I have been appreciating for a long time the Intensive Summer Institute. I'm eager to hear more about how it developed. Have you been involved from the beginning?

Samuel

Yes, from 2012 onwards.

Terry

What years has it been going?

Samuel

Every year from 2012 to 2015, 2017, and the next one will be in 2019. In 2016, we have an Independent Summer Intensive Study whereby since we couldn't camp out, we listed areas of study and decided to meet for a two full day review. This format had lesser number of participants but we got excellent feedbacks.

Terry

How did it get started?

Samuel

It is a long story. When I volunteered to be staff [Associate Staff] at the invitation of a friend who was trying to revive the UESI ministry in Delhi University area, I realized then that the standard staple which we used to feed or the way students go about doing their activity was not

leading to in depth nourishment. I decided to expose the students to whatever I wish I was exposed to during my undergrad days. Hence I did a lot of experimenting. 2007 was the year when we first started a summer book review. Usually, students go home for summer vacation but that year, instead of cancelling the Bible studies, I asked the students to come for a weekly (sometimes twice in a week) study looking at Vinoth Ramachandra's **Gods That Fail** and **101 Errors in the Bible**, a tract by Muslim apologists and Christian response to it. The pattern continued every year till 2011 but with different topics and issues.

In 2012 we redid everything. I realized a lot could be done more in the 8 weeks of summer vacation students have. So for 8 weeks we met 4 days a week, 5 hours a day.

Terry

How did you structure it initially?

Samuel

It was prior reading, lecture and discussions based. The books (usually thin ones) would be handed first before the start of the week. The aim was to get undergrads and some people who had graduated from College to integrate their faith with their academics. They might be headed to an academic career or to work in government or NGOs. I wanted to broaden intellectual and spiritual horizons.

We started with global economic history (in 2012). We used a short Oxford University Press book on global economic history. It was only 100 pages long. A friend of mine who was finishing his doctoral work in anthropology was working on worldviews. He talked about what is a Christian worldview using James Sire's book.

Terry

How was each day organized?

Samuel

We started at 3pm and we gone on till 7pm. Initially we had lectures, then discussion of the lectures and the readings. The following year (2013) we started having student presentations on select papers apart from the previous format.

Terry

Why did you move to presentations?

Samuel

So they could also learn how to present what they had learned, and not merely process what they have heard. Moreover, they don't have that kind of training/exposure in their colleges/universities. Mostly student evaluations are based on a year/semester-end exam. So they didn't have much opportunity for participation. So we gave them assignments to learn the art of doing small research on their own.

Terry

What topics did you cover?

Samuel

The range of topics we select are vast. Usually, we pre-selected topics based on what intending participants wanted to do apart from our own [resource persons] area of interest. For example, at that time [2012-13] there was a heated debate going on women's leadership in the churches. We studied human suffering, violence and ethnic conflicts, postcolonial critiques, Technology and so on. We also looked at pluralism.

Terry

How did the presentations work?

Samuel

Usually we grouped students into about 3 students per group. We gave each group 20 minutes to present.

Terry

Did the students enjoy it?

Samuel

Very much. In 2013 we used a Massachusetts Institute of Technology climate change simulation program. We divided students into different group of countries – High Income, Middle Income and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and we had negotiations on capping CO2 emission. The negotiations failed! The experiment worked but the students couldn't reach agreement.

Terry

What did that teach them or you?

Samuel

It demonstrated how we have our own levels of comfort and how difficult it is to move out of our comfort zones. It helped us better understand how human greed works at the global scale.

Terry

Were all students from a single institution?

Samuel

In 2012, they were mostly students of Delhi University but from 2013 students from other universities also started coming.

Terry

Were there changes in the Summer Institute as it evolved?

Samuel

Yes. We also shortened it from 8 to 6 weeks, as 8 weeks was rather long and ate up all the days. In 2014 we made it more Intensive – 3 weeks, 5 days a week and 5 hours a day program.

By 2015 we were down to 2 weeks in a residential, whole day brainstorm format. We had the two week institute outside Delhi in a hill station. The chief reason was that the resource persons work schedule have to be factored.

Terry

What are the pros and cons of longer versus shorter, more concentrated programs?

Samuel

6 weeks is optimal in my opinion if we all have the time. By the time students get to the 4th week they are fully into it. The sense of rush is not there. They could come up with their own thinking. The learning was much deeper. But the problem was that people from other parts of the country couldn't join, so we were restricted mainly to participants from Delhi. The longer program worked well in one urban setting but it didn't work so well for people outside that urban area.

Terry

So when you switched to a two-week residential program at the hill station, did you seek to recruit people from all over the country?

Samuel

Yes, we did.

Terry

Were you satisfied with the 2 weeks residential course?

Samuel

Yes and no. Yes, because the level of people's interest and motivation was high throughout. But then student abilities are quite different, presenting us challenges which could be tackled better in the longer format. Also, instead of different interest areas and exploring it in-depth, we were now more selective so that it would not be too overwhelming. We concentrated both on biblical and topical issues to a smaller range now.

What is not quite satisfactory is that we are not able to gauge to what extent has the sessions and discussions impacted the participants. And more importantly, the level of friendship that was developed among new friends needed more time.

Terry

What did a usual day look like?

Samuel

I think I will elaborate on the current residential conference that runs for two weeks. The day began with devotions after rise and shine. We carefully sifted through a pre-decided book from the Bible for our devotions. We prefer a UESI staff to take this one up if available. This is followed by breakfast and by 9am we have the first session for the day. After lunch there is sometimes a 2 hour recess before games session start. Being a hill station, some students could explore the town during the recess.

We have one session in the evening. At the end of the day, there is a group reflection on the day's learning – here the resource persons are not allowed to attend so that students and faculty can have free and frank discussions among themselves.

Terry

I recall that students were also asked to keep journals. What was goal with the journals? How did they contribute to the mission of the institute?

Samuel

As Henry Ford once said, “memory cannot replace records”. The goal of maintaining journals is manifold. First, it is to remind oneself and the group of highlights of the lessons learned. Second, it's to make the learning available to a larger audience. Third, the aim is to enhance the writing skills of many of the participants as most of them haven't developed the habit of maintaining personal diaries.

Terry

Who have you been trying to reach in these intensive institutes?

Samuel

Initially the participants were undergraduate students of Delhi University. As of now, the intended participants are Post Graduate students, Research Scholars and young faculty. We allow a few bright undergraduates who come highly recommended.

Now we also allow (on demand) few people who are working in either the pvt or govt viz. outside of the university setting to come and participate. Their presence enhances the discussions.

Terry

Why was there that shift?

Samuel

It wasn't so much intended as in conscious policy move. As the institute got more popular, people with high academic education and less biblical knowledge were intrigued by the kind of sessions we planned. They wanted to come and learn and thus be more effective as a Christian in their professions.

Terry

Do graduate students, e.g., masters and doctoral students, participate?

Samuel

Initially No.

Terry

Do professors or university teaching staff get involved?

Samuel

Yes, but mostly as attendees. This is fascinating. They were humble enough to be alongside recent graduates. The faculty were mostly junior assistant professors.

Terry

It wasn't a problem having professors and students together?

Samuel

No. Everyone realized they needed to know and grow more.

Terry

Was there an application and selection process?

Samuel

Yes. The number of seats was limited. We didn't have a set criterion. People who seemed visibly interested were the ones we selected.

Terry

You exercised your subjective judgment up to 2014?

Samuel

Yes. Since then the young recent graduates of the North Delhi EGF do the selections. I am no longer involved, unless I come across one or two who I think ought to be included.

Terry

Does this take place outside a university context? If so, why?

Samuel

Earlier we were mostly inside the university. By 2017 it became a mix of inside and outside.

Terry

What are the relative merits of inside versus outside?

Samuel

It is difficult to say. Half of the participants aren't attached to a university. They are trying to get jobs or planning for research work. Given the Indian context we thought it is important to discuss topics that relate to academia but which are not necessarily taught in the university classrooms. For example, we wanted to study engaging the government – how should we hold it accountable? This is not part of any university curriculum but people, inside and outside, are equally concerned about that issue.

Terry

How do you decide on topics?

Samuel

This is a fascinating question. We realized that the topics has to have both Biblical as well as mainstream University disciplines since the basic aim is Integration of faith and living/studies. Plus, develop theological/Biblical groundings of our actions for all the participants. From the start of the residential program we decided we needed morning devotions to orient ourselves for the day. Apart from that we select one or two biblical studies say on the topics of holiness or forgiveness or eschatology. But when it comes to other subjects, e.g., earth systems engineering, or Geopolitics the aim becomes different. Students coming from Arts & Social background need to know what the most brilliant scientists/technologists think about the future of the planet/universe. Likewise, students from STEM need to know the implications of their area of study/work for the wider society. Are scientists and engineers useful idiots as Nazi Ideologues maintained? How can we as Christians judge where our leaders have gone wrong or what should be the priority of our Universities and Research Institutions etc.? So, each year the main resource persons – me, Azhoni and Kanato sat down 8 months ahead of time to decide what areas to cover. We also take inputs from our friends and those we wanted to co-teach. Also, we expected intending participants to read the assigned books before the event. Provision is made for graduate students who have recently finished their research work, or research scholars working in a particular area to share about their work. The aim is to generate interest and widen the horizons of participants who have no knowledge outside their field.

Terry

Do students self-select depending in part on the topics being discussed in any one year?

Samuel

Yes.

Terry

Do you try and spread topics from year to year in order to appeal to people with different kinds of interests?

Samuel

Yes, we do.

Terry

Do you advertise the programs ahead of time so potential participants can decide if the issues that year will be relevant for them?

Samuel

Though programs are ready much ahead, we don't advertise the programs widely. It is mostly a word of mouth invitation.

Terry

What are the costs and administrative demands of the Summer Institutes?

Samuel

It worries me every time that we won't be able to afford it but God has always been gracious.

The Indian IFES movement – UESI – has a two weeks training camp each year and I asked one of the UESI staffs what it cost - R600 (600 rupees) a day. But most fortunately, we managed to get the 2015 hill town site for R150 food and accommodations. In 2017 it was R300 a day. No one minds that the food is bad – what they want is lively discussions! So, for 2 weeks the total cost per attendee is R5000. Students pay for half, the rest we raise. People who are working in the government or elsewhere bear their own costs and some of those people [already employed] provide some support for the others who are students or not yet employed. Actually, R2500 is a manageable amount. Attendees are usually shocked that it is such a low amount. Attendees also pay for their own travel expenses to come up to Delhi. From Delhi to the hill station we provide transport (included in the camp fee of R2500).

Terry

In 2019 are you going back to the hill station?

Samuel

Yes, that's the plan and the prayer.

Terry

When you look back over the years since 2012, how do you appraise the value of the Summer Institute.

Samuel

I have mixed feelings about it. From one perspective it is extremely successful. It has acted as a BIG eye opener. It has enabled students to take active interest in their academic studies and university life. Even weak students have improved themselves after the Summer Study. Summer School has acted as a fuel, a kind of a booster on their flagging academic work. Also, they are no longer affected that much by social and family expectations of what kind of job they should seek etc. Interestingly, the topics and the discussions therein also generated probable areas of PhD/Research work! The reason for dissatisfaction I guess is because I expect much more from the students and attendees. Perhaps, too much! Human beings are complex. But slowly they are producing fruit on the ground in a manner I cannot predict. I guess I should be more patient and be more tolerant of the frailties of people just as God has been extraordinarily patient with me!

Terry

How has your leadership of the Summer Institute been part of your personal spiritual growth?

Samuel

The two have nurtured each other. The Summer Schools have co-evolved with my own intellectual-spiritual journey.

Terry

Has anyone else tried to reproduce this anywhere else in India?

Samuel

I've had some conversations with others but it hasn't come about yet. I think it's necessary.

Terry

Why hasn't it spread, do you think?

Samuel

We are stuck with a limited understanding of what the Gospel and our Christian faith is. There is a widespread understanding within my movement that to bring a person to faith in Christ is the reason why UESI exists. It is much less focused on discipleship. And even if it touches on discipleship, it doesn't do so in the way we do in the ISS. So being born again is the focus, the primary thing. And, theologically, UESI was founded as an alternative to the Student Christian Movement and its more liberal theology. So many in UESI are suspicious about our efforts to broaden the understanding of discipleship to all of life – to society, politics, the economy, technology etc. As long as students don't do drugs, don't smoke or drink alcohol and are regular to church and prayer meetings then we are doing fine – this kind of mindset hampers critical engagement of the Full Gospel with the whole university.

Terry

But you do have a relationship with Delhi UESI?

Samuel

Yes, Delhi UESI has been most supportive of every endeavor of the students along this line. Without their support we wouldn't have been able to pull off many of the things.

Terry

What advice would you give to others who would like to try a Summer Institute, or something like it, in their countries?

Samuel

We started quite small. We already had a weekly discussion group going from which the summer school is an outgrowth. So maybe start small with an event in a given location? So we already have a ready audience. We have not invited resource persons from outside of UESI. We try to do it on our own. We wanted to develop in-house expertise. Many speakers want to come and join but we haven't followed up on those. We prefer alumni from earlier summer institutes. So we are concerned with capability development. Organizing it can be a harrowing experience sometimes. Often we are at the point where we want to cancel (because of cost, time, leadership, or I was micromanaging) BUT God always makes it possible to happen. If people have the heart for it, go ahead and do it. Don't micromanage. Delegate to others. They usually don't do it the way we expect but they do it their way and it works!

Terry

Could people be directly in touch with you about your experience and your vision?

Samuel

Yes, I'll be happy to help. I do reply to emails and messages but according to my set time!

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Event organizer: The North Delhi Evangelical Graduates Fellowship (EGF) and Inter-Collegiate Evangelical Union (ICEU)

Location: New Delhi

Country: India

Participants: Recent graduates of Indian universities

Language: English