

# OCRPL'S FIRST ONLINE ANNUAL GET TOGETHER

Over 100 faculty and students of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life joined in their first online annual get together on Thursday July 15 for two and a half hours.

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, the executive director of OCRPL welcomed the doctoral, masters and bachelors students and encouraged them, at whatever stage they completed a programme, to remain lifelong learners. While the world is characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA), he stressed the Christian VUCA response of Vision (of God's will), Understanding the Times, Courage and Action.

Canon Dr Vinay Samuel, a founder of OCRPL, reminded the gathering that they were part of a tradition of Christian scholarship from the Global South that stretches back fifty years when two thirds world theologians began to meet to develop mission and theological scholarship that rose from, was shaped by and addressed their own contexts.

It had become clear that strategies developed in the seventies and eighties by the Discipling Every Nation Campaign and others like them had made no difference to the growth of the Christian community in India for example, because they were activists but did not use knowledge of engaging with and in the culture properly.

It was the new evangelical leadership that was then emerging in Asia, Africa and Latin America which took seriously the social construction of knowledge, exposed the colonial shaping of knowledge and understood the role of culture and context. This leadership upheld the reality of both that and of the gospel.

In India and Nepal, those who created knowledge, the Brahmins, kept it to themselves and used it to hold power. In sharp contrast Christian faith democratized knowledge through the Holy Spirit given to everyone. Such knowledge is not for knowledge's sake but to transform, change and renew communities.

Dr Chris Sugden leader of the Ph D Programme explained that OCRPL stands for researching and contributing new and tested knowledge on the role and impact of religion in public life. This is a resource for the church especially in the Global South and where it faces persecution. OCRPL researchers are passionate to find out about the engagement of biblically based Christian faith with their own communities so that the rest of the world church can benefit from their evidence-based finding and conclusions.

OCRPL's first doctorate graduate Solomon Amao was congratulated on passing his viva exam in June this year investigating how biblical teaching addresses nepotism and corruption in Nigerian church and society.

OCRPL researchers are in Antigua, Austria from Syria, the Bahamas, Colombia, Cyprus from Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Rwanda,

Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and UK. So OCRPL stands for the way we can all learn from and support each other in adding to knowledge.

Professor Jurgens Hendriks from Stellenbosch University and founder of the Network for African Congregational Theology of which OCRPL is a member, writes that OCRPL helps to build a sound academic foundation with the groups of students working on their research proposals. It creates a friendship and academic supportive network between students from different continents.

Dr Joshva John, the dean of OCRPL, welcomed Dr Gerhard Emmenes from South Africa as its new registrar and Dr Justin Moses, the acting registrar of Serampore University, India which is a partner in the new BTh programme. Among supervisors of OCRPL researchers, Dr Kevin McKemey, Professor John Goldingay, Bishop Dr Joshua Banda from Zambia and Dr Dion Forster of Stellenbosch University were introduced to the students.

Dr Sara Ashfari, leading the MPhil programme in Islamics with Stellenbosch University, introduced scholars taking part from Asia and Africa and introduced our first cohort of 17 MTh students. Dr Anna Bekele leading the MTh in Islamics course welcomed the MTh students, of which there are 2 cohorts comprised of a total of 30 students.

Dr Prasad Phillips, the newly appointed deputy executive director of OCRPL, introduced the Shepherds Academy BTh programme and its regional co-ordinators throughout Africa and Asia. Some of the first enrolled BTh students in Shepherds Academy attended and were introduced. These students came from three cohorts in South Sudan, Zambia, and Nepal.

The gathering introduced participants in different OCRPL programmes who live in the same regions to each other. It is also hoped that as they got to know the range of programmes available they might introduce their colleagues to them.

At the close of the programme, after a 'group' zoom photo, Dr Prasad Phillips recorded heartfelt thanks and good wishes to Dr Joshva John, the OCRPL dean, as he moves on at the end of August to be head of the International Bible Advocacy Centre of the Bible Society. Dr John assured the meeting that he would continue to support and be available to the OCRPL programmes.